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Philosophy

The Tyranny of Choice
Renata Salecl
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We live in a free society, yet, in philosopher Renata Salecl's opinion, society has reached a point where "life choices are described in the same terms as consumer choices." It's a scenario that creates the illusion that we can control every aspect of our lives—from the biggest decision on down to the tiniest details—and one that, for most, leads to anxiety and indecision. For, as Salecl writes in her fascinating new book, *The Tyranny of Choice*, "Who do we become when everything about us is optional?"

Salecl argues that the tremendous freedom we experience in modern life has had a profound impact on human happiness. "The more we have tried to convince ourselves that choice brings greater satisfaction," she writes, "the less we seem to enjoy actually having it."

The prevailing societal notion that people "are in a position to make a work of art out of their own lives, shaping every element at will" creates tremendous pressures and sparks anxiety in everything from their physical bodies, finances, and family on down to the decoration of their homes.

The book's driving theme is this: "*why* [people] embrace the idea of choice, and what is gained or lost when they do." In tracing the idea of choice through its interplay with and impact on anxiety, relationships, love, and the decision to have children, Salecl provides a fascinating look at the emotions and external factors driving the decisions we make.

The crux of her argument is that, in a society driven by freedom of choice, "social critique is increasingly replaced by self-critique." This distinction binds the book together, establishing a context in which people's intimate choices are so agonizingly difficult and they are so engaged in deliberating about them that the possibility of social change through choice on a broader scale becomes unthinkable.

Though Salecl touches upon the philosophical works of Georg Hegel and Jacques Lacan, she breaks down their concepts into language that can be understood by the lay reader. There's

still a bit of jargon here, but overall *The Tyranny of Choice* is an interesting hybrid—a work of philosophy about an everyday problem and that's written in everyday language.

Oline Eaton