

I am free – and that is why I am trapped

JAKOB SCHREIBER

Student at the Cologne School of Journalism

I wanted to study abroad for a semester in the autumn. When I read the list of available cities, a strange thought struck me: I was glad that I only had twelve universities to choose between and that only a few of them were options I would seriously consider.

Finally, I thought, no more agonising over which one to choose. No more endless pro and con lists, no more asking friends, reading countless accounts of other people's experiences, only to be none the wiser at the end of it all than I was at the start.

I couldn't stop thinking about the happiness I felt at having my options restricted. In conversations with friends and family, I noticed that most of us face the same problem. From my brother, who can't pick between the 18,475 different degree courses on offer in Germany, to a friend who is wondering whether her partner is really the right guy for her, when, after all, there's an endless selection of others on Tinder.

'How am I supposed to know what the right decision is, what consequences it will have, whether I'll later wish I'd made a different choice?'

Studies show that most people my age feel the same. No generation before us ever had such freedom about how to live our lives: where to study, who to go out with, what job we want to do in future. Needless to say, it's a huge privilege to even be able to ask these questions. And yet this luxury is overwhelming for many people. To paraphrase Franz Kafka: I am free – and that is why I am trapped.

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A FIRST-WORLD PROBLEM – BUT STILL A PROBLEM

When I wonder about these kinds of questions, I often think of my grandfather. He grew up in a different time in very different circumstances, and could only dream of having so many options to choose between. At the age of sixteen, he had no choice but to take over his father's business so he could feed his family. His life ran along a set course, without many branches in the road where he got to make a choice. And although that definitely wasn't always easy, he himself says that he doesn't envy me for my abundance of possibilities.

I'm speaking from a very privileged position. Even today, many young people don't get to agonise over lots of different options. From people who don't even get the chance to complete secondary education, to refugees who come to Germany and have nothing – certainly not options to choose between. Compared with those people's lives, choosing the right course to study at university seems almost laughably trivial. A classic first-world problem. Nonetheless, it is one that causes a lot of people to feel worried and anxious.

Big decisions with a profound impact on people's futures are only the tip of the iceberg. Even in everyday situations, we're constantly forced to make choices, up to 35,000 times a day. Most of them are banal ones that we'll quickly forget about. Shall I meet up with friends this evening or do I need an evening by myself? Shall we go for Italian or Chinese? Shall I read a book or watch a film? Even though these kinds of decisions don't have a long-term impact, they can be a source of stress. We are constantly worried about missing something and disappointing ourselves or others.

A WORLD OF JAM PROBLEMS

The agonising need to make choices is being exacerbated by the digital revolution and advances in technology. On top of all the influences from the analogue world, there's a rising flood of information from the Internet. Some of us will be familiar with the feeling of flicking through Netflix for what feels like an eternity in search of the right film, before resignedly closing our laptop because we simply can't make up our minds. That's just one of many examples illustrating the dilemma of life in our affluent society.

There have been numerous scientific studies of this dilemma. The most famous is probably the jam experiment conducted by American researchers around the year 2000 in a small store in the USA. They set up tables where customers could sample different jams. There was a selection of six different flavours. 40% of passers-by took up the offer and tried some bread with jam. 12% of them then took a jar of jam with them to the checkout. In the second stage of the experiment, the researchers put out twenty-four different flavours. A huge selection. This time, 60% of passers-by tried one of the jams, significantly more than before. But less than 2% bought a jar afterwards. Clearly, the variety of options piqued their curiosity, but also made it impossible for them to make a decision.

HOW MANY DIFFERENT DEODORANTS DOES A SOCIETY NEED?

WIn supermarkets, we don't just have a choice between an average of thirty-six different varieties of jam. In an average German supermarket, there are around 3,000 different products, with new ones being added almost every day. Which prompts the question: do we really need the eighty-seventh new deodorant or yet another type of cereal? Sure, up to a certain point there are benefits to having a variety of different products. But after that point, it becomes a disadvantage instead. Constantly being bombarded with an excessive number of products causes stress, which reviews, tests, price comparisons and online ratings can further contribute to. In individual cases, these tools can be very useful, but in aggregate it's increasingly the reverse.

How can this excessive selection be reduced? Each individual in our society can consciously impose restrictions on themselves. If I liked the type of pasta I bought last week, do I really need to select a different one today? If we don't always succumb to the drive to self-improvement, perhaps companies will respond and stop constantly flooding the market with supposedly even healthier, cheaper or tastier products.

People like me could make our lives even easier by going one step further. Whenever our decisions don't have any real impact, we could restrict the number of choices we have to make to the absolute minimum by cancelling Netflix, deleting Tinder and cutting out the online shopping. At least for a while. Some famous businesspeople have been doing that for a long time already. Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, who wears the same outfit every day. The Facebook CEO has given up a varied wardrobe in order to save time and energy for other mental activities. It's only a drop in the ocean, but, as John Tierney, co-author of the bestselling *Willpower*, puts it, 'No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can't make decision after decision without paying a biological price.'

Of course, this method isn't for everyone. Usually it's enough just to try looking at your situation from the outside for once. How relevant will the decision be in an hour, a month, a year from now? Taking a meta-perspective on yourself gives you the distance you need, helps to relativise your decisions and, above all, saves time that you can instead use to fret over the decisions that really matter.

Like where to go for my semester abroad. I think Athens might be nice.



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Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

Members of management: Dr. Anna Herrhausen and Daniela Kaiser

Unter den Linden 13-15

10117 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 3407 5559

Fax. +49 (0)30 3407 4209

E-Mail: info.ahg@db.com

Commercial Register: Local Court of Charlottenburg, 116881B