



The Era of Choice: The Ability to Choose and Its Transformation of Contemporary Life (Bradford Books)

Edward C. Rosenthal

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Silver Award Winner for Philosophy in the 2005 *ForeWord* Magazine Book of the Year Awards

Today most of us are awash with choices. The cornucopia of material goods available to those of us in the developed world can turn each of us into a kid in a candy store; but our delight at picking the prize is undercut by our regret at lost opportunities. And what's the criterion for choosing anything—material, spiritual, the path taken or not taken—when we have lost our faith in everything? In *The Era of Choice* Edward Rosenthal argues that choice, and having to make choices, has become the most important influence in both our personal lives and our cultural expression. Choice, he claims, has transformed how we live, how we think, and who we are.

This transformation began in the nineteenth century, catalyzed by the growing prosperity of the Industrial Age and a diminishing faith in moral and scientific absolutes. The multiplicity of choices forces us to form oppositions; this, says Rosenthal, has spawned a keen interest in dualism, dilemmas, contradictions, and paradoxes. In response, we have developed mechanisms to hedge, compromise, and to synthesize. Rosenthal looks at the scientific and philosophical theories and cultural movements that choice has influenced—from physics (for example, Niels Bohr's theory that light is both particle and wave) to postmodernism, from Disney trailers to multiculturalism. He also reveals the effect of choice on the personal level, where we grapple with decisions that range from which wine to have with dinner to whether to marry or divorce, as we hurtle through lives of instant gratification, accelerated consumption, trend, change, and speed. But we have discovered, writes Rosenthal, that sometimes, we can have our cake and eat it, too.

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