

UNITED WISDOM

Feelings in decision-making: information, motives and limits

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

“community of feeling”

The narrator in George Eliot's The Lifted Veil, chapter I; a fragment explaining his friendship with Charles Meunier. Different intellectual interests do not exhaust the connection described in fiction; this is not an empirical rule. Primary context.

What this article is about

Imagine two manageable ways to spend a free evening. In one, someone helps friends prepare a small exhibition; in the other, they stay home and finish their own drawing. The timing, journey and arrangements are known. Further research reveals no hidden winner. Yet the first possibility brings both interest and tension, while the second brings relief and a sense of missing out. What should this difference contribute? Should feelings be treated as interference with calculation, or should the strongest feeling make the decision?

This article examines a different role for experience: it can draw attention to what is wanted, the cost of taking part and significant conditions without certifying other people's intentions or future events. We need to distinguish information about the world, our own preferences and an impulse to act. The discussion concerns ordinary voluntary decisions by adults who have several acceptable possibilities. The aim is to make the grounds of a choice clearer while preserving mixed feelings, the freedom to decline and later revision. It is neither a way to calculate one true desire nor a psychological test.

I. Even known facts do not choose for us

In the hypothetical exhibition scene, someone can find out when work begins, how much there is to do and who will attend. They can confirm that helping is voluntary. They can check whether tomorrow leaves enough time for their drawing. Each answer changes the picture of what is possible. But after the answers, a question remains that factual description cannot settle: what do they want to give this evening to? Information supports comparison without determining what each possibility means to every participant.

If choice is understood solely as a search for mistakes in the data, personal preference starts to look like a shortage of evidence. Someone keeps collecting information despite already

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understanding the consequences. They wait for one possibility to become objectively compulsory and relieve them of having to prefer it. Sometimes such an answer does emerge: a promise is discovered, a place is unavailable or another person does not consent. But between two acceptable possibilities, greater precision may leave the same freedom of choice that was present at the start.

Here feelings have a substantive role. Interest in shared work can prompt attention to the value of taking part. Irritation at another public evening can prompt consideration of its burden. These messages still need examination; each may have several explanations. But excluding them altogether would exclude part of the question of whom the action serves and why it is being chosen. Comparing convenience without considering the person's relationship to that convenience remains incomplete.

Preference does not cancel obligations. If help has already been promised and others rely on a particular contribution, reassessing the evening must take their situation into account. A feeling can change what is wanted without rewriting an existing arrangement. Someone can discuss a replacement, reduce their participation or acknowledge that the promise proved too demanding. Each response carries its own responsibility. Inner experience thus enters deliberation alongside factual relationships rather than replacing them.

II. Desire, explanation and action do different jobs

“I want to stay home” states the direction of a desire. “They will take advantage of me at the exhibition” proposes an explanation of other people's conduct. “I will not come” states an action or intention. These sentences may arise together, but they do not make the same report. Someone can want to stay home without certainty about another person's intention. They can find the conditions inconvenient and still choose limited participation. They can decline because their capacity is exhausted without declaring the organiser guilty.

The distinction matters especially when an explanation tries to make a desire indisputable. It may feel awkward to admit that one's own drawing matters more today than a shared project. A story then appears in which all the participants are bound to be ungrateful. If unsupported, that story gives the choice a false ground. It is more honest to name the actual preference and examine promises separately. Declining an optional invitation does not always require proving that the other party is bad or the proposal itself mistaken.

In Nicomachean Ethics, III.2–3, Aristotle distinguishes wishing for an end from choosing an available action after deliberation. This is philosophical reasoning about moral action, not a modern account of emotional mechanisms. His attention to the precise object under discussion is useful here. A desired outcome and the means of reaching it do not automatically coincide.

We neither apply his ancient judgments of character to the reader nor use them to explain individual experiences.

An everyday decision can use the distinction more modestly. Someone wants to belong to a group, but attending every suggested gathering is not the only possible means. They want rest, but silently breaking a promise is not necessarily the best way to preserve it. They want clarity, but another person's motives may remain unknown. Clarifying what is wanted sometimes reveals another possibility: helping earlier, supplying finished material or agreeing on a future occasion. A new action need not emerge, but the question becomes more precise.

III. Mixed feelings can reflect two significant sides

Interest and tiredness can be present together. Without further grounds, this does not mean someone secretly does not want to participate or fears every kind of closeness. In the hypothetical example, shared work appeals to them while the late journey home is genuinely inconvenient. The two assessments concern different sides of the evening. Immediately labelling one response authentic and the other false removes material that still needs to be connected with circumstances.

We can ask what each response concerns. What is welcome: seeing the work, speaking with a particular person, working together? What is burdensome: the journey, an unclear role, noise, duration? The question does not assume an answer will necessarily be found. Sometimes experience remains indistinct. But when a distinction can be named, it becomes clearer which part of the offer might change. Someone can agree to help set up and decline the reception; an organiser can offer a short shift instead of a whole day.

If conditions cannot change, mixed feelings can still describe the cost. Taking part may mean giving up a quiet evening; declining may mean missing an interesting encounter. Choosing one possibility need not erase the other's value. Regret about what was missed does not prove the decision was wrong. Pleasure after agreeing does not eliminate a need for rest. Someone can prefer an option while acknowledging a loss, without constructing an explanation in which the unchosen possibility suddenly meant nothing.

This is where advice to choose only what feels good becomes troublesome. It sets a condition that many ordinary decisions do not meet. Changing a schedule can reduce a burden and disappoint friends at the same time. A new activity can appeal while leaving one's readiness uncertain. Our narrower question is different: which significant sides have been identified, and which does the decision consider? A fuller examination matters more than emotional uniformity, which cannot always be obtained or promised.

IV. Intensity describes a feeling's strength, not an argument's weight

When anxiety becomes stronger than interest, that first describes present experience. It does not yet show that anxiety predicts the future more accurately or that interest has lost its value. Choice also requires examining the object, consequences and available conditions. Very strong annoyance about an inconvenient journey may compete with a quiet concern for a promise. Their practical and ethical weight cannot be calculated by comparing the force of bodily responses.

Imagine another hypothetical scene. An adult chooses between two amateur workshops. A new group brings noticeable apprehension; a familiar one feels calm. Apprehension may accompany appealing uncertainty, an unsuitable format or a specific doubt about the conditions. Calm may reflect a suitable place or mere familiarity. The difference itself does not say which group to choose. It is more useful to check schedules, expectations and the possibility of a trial session, then connect the feelings to those particular features.

Comparison therefore requires neither suppressing a vivid response nor obeying it. Someone can acknowledge that participation would currently feel difficult even if its reason is unclear. They can choose a smaller burden without asserting that the new group is dangerous. They can also agree to a safe trial while retaining the freedom to leave. In either case, inner experience contributes to what is manageable, and information about conditions keeps its separate role. The decision certifies no general theory of personality.

When an observable threat or coercion is present, protection should not await a complete analysis of feelings. That differs from choosing a voluntary workshop. An incomplete explanation of anxiety does not oblige someone to remain in dangerous circumstances; an absence of anxiety does not certify safety. Available protective actions and appropriate help matter here. Discussing intensity is intended to clarify grounds, not to delay necessary measures or test one's endurance.

V. An imagined future feeling is still a supposition

When choosing, people often picture what they will feel afterwards. In our hypothetical scene, someone sees themselves content among friends or peacefully drawing at home. These images help name expectations, but they are not reports of future experience. The evening may unfold differently, their state may change, and some pleasures or difficulties may not yet be represented at all. A statement about a future feeling therefore needs the same modesty as another unverified assessment.

The difference between desire and forecast becomes especially clear in promises to oneself. “I want declining to make things easier” differs from “declining is guaranteed to bring relief.” “Meeting matters to me” differs from “after meeting, I will certainly stop feeling lonely.” The first sentences describe what is wanted; the second add a causal forecast. Separating them preserves the value of meeting or resting without demanding an outcome that the chosen action cannot yet promise.

In George Eliot's The Lifted Veil, chapter I, the narrator's unusual capacities do not make his relationships simple or transparent. This is fiction with a supernatural premise, not research into the reliability of feelings. It allows a question about the difference between information about another person and a human connection. We do not use its fantastic premise as evidence of mind-reading, a psychological mechanism or a universal need to hide experience.

Our example needs only a narrower caution: an imagined relationship does not replace an actual agreement. Someone can anticipate a friendly atmosphere and still clarify their role. They can prefer solitary work without predicting complete satisfaction. A choice retains its dignity without certainty about a future mood. Its grounds may be today's available time, intelligible obligations and the significance of an activity, rather than a promise of a particular emotion when the evening ends.

VI. The cost of taking part includes capacity without reducing everything to discomfort

The cost of an action looks different when attention includes the person undertaking it. One participant can easily stay late; another already knows that doing so would prevent an important task at home. One wants extended conversation; another has time only for brief help. A shared task does not create identical possibilities. Feeling burdened can prompt a check of scheduling, scope and available capacity, but that check concerns specific conditions rather than a general verdict of weakness or selfishness.

What is manageable need not be comfortable throughout. Someone can voluntarily choose a difficult action because it matters to them. Tiredness after helping does not by itself establish that agreeing was a mistake. Relevant questions include what was known, what scope they accepted and whether they could refuse additional demands. If a role gradually expanded without agreement, that is a new circumstance. If the burden was understood and accepted, its unpleasantness need not undo the reason for choosing it.

It helps to distinguish a cost someone is willing to accept from a cost they are asked to conceal. In a hypothetical group, “this will take the whole evening” supplies material for a decision. “If you are a good friend, you will not notice the time” links participation to a judgment of character and makes conditions harder to discuss. Caring about the shared

project does not require accepting this pressure. Someone can support the aim and offer limited help without defending themselves against a story of insufficient love for others.

Accepting a use of time also does not create a duty never to complain. After manageable work, someone may want quiet or acknowledge that next time they will choose a smaller role. This is feedback about an actual experience, not an automatic accusation against organisers. If an arrangement was breached, the breach itself should be named. Feelings draw attention to costs; responsibility for conditions also depends on what was promised, agreed and actually done.

VII. In a shared decision, an inner reason needs discussable conditions

When an evening affects several people, personal preference is not the only ground. Someone else may rely on transport, a shared meal or previously promised help. Each has their own experience, and nobody must share every feeling of the others. A joint conversation becomes possible when an inner response connects with a discussable proposal: what time is available, what is agreed, what arrangement must change and whom the change will burden.

In a hypothetical scene, two adults decide whether to receive guests on Sunday. One welcomes the meeting; the other finds preparing for it burdensome. Reporting tension does not prove the guests are unpleasant or a partner disrespectful. But it can reveal an important condition: one person is expected to do the cleaning and cooking. The issue then concerns the distribution of work. A simpler format, another date or a different meeting place can be discussed. Altering proposals allows the action to be considered while preserving different feelings about it.

Not every difference can be reconciled. Sometimes one person wants to invite a large company while the other does not consent to using their shared home for it. Even the warmest wording does not automatically create permission. Space for refusal and another venue matters. Requiring proof that the gathering is objectively harmful substitutes a question of fact for a question of consent. Shared homes and other people's time need agreement even when neither option has been judged dangerous.

After agreement, it helps to check which version of the proposal was accepted. A short visit without a shared meal cannot quietly become a full day with cooking. New enthusiasm from one participant does not extend the other's consent. Feelings thus remain important motives for discussion while action rests on definite conditions. Shared choice remains possible without requiring emotional unity or deciding who feels more correctly than everyone else.

VIII. A passing response and a lasting preference in light of available history

Sometimes someone wants to know whether today's reluctance concerns this particular evening or the format in general. One experience does not settle that. They can recall several relevant occasions, compare conditions and notice differences. After a noisy day, a brief meeting felt different from one after a free weekend. An unclear role felt more burdensome than an agreed task. This history helps formulate a supposition without turning a few memories into a reliable study of character.

Modest wording is possible. “The last two times, I wanted to leave after an hour” is more precise than “groups are bad for me.” “Taking part is easier when I know the finish time” states a condition that can be discussed. A preference may be stable enough for the next arrangement even when its origins remain unexplained. Someone does not need a diagnosis or a universal theory of personality before describing an available form of voluntary participation in an ordinary activity.

Whether another trial makes sense depends on its cost. If the activity is safe, consent is free and leaving is easy, brief participation can be tried. If previous experience involved coercion or significant harm, repeating it for a cleaner comparison is unnecessary. Declining a trial also leaves some knowledge unavailable. That is an acceptable boundary: not every question about oneself deserves any price. The available history can support a cautious decision without answering for every future circumstance.

A later change of preference does not make an earlier report dishonest. Someone needs a quiet evening today and wants a shared project a month later. An arrangement can be updated, stating the time and conditions to which the new assessment applies. Respect for feelings includes the possibility of revision. Otherwise, one once-powerful response becomes a rule that must be followed after it has stopped describing the available desire, burden or relationship to the activity.

IX. A decision can be clear while feelings remain mixed

Comparing conditions does not always produce inner unanimity. Someone decides to help at the exhibition and still regrets missing time for their drawing. They choose to work at home and miss conversation with friends. This need not show that analysis is unfinished. If two possibilities matter, the excluded side can remain significant after a choice. A decision gives action a direction for a particular time; it need not make other desires nonexistent or mistaken.

Clarity can take another form. What exactly was chosen? Until when does the agreement apply? What cost is acknowledged? What new fact would prompt reconsideration? In the

hypothetical scene, someone helps set up until six and then leaves. They know they will miss part of the gathering and do not promise themselves complete satisfaction. These grounds may be clear enough to act on even while their relationship to the evening includes regret, interest and a little doubt.

A decision need not be defended with invented certainty. Someone can state their availability without revealing every feeling. “Today I can help only until six” suffices to arrange the time. If they want to describe their inner difficulty, they can do so freely. If they do not, personal space remains legitimate. Precise action and emotional disclosure are not an obligatory pair; others are entitled to know the conditions of a promise, but not every private reason behind it.

This is how including feelings differs from handing them all authority. They help reveal significance and cost, while choice brings that report together with possibilities, obligations and consent. A successful evening or an absence of regret cannot be guaranteed. It is possible to try to give an action honest grounds and limited scope. Ambivalence is then not forcibly removed; it has a place that still permits naming the next action and conditions for revising it.

X. After acting, a particular ground can be corrected

Returning to a choice is usefully begun with what actually happened. Someone helped at the exhibition, but work ended two hours later than agreed. That is new information about conditions. They finished their drawing at home but wanted conversation all evening. That reports an actual experience. Both can inform the next choice, but the revisions differ. In the first case, the finishing-time agreement needs examination; in the second, the combination of solitary work and conversation does.

The difference between a mistaken forecast and a changed preference is particularly important. If someone expected a quiet meeting and found a noisy reception, the event's description was inadequate or changed. If it was exactly as promised but no longer appealed, experience has received a different assessment. There is no need immediately to identify a culprit or declare the earlier decision meaningless. It is more useful to name what needs updating: information about the format, available capacity, willingness to participate or the way a role is agreed.

A hypothetical example can include a pleasant surprise. Someone arrives without much enthusiasm, helps unpack boxes and becomes interested in the work. That new experience can be considered at the next invitation. But one good evening does not certify that any amount of help will be manageable or any meeting pleasant. A precise correction concerns the known occasion: a short task agreed in advance worked better than expected. It does not require extending consent to all future proposals from the group.

If the experience was difficult, revision can also stay limited. Perhaps an earlier journey home is needed; perhaps this particular format no longer suits. Sometimes the significant feature remains unclear. It is acceptable to leave the question open and choose a smaller role. A lesson need not become a strict rule about oneself. Someone can change one condition, preserve a meaningful aim and test only what they are willing to take responsibility for in their next voluntary action.

Inner experience thus continues across time. It need not be declared infallible beforehand to be considered afterwards. It need not be rejected wholesale because one outcome was unexpected. The next decision needs a particular correction to the available picture. That may make a promise more modest, an offer more precise or a refusal clearer. A feeling remains an experience that occurred, while the conclusion remains open to further refinement.

What this means in practice

For one ordinary voluntary choice, try a brief comparison of two available options. First name the actions and known conditions: timing, role, other people's consent and existing promises. Separately note what appeals and what feels burdensome in each. Finding a precise psychological label or declaring one response authentic is unnecessary. If its object is unclear, leave that uncertainty visible in the note.

The next question concerns explanation: am I adding an unsupported assertion about another person or a guaranteed future feeling to what I want? In our hypothetical example, “they are bound to demand more and more” can become an observation that the scope of help has not yet been agreed. That is a reason to clarify conditions. “At home I will certainly be happy” can become today's preference to finish the drawing. Desire is preserved without posing as knowledge of another person's intentions or the outcome.

Then consider a small adjustment to the proposal. Can the time be shortened, the role changed, participation postponed or the offer declined? Another person is free not to accept the revised version. Existing promises should be discussed directly, with attention to the expectations created. After that, choose a manageable action and name one accepted cost. There is no need to wait for every doubt or uncomfortable feeling to disappear. If choosing remains impossible, the note can end with a particular missing condition rather than a demand to decide at any cost.

The limited result of this trial is a clearer ground for one choice: which inner message was considered, which external conclusion remains unknown and which conditions are agreed. This is an author-proposed form of deliberation, not diagnosis, an experiment or a promise of a better mood. It can be shortened, postponed or left unused. If threats, violence or coercion are present, stop the analysis in favour of available protection and appropriate help. Medical, legal

and financial decisions need more than these distinctions: significant conditions must be checked within the relevant field.

Key quotation

> *"I am unable to define my feeling"*

The narrator in George Eliot's The Lifted Veil, chapter I; a brief fragment describing his relationship to Bertha. His uncertainty belongs to this particular narrative; it determines neither another person's reasons nor the right decision for them. Context.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity relevant to the article	Significant difference
Eliot's literary narrative ↔ deliberation about relationships	A representation of another person does not exhaust one's relationship to them.	The narrator's fantastic capacity does not establish a psychological mechanism.
Aristotle's desire and choice ↔ examining options today	What is wanted and an available action need to be distinguished.	Ancient moral philosophy is neither emotional research nor a diagnosis of the reader.
Literary uncertainty ↔ philosophical precision about the object of choice	Both supports encourage naming the object of examination carefully.	Fiction sustains ambiguity; ethical analysis distinguishes kinds of action. No unified theory follows.

Sources

• George Eliot. The Lifted Veil, chapter I. Project Gutenberg no.2165, fixed HTML version updated 10 March 2022, transcribed by David Price. Selected contexts concerning the narrator, friendship and an indistinct feeling were read; a literary support rather than empirical evidence.

• Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, III.2–3, translated by W. D. Ross. Desire, opinion and choice of an available action following deliberation. A particular philosophical distinction is used; ancient judgments of character are not applied to the modern reader.

Tags

decision, feelings, desire, preference, deliberation, motive, fact, conditions, consent, promise, participation, burden, interest, tension, joy, anxiety, mixed feelings, intensity, uncertainty, expectation, forecast, future, cost of choice, refusal, boundaries, revision, Aristotle, George Eliot, literature, ethics

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