


UNITED WISDOM

# Past costs and the next choice

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

A15 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

# Past costs and the next choice

## Epigraph

> *“prospective, not retrospective”.*

William Stanley Jevons, The Theory of Political Economy, Chapter IV, Theory of Exchange, The Origin of Value: a short fragment concerning the direction of industrial activity. This economic argument is no command to forget history, relationships or obligations. Context.

## What this article is about

Someone has already invested time, effort or money and is now deciding whether to continue. Stopping may seem an admission that everything was pointless. Yet a further action does not recover elapsed hours simply by continuing. The present choice requires another question: what can still change, what does each available option require, and which created possibilities actually remain? The past enters this picture, but it does not enter in just any way.

We will consider Marina's fictional work on a small family album. She has spent several weekends gathering material and discovered that the original format does not suit her. This is an ordinary voluntary adult project, not financial advice or an explanation of everyone's behaviour. The article distinguishes sunk costs, remaining results, future actions and known obligations. The authors' practice has not been tested. Its aim is to name the foundations of a next step more accurately, preserving the right to continue, reduce, change or finish the undertaking without having to pass judgement on one's whole past.

## I. What has already been spent belongs to a completed action

Marina planned a large album with a separate page for every year. She spent several weekends scanning photographs and preparing captions. She now discovers that this format requires considerably more work than she is willing to do. A thought appears: after everything invested, stopping is impossible. The past becomes a foundation for future participation, although continuation itself has not yet been considered. The weekends really were spent, but they do not say whether the next weekend is needed for the same format.

Here we call costs sunk when the present choice cannot recover or change them. Elapsed time cannot be made unelapsed. Yet not every completed payment is non-refundable: refunds, transfers or other arrangements depend on actual conditions. The article establishes none of them. We first need to determine the status of a particular element, rather than name the entire



@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

history lost in a single word. Otherwise we might exclude a real refund possibility or treat something as available although nobody promised it.

A cost's existence differs from its assessment. Marina may regret the days spent, welcome the skill she acquired, or feel both together. No feeling changes the calendar fact. But it can name the past's significance to the person. There is no need to persuade oneself that everything was necessarily useful before gaining permission to consider the next step. A limited result and an unpleasant price can be acknowledged without deriving an automatic obligation to continue the original plan.

The first boundary is therefore simple: what has already happened and will remain the same across the present options? If another month of work will not recover the earlier weekends, they cannot be recorded as a result of that month. They belong to history. A new choice may create a new result, but it needs foundations of its own. This assesses no character and forbids no appreciation of what was invested. It is a distinction in time, preventing a future action from being credited with changing something it cannot actually change.

## II. A created result differs from the cost of creating it

After preparing the photographs, Marina has digital copies. They may be useful for a smaller album or a separate family selection. This is currently available material, although past work created it. Its role in the next decision differs from the number of hours already spent. We need to understand what can actually be done with it now. A useful result need not be discarded because the original plan changes, but the existence of files does not promise a suitable way to use them.

A retained skill may also matter. Marina learned to caption images and arrange folders so she can find what she needs. This is no recovered time, but a present ability. Its value concerns a particular action for which it will be useful. We need not declare every difficulty a lesson or every loss a contribution to growth beforehand. Sometimes the created result is small and its cost substantial. Both can be named without demanding an optimistic account that must justify every page of the past.

Material may have limitations. Some photographs belong to relatives who agreed to personal viewing but not wider distribution. Completed scanning does not expand their permission. A new format needs consideration under its own conditions. This distinction matters: the result is technically accessible, but the chosen action with it has not necessarily been accepted by the people affected. Marina's earlier labour grants no authority over someone else's image and removes no right to limit a new publication.

The past can thus enter the present choice through actual results, information and possibilities. It does not enter merely through its size. Two projects involving equal hours may leave

different materials; identical materials may have been produced by different routes. The next action needs a present subject. We can preserve a successful part of the work and change the rest without calling it either complete continuation or complete destruction. Choosing a form need not accept the whole history as an indivisible package.

## III. Jevons distinguishes expended labour from future utility

In Chapter IV, The Origin of Value, Jevons argues against the view that an object's value is directly determined by the labour spent on it. He considers undertakings involving large efforts and distinguishes their future utility. He then explains that new labour can affect supply and, through it, utility and value. This is a selected argument in historical economic theory, not a contemporary empirical study of family projects.

Both parts need preserving. Labour already expended does not automatically establish future value. But new labour may change the available result. If Marina spends another hour captioning prepared photographs, readable captions appear. If she spends another month creating the original large album, there is a different anticipated result with a different cost. These actions need consideration on their merits. The economic fragment does not yield a rule that every continuation after costs is mistaken or every termination necessarily wiser.

Transfer to ordinary life is limited. Family memory, respect and accepting another person's participation are not exhausted by the exchange value of things. Someone may have moral reasons to complete a particular promise, and these cannot be called irrelevant simply because they provide no convenient economic benefit. Our question concerns a different transition: does the fact of expenditure itself prove that a further action is needed? Jevons helps distinguish the times of assessment, but establishes no single measure of meaning for all human life.

The article therefore does not use his model for personal investments, buying assets, valuing businesses or legal obligations. Such matters need separate information and relevant expertise. Here we consider a small voluntary project. We preserve the source's accuracy and develop our own conditional comparison. It can offer a limited question about a future action, not an authoritative answer on another person's behalf concerning the worth of relationships, memory, labour or the right to change an earlier form of participation.

## IV. Future options are compared through what actually differs

Marina can retain the large album, make a short selection, or finish at the stage of available files. The elapsed weekends are the same for all three options. Future hours, the amount of material and the anticipated result differ. Each element need not be assessed precisely to the minute. We simply avoid mixing the common history with the new cost of one route. Otherwise continuation looks cheaper because the past has already been included in its justification, while stopping seems separately to destroy time that actually elapsed earlier.

The next actions can be named in ordinary words. The large album needs further captions and layout. A short selection needs a limited choice of images and agreement about using them. Finishing at the present stage requires preserving files and communicating the new scope to those expecting a result. These points determine no single decision. They show that termination also involves actions and continuation is more than refusing to acknowledge something unpleasant. Each option receives a real subject of its own, available for consideration now.

There is also the possibility of doing none of the new list. No form may suit the present conditions. The voluntary project can then be postponed, with necessary communication and actual obligations retained separately. Yet a pause need not be free: someone is waiting, materials take space, and a question remains open. The article promises no convenient refusal. It proposes considering established consequences, rather than filling the unknown with frightening or favourable forecasts to support an outcome chosen beforehand.

Comparison is therefore limited to available changes. What will each next option gain or lose, which conditions are needed, and whom will it affect? Answers can be qualitative and partial. A family album need not become a precise mathematical problem. People retain the right to value different things differently. Accuracy means that a new cost belongs to a new action, the past remains history, and an unknown outcome is not presented as an already received benefit because earlier effort was substantial.

## V. Stopping can have a real cost

Marina promised to show a selection at a family gathering. If she ends the work, she needs to communicate what changed. Depending on the actual accepted agreement, this may require an explanation, another available proposal, or acknowledging inconvenience to relatives. The past weekends are unrecoverable, but a present promise does not disappear with rejection of the large format. The language of costs should not authorise ignoring people already organising their own actions around a known message.

But a promise needs reading within its actual scope. Did Marina mention a few photographs or a completed large album? Did others accept participation, or did she merely imagine their expectations? Guilt cannot turn the unknown into an obligation. A particular subject can be clarified without recounting one's entire personal history or asking an audience to judge one's character. Responsibility concerns an accepted action; it does not necessarily require preserving every detail of an original inward plan unknown to others.

The cost of termination may include preserving material, returning a borrowed object, or following cancellation arrangements. These actions remain future actions and may differ across options. They are not sunk merely because they concern ending an old project. A part already unavoidable under every choice has a different status. The particular undertaking's facts need consideration. The article establishes no contractual rules, compensation or right to withdraw unilaterally. Philosophical clarity cannot replace checking applicable conditions when consequences are substantial.

Stopping is therefore not correct by definition. Sometimes continuation suits because the remaining work is small and the desired result available. Sometimes another form is preferable. Sometimes an original agreement needs a separate decision. Distinguishing costs removes one unnecessary argument without removing all the others. It preserves the present and its actual connections, rather than promising a clean page on which nobody and nothing else must be considered any longer.

## VI. Partial continuation is a new option

Marina decides to finish ten pages instead of a large album. This may use some prepared material and reduce future work. But ten pages form their own proposal, not a magical combination of the virtues of continuation and refusal. Their meaning, cost and conditions need consideration. Relatives may accept a smaller selection or want something else. Size alone makes no new format suitable for everyone. The proposal remains open until there is an actual answer from those whose participation it needs.

Another option is retaining captions alone. The result may then be useful later without a promise of another album. We should preserve the distinction between an available present action and assumed future use. If Marina currently does not want to return to the project, she need not justify keeping files through a confident plan for using them. Material can be preserved for its own meaning. Yet this does not confirm that it will necessarily prove useful. Unknown continuation can remain unknown without destroying every created possibility.

Reduction sometimes retains the hardest parts. Ten pages still require agreement about images and understandable captions. A smaller form cannot be considered easy merely by its page count. The next option is checked through actual actions. This is a logical distinction, not

a claim that small projects are generally harder than large ones. The specific cost may differ. We need to see it, rather than choose an attractive name that seems already to prove availability and future satisfaction for every participant.

Reconsideration has a boundary too. We need not endlessly seek a compromise that preserves at least something from the old plan. A person can acknowledge that they no longer want any of its forms, with actual obligations considered separately. They may retain the original option on a new foundation. Partial continuation is useful as a real possibility, not a mandatory step between loyalty and betrayal. It belongs beside other actions without promising inevitably to rescue history from admitting a limited result.

## VII. Expenditure creates no indefinite consent

A relative gave Marina photographs and helped choose captions. Marina may think that after such participation, wider distribution of the album cannot now be refused. But completed help provides no indefinite permission for a new action. The subjects differ: a personal family selection, a display at a gathering, and open publication. They may have different recipients and consequences. A large cost of earlier work does not permit quietly combining them as if the first answer already covered every subsequent form.

This applies to one's own participation too. Marina once worked gladly on the project; her desire has now changed. Change does not necessarily make the earlier willingness a lie. Both dates can be acknowledged and promises considered separately. A present boundary does not require proving that someone never loved the undertaking. Gratitude for earlier help is also not an obligation to continue a shared format endlessly. It may appear through accurate communication and respect for another's participation without appropriation of their present answer.

If conversation becomes pressure, the past cannot be used as a loyalty test. Someone is told: because we invested so much, you must agree now. This formula establishes no voluntary permission. Threats and coercion require suitable protection; a shared project is not proposed as another test of the ability to reach agreement. In an ordinary safe situation, the boundary of a next action can be clarified and personal reasons left private. Nobody has to explain their entire life to limit new participation.

Yet a known obligation is not cancelled by invoking freedom. Its subject and an allowable way of changing it need to be seen. The article authorises neither appropriating another person's materials nor silently disappearing from an agreed shared task. It preserves two boundaries together: past participation creates no unlimited power over a person, and a present choice has actual consequences. Considering them is more accurate than a general argument over who is more obliged to preserve everything invested as proof that history mattered.

## VIII. The unpleasantness of loss does not determine whether continuation is needed

Marina dislikes the failure of the large format to take shape. That feeling may remain after suitable reconsideration. It should not be treated as proof of a wrong present choice. Stopping does not recover the past, and continuing does not necessarily remove regret either. The article establishes no emotional law and promises no relief from correct reasoning. It allows a narrower position: a significant cost can be acknowledged while a further action still needs separate consideration through present conditions and available results.

Someone wants to show themselves that the effort was not wasted. This can be named as a present motive without shame. Then we can clarify what the next step will actually provide. Will ten completed pages appear, or will more time simply be added to the earlier total? An unknown result can remain unknown. There is no need to condemn the desire to finish an undertaking beforehand. Completion sometimes has an understandable meaning. What matters is not replacing that meaning with repeated reference to the amount already done, which a new action cannot change.

Someone else wants to stop to avoid seeing a reminder of failure. That is also not yet a complete answer. Material and promises need consideration, rather than demanding the immediate disappearance of every sign of the past. Access to the project can be limited and necessary information separately retained. A small part can continue if it suits. The article appoints no emotion as a correct or incorrect leader. It distinguishes a feeling, the subject of a desire and actual actions through which someone intends to answer a present question.

History's cost thus stays visible. We need not persuade ourselves that spent days mean nothing in order to stop treating them as an order. We can regret, appreciate, feel grateful and change the form. These attitudes need not merge into one assessment of the entire work. A present choice does not conduct a final trial of every previous hour. It concerns a next available action, which can be modest yet clear enough without demanding emotional justification of everything that already happened.

## IX. New knowledge changes foundations, not past dates

Through preparation, Marina learned how many captions were actually needed and what format could be shown to the family. This information was acquired through work and may change the next choice. History matters here as information, not as a demand to repeat expenditure. The past need not be separated so sharply that everything learned is lost. New facts can be used and the original plan acknowledged as incomplete. This does not prove that every difficulty should have been known beforehand or that present reconsideration strips the past of dignity.

Information may be unfavourable. Some images do not suit the chosen display, necessary help is unavailable, or work takes more time. Those facts do not become less significant because of earlier hours. Nor should favourable new information be rejected for the sake of stopping on principle: someone has agreed to limited use, the format is simpler, or necessary captions are ready. We should retain actual material, rather than collect only what justifies continuation or termination already chosen as proof of being right.

An assumption about the future can be named separately. Marina thinks completion will now take one evening. Until the work is finished, this is an estimate. It may be well founded or remain rough. It need not pretend precision to support a clear choice. We need to see which change in that estimate would matter and what else requires inquiry. A new question is useful when its answer concerns an action, rather than merely repeating general worry about spending more time without the desired result.

History therefore stays in the decision. It provides information, created possibilities and actual promises. It does not automatically establish continuation's usefulness through the size of expenditure alone. These ways of considering the past differ. Someone can change an action and retain what they learned without promising that the next option will be error-free. Reconsideration responds to present material; it does not make the past nonexistent or prove that every plan once accepted must be preserved forever.

## X. Continuation can rest on a new foundation

Marina still wants to finish the large album. She has considered remaining actions, relatives' consent and available time. The project continues to matter to her. This is a possible choice. Distinguishing costs does not require ending an undertaking because some labour is already past. If continuation suits on present grounds, history does not obstruct it. The question is whether someone can name the next result and its cost without relying only on the argument that too much has now been done to stop.

A second answer is finishing the short selection. A third is preserving files and ending the project. Each option may have an understandable foundation in a particular situation. There is no general ladder of maturity from continuation to refusal. Persistence and changing a format do not determine personal quality by themselves. An action can be assessed within its conditions without declaring everyone who completes steadfast or everyone who stops free. Such names are too broad to replace necessary information about the actual voluntary undertaking and its consequences.

If an accepted decision later changes, new material is needed. The work proves different, something becomes unavailable, desire changes, or an agreement is clarified. The particular subject needs consideration. We need not recount every earlier hour each time to gain permission to change. Yet a change should not be hidden from people depending on an accepted message. Accuracy in a next step includes one's present relation to others, rather than only inward release from an uncomfortable thought about the cost of one's past.

The result can thus remain small: understand what no longer changes, which possibilities exist, and what the chosen action needs next. This guarantees neither calm nor a better result. It preserves choice in the present, where something can still be done, declined or communicated. The past remains part of life without requiring one final assessment. The future gains no right to promise its full reimbursement, and the past gains no right to appoint every next step compulsory merely through its size.

## What this means in practice

For one ordinary voluntary project, separate already unchangeable expenditure from a present result and future actions. Do not call a payment non-refundable without checking its conditions. Note which materials, information and skills are actually available now. Then name several real options: continue the original form, reduce its scope, change the method or finish the undertaking. Each has its own conditions; a small option is not necessarily easy, and stopping may still require communication.

Compare what still differs: new work, a possible result, the cost of changing and effects on accepted promises. Elapsed hours neither become a result of continuation nor disappear through refusal. Created materials may nevertheless have present meaning. Another person's earlier involvement provides no indefinite permission for a new publication or role. Substantial contractual, financial or specialised consequences need separate checking, which the article cannot replace.

A feeling of loss can be acknowledged without having to justify the entire history immediately. Name the next step's foundation in present time. This is the authors' suggestion for reflection; its effectiveness has not been tested. You can decline or stop it. It promises no recovery of

costs, disappearance of regret or better outcome. Its possible result is limited to accuracy: understanding what can still change, without turning what is already done into an automatic obligation to do everything else.

## Key quotation

> *“with a view to future utility”.*

Jevons, the same section of Chapter IV: part of an expression concerning the present assessment of things in a commercial context. This fragment does not reduce human dignity, memory or consent to utility. Context.

## Connections between traditions

| Comparison | Limited connection | Boundary |
|---|---|---|
| Jevons ↔ a next step | Expended labour differs from future utility. | Historical economic theory provides no general measure of relationships or moral obligations. |
| Created material ↔ elapsed time | A result may remain available although time is unrecoverable. | Not every loss can be declared a useful lesson. |
| Authors' reconsideration ↔ an agreement | Future actions and present promises need consideration. | The language of sunk costs removes neither consent, safety nor checking of substantial conditions. |

## Primary sources

• W. Stanley Jevons. The Theory of Political Economy, Chapter IV, Theory of Exchange, The Origin of Value. Third edition, London: Macmillan, 1888; first published in 1871. Metadata and the selected continuous argument about labour, future utility, supply and value were read; the whole volume was not read. Quotations belong to Jevons's own words, not the nearby quotation from Ricardo. Historical theory proves no psychological effect of the authors' practice and provides no personal investment recommendation.

## Tags

costs, past, choice, continuation, stopping, result, labour, time, sunk costs, utility, Jevons, value, project, album, memory, material, skill, promise, consent, condition, reconsideration, responsibility, form, scope, information, loss, regret, present, future, voluntary participation

## About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.