

UNITED WISDOM

Incommensurable values: why one scale is not enough

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *single scale of units of value*

Ruth Chang, introduction to *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*,1997, first extended paragraph distinguishing two meanings of the term, printed p1. The fragment concerns exact measurement, rather than a ban on every comparison. Actually read author scan.

What this article is about

A small venue is preparing an exhibition. One proposal displays a map of vanished city workshops; another presents family letters that reveal the everyday voice of an earlier generation. Space and time permit only one complete exhibition. In this fictional scene, willing participants own both collections, their use is authorized and the objects can be displayed safely. No public promise has been made. The organizers ask which matters more. Soon, visitor numbers, the documents' age and personal attachment appear to describe different aspects of significance.

Incommensurability need not mean that reasoning has ended. A common unit, the possibility of comparison, an action's permissibility and grounds for a particular choice are separate questions. We examine how one scale can serve a narrow purpose while distorting a broader one, why the criterion must be named and what remains after abandoning false precision. Ruth Chang supplies philosophical distinctions. Our exhibition scene and voluntary exercise are editorial reasoning, rather than observations or a proven procedure for resolving every conflict of values.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

I. One question can conceal several subjects

The organizers say they must choose the more valuable exhibition. Valuable presently gathers different concerns into one word. The map reveals the city's shared history; the letters preserve particular people's speech. One participant asks about public access, another about an irreplaceable object, and a third about opportunities for interesting conversation. All three questions have substance, yet their answers do not describe the same quantity. Without naming the subject, an honest comparison can move in different directions. People answer different questions and mistake disagreement for evidence that someone cannot recognize value at all.

They could first separate their questions. How many people will see the exhibition? What information will it make accessible? What kind of document is it? How will visitors participate? Answers need not immediately enter a common total. They reveal several properties of a proposal. Attendance may be estimated, personal attachment described, and condition checked technically. These forms of knowledge differ. Scores can be assigned by agreement, but that agreement does not discover the actual number of units of human significance contained in each collection.

The bearer of value also matters. They are comparing two particular exhibitions in this venue, rather than city history and family memory in general. The map could be unreadable or thoughtfully prepared; the letters could have intelligible context or remain inaccessible to an outsider. A subject's importance does not guarantee the quality of every presentation. Nor does poor presentation discredit the entire subject. Keeping this distinction makes discussion concrete. The organizers examine available proposals instead of demanding a final choice between public and personal life as two incompatible accounts of worthwhile existence.

Clarification may reveal that the decision needs another name. If the principal aim is to open an inaccessible part of city history, the map bears one relationship to that task. If the purpose is to demonstrate ways of reading a family document, the letters bear another. The exhibition's aim can change, but that change should be stated. Otherwise, one person assesses educational results while another protects personal memory, and a general appeal to value conceals an unsettled subject. Incommensurability should not name everything at once: sometimes people first need to establish what event they intend to create together.

II. A common unit measures a particular property

Wall area provides a genuine common unit for arranging the display. The organizers can establish how much space each proposal needs, which passages remain clear and whether lighting is suitable. This precision is sound: the property admits measurement in the relevant quantity. But a square metre of display is not a square metre of historical significance. Occupying more space does not make the map more important. Compact letters do not necessarily win on substance. The same accurate measure can help arrange an exhibition while failing to settle its value.

Preparation costs also permit comparison of a particular expenditure. A limited budget makes affordability relevant. Money then measures the use of funds without necessarily measuring each document's significance. Confusion begins when a more expensive presentation becomes automatically more valuable, or a cheaper one morally better. Prices may reflect size, transport, printing and available resources. An exact expense remains an exact expense. Reaching a different conclusion requires an additional reason; the existence of a sum does not by itself supply that reason.

Chang's introduction to the1997 collection separates the absence of a common precise unit of value from incomparability. Our application begins there: a measure of one property does not become a universal measure of every significant aspect. We do not conclude that numbers always harm decisions or that quantitative decisions are necessarily mistaken. The philosophical boundary is narrower. One must know what has been measured and which conclusion follows. Otherwise, a reliable figure for expense answers a question about meaning through a transition that nobody has justified.

A narrow measure can remain useful once its limits are acknowledged. The organizers still use dimensions and budgets. Respecting family memory does not require destroying their table. Each column simply has a subject: arrangement, preparation, expected audience or ways of reading. Some information is quantitative, some qualitative, and some unknown. This is less striking than one final number, but shows more honestly what is known. Several reasons can enter a decision without pretending that they have already been converted into a discovered unit of human or historical significance.

III. Lacking an exact measure does not erase differences

Imagine two presentations of the letters. In one, the document appears without a label or context. In the other, the addressee, period and subject of the exchange are explained. If the purpose is to let visitors read the document, the second format can have a clear advantage. No number is needed to express how many units better it is. A relevant reason can be stated. The absence of a common scale therefore does not exclude justified distinctions. It prevents us from expressing every difference in an identical exact quantity like wall length or printing cost.

Chang's opening definition emphasizes the difference between measurement and comparison. Her text does not establish that every pair of options must be incomparable. Indeed, it urges care before reaching that conclusion. We preserve this direction instead of attributing a familiar slogan about the impossibility of assessing values to her. A philosophical concept can clarify the question without closing discussion. Even without a universal number, the organizers may have reasons to reject an unreadable format, awkward arrangement or a proposal that fails to meet the current event's stated purpose.

Comparison can be partial. The map may better introduce the geography of craft, while letters better reveal personal speech. Neither result establishes an overall winner. Advantages can be stated in particular respects while their broader relationship stays open. This record does not prove decision paralysis. It gives a more accurate basis for the next question: which aspect should receive support now, and why? We promise no automatic combination of local comparisons into a complete ordering. Sometimes a decision retains an incomplete assessment rather than inventing an exact sum for a confident final label.

The reverse case is possible too. A presentation might fall short in every known material respect and offer no separate advantage. Complexity then need not be defended by calling it incommensurable. If the map lacks readable labels, a workable display and relevant content, its general subject does not rescue this proposal. Respect for value permits assessment of its embodiment. Philosophical caution works both ways: avoid claiming numerical completeness without grounds, and avoid declaring comparison impossible where a concrete advantage is intelligible and relevant to the agreed task.

IV. Comparison needs a stated respect

The map is better than the letters is incomplete until the respect is known. Better for introducing urban geography? For closely reading personal speech? For arranging a display in a narrow corridor? Answers may differ without contradiction. One option can be easier to arrange while doing less to develop the chosen theme. Confidence alone does not give better a universal meaning. The organizers must state the relationship between a known property and their decision. Objections can then address the criterion, a fact or the connection between them, rather than becoming a general argument over somebody's sensitivity.

Chang introduces a covering value: an evaluative basis relative to which comparison occurs. We use it as a reminder to name the subject of assessment. It supplies neither a complete list of proper bases nor proof of one compulsory aim. For our scene, the organizers can say that the exhibition should make particular material accessible to visitors, then examine each proposal's contribution. A different aim can be discussed separately. The concept does not choose an aim for them or authorize one voice to declare its own basis shared without the others' agreement.

A stated basis may itself contain several aspects. Access to material concerns both the number of viewers and their ability to understand what they see. A map with brief explanations may reach more people; careful reading of letters offers another kind of encounter. These aspects need not immediately become one number. The structure of the shared idea can be shown. This differs from endlessly adding criteria: each new aspect should relate to the purpose instead of appearing solely to defend a favorite proposal. The basis remains discussable because its contents and their reasons are visible.

Sometimes disagreement concerns the selection of that basis. One organizer makes reach decisive; another favors depth of engagement with a small collection. They may understand the facts alike while assigning different significance to them. Another attendance estimate will not remove that disagreement by itself. The event's purpose and the permissible arrangement for shared decision need discussion. This is a separate subject, rather than a defect in numbers. In our voluntary scene, people can agree, change the format or discontinue the project. Naming disagreement accurately does not guarantee a common assessment.

V. Conversion into one scale includes a decision

The organizers suggest scores: ten for reach, eight for novelty and six for personal significance, followed by addition. Before arithmetic starts, decisions have already been made about included aspects, weights and the conversion of properties into numbers. The total uses those grounds rather than creating them. Disagreement with the result may therefore concern the scale's design even when the calculation is correct. Showing the initial decisions helps more than demanding obedience to mathematics in general. Someone can accept the addition and question the meaning of the quantities added together.

Personal significance, for example, need not belong to everyone equally. A family member, a visitor and a coordinator have different relationships to the letters. One score conceals whose assessment was used. It can represent an explicit editorial agreement, but cannot be declared a common measure of everyone's feelings. Otherwise, the scale silently appropriates other people's answers. Our scene permits several relationships to a subject without presenting the closest participant's judgment as reliable knowledge of every future visitor's experience.

Some scales help precisely as agreements. Participants can decide that this event primarily offers an accessible encounter with local history and assess proposals within that framework. Such a framework supports cooperation when its limits are understood. It does not prove that a letter has less significance in the world at large. Being conventional does not make it useless. Its status must remain clear: a rule of the present selection, adopted by these participants for a named task. The result need not recur elsewhere, since aims, resources and people can change.

Particular care is needed where a score hides a material boundary. If using a letter is unauthorized, artistic merit does not compensate for missing consent. Our initial scene includes permission, but an actual project must establish it separately. A known prohibition cannot become a small negative score outweighed by expected attendance. This concerns the permissibility of the operation, rather than the weight of aesthetic value. Incommensurability does not remove such boundaries. Recognizing different subjects helps prevent consent, safety or another person's authority from dissolving into an attractive total.

VI. One failed instrument does not establish incomparability

Unhelpful scores may tempt the organizers to declare the proposals entirely incomparable. That conclusion is too broad. Perhaps this scale is unsuitable, the purpose unsettled, information missing or another meaningful relation available. Each explanation differs from established incomparability. Keeping them separate helps the next step. Rejecting an instrument is not a final philosophical finding. It can be an honest local conclusion: this summation method does not reveal an intelligible reason for deciding the present exhibition's subject.

Ignorance has a different marker. The organizers do not know whether the map can receive suitable explanations or a letter can be prepared at a readable size. Answers could change the options' quality. This is not the absence of a common unit of value. Technical availability can be investigated first. If answers arrive and the difference remains, comparison's grounds become the next subject. Calling both stages one metaphysical difficulty converts an ordinary preparation question into an imposing explanation that says nothing about conditions and may obstruct the small answer originally needed.

Language can also be unsettled. One participant calls a display living; another hears lively, and a third connected with life today. Different meanings may produce different assessments without an evaluative disagreement. Clarifying them need not establish one permissible vocabulary for art. It shows which meaning is used here. Difficulty may then disappear or remain. Neither result should be promised. A philosophical concept gains no precision from being asked to cover every linguistic, technical and evaluative difference under one forceful name.

Sometimes comparison remains incomplete after available clarification. That can be admitted without ruling out every reasonable choice. Organizers might decide on a stated limited basis, arrange successive exhibitions if resources permit or postpone the project. None of these actions proves that all values have been measured. They address a particular incompleteness. This is no universal license to wait: deadlines and consequences of delay matter too. Our scene allows calm consideration because it involves no urgent danger or obligation already undertaken on behalf of others.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

VII. An unchosen value does not become worthless

Suppose the map is selected for the first exhibition because the venue stands near a city route and the current aim is to reveal former workshop locations. This limited reason does not devalue the letters. Family voices remain real despite their absence from this display. The organizers need not add a new judgment that personal documents interest nobody. That judgment may make defending the choice easier, but exceeds what is known. They can simply state which aspect the event supports and which lies outside it, without denying the latter's substance.

Nor should a second exhibition be promised merely to soften refusal. Without a date and resources, it remains a possibility. The letters' significance can be recognized without inventing an obligation that later needs another explanation. Preserving value differs from guaranteeing its present or future realization. Sometimes a person can respect a subject while lacking a way to include it in action. Our scene establishes no general test of anyone's sincerity. It simply avoids making a promise a condition of every honest acknowledgment of what remains unchosen.

A personally involved participant may feel disappointed. This response need not refute the grounds for choosing the map, but should not be called mistaken merely because a decision has been made. The exhibition touches different relationships to the material. A shared project can finish a stage while someone still regrets the letters' absence. Those states can coexist. A feeling need not receive a score to be recognized as real. Nor does that feeling confer authority to overturn another person's agreed answer. Separating subjects helps acknowledge responses without promising that clear reasoning will make everyone equally satisfied.

Later success does not erase the unchosen option either. Visitors' interest in the map is evidence about the exhibition held, rather than proof that the letters could not have offered another valuable experience. The unchosen presentation was not observed under those same conditions. A successful outcome therefore does not retrospectively settle every possible comparison. The organizers can recognize that the decision served its task while leaving a broader question open. Evaluating results remains useful without becoming a new universal scale certifying everything ever considered alongside the selected exhibition.

VIII. A shared framework leaves room for different participants

A conversation about value can quietly redistribute decision authority. The coordinator calls attendance objective and attachment to the letters subjective, therefore less significant. Yet visitor numbers become decisive only through a chosen aim. Measurability does not grant general authority over other aspects. Reach can be reasonably preferred for this event, but the reason must be stated. Otherwise, a convenient indicator becomes a form of power: possessing a number appears to authorize the whole decision, while others must convert their relationship to the material into the same quantity to gain a voice.

This does not make every opinion decisive. Participants can have different roles and an agreed procedure. Who controls the venue, who is responsible for documents and who prepares explanations? These facts matter and cannot be replaced by general equality of assessments. But a role does not guarantee the holder's evaluative perfection either. Authority to make this decision should be distinguished from a claim about the material's significance. A coordinator may select a format through an agreed process without gaining complete knowledge of each participant's family memory.

Another perspective can clarify the shared question. A viewer unfamiliar with the family context may explain which labels would make a letter readable. This concerns accessibility of presentation, rather than rejection of memory. A family member may reveal an everyday word's significance that outsiders missed. Different relationships can broaden the description. Agreement remains uncertain: people can understand more and still prefer different exhibitions. We promise no common numerical assessment from respectful conversation, nor removal of the space constraint with which our fictional task began.

Voluntary discussion preserves the right to limit disclosure. A letter's owner need not reveal an entire family history for a refusal of a display method to be heard. An available presentation can be discussed without making personal material a public examination. Pressure or threats remove any requirement to continue our ordinary comparison exercise. Safety and suitable support matter more. Incommensurability is no invitation to endure coercion for philosophical subtlety. Consent to an operation remains a separate condition even when everyone sincerely values the material and wishes to show it.

IX. An unfinished comparison need not prevent closure

Participants can finish the decision while retaining several grounds: the map supports geographical understanding, the letters preserve another kind of speech, and overall significance has not become a number. This is no mandatory protocol for every exhibition. Here such a record helps preserve the question actually settled. The first display has been arranged; the entire theory of memory has not. What remains need not become a debt or promise. It can stay an acknowledged subject for different circumstances, should resources and interest arise among willing participants.

An open comparison does not make every later decision equally good. When facts change, reasons should be examined again. Losing context may make the map cease to serve the purpose. An accessible format may change the letters' position. Neither an immutable number nor rejection of every comparison need protect the previous result. What matters is new knowledge and the relation now considered. A decision gains stability from intelligible grounds, rather than a promise never to change in response to facts unavailable or nonexistent before.

There is also a limit to reopening discussion. Each mention of the letters need not cancel the map immediately. Significance can be acknowledged without another selection that day. Otherwise, openness makes finishing impossible. In our scene, participants may state what would warrant reconsideration: changed conditions, an available format or a newly agreed aim. This is no verified universal rule. It distinguishes substantive change from renewed awareness of a known constraint, which does not always correspond to a new fact or available action.

The same modest boundary applies to personal choice. A person may accept an option without settling every aspect of life's value. Sometimes knowing what is supported now and what lies outside this act is enough. This licenses neither indifference to consequences nor arbitrary choice. Facts and boundaries still test a stated reason. But justifying a particular step differs from fully commensurating every human value. Requiring the second before the first gives an ordinary limited decision a task that one person and one evening cannot honestly complete.

X. Precision preserves different ways of seeing significance

Initially, the organizers wanted the more valuable exhibition and hoped for one scale. They now distinguish measurement of properties, comparative relations, a chosen aim and the permissibility of an operation. These distinctions supply no eternal winner. They reshape the question: what is considered, in which respect and on what grounds? Choice sometimes becomes easier and sometimes does not. Incommensurability need no longer explain every difficulty at once. A particular limit of knowledge or assessment can be named without proving that no rational next step exists.

A scale remains an instrument where its subject is clear. Dimensions aid arrangement, expenditure aids planning and qualitative description reveals presentation. None of these answers must measure all historical memory. Nor must memory defend itself through a ban on practical measurement. Their coexistence requires no choice between a cold table and ineffable feeling. Different descriptions can work together if their conclusions do not expand unnoticed. Someone can use an accurate number while preserving a meaning that this number does not actually measure.

Chang's philosophical support matters through caution about transitions. No common unit does not entail no comparison; an unsuitable scale does not entail useless reasoning. Our exhibition develops these boundaries at a modest level. It proves neither the introduction's complete argument nor moral or legal conclusions for the participants. It prescribes no obligatory relationship to the past. Readers may omit the exercise and retain only a distinction. Respect for a serious source does not require every person to turn a choice into a demonstration of complete philosophical mastery.

Perhaps the first exhibition will show the map while the letters stay home. This does not silence family voices or establish a universal victory of public over personal life. It is one action under particular conditions. Its task can be assessed, success or shortcomings recognized, and unchosen significance preserved without one unit for everything. Incommensurability then does not impose final silence. It reminds us that a precise decision needs a precise question, and that a reasonable choice can have grounds even when what remains outside it has not been converted into identical scores.

What this means in practice

If useful, consider a small safe choice between two voluntary formats: displaying ordinary material, spending an evening or arranging personal reading. You may omit or stop this exercise without explanation. It does not address threats, serious risk, another person's lack of consent or the determination of significant obligations.

Name two particular proposals and one respect of comparison. What really has a common unit? What is described qualitatively? Which transition to overall significance lacks grounds? Then try stating one local advantage without a precise number: better for this subject because this aspect is known. If grounds are missing, preserve the unknown instead of inventing an assessment.

The limited result is a clearer distinction between measurement, comparison and the present decision. It guarantees no winner, agreement or freedom from regret. Do not convert prohibition, missing consent or threat into a small negative score outweighed by attractions. Stop discussion if pressure or unwanted personal disclosure appears. The exercise cannot

replace competent clarification of actual conditions; it is permissible to finish by acknowledging that a choice has not yet been established.

Key quotation

> *items cannot be compared*

Ruth Chang, the same introduction, printed p1, the next terminological meaning: a short fragment about incomparability. Its surrounding context distinguishes this meaning from lacking a single measure. Actually read author scan.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Meaning and boundary
Chang ↔ editorial example	A precise common unit differs from comparison's possibility. The exhibition is our example, rather than the source's.
Cardinal measure ↔ qualitative relation	An advantage can be visible without an exact magnitude. Qualitative assertions still need grounds.
Shared aim ↔ personal relationship	Material touches different evaluative bases. A common score cannot appropriate another person's experience.
Scale ↔ agreement	A conventional arrangement can help this selection without becoming a worldwide measure of significance.
Decision ↔ remainder	A particular act can finish amid incomplete overall assessment. The unchosen is not declared worthless.

Sources

1. Ruth Chang. Introduction, Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason. Introduction to the collection she edited, Harvard University Press,1997,printed pp1–34; author's22-page scan. We actually read selected opening definitions, the distinction between exact measure and comparison, and covering value on the scan's first four pages. Later two-column extraction sometimes interleaves text; direct fragments use only the readable opening of printed p1. Neither the entire introduction nor every essay in the collection is claimed read. Philosophical conceptual support, rather than experimental evidence for our exercise.

Tags

values, incommensurability, incomparability, comparison, scale, measurement, unit, Chang, practical reason, covering value, grounds, aim, relation, qualitative assessment, cardinal measure, ordinal comparison, memory, documents, exhibition, significance, criterion, consent, permissibility, consequences, unchosen options, remainder, decision, voluntary participation, boundaries, United Wisdom

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 coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.