

UNITED WISDOM

Choosing between two permissible losses

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

incompleteness in ranking

Amartya Sen, *Maximization and the Act of Choice*, original Banca d'Italia working-paper version,1996,printed p8, paragraph on an unavoidable choice. Incomplete assessment does not itself establish permissibility. Actually read official primary text.

What this article is about

Vera is rearranging a small room where she reads and sometimes makes paper models. Keeping a large table means storing some books in a closed cupboard. A smaller table leaves the books visible but cannot comfortably accommodate large sheets. Both arrangements are feasible and safe; she owns the furniture, nobody depends on its present arrangement, and no promises to others are involved. This is our fictional scene. Each available option loses a real convenience, and neither feels like a pleasing completion of the entire task.

Sometimes someone seeks an answer as though a permissible decision must preserve everything meaningful. Yet careful reasoning may not remove limits on space, time or another resource. We consider another outcome: choosing for an intelligible reason without denying a loss or calling every concession a violation. Amartya Sen's theoretical distinction between complete assessment and possible action offers narrow support. Our domestic scene and voluntary exercise remain editorial reasoning, rather than a proven procedure for making moral decisions.

I. Name the loss before promising a winner

Vera initially says she wants a convenient room. This hides what she will surrender. A large table supports models; visible books support easy access and the room's familiar appearance. Describe only advantages and each proposal seems almost complete. The loss appears later, once furniture moves. A more accurate beginning describes both arrangements together with what each leaves out. The real fork can then be discussed, rather than two attractive pictures producing an unpleasant remainder as though nobody could have anticipated it.

Loss has a particular subject. Closed storage does not destroy the books; a smaller table does not erase Vera's ability to make models. She loses constant visibility or a particular

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working-surface size. These may still matter. Precision prevents one convenience from becoming the entirety of reading culture or a creative life. The more extensive the described loss, the harder an available act becomes to see. Reducing an unjustified description differs from persuading oneself that there is no real cost and that discomfort must immediately disappear.

Not every loss needs a number. Vera can establish which sheets will not fit and how many books will go behind a door. The familiar room's significance need not share that unit. Naming its content suffices here. Numbers can describe dimensions; a total concealing different inconveniences does not complete comparison. The present task is smaller: establish the constraints accompanying each arrangement. The eventual decision can then avoid defending itself by denying something already known and considered important.

A supposed loss may also be mistaken. Vera imagines cupboard books becoming impossible to read, although the door opens and access remains. That exaggeration can be checked. Access does not make visibility unimportant, however: she sees the room daily and may prefer a particular arrangement. Examination preserves both points. A false description disappears without a genuine convenience becoming a whim because life without it is possible. Many meaningful things lie between life's necessities and worthlessness. Surrendering one need not require ceasing to value it.

II. Permissibility and painlessness answer different questions

The initial arrangements are permissible under the established conditions. Vera controls her own objects, preserves a safe passage and breaks no agreement. This does not follow merely from the losses being small. A table blocking a necessary exit or another person's cupboard would change the question. An appealing convenience does not remove a separate check. Not every act becomes a permissible loss because its result compares favorably. We establish no legal rule; we distinguish the cost of an allowed act from a known violation needing different consideration.

Painlessness does not establish permissibility either. Someone may calmly affect another person's consent while feeling deeply troubled about declining a personal convenience. Feelings reveal a response without replacing examination of the subject. Disappointment at closed books does not prove rearrangement wrongful, and pleasure in the large table does not prove its placement safe. Answers need separate sources. Otherwise intensity becomes a decision rule: difficult means wrong, pleasant means permitted. Neither transition is secured by the known facts in advance.

A promise raises another question. If Vera has agreed to provide this room for someone else's work, its conditions do not belong solely to today's wishes. Our scene includes no such

agreement. We offer no general cancellation of duties under the name of limited resources. Conflicting obligations concern another subject and should not automatically enter this scene. Vera is defining a voluntary activity at home. This may require care and reasons while remaining distinct from deciding who is entitled to an already promised result and how another person's dependence must be considered.

Discomfort can remain after those checks. It need not disappear before the options' actual status is recognized. One may permissibly lose a convenience without enjoying that part of a decision. This says neither that every loss should be endured nor that haste is needed. It avoids making painlessness an additional condition of an allowed step. Vera can search for another arrangement, accept a known cost or keep the current room. Each path needs its actual description, rather than a promise that the proper answer must be emotionally untroubled.

III. A complete ordering may not arrive before action

In *Maximization and the Act of Choice*, Sen discusses choice with incomplete ordering and distinguishes optimality from maximality. The narrow point is that lacking an established best option differs from lacking an option not judged worse than any other available option. This does not morally authorize any action. The paper analyzes choice; our scene's permissibility is established separately. We do not turn a mathematical relation into advice to tolerate harm. Its role is to question complete assessment of everything meaningful as a prerequisite for every concrete step under known constraints.

Vera may see neither arrangement as superior in every material respect. A large table assists one activity; an open shelf provides another convenience. This does not prove perfectly equal assessments. It marks the present comparison's limit. A third feasible option preserving both features without a separate drawback would change the situation. It cannot be treated as existing merely because a complete solution is desirable. No overall winner in a known set and an imaginable desired arrangement are different facts requiring different treatment.

Incompleteness can have different origins. Vera may not know whether retrieving cupboard books will be convenient; this can be checked. Or she knows both conveniences but has not settled their relative importance. These cases lead to different next steps. Another cupboard measurement need not settle which experience matters now, while philosophical discussion does not establish whether a door opens. Gathering every unknown and evaluative difficulty under one description of profound choice leaves neither the simple available question nor the remaining reason its own place.

A deadline also has content. Sometimes a decision can stay open; sometimes furniture must return to a usable arrangement by evening. Here that is a domestic deadline, not an

emergency. It limits comparison without creating knowledge of superiority. Vera can choose on reasonably intelligible grounds and retain an incomplete ordering. If a significant safety condition is unknown, however, the deadline does not make it known. The theoretical distinction's boundary remains visible: incomplete assessment of permissible available options differs from unknown permissibility of an operation that cannot simply be declared allowed to finish a task.

IV. An imagined lossless option is not an available option

Vera compares real arrangements with a room containing both a spacious table and an entirely open library. That image understandably expresses desire. Present dimensions cannot realize it. If the image becomes a third offer, both feasible options lose to something absent from the set. This does not meaningfully refute their quality. Accurate comparison preserves the imagined arrangement's status: desired, currently unavailable. It may direct a search without receiving all the advantages of an actual answer before space, resources and necessary conditions have been checked.

This distinction permits creating another option. A folding surface, different cupboard or alternative placement could be examined. Each idea has costs and conditions. A folding table may be awkward; another cupboard position may obstruct light; buying furniture may exceed resources. Inventiveness does not promise the disappearance of every fork. Sometimes searching changes the task; sometimes it reveals different combinations of losses. The new option should face the same questions, rather than receiving special permission to count as complete because it was invented after prolonged dissatisfaction with the first two.

Deferral belongs to the actual set only with its own content. Leaving furniture unchanged preserves familiar reading while retaining cramped model-making. That may suit Vera. Waiting does not automatically remove the cost; it selects the current arrangement for longer. She can prefer it for a stated reason. Declining rearrangement need not masquerade as escape from every decision. Sometimes postponing change is a meaningful step, sometimes a deferred question. Either way, consequences remain open to consideration rather than disappearing under the reassuring name of a pause.

A limited search boundary might help. Vera could examine one available folding surface and then return to the known arrangements. This is our way of organizing a small task, not a scientifically established norm. Another person may need another extent or no trial. The important subject is whether a genuinely feasible option with different features appears. That differs from endlessly browsing ideal rooms, where each picture heightens dissatisfaction with existing space without adding an available operation. The desire remains respected without being misrepresented as an answer.

V. Particular people bear particular losses

Our scene concerns Vera's conveniences. Its structure cannot be transferred to someone gaining benefits while another bears unagreed costs. A total of convenience may conceal distribution. If a neighbor is asked to lose their shelf for someone else's table, their answer matters separately. Even a useful shared purpose cannot appropriate consent. Before comparison, name whom each change affects and who has relevant authority. This does not demand identical interests. It reveals what belongs to the person considering action and what is not yet their resource.

Losing an object also differs from declining an opportunity. Destroying a unique document, temporarily storing copies and missing an optional session have different consequences. Loss does not make them equally reversible. Vera should establish whether books and access remain, whether appearance alone changes or an object is damaged. These facts shape the act's description. We demand no dangerous experiment to discover its cost. Where irreversible serious damage is possible, a domestic analogy cannot justify proceeding in hopes that later reflection will confirm the decision.

Nor may another person's significance be assigned in advance. A family member may relate differently to visible books; a room's co-owner has their own participation. Vera acts alone in our original scene precisely to make this question visible. Different facts require another framework. Clear reasoning does not create authority. People may propose comparison, hear responses, seek an agreed arrangement or stop the project. An attentive conversation guarantees neither a complete shared ordering nor identical feelings about each aspect of a forthcoming change.

Cost distribution may matter even after agreement. People accept a particular extent of participation without necessarily calling their losses equal. That difference can remain in a shared decision's account. Otherwise consent becomes a requirement to stop feeling disappointed or noticing inconvenience. Our scene imposes no such demand. Vera may acknowledge her cost afterward; shared participants may respond differently while respecting actual conditions. We derive no rule for every obligation, preserving only the distinction between accepting an operation and assessing all its consequences identically.

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VI. A reason connects the cost with the present subject

Vera chooses the large table because she wants to complete paper models over the next two months. That reason has a duration and content. It claims neither that visible books are unimportant nor that craft universally outranks reading. The room serves a present subject. Another reason could produce another decision. A small scale does not make choice random: surface size, the sheets and intended work have an intelligible connection. Stating it helps more than proving the proper relationship between books and materials for every person.

A reason need not turn a cost into an advantage. Vera may choose the table while still finding the closed shelf inconvenient. She need not invent a story in which hidden books inevitably free her from excess or deepen reading. That might be reassuring, but our scene does not establish it. The known cost is accepted now for particular work. This celebrates no losses in general. It preserves an act without the added fiction that every excluded aspect was actually an obstacle to development and must therefore be called a benefit when lost.

Cost can be accepted to a stated extent. Vera is not closing the library forever: she considers two months under actual conditions. If reversing rearrangement requires help, agreement must precede calling the trial easy. Damage would undermine reversibility. These conditions can be checked here. Naming a duration has no magic. It clarifies a proposal only alongside what will really permit stopping, changing the room or retaining another arrangement without promising resources unavailable now.

Explanation also has limits. For this safe voluntary arrangement, Vera need not prove hers the only possible reason. Others may order things differently. Freedom still leaves facts material: sheet dimensions, cupboard access and passage require checking. Autonomy and attention to the subject can coexist. Her decision need not obtain existence from another person's approval, but cannot shield itself through a general appeal to personal choice against a clarification relevant to its conditions or showing that the stated connection between purpose and action lacks grounds.

VII. Acknowledging the remainder differs from making a promise

After rearranging, Vera misses the open shelf. This corresponds to a known cost without necessarily requiring immediate cancellation of the table. An expected loss's felt presence differs from a new fact about unsuitable arrangement. Difficulty opening the cupboard would change actual access. Intact access alongside a less pleasant view may mean a known feature has become experienced. No response receives a compulsory answer in advance. The content can be checked, disappointment acknowledged and a next step considered without requiring a reasonable cost to become imperceptible.

Acknowledgment is sometimes converted into a promise to restore everything. Vera imagines putting books out daily so neither aspect loses. That requires time and may obstruct models. Compensation needs its own resource; regret cannot conjure it. A small available way of preserving convenience can be sought, or incomplete restoration honestly acknowledged. Respect for the lost aspect is not proved by an obligation that immediately returns the original difficulty in another form and later requires another refusal.

Nor is a remainder a debt to an imagined former self. Vera liked the visible shelf and now supports models. This need not accuse either yesterday's desire or today's action of insincerity. People can change how meaningful things are embodied. The earlier subject should not disappear to create an appealing biography. The open library can remain desirable while the present room differs. That establishes no philosophical correctness of every decision. It retains memory of a cost without making it an obligatory prohibition on every future change to familiar arrangements.

Remembering also differs from making the selection anew every day. Vera could choose a recognizable moment for examining actual work at the table. Each recollection of the shelf need not reopen the whole arrangement. This is an editorial suggestion, not a measured norm. Changed conditions may require an earlier check; suitable experience may make continual assessment unnecessary. A cost can be acknowledged while a stage ends. What remains open is not every act, but the larger question of arranging meaningful aspects of life when resources and interests later change.

VIII. New information examines an act, not an entire person

After a week, the table proves useful, but model-making occupies fewer evenings than expected. This is new information about present use and may alter space's relative significance. The initial choice need not become an error: it rested on a previous intention and available evidence. Yet fidelity does not require ignoring new content. Vera can ask how much surface is actually needed and what next step is feasible. Assessment concerns room arrangement rather than a general verdict on someone's ability to predict every detail of future interest.

Conversely, one awkward session does not refute the whole subject. Tiredness, unsuitable materials and an unfinished model differ from a table failing its task. Every unpleasant evening need not prove that books should have won. Examination matters when it relates to the original reason: does the surface suit the acts for which it was chosen? A changed question should be named. Otherwise every later impression enters endless competition between two subjects, although some impressions concern only a particular evening or another constraint.

Success does not erase the remainder either. A finished model shows the table assisted actual work. It neither proves an open library meaningless nor establishes a universally best choice. The unchosen arrangement was not simultaneously observed under identical conditions. This limit permits enjoyment of the result without assigning it another task: finally justifying every refusal and securing the selected aspect's victory on every possible ground. Particular benefit and cost can be recognized without turning one completed project into a general theory of permissible losses.

If a real safety or consent problem appears, voluntary convenience ceases to provide a sufficient framework. Facts need a corresponding response. An accepted cost cannot defend the operation against them, nor can this scene replace competent examination of serious risk. Permissible refers to established conditions rather than a wish to retain the decision. Conditions may prove different. An intelligible reason remains open to checking precisely because it does not promise to turn every future fact into confirmation of the original choice.

IX. Discussing costs must not become coercion

Vera tells an acquaintance about the room. He says a large table makes sense if models matter. This is a possible discussion point, not a demand to prove a new identity. Then he claims a worthy reader never hides books. That may express taste without acquiring authority over her room. A substantive comment differs from judging a whole person. Vera can hear another view, check facts and retain her answer without promising everyone will assess her accepted cost identically.

Another person's experience may reveal a condition. The acquaintance knows the cupboard can become difficult to open after moving: this is testable. His preference for open shelves has another status. The whole conversation need not be accepted or rejected. A fact can help while an optional hierarchy remains optional. Independence does not forbid assistance, and assistance does not confer authority. A clear boundary keeps the actual arrangement discussable without deciding whether one room proves someone sufficiently creative, responsible or cultured.

Where discussion demands unwanted disclosure, becomes mockery or includes threats, our exercise requires no continuation. Vera need not present every private motive to acquaintances. Serious threats call for safety and suitable support, rather than a more elegant explanation of furniture. The calm scene presumes freedom to finish a conversation. That is a boundary, not a reward for a correct answer. Someone may have no settled arrangement while already having a right to avoid a person who uses questions about losses to gain power or treats refusal to discuss them as evidence of guilt.

The framework should not be used against others either. Vera cannot demand that someone endure inconvenience in their room because she accepted hers. People have different conditions, possessions and reasons. We describe one way of handling a cost, rather than a standard of sufficient endurance. Readers may refuse the exercise. Acknowledging loss does not create an obligation to choose difficulty to prove maturity. Another format, retaining the present arrangement or a new step may each suit its known conditions without repeating someone else's story to earn respect.

X. A finished decision can preserve an unfinished desire

The room now has a large table. Vera knows why she selected it and which convenience was lost. She has neither completely ordered every value nor ceased wanting the open shelf. For this task, those absences need not mean failure to finish. One act under known conditions is complete; life exceeds it. The result can remain without invented comprehensiveness. A cost need not become a mistake, extinguished desire or concealed benefit merely because rearrangement happened and someone wants a final indisputable answer.

Sen's distinction encourages caution about requiring a complete winner without arranging Vera's room. It establishes neither permissibility of arbitrary losses nor the content of ethical obligations. Our scene begins after checking limited conditions separately. Reasons, cost, scope and subsequent experience can then be considered. A theoretical label need not be applied to the self to use a simple distinction. Declining a convenience and recognizing its significance can coexist in an honest account of a present decision.

Later life may change the fork. Another room, project or suitable piece of furniture could appear. Today's result could then be reconsidered. Future possibility need not justify a present promise of no losses. One may choose under a known limit while leaving hope named as hope. It neither replaces action nor devalues it. Today's cost is not hidden behind imagined tomorrow's convenience, and change is not forbidden to prove that an accepted decision must remain the only answer forever.

A choice between permissible losses may need greater precision rather than greater certainty. What is available? What does each option lose? Whose conditions matter? Why is one cost accepted now, and which fact would change a next step? Limited answers may leave regret intact while giving action content. Sometimes reasonable closure supports a particular subject, acknowledges what remains outside it and avoids asking one small decision to prove that a person can preserve everything important simultaneously under every real constraint.

What this means in practice

If useful, examine a small safe choice about your own voluntary activity where both options are already permissible. You may omit or stop the exercise without explanation. It settles neither serious risks, conflicting duties nor another person's lack of consent.

Describe two actual options with each one's specific cost. Separate established conditions from what needs clarification. Keep an imagined lossless answer outside the available set. Try naming a reason for one present choice without turning its cost into an invented advantage or promising complete compensation without resources.

The limited result is a more intelligible act and an acknowledged remainder. Neither regret's absence nor a uniquely correct answer is guaranteed. Check actual reversibility before calling an act a trial. Stop discussion under pressure, threat or demands for private information. An unknown material condition's permissibility is not established by the exercise; finishing without a decision is allowed.

Key quotation

> *not judged to be worse*

Amartya Sen, the same original1996 working-paper version, printed p8, following paragraph on maximality. The surrounding sentence considers the option in relation to other available options without establishing superiority. Actually read official primary text.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Meaning and boundary
Sen ↔ editorial scene	Incomplete assessment need not exclude choice. Theory does not establish an arrangement's permissibility.
Cost ↔ violation	Discomfort in an allowed step differs from absent consent or a known prohibition.
Actual ↔ imagined	A desired option can direct search without becoming available before its conditions are checked.
Reason ↔ remainder	A present subject can receive support while a lost convenience remains significant.
Decision ↔ reconsideration	New facts can change an act without refuting the whole person or an earlier reasonable basis.

Sources

1. Amartya Sen. Maximization and the Act of Choice. Banca d'Italia, Temi di discussione270,May1996; original working-paper version of the theoretical work later published in Econometrica65(4),1997,pp745–779. Covers, primary abstract, introductionprinted pp7–9, selected section6pp39–41 and conclusion contextp48 were actually read. These are physical PDFpages1–11,41–43,50; neither the entire65-page document nor its proofs was read. New short fragments use only the readable printedp8 context of this original version. The Stanford/JSTOR transmission's explicit personal/noncommercial restriction excludes it for new quotations. Absence of that notice in the original is no permission for whole reproduction, import or every operation. A changed year or version creates neither a new work nor a renewed quotation budget.

Tags

choice, losses, permissibility, cost, reason, Sen, maximality, optimality, incomplete assessment, options, constraints, space, time, resources, consent, obligations, regret, remainder, action, experience, reversibility, reconsideration, imagination, availability, consequences, voluntary participation, freedom, boundaries, decision, United Wisdom

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