

1 The holiday puzzle

Let's start with this example from Hedden 2015.

INCOMMENSURABILITY
 You are offered the choice between a scuba diving holiday and a safari holiday. You don't prefer SCUBA to SAFARI, nor SAFARI to SCUBA, and yet you don't find them equally good: they are incommensurable to you.

SWEETENERS
 Despite finding SCUBA and SAFARI incommensurable, you prefer more money to less and so you prefer SAFARI+MONEY to SAFARI. However, the money – the “sweetener” – doesn't break the tie: SAFARI+MONEY and SCUBA are incommensurable.

HOLIDAY PUZZLE
 On Monday, you will be confronted with two boxes; box A contains the safari holiday tickets and box B the scuba holiday tickets (and you know this). You will have the choice to put £5 in one of the two boxes. On Tuesday, you will choose which box to take (and you know all this on Monday, and on Tuesday you will remember what you did on Monday).

Consider your choice on Monday:

- Put the money in box A
- Put the money in box B

You have no intrinsic preference for putting the money in one box rather than the other. Either option is permissible. Say you put the money in A. Now consider your choice on Tuesday:

BOX A SAFARI+MONEY
 BOX B SCUBA

You find these options incommensurable since you have no preference between them. Intuitively then, it is permissible to select SCUBA. That decision seems irrational.

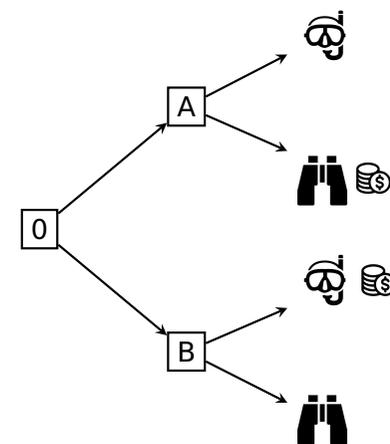


Figure 1: The holiday puzzle

2 Diagnosing the holiday puzzle

Consider a relation among options that: (1) has some connection to rational choice, and (2) might be incomplete. I focus on preference.¹ For a pair options φ, ψ , there are four ways your preference could be between them. You can strictly prefer ψ to φ , strictly prefer φ to ψ , be indifferent between them or have no relation of preference hold between them. Call indifference or strict preference for φ over ψ “weak

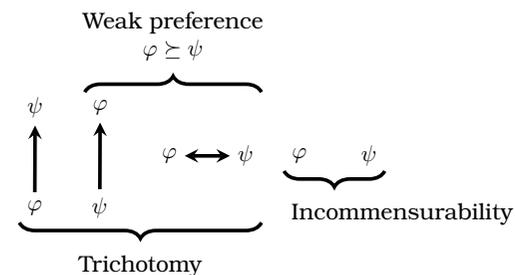


Figure 2: Trichotomy and incommensurability

¹But there are a number of other examples of such relations: Broome's relation of objective betterness in Broome 1991; the relation of “having more reason to φ than to ψ ” (Portmore 2019); subjective judgements of betterness...

preference". If one of the first three options holds between any two options in the option set, the relation is *complete*, or the relation satisfies *trichotomy*. We are here interested in failures of completeness, in incommensurability.²

INSENSITIVITY TO SWEETENERS is the distinctive property of incommensurable goods, indeed, if **CONTINUITY** holds, then whenever you have incommensurable goods, there are sweeteners.

INSENSITIVITY TO SWEETENERS If φ and ψ are incommensurable, then there is a small improvement to φ , call it φ^+ such that φ^+ is strictly preferred to φ but φ^+ is still incommensurable with ψ

CONTINUITY If φ is strictly preferred to ψ then there is an option φ^- such that φ is strictly preferred to φ^- and φ^- is strictly preferred to ψ .

Return to the question of the relation between preferences and rational choice (or normative sanctioning more broadly). What relationship is there between preference and rationally permitted choice? Consider the following properties an option φ might have:

STRICT OPTIMALITY φ is strictly preferred to every other option

OPTIMALITY φ is weakly preferred to every other option

MAXIMALITY There is no option ψ such that ψ is strictly preferred to φ

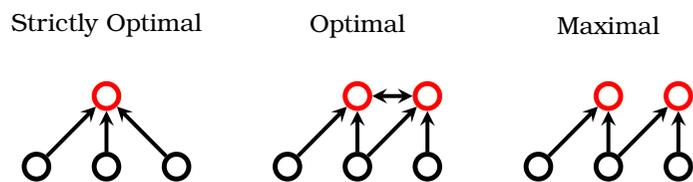


Figure 3: Strictly optimal, Optimal, and Maximal

And consider the following preference-choice links:

STRICT OPTIMALITY ENTAILS OBLIGATION If φ is strictly optimal, then it is uniquely permissible (i.e. obligatory) to choose φ

OPTIMALITY ENTAILS PERMISSION If φ is optimal, then it is permissible to choose φ

²There are many reasons why such a relation might be incomplete, for example: indeterminacy, imperfect introspection, imprecise credence or value, parity...

MAXIMALITY ENTAILS PERMISSION If φ is maximal, then it is permissible to choose φ

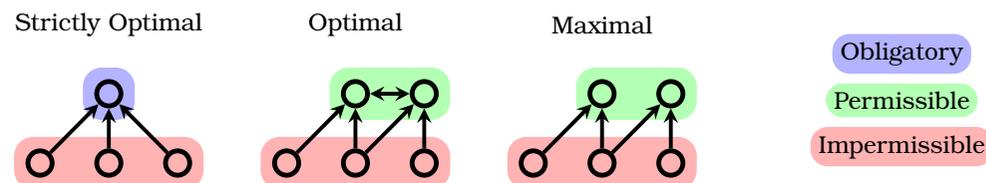


Figure 4: Choice preference link

If your preference is transitive then if φ is optimal, then it is maximal but not vice versa (unless the preference relation is complete). And if φ is optimal, only optimal choices are maximal (Suzumura 1983).

We can turn the holiday puzzle into a trilemma.

TRILEMMA

- **INSENSITIVITY TO SWEETENERS**
- **MAXIMALITY ENTAILS PERMISSION**
- **SCUBA is impermissible on Tuesday**

The other thing to note is that the sequences of choices is dynamically incoherent, in the sense that it's a sequence of choices you yourself would have considered irrational on Monday! (See Figure 5).

My response to the holiday puzzle echoes that of Ruth Chang:

The rational permissibility of choosing either of two items on a par, then, must be constrained by one's other choices. ... This is true even though there is a sense in which because [the options] are on a par, it is rationally permissible to choose either. ... [The sense in which it's irrational to choose the unsweetened option] depends on understanding the rationality of choice against a background of other choices (Chang 2005, p.347)

3 Choice, preference and rationality

Denying **MAXIMALITY ENTAILS PERMISSION** seems like it's denying an important link between preference and rational choice. Some attempts

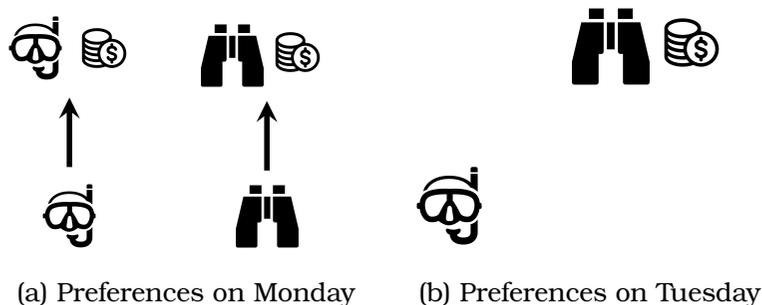


Figure 5: Holiday puzzle preferences

to capture this link:

PREFERENCE DETERMINES PERMISSION What it is rationally permissible to choose at a time supervenes on preferences at that time

PREFERENCE DETERMINES CHOICEWORTHINESS What is choiceworthy at a time supervenes on preferences at that time

CHOICEWORTHINESS DETERMINES PERMISSION What it is rationally permissible to choose at a time supervenes on choiceworthiness

The first is equivalent to conjunction of the second and third. I deny the third, and thus also the first.

STRONG CHOICEWORTHINESS φ is in the choice set if and only if choosing φ is rationally permissible

WEAK CHOICEWORTHINESS If φ is not in the choice set, then choosing φ is rationally impermissible

We then have the principle that **STRONG CHOICEWORTHINESS DETERMINES PERMISSION**, but no such analogue principle for weak choice sets. Compare with Figure 4 which depicts a strong choice set. And thus we can characterise the link between preference and permission

OPTIMALITY ENTAILS STRONG CHOICEWORTHINESS If φ is optimal then it is permissible to select φ ³

MAXIMALITY ENTAILS WEAK CHOICEWORTHINESS If φ is not maximal, then it is not permissible to select φ

³You might even want to deny this. Ask my why in Q&A!

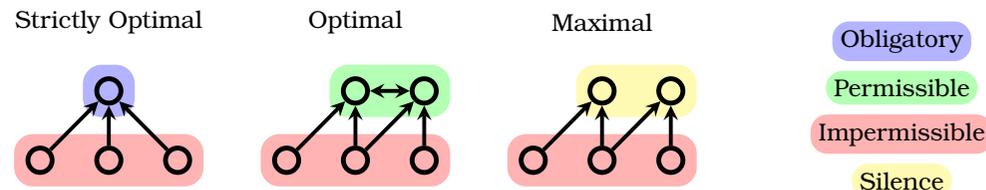


Figure 6: Weak choice set

4 Picking

Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser 1977 suggest that while you can't *choose* between equals, you can *pick* one. Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser suggest picking is *arational*: there is no rational assessment of your picking among choiceworthy options. I argue that this is true for strong choice sets but not for weak choice sets.

RATIONAL PICKING
When there is no optimal option, the procedure for picking among the maximal options is *subject to rational assessment*.

Upshot: an option can be weakly choiceworthy but still an impermissible selection (e.g. picking SCUBA on Tuesday in the holiday puzzle). Here's Chang again:

[W]hen your given reasons are on a par, you have the normative power to *create* new will-based reasons for one option over another by putting your agency behind some feature of one of the options. (Chang 2017, p.16)

I interpret this as: your previous selections commit you to willing there to be a reason to pick one option over the other (if possible). So Chang's "two senses" of permission correspond to (weak) choiceworthiness, and permissible according to a rational picking procedure.

DYNAMICALLY COHERENT RATIONAL PICKING (DCRP)

Your previous selections commit you to pick in a dynamically coherent way (when possible).

If your preferences don't change (and weren't irrational to begin with), it's always possible to do so.

SOLUTION TO THE HOLIDAY PUZZLE

Placing the money in box A on Monday commits you to pick box A on Tuesday (if possible).

So what is picking? Picking the sweetened option is:

- obligatory?
- supererogatory?
- encouraged?

Picking the unsweetened option is:

- suberogatory?
- less irrational than picking a non-maximal option?

What is commitment? Committing to pick is not like planning:

- Not necessarily conscious (compare: I am committed to believe all logical consequences of my beliefs).
- Can be retrospective.
- Compatible with sophisticated choice.
- No implausible overriding of current preferences.
- Choice is between options available at a time.
- Compatible with PREFERENCE DETERMINES CHOICEWORTHINESS.

Committing to pick is not like mind-making:

- Compatible with “determinately second best” options being permissible.
- Silent about at-a-time decision.

So there are (at least!) two “levels” of normative assessment: assessing the choice set, and assessing the procedure for picking (Helzner 2013; Levi 1980, 1986). Maybe irrationality is a graded notion

(Schervish, Seidenfeld, and Kadane 1997; Staffel 2020)? If the members of the choice set are optimal, then there's no normative work for the picking procedure to do. If the members of the choice set are non-optimal maximal options, then (at least in sequential contexts) procedures for picking can be rationally assessed.

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