

Ulysses Unbound

*Studies in Rationality,
Precommitment, and Constraints*

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Chapter I

Ulysses Revisited: How and Why People Bind Themselves

I.1. INTRODUCTION: CONSTRAINT THEORY

In this chapter I discuss why individuals may want to restrict their freedom of choice and how they achieve this end. Broadly speaking, they may want to protect themselves against passion, preference change, and (two varieties of) time-inconsistency. They do so by removing certain options from the feasible set, by making them more costly or available only with a delay, and by insulating themselves from knowledge about their existence.

In this section, I want to locate constraints that individuals impose on themselves within the broader field of what one might call “constraint theory.” At a very general level, the present book illustrates the proposition that sometimes *less is more* or, more specifically, that sometimes there are benefits from having fewer opportunities rather than more. This idea must be seen on the background of the standard case, in which the exact opposite is true. Prima facie it would seem that nobody could have a motivation for discarding options, delaying rewards, or imposing cost on themselves. And in most of everyday life this intuition is obviously correct. Most people would rather have more money than less, more occupational options rather than fewer, rewards sooner rather than later, a larger range of potential marriage partners rather than a smaller one, and so on. Much progress in human history has in fact taken the form of removing material or legal restrictions on choice. Moreover, even when we don’t benefit from having more opportunities, they usually do not harm us either, since we can always choose not to take them up (the “free disposal” axiom of general equilibrium theory). If I find some of the free meals offered by airlines unappetizing, I don’t have to eat them.

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In this book I discuss nonstandard cases in which the “more is better” assumption is invalid. It can be so for one of two reasons. On the one hand, the individual might benefit from having *specific* options unavailable, or available only with a delay, or at greater cost, and so on. (Although I always eat the meals the airlines offer me, I would pay them a bit extra for not serving me.) This is the topic of Chapters I and II. On the other hand, the individual might benefit just from having *fewer* options available, without the desire to exclude any specific choices. This is the main topic of Chapter III, where I argue both that artists need constraints and that the choice of constraints is largely arbitrary. True, the first reason for wanting to be constrained can apply here too, as when a film director decides to shoot in black and white so as not to be tempted by the facile charms of color photography. Yet the second reason for artistic precommitment is usually more important. The decision by a writer to use the format of the short story rather than the novel is not dictated by the desire to exclude any specific words or sentences, only by the desire to use fewer of them.

This second reason might also apply to social life more broadly. Erich Fromm argued that with the rise of the modern world and the progressive removal of restrictions on action, there has also emerged a “fear of freedom” – a fear of having too much choice, too many options, being subject to too little authority.¹ Along similar lines, Tocqueville said, “For my part, I doubt whether man can support complete religious independence and entire political liberty at the same time. I am led to think that if he has no faith he must obey, and if he is free he must believe.”² The implication is not that people would *choose* to limit their options, but that they would benefit from having fewer rather than more. Many who like me grew up in the relatively austere 1940s and 1950s believe that children and teenagers in later decades would have benefited from having fewer opportunities and less money to spend. And there is a great deal of folklore to the effect that rich kids suffer irreversibly from having too many options, and that individuals who are very richly endowed in talents end up being jacks of all trades and masters of none. Although these beliefs may partly be sour grapes, casual observation suggests that they are not always only that.

At the same general level, the idea that less is more is susceptible of another interpretation, namely, that *ignorance is bliss*. Again, this

1. Fromm (1960).

2. Tocqueville (1969), p. 444. See also Elster (1999a), Ch. I.5.

I.1. Introduction: Constraint Theory

idea must be considered on the background of a standard assumption to the contrary, namely, that *knowledge is power*.³ In this case, too, historical progress has often taken the form of gaining new knowledge that enhances our mastery over nature, including, sometimes, human nature. Because this knowledge can also have destructive consequences, one might ask whether it might not sometimes be better to abstain from acquiring it. In *De Finibus* (V.xviii) Cicero has Antiochus interpret the Sirens episode of the *Odyssey* in this perspective:

So great is our innate love of learning and of knowledge that no one can doubt that man's nature is strongly attracted to these things even without the lure of any profit. . . . For my part, I believe Homer had something of this sort in view in his imaginary account of the songs of the Sirens. Apparently it was not the sweetness of their voices or the novelty and diversity of their songs, but their professions of knowledge that used to attract the passing voyagers; it was the passion for learning that kept men rooted to the Sirens' rocky shores.

Cicero does not suggest, however, that Ulysses bound himself to the mast in order to remain ignorant, nor that the knowledge the Sirens offered would have been dangerous to him. Hence the analogy that is sometimes drawn between the Sirens episode in the *Odyssey* and the Fall in Genesis is somewhat halting.⁴ The Serpent seduced Eve by offering her intrinsically corrupting knowledge, whereas the Sirens (in this reading) used the prospect of knowledge merely as a means of enticing their victims to the rocky shores.

In *Forbidden Knowledge*, Roger Shattuck pursues the theme of dangerous knowledge and blissful ignorance through a number of historical and fictional examples. From the history of science, he cites notably the moratorium on DNA recombinant research in the 1970s and objections to the Human Genome Project, arguing that there may be non-obscurantist reasons for blocking or halting the progress of knowledge.⁵ Or consider another example: some years ago voices in the Norwegian government opposed exploratory oil drilling north of 62 degrees latitude. To those who argued that it could do no harm and might be useful to know whether there was oil in that region, these critics replied that if one found oil there would be an irresistible pressure on politicians to begin exploitation immediately. The critics

3. For a discussion of opposite proverbial sayings of this kind, see Elster (1999a), Ch. I.3.

4. For this analogy see Montaigne (1991), p. 543, and Shattuck (1996), p. 28.

5. Shattuck (1996), pp. 186–95, 210–17.

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lost, and were proven right. I discuss half a dozen cases of this general kind at various places in this chapter. By and large, however, the emphasis in the book is on constraints that take the form of making known options less available rather than that of blocking knowledge about their existence.

The book as a whole is concerned with two types of beneficial constraints. First, there are constraints that benefit the agent who is constrained but that are not chosen by the agent for the sake of those benefits. This is the topic of I.5, and a central issue in Chapters II and III. The constraints may be chosen by the agent for some other reason, chosen by some other agent, or not be chosen by anyone at all but simply be a fact of life that the agent must respect. I shall refer to these as *incidental constraints*. Let me give two brief examples, both from the “fact of life” category. One concerns the need to shoot films in black and white before the invention of color photography. It has been argued, as we shall see in Chapter III, that this constraint made for greater artistic creativity. A similar argument has been applied to the social sciences. In a comment on James Coleman’s work, Aage Sørensen claims that the invention of high-power computers came at the detriment of sociological theory, when and because “the data limitations and computational limitations that inspired Coleman to enormous creativity and imagination in developing and applying the models were removed.”⁶

Second, there are constraints that an agent imposes on himself for the sake of some expected benefit to himself. This is the main topic of the present chapter, and an important topic of Chapters II and III as well. In *Ulysses and the Sirens* I referred to this phenomenon as “pre-commitment” or “self-binding.” Others have used the terms “commitment” or “self-commitment.” In the present volume, I often retain my earlier terminology. When the emphasis is on the constraints that are created rather than on the act of creating them, I refer to them as *essential constraints*.

Essential constraints are defined in terms of *expected* benefits, incidental constraints by the *actual* benefits they provide to the agent. (I ignore cases in which A constrains B with the intention of benefiting B but no benefits are in fact provided.) Whereas the establishment of essential constraints is always explained by the expectation of benefit, the actual benefits of incidental constraints may or may not enter

6. Sørensen (1998), p. 255.

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into their explanation. In I.5 I discuss the view that emotional constraints on behavior emerge from natural selection by virtue of their beneficial impact on reproductive fitness. If that view is correct, the effects of the constraints have explanatory force. In Chapter II, I mention that consequences of constitutional arrangements that were not in the minds of the framers may come to be acknowledged at a later time, and then serve as reasons to maintain those arrangements if the grounds on which they were originally adopted no longer obtain. In that case, too, the effects of the incidental constraints would have explanatory force.

Because of the pervasive use of functional explanation in the social sciences, it is easy to commit one of two closely related fallacies: to confuse incidental and essential constraints, and to assume without argument that the benefits of incidental constraints always tend to explain them.⁷ The human mind, it seems, is simply very reluctant to admit the idea of accidental or non-explanatory benefits.⁸ In II.1 I mention some of my own past confusions, and I am not alone in this respect. Thus one task of the present book is to demarcate, as clearly as I can, intentional self-binding from other ways in which beneficial constraints can come about. Another task is to examine whether there can be constraints that are, as it were, essentially incidental. An agent might be *unable to make himself unable* to act in a certain way, and yet find himself constrained, to his benefit, by the force of circumstances or through an act of another agent.

As mentioned, the present chapter is mainly concerned with essential constraints, or self-binding in the standard intentional sense. More specifically, I shall discuss an agent's desire to create obstacles to his or her future choice of some specific option or options. In this perspective, precommitment embodies a certain form of *rationality over time*. At time 1 an individual wants to do A at time 2, but anticipates that when time 2 arrives he may or will do B unless prevented from doing so. In such cases, rational behavior at time 1 may involve precautionary measures to prevent the choice of B at time 2, or at least to make that choice less likely. The present chapter is a survey of the why and how of precommitment – of the *reasons* why people might want to precommit themselves and of the *devices* they have at their disposal.⁹

7. Elster (1983a), Ch. 2. 8. Elster (1983b), Ch. II.10.

9. In this book I assume a simple conflict between a short-term and a long-term interest. In the model presented by Ainslie (1992), the mind contains a whole population of

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Reasons for precommitment

	Overcome passion	Overcome self- interest	Overcome hyperbolic discounting	Overcome strategic time- inconsistency	Neutralize or prevent preference change	
<i>Devices for precom- mitment</i>	Eliminating options	I.2 I.7		I.3 I.7	I.4	I.6
	Imposing costs	I.2 I.7	I.5	I.3 I.7	I.4	
	Setting up rewards	I.7		I.7		
	Creating delays	I.2 I.7		I.3	I.4	
	Changing preferences	I.2 I.7				
	Investing in bargaining power				I.4	
	Inducing ignorance	I.2 I.7		I.3	I.4	I.6
	Inducing passion		I.5		I.4	

Table I.1

In I.2 I consider the traditional view that precommitment is an instrument to protect us against passion. Then I discuss the more recent argument that precommitment can help us overcome the problem

interests, with time horizons ranging from fractions of a second to a lifetime. In that case, more complex phenomena become possible, such as alliances between a short-term and a long-term interest against intermediate-range interests. Elsewhere I have used the following example to illustrate this idea: "I wish that I didn't wish that I didn't wish to eat cream cake. I wish to eat cream cake because I like it. I wish that I didn't like it, because, as a moderately vain person, I think it is more important to remain slim. But I wish I was less vain. (But do I think that only when I wish to eat cake?)" (Elster 1989a, p. 37).

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of time-inconsistency, be it due to hyperbolic discounting (I.3) or to strategic interaction (I.4). In Section I.5 I consider the argument that passion can serve as such a device. Rather than being an obstacle to the rational pursuit of self-interest (I.2), passion can help us overcome our tendency to act according to immediate self-interest when doing so is against our long-term interest. In I.6, I consider some variations on the “Russian nobleman” case introduced by Derek Parfit, with main emphasis on why fundamentalists might want to insulate themselves from the modern world in order to prevent preference change. In I.7 I survey the numerous forms of self-binding strategies adopted by addicts. In I.8 I discuss some reasons why precommitment, when feasible, might not be desirable; and when desirable, might not be feasible. Here, I also discuss some alternatives to precommitment.

Not all devices for precommitment can serve all reasons for precommitment. Table I.1 indicates some of the main connections between reasons and devices for precommitment, and helps the reader to locate the sections where the various cases are discussed.¹⁰

I.2. PASSION AS A REASON FOR SELF-BINDING

When we act under the influence of passions, they may cause us to deviate from plans laid in a cooler moment. Knowledge of this tendency creates an incentive to precommit ourselves, to help us stick to our plans. Here, I use “passion” in an extended sense that covers not only the emotions proper such as anger, fear, love, shame, and the like, but also states such as drunkenness, sexual desire, cravings for addictive drugs, pain, and other “visceral” feelings.¹¹

From Aristotle to some time in the twentieth century, the most frequent antonym of passion was *reason*, understood as any impartial – dispassionate or disinterested – motivation.¹² A person who wishes to behave justly toward others but fears that his anger

10. In this chapter as well as in the following, I ignore *randomization* as a form of individual or collective precommitment, to avoid repeating what I have written elsewhere on the topic (Elster 1989b, Ch. II). A brief survey of the issue is offered in the discussion of randomization in the arts (III.8).

11. For a discussion of the role of emotions in the explanation of behavior, see Elster (1999a), notably Appendix to Ch. IV. For the place of viscosity in the explanation of behavior see Loewenstein (1996, 1999).

12. For a fuller discussion see Elster (1999a), notably Ch. V.

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might get the best of him is advised to precommit himself in one of the ways to be discussed shortly. Among modern economists, the most frequent antonym of passion is *rational self-interest*. A person who fears that anger might cause him to act in ways contrary to his self-interest would do well to avoid occasions on which this emotion might be triggered. A reasonable agent precommits himself against anger so as not to hurt others, whereas an agent moved by rational self-interest does so in order not to hurt himself. Later in this chapter, we find examples of precommitment motivated by either of these dispassionate attitudes. As we shall see, other cases also arise. An agent in the grip of passion may precommit himself against another passion, against the rational pursuit of self-interest, or against reason. A rational and self-interested agent may even precommit himself against his own rationality.

EFFECTS OF PASSION

I shall distinguish among four ways in which passions may cause a discrepancy between plans – whether based on reason or on rational self-interest – and behavior. They may do so by distorting cognition (inducing false beliefs about consequences), by clouding cognition (blotting out awareness of consequences), by inducing weakness of will (options with worse perceived consequences are chosen over those with better consequences), or by inducing myopia (changing the decision weights attached to the consequences). Whereas the first two mechanisms involve cognitive irrationality, the last two need not. Whereas the third involves a motivational irrationality, the fourth need not. All but the second leave the agent with some capacity to respond to incentives.

(i) Passion may distort our thinking about the consequences of the behavior. This was in fact Aristotle's definition of emotion: "The emotions are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments, and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, for example, anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites" (*Rhetoric* 1378a 21–22). Although this does not provide a good definition of emotion – there are too many exceptions, some of them noted by Aristotle himself¹³ – it accurately

13. Aristotle counts hatred as an emotion (*Rhetoric* 1382a 2–16), but also says that hatred can leave judgment unaffected (*Politics* 1312b 19–34). See also Elster (1999a), Ch. II.2.

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captures many cases of emotionally induced wishful thinking and self-deception. Emotions can affect “probability and credibility estimates” concerning events outside one’s control.¹⁴

This mechanism may also apply when the passion in question is a craving rather than an emotion. In an example from David Pears, a

driver goes to a party and he judges it best to stop at two drinks in spite of the pleasure to be had from more, because there is nobody else to take the wheel on the way home. Nevertheless, when he is offered a third drink, which, we may suppose, is a double, he takes it. How can he? Easily, if the wish for a third drink biases his deliberation at the party before he takes it. For example, he might tell himself, against the weight of the evidence, that it is not dangerous to drive home after six measures of whiskey, or he might forget, under the influence of his wish, how many drinks he has already taken.¹⁵

(ii) The passion may be so strong as to crowd out all other considerations.¹⁶ Before an unpleasant encounter, I may resolve to keep my cool. Yet when provoked to anger, I lash out without pausing to consider the consequences. It is not that I do not know the consequences or that I have false beliefs about them: I simply do not, when acting, keep them before my mind. This is Aristotle’s conception of weakness of the will (or one of his conceptions), “admitting the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk. But now this is just the condition of men under the influence of passions; for outbursts of anger and sexual appetites and some other such passions, it is evident, actually alter our bodily condition, and in some men even produce fits of madness. It is plain, then, that incontinent people must be said to be in a similar condition to these.”¹⁷

(iii) I may know even at the time that I am acting against my better judgment. When offered the third drink at the party, the driver may accept it and yet think *as he does so* that he shouldn’t. Although the

14. Frijda (1986), pp. 118–21.

15. Pears (1985), p. 12. Along similar lines Rabin (1995) argues that “we may over-eat not because we consciously sanction over-weighting current . . . well-being over future well-being, but because we systematically deceive ourselves in ways that support immediate gratification.”

16. The passions may also *preempt* all other considerations. As explained in LeDoux (1996) and summarized in Ch. IV.2 of Elster (1999a), there is a direct pathway from the sensory apparatus to the emotional apparatus in the brain that bypasses the thinking part of the brain entirely, so that when the sensory signal arrives to the latter some milliseconds later, the organism has already started to react.

17. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147a.

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reasons against drinking are stronger qua reasons than the reasons for drinking, the latter have a stronger causal efficacy qua sheer psychic turbulence. Something like this is the view of weakness of will that has been made prominent by Donald Davidson and that, in one way or another, is at the center of most recent philosophical discussions of the subject.¹⁸

A problem with this third view is the difficulty of finding reliable evidence that the agent really thought that, all things considered, he should not take the drink. It is easy enough to find independent evidence that the driver, *before* going to the party, did not want to have more than two drinks. He may have told his wife, for instance, "Stop me if I have more than two drinks." *After* the party, too, he may regret his behavior as contrary to his real interest and take steps to ensure that it doesn't happen again. But how can we know that this all-things-considered judgment exists at the very moment that he is accepting the third drink? By assumption, there is no observable behavior that can support this interpretation. How can we exclude, for instance, the possibility of a last-second preference reversal due to hyperbolic discounting (I.3)? The agent might retain an accurate appreciation of the consequences of his behavior yet weigh them differently from the way he did before. Because Davidson offers a transcendental argument – how is acting against one's better judgment at the time of action *überhaupt möglich?* – it is disturbing that the empirical premise is so hard to establish.¹⁹

(iv) A person in a state of passion may weigh the consequences of behavior differently from the way he does in a calmer mood. An addict, for instance, may have accurate beliefs about the disastrous effects of the drug on his or her body or purse, and yet ignore them because of an addiction-induced increase of the rate of time discounting.²⁰ The urgency and impatience often associated with emotion can have the same effect. If I have the choice between seeing

18. Davidson (1970).

19. Cp. Montaigne (1991), p. 1161: "I realize that if you ask people to account for 'facts,' they usually spend more time finding reasons for them than finding out whether they are true. . . . They skip over the facts but carefully deduce inferences. They normally begin thus: 'How does this come about?' But does it do so? That is what they ought to be asking." See also Merton (1987) for the need to "establish the phenomenon" before one sets out to explain it. For a fuller discussion, see Elster (1999d).

20. Becker (1996), p. 210; O'Donoghue and Rabin (1999a); Orphanides and Zervos (1998).

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the person I love for ten minutes today and seeing him or her for one hour tomorrow, I might opt for the former option. The effect of passion in such cases is to induce myopia, rather than to distort and cloud cognition or to make us act against our better judgment. Note that the passions that induce myopia may themselves be either durable or transient. In the latter case, a *short-lived* passion causes the agent to have a *shortsighted* idea of his interests. Although the ideas of “momentary passion” and “immediate interest” are conceptually distinct, they are often causally linked (see also II.7).

In self-deception, weakness of will, and myopia – cases (i), (iii), and (iv) – the agent is *reward-sensitive*. This is not to say that he is rational, only that he is capable of exercising choice by weighing consequences against one another.²¹ If the delayed negative effects of a certain behavior would be truly disastrous, the agent is less likely to fool himself into believing that they do not exist, less likely to accept them against his own better judgment, and less likely to let them be dominated by short-term reward. It is only in case (ii) that passion makes the agent entirely deaf to incentives beyond the desires of the moment.

PRECOMMITMENT AGAINST PASSION

These differences have obvious implications for strategies of self-binding. When the agent is able to take account of incentives even in the heat of passion, precommitment can take the form of attaching a cost or a penalty to the choice one wants to avoid making. If you think you might get too drunk or too amorous at the office party, you can increase the costs of doing so by taking your spouse along. In *Lucien Leuwen*, Mme de Chasteller takes care to see Lucien only in the company of a chaperone, to make it prohibitively costly to give in to her love for him. By contrast, some passions are so strong that the only practical way of neutralizing them is to avoid occasions that trigger them.²² In *La Princesse de Clèves*, the princess flees the court for the countryside to avoid the temptation of responding to the overtures of the Duc de Nemours; even later, when her husband is dead and she is free to remarry, she stays away. “Knowing how circumstances affect

21. For a fuller discussion, see Ch. 5.1 of Elster (1999b).

22. In Ch. 5 of Elster (1999b) I discuss whether there are cases in which this statement is true even when the word “practical” is omitted.

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the wisest resolutions, she was unwilling to run the risk of seeing her own altered, or of returning to the place where lived the man she had loved."²³

Anger is perhaps the most important of these blind-and-deaf passions. It may be unique among the emotions in its capacity to make us forget even our most vital interests. According to Seneca, anger is "eager for revenge even though it may drag down the avenger along with it."²⁴ "Who sees not," Hume asked, "that vengeance, from the force alone of passion, may be so eagerly pursued as to make us knowingly neglect every consideration of ease, interest, or safety?"²⁵ Clearly, if angry people are willing to disregard even a risk to their lives they will not be deterred by any additional disincentives. As we shall see in I.5, this disregard for consequences that characterizes the angry man may also serve his interest, that is, have good consequences. Here I shall focus on the need to contain anger, drawing heavily on various observations in Montaigne's *Essays*.²⁶

It is a commonplace that other people can detect that one is angry or in love before one knows it oneself. When one is in love for the first time, as Madame de Rênal in Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*, one may live the emotion fully and innocently until one day the realization strikes: "I am in love." There is no self-deception involved, merely unawareness.²⁷ In anger, too, the emotion often has to reach a certain threshold before awareness occurs. At the same time, episodes of anger are often characterized by a "point of no return" beyond which self-control is of no avail.²⁸ The reason that anger is so hard to control, according to Montaigne, is that the second threshold occurs before the first. "The infancies of all things are feeble and weak. We must keep our eyes open at their beginnings; you cannot find the danger then because it is so small; once it has grown, you cannot find the cure."²⁹ In other words, the dynamics of anger (and of love) is subject to the dilemma illustrated in Figure I.1.

If this is right, and I think it often is, a self-control rule such as counting to ten is not likely to be a good remedy against anger. It is an *advice*, and not a very effective one; not a *device*. Although delay

23. Lafayette (1994), p. 108; see also Shattuck (1996), pp. 114–21.

24. *On Anger*, I.i.1. 25. Hume (1751), Appendix II.

26. See also Elster (1996) and Elster (1999a), Ch. II.3.

27. For more extensive discussions of unacknowledged emotions, see Elster (1999a), Chs. II.3, III.2, and IV.2.

28. Frijda (1986), pp. 43–45, 91, 241.

29. Montaigne (1991), p. 1154; see also Ekman (1992), p. 47.

I.2. Passion as a Reason for Self-Binding

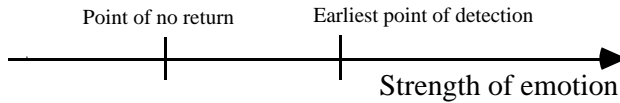


Fig. I.1

devices can be effective forms of precommitment (Chapter II), they have to be set up ahead of time rather than being left to the discretionary control of the agent at the moment he or she needs them. As Thomas Schelling writes, “If I am too enraged to mind my behavior, how can I make myself count to ten?”³⁰ In theory, delay devices might be used to counteract passion, in the wide sense that also includes cravings for addictive substances. If I want to limit my drinking to social occasions but do not trust myself to do so, I could keep my liquor in a safe with a delaying device so that I would have to set it six hours ahead of time to get access to it. In practice, I have not come across any examples of this strategy. Perhaps it is too expensive – a safe with a timer costs about \$1,000 (see also I.8).

Legislation that requires a trial separation before a final divorce might seem to be an exception. The delay allows extramarital passion to calm down and reason to regain the upper hand. Yet with an exception that I discuss later, the delay is always imposed by the state rather than chosen by the spouses themselves at the time of marriage. The legal rights and duties of marriage come as a package. Even when the fact that two people marry shows that they prefer the “delay package” over mere cohabitation, they might have chosen an “instant package” with the possibility of divorce at will had that been available. Marriage would be an essential constraint rather than an incidental constraint only if the delay package was preferred both to cohabitation and to the instant package, because only in that case could restrictions on the freedom to divorce be the *motive* for marrying. Although I have in the past, along with others, used marriage as a standard case of precommitment, I now believe this to be a mistake, or at least misleading.³¹

30. Schelling (1999). Watson (1999) describes “the predicament of self-control” in similar terms: “Techniques of self-control often work by maintaining one’s focus against . . . distractions. But employing those techniques already takes an amount of focus that tends to dissolve precisely where it is needed.”

31. See also Montaigne (1991), p. 698: “We thought we were tying our marriage-knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and

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Gun-control legislation also works by imposing delays between the request for a gun and its delivery.³² Although these laws serve to protect citizens against fits of murderous passion, it is less plausible to view them as instances of intentional precommitment. Legislators or voters in a referendum are probably much more concerned with protecting themselves and the population at large against others than with self-binding in a literal sense (see also Chapter II). Those who are bound may welcome the ties – or not.

Montaigne noted that when emotions emerge suddenly and strongly we cannot control them, whereas when they are weak enough to be kept under control we may not notice them. He did not think that the problem was necessarily insuperable: “If each man closely spied upon the effects and attributes of the passions which have rule over him as I do upon those which hold sway over me, he would see them coming and slow down a little the violence of their assault. They do not always make straight for our throat: there are warnings and degrees.”³³ Yet almost all his practical advice takes a different form: we should avoid the occasions for strong emotions rather than try to stifle them when they arise. “For common souls like ours there is too much strain” in trying to resist or control the emotions.³⁴

Emotions are triggered by external events, but only if they come to our knowledge. To prevent the emotions, therefore, we may either ensure that these events do not occur or, if they do, that we do not come to know about them. Montaigne adopted both strategies: “I shun all occasions for annoyance and keep myself from learning about things going wrong.”³⁵ Concerning the first strategy, he refers to the example of King Cotys: “He paid handsomely when some beautiful and ornate tableware was offered to him, but since it was unusually fragile he immediately smashed the lot, ridding himself in time of an easy occasion for anger against his servants.” For himself, he adds, “I have likewise deliberately avoided confusions of interests; I have not sought properties adjoining those of close relatives or belonging to

affection. In Rome, on the contrary, what made marriages honoured and secure for so long a period was freedom to break them at will. Men loved their wives more because they could lose them; and during a period when anyone was quite free to divorce, more than five hundred years went by before a single one did so.” Montesquieu makes the same argument in *Lettres persanes* (Letter 116). See also Phillips (1988), Ch. 5.2.

32. I am grateful to David Laitin for bringing this issue to my attention.

33. Montaigne (1991), p. 1219. 34. *Ibid.*, p. 1148.

35. Montaigne (1991), p. 1075.

I.2. *Passion as a Reason for Self-Binding*

folk to whom I should be linked by close affection; from thence arises estrangement and dissension."³⁶ In *On Anger*, Seneca offers similar advice:

While we are sane, while we are ourselves, let us ask help against an evil that is powerful and oft indulged by us. Those who cannot carry their wine discreetly and fear that they will be rash and insolent in their cups, instruct their friends to remove them from the feast; those who have learned that they are unreasonable when they are sick, *give orders that in times of illness they are not to be obeyed.*³⁷

The second strategy is to shield oneself from knowledge of events that might make one angry or otherwise emotionally disturbed.³⁸ Referring to an old man whose servants abuse him without his knowing it, Montaigne observes that it "would make a good scholastic debate: whether or not he is better off as he is."³⁹ I suspect Montaigne would say that he isn't, and that the key factor is that the old man did not *deliberately* blind himself to what his servants were doing. This is what Montaigne himself did: "I prefer people to hide my losses and my troubles from me. . . . I prefer not to know about my estate-accounts so as to feel my losses less exactly. Whenever those who live with me lack affection and its duties I beg them to deceive me, paying me by

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 1147–48. 37. *On Anger*, III.xiii.5; my italics.

38. Tyler Cowen (personal communication) notes that some investment theories say that one should never look at one's portfolio. Whereas this advice could be based on the tendency to discount the future hyperbolically (see discussion at the end of I.3) or by a tendency to place excessive emphasis on recently acquired information (Bondt and Thaler 1985), it could also be justified by a tendency to react emotionally to good or bad news.

39. Montaigne (1991), p. 442. This observation prompts a couple of comparative remarks. First, note that the issue raised by Montaigne differs from the question whether it would be better to believe one's servants to be honest while in reality they are not or to believe them dishonest while in reality they are honest. Thus Gibbard (1986), p. 169, comments, "A jealous husband may . . . prefer a 'fool's hell' in which his suspicions rage but his wife is in fact faithful, to a 'fool's paradise' in which his suspicions are allayed but in fact he is unknowingly cuckolded." Second, we may compare Montaigne's dilemma with a similar conundrum raised by Tocqueville (1969, p. 317) in his discussion of American slavery. Tocqueville notes that "the Negro . . . admires his tyrants even more than he hates them and finds his joy and pride in a servile imitation of his oppressors" and asks whether he should "call it a blessing of God, or a last malediction of His anger, this disposition of the soul that makes men insensible to extreme misery and often even gives them a sort of depraved taste for the cause of their afflictions." Tocqueville and Montaigne both make the point that if well-being is bought at the cost of autonomy the price may be too high.

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putting a good face on things."⁴⁰ Seneca provides another example: "The great Gaius Caesar . . . used his victory most mercifully; having apprehended some packets of letters written to Gnaeus Pompeius by those who were believed to belong either to the opposing side or to the neutral party, he burned them. Although he was in the habit, within bounds, of indulging in anger, yet he preferred being unable to do so."⁴¹

Another situation where ignorance may be bliss is in matters of marital faithfulness. Montaigne writes, "Curiosity is always a fault; here it is baleful. It is madness to want to find out about an ill for which there is no treatment except the one which makes it worse and exacerbates it."⁴² In fact,

We should use our ingenuity to avoid making such useless discoveries which torture us. It was the custom of the Romans when returning home from a journey to send a messenger ahead to announce their arrival to their womenfolk so as not to take them unawares. That is why there is a certain people where the priest welcomes the bride and opens the proceedings on the wedding-night to remove from the groom any doubts and worries about whether she came to him virgin or already blighted by an *affaire*.⁴³

This is not like avoiding going on the scales to see if one has gained weight, or neglecting to make an appointment with a doctor to find out if one has some dread disease. Those self-deceptive practices are matters of individual information-avoidance, whereas Montaigne here is referring to custom and public policy.

The phenomenon of *regret-avoidance* can be an instance of either strategy. Consider an example suggested by Robert Sugden (personal communication). Suppose first that a driver who sees that traffic is very dense on the highway is deliberating whether to leave it for a smaller road. As the smaller road crosses the highway some miles further away, he knows that he will learn whether his decision was justified, and that if traffic on the highway is in fact going smoothly he

40. Montaigne (1991), pp. 731–32. There is another element at work too: "When I am on my travels, whoever has my purse has full charge of it without supervision. He could cheat me just as well if I kept accounts, and, unless he is a devil, by such reckless trust I oblige him to be honest" (pp. 1078–79). By "consciously [encouraging his] knowledge of his money to be somewhat vague and uncertain" (p. 1079), he worries less *and* ensures that there is less to be worried about. See also note 111.

41. *On Anger*, II.xxiii.4. 42. Montaigne (1991), p. 982.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 983.