

# The Hard Things about Hard Choices? A Reply to Chang

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I reply to Ruth Chang’s ‘What is so Hard about Hard Choices’.

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Ruth Chang has presented very insightful challenges and alternatives to the view I proposed in “The Hardness of the Practical Might” (Tenenbaum 2024) and I certainly will not be able to address all of her arguments here. However I will try to characterize more precisely the puzzle of incommensurable choices that I was trying to address,<sup>1</sup> discuss some potential differences about how we understand the nature of practical rationality, and then explain why I still think that the Extended Theory of Rationality (ETR), the theory of instrumental rationality I favour (together with the Kantian condition) provides a solution to this puzzle. Even though I cannot pretend that this is a fully persuasive response, I hope it will at least clarify the nature of our disagreements (and agreements).

Chang accurately describes the puzzle I propose as a tension between three claims that all seem to be correct. For reasons that will be clear below, I would not formulate claim [2] as Chang does. I would prefer to say that there is sufficient reason to choose any of the relevant options (or that none of the relevant options are defeated) rather than that “reasons for choosing have run out” (Chang, 2024, 273). At any rate, Chang and I are in agreement that [1] is correct: the choice among

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<sup>1</sup> I take to heart Chang’s misgivings about using ‘incommensurable’ in this context. But since this is the word I use in the original article (Tenenbaum 2024), it will be easier to proceed with the stipulative definition put forward there while mostly adhering to Chang’s terminology when discussing her view. I also fear that using ‘non-trichotomously related’ suggests a view according to which practical reason is fundamentally comparative, and, as I discuss below, this is a view I reject.

incommensurable options is (at least often) hard in some intuitive sense of ‘hard’. However, Chang thinks that we need a more precise account of this intuitive hardness before we can evaluate proposals that claim to answer the question of why these choices are hard “even if one knows that it is rationally permissible to choose either option” (Chang 2024, 273), and Chang claims that I fail to provide such an account.

I am not sure I agree with this characterization of what my argument needs. My starting point is simply that, intuitively, to use one of the central examples in “Hardness of the Practical Might”, when asking herself whether to retire early, Mary faces a hard choice even if she is in a position to know that she has sufficient reason to decide either way (or, that she knows that both options are rationally permissible). I then characterize various ways in which a choice can be hard, and I argue that (many) such choices among incommensurable options are *deliberatively* hard; moreover, in such cases the agent is *required* to deliberate before deciding (at least absent external pressures on the agent’s timeframe). If this is true, this form of ‘hardness’ is particularly puzzling as it is not clear what an agent would deliberate about once they understand that all the relevant options are permissible. Nothing Chang says seems to challenge the view that at least some choices among incommensurable options are hard in this manner; thus, even if Chang is right about her characterization of the hardness of non-trichotomous choices, we still need to account for why deliberation is appropriate in these contexts. I argue that ETR, together with the Kantian condition provides exactly such an account. Since I do not see how Chang can provide an alternative explanation of why these choices are *deliberatively* hard, I do not think that Chang’s proposed explanation is, on its own, a direct challenge to the central argument of the paper. On the other hand, I think when Chang proposes the particular definition of “hard choice” (274), she is in fact proposing a *different* way in which choices among non-trichotomously related items are hard, a way that she argues my view does not account for. And, of course, if she is right about that, this would be a serious challenge to my argument, especially if my account were incompatible with a plausible account of this other form of hardness. But I have doubts whether choices among incommensurable options are hard exactly in the way characterized by Chang’s definition. The crucial point is condition (iv); namely, that “the difficulty in arriving at a rational choice is *distinctive* to cases that meet conditions (i) – (iii)” (274). Chang says that (iv) is needed since “the explanation of the hardness of a hard choice should involve appeal to difficulty that is

not also present in easy choices” (Chang 2024, 274). But (iv) seems to impose a significantly stronger desideratum: since (i) implies that the options are not trichotomously related, (iv) presupposes that *choices among incommensurable options are distinctively hard*. I do not think anything about our ordinary experience making these choices commit us to accepting that there is something *uniquely* hard in these circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Chang is right that what makes a choice hard needs to be something that, well, is *distinctive of hard choices*. And if my account cannot distinguish between easy and hard choices more generally, then, it certainly should be jettisoned. Fortunately, I think this is not true. But I think this point will be clearer if I first go over some background issues that might be the source of some of the disagreement here.

Let me start by going over a point that I should have emphasized more in “Hardness of the Practical Might”. It is a central tenet of the theory of rationality I defend that rational agency is, at its fundamental level, non-comparative.<sup>3</sup> On this view, an agent acts instrumentally rationally insofar as they take sufficient means to their ends. Let us say that by some miracle I am left for a week with just two ends: playing the piano and spending (enough) time on the beach.<sup>4</sup> If by the end of the week, I (non-accidentally) played the piano often enough and spent some time on the beach I was fully rational throughout the week, or, in my preferred language, I manifested my rational powers flawlessly. Now at every moment I am playing the piano, I could have gotten up and gone to the beach, and every moment I were at the beach, I could have turned around and head back to play the piano. But since each of these momentary choices would be compatible with my pursuit of these two ends, comparative attitudes are irrelevant here; I need not have any comparative attitude to make my choice of staying home and playing the piano rational. No need to postulate picking or plumping here, my rational pursuit of each end fully explains my actions.<sup>5</sup> However, given that, on this view, it is also true that particular ends generate in some cases end-relative preference orderings, each of

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<sup>2</sup> For an argument that choices among incommensurable options are not *distinctively* hard, see Andreou (2024).

<sup>3</sup> Tenenbaum (2020, chap. 3). A summary of the main arguments of the book appear in Tenenbaum (2023) and in a series of posts in the *The Brains Blog* (Tenenbaum 2021).

<sup>4</sup> We need to imagine that my bodily functions are being taken care by an angel or something like that.

<sup>5</sup> I also think that my choice of, say, playing the piano is, at least in the ‘good case’ in which I manifest my capacity to act rationally, fully explained by the fact that it is (part of a) sufficient means to playing the piano and my implicit awareness of the principle of instrumental reasoning. See (Tenenbaum, chapter 2).

these situations is potentially a case in which the small improvement argument applies. If I learn that the better beach is the West Beach it would settle that I must go to it rather than to the East Beach, but it would not make it any less rational for me to play the piano instead. I think this is a way in which options can be incommensurable in the sense defined by the small improvement argument that is not covered by any of Chang's three options (Chang 2024, 274–276), since they all presuppose that a comparative relation must hold between the options insofar as one of the options is rational. Of course, I cannot argue here that this proposal does better than one that relies more extensively on comparative attitudes,<sup>6</sup> but the important point for our purposes here is that this account is not in conflict (and indeed better reflects) our ordinary experience of, and intuitive judgments regarding, choices in which these two ends, or similar ends, are involved.

Despite Chang's claim that my view seems to make deliberation exceedingly hard in each case, ETR here seems to be at a great advantage over other theories of instrumental rationality. On classical decision theory, for instance, at each moment I need to have a preference ordering that determines whether I must pursue one of these options at this moment; this is a certainly a much more demanding theory of rationality. Of course, this toy example is oversimplified. Let us bring this example closer to a normal situation, in which I have these ends *among many other ends*. I am vacationing and I do want to spend most of my time playing the piano and enjoying the beaches, but I still have my ends of keeping myself alive, being a good parent to my children, ensuring that my house back in the city is inhabitable, and so forth. Exactly because the fundamental attitudes for ETR are not comparative, not much will change when we introduce these ends. Given that, at least as far as I know, what I do during my vacation week will not prevent me from pursuing sufficient means to any of these ends, I will be fully rational by doing exactly what I did in our original example (give or take leaving some time to provide for my basic needs given that no angels are likely to be present in a more realistic version of the vignette). Someone may object that there is *always* an epistemic possibility that some of these ends will be affected, but unless I have reason to believe that this is a significant likelihood, this mere possibility changes nothing in determining how a rational agent would

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<sup>6</sup> See my Tenenbaum (2020) for a detailed argument. As the appeal here to end-relative preferences and Pareto preferences suggests, I also do not want to deny that sometimes comparative attitudes are important; so this view is fully compatible with much Chang's seminal work on the need of a fourth comparative relation of parity.

act, at least according to ETR.<sup>7</sup> And of course if suddenly I learn one of my other ends would be undermined if I did not act on it (say, if turns out that my student needs to have her defence in the next few hours, otherwise she will not be able to graduate), I must take the sufficient means to this end. Rather than being particularly demanding, this is all quite intuitive.

Chang correctly zooms in a complication generated by Pareto Preferences. Suppose there is now an excellent public piano on the West Beach; in fact, a piano that is actually significantly better than any other I could use during my vacation. Then I have what I call a “Pareto Preference” for playing piano at the beach, and such Pareto preferences can single out an option as the only rational option. At least in our original idealized vignette it does: since only these two ends are relevant, I cannot, insofar as I am rational, stay indoors in such a situation. However, Chang worries that potential ways in which a certain course of action could be Pareto preferred will put pressure in favour of deliberating even in situations in which a decision is intuitively easy. But rationality is relative to what we know (or are at least in a position to know in the relevant sense); perhaps buying the winning lottery ticket is the best investment I can make, but because I have no way of knowing what the winning ticket is, this fact is irrelevant to the pursuit of my ends. Similarly, the mere possibility that Mary’s company could float new retirement options tomorrow (as opposed to, say, a serious chance they will do so) does not change the nature of her options. And given that any human being has the end of not deliberating too much (as a necessary condition of pursuing many of our other ends), we often have sufficient reason to stop deliberation.<sup>8</sup> So, in many cases, our decisions are easy on my view for the mundane reason that in many choice situations the outcome of deliberation is clear enough without much effort, and even though we could go on deliberating, we have sufficient reason to stop. It is true that on my view not all cases of incommensurable options will be deliberatively hard, but this is also intuitive. In our vignette, I can through the course of my vacation realize both my

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<sup>7</sup> For more detail on how risk and uncertainty is incorporated into the theory, see (Tenenbaum 2020, chap. 9).

<sup>8</sup> I should also say that ETR (and, to my mind, any plausible theory of instrumental rationality) allows to act counterpreferentially in such cases. I argue that this is a consequence of the fact that our ends are vague and indeterminate. If there were no such permissions, I would never be rationally permitted to write my book, since at any particular moment I would prefer to watch short videos online than get back to work (given that one more minute of watching videos would make no difference to the quality of my book). See (Tenenbaum 2020, chap. 4; Tenenbaum and Raffman 2012).

ends in an acceptable manner, so I could simply move from the beach going to piano playing without much consideration. Even in these relatively trivial cases of incommensurability, I *could* deliberate as I make a plan for when to go to the beach and when to play the piano. But, typically, deliberation in such a case would be rather easy given that I have no reason to suspect that any other of my ends is involved, or that some complex arrangement is in some way Pareto superior. However, deliberation here (in moderation of course!) is merely permitted, while given the importance Mary gives (and ought to give) to her decision of whether to retire, she is *required* to deliberate before making a decision. In the paper, I argue that the Kantian condition (together with ETR), provides exactly the possibility of explaining why this requirement is in place, why Mary must engage in some difficult deliberation even if she knows that she can both permissibly choose to retire and to keep working. Chang is also correct, however, that my account does not show that the hardness of Mary's choice is distinctive in virtue of the fact that her choices are incommensurable; the same form of 'hardness' would apply to choices in which I am still trying to figure out whether a certain option is permissible at all. But as I said above, I do not think that showing that the choice among incommensurable options is *distinctively* hard should be among our *de-siderata*.

In this context, let me make a couple of observations about the possibility of well-formed choice situations. My view is that practical reasoning never *concludes* in a well-formed choice situation as Chang describes it.<sup>9</sup> Let us suppose I am making an investment and I have to decide whether to invest in bonds or mutual funds. This is as well-formed as a choice gets: there is possibly only one relevant consideration (expected financial gain), and the facts that bear on my decision are relatively clear—or at the very least we might assume that they are. So far this is a well-formed choice. But making this choice is not the conclusion of practical reasoning. Suppose this decision turns out to be quite easy: investing in mutual funds is clearly the best option. However, arriving at this conclusion is certainly not enough for me to act rationally. I still need to *do* it; at the very least I need to contact my banker and give her the go ahead. If I stop at the decision and do nothing else, I will have acted irrationally. I could certainly place the call right now, but is the choice situation of whether I should call right now well formed? It seems unlikely; after all, there is so

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<sup>9</sup> See Tenenbaum (2007).

*much* I could do right now.<sup>10</sup> However, in this particular decision (that still needs to be implemented in action), I did, in an important sense, choose from a well-formed choice set. After all, we can be confident that for any particular action of investing money that I perform, it will be rational only if it is an action of investing money in mutual funds and that every action of investing in mutual funds will be rational relative to the ends involved in the decision of how to invest the money (at least if we add a few further assumptions). But part of what I tried to show in the paper is that this is not the case when the choice among incommensurable options is hard. In Mary's case, the decision to retire early could not ensure that any action of her of engaging in early retirement is rational relative to the relevant ends, and it seems this point generalizes to any cases in which choices among incommensurable options are similarly hard.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Chang is right that there is something uniquely hard about non-trichotomously related choices. I find her account of the way in which they are volitionally hard compelling and fascinating and I cannot give its proper due here. Instead, I will end by briefly mentioning my reasons to be still somewhat skeptical of Chang's proposal while also proposing a way in which other views (including my own) could allow that there is something distinctively hard about these choices. I am myself unsure that the will could have the role that Chang ascribes to it; I am not sure how to understand a capacity for rational agency that can also create reasons *ex nihilo* (as it seems to me Chang is committed to accepting), but this is too large an issue to pursue here.<sup>12</sup> So let us grant that this is within the powers of the will. But then why is it "volitionally hard" to create reasons in this way? A strenuous exercise of the will seems to be connected with the difficulty of the obstacles, much like a challenging exercise of any capacity seems to be connected to the difficulties it faces (it is hard to swim in the ocean because the currents pull you away from the intended target). But would not the will then be at its most comfortable when it is

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<sup>10</sup> Part of the argument for ETR is that a theory of instrumental rationality that start from comparative attitudes can never explain how our actions are ever expressions of our rational nature, or even how they could in any sense approximate any kind of ideal of rationality.

<sup>11</sup> As I concede in the original paper (and above), there could be cases of incommensurable choices that are affectively hard but not deliberatively hard, as well as cases which are not hard at all (as, at least in some instance, the choice between *éclair* and ice-cream for dessert). But, again, I think this is all as it should be.

<sup>12</sup> Part of the issue here might be Kantian conviction that the will is not in any way separable from the capacity for rational action; that is, that the "will is nothing but practical reason" (Kant [1785] 2012, 4:412), so there is nothing that the will could do to 'create reasons'.

completely free, when it needs to follow nothing but its own direction while nothing can pressure it in the opposing direction?<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, I think we can explain why there might be a distinctive form of *affective* hardness with meager resources. As I argued in the original paper, often when I choose among incommensurable options my choice is affectively hard, as I forego an important value. However, this kind of hardness is also not unique to choice among incommensurable options.<sup>14</sup> To go back to another example in the original paper, the same kind of affective hardness is present when I leave my grandmother to spend her last days alone in order to save my children from the Nazis, even though it is clear that this is the only justified decision in this situation. But when I leave my grandmother behind, at least I can tell myself that my hands were tied; I *had* to save my children in this situation. On the other hand, if Sartre's student leaves his mother behind to join the resistance,<sup>15</sup> he cannot say the same thing to himself. Assuming he knew he had sufficient reason to choose either, or that the reasons were on a par, he must also accept that he *could* have stayed with his mother. I'm not sure how much one can hang on this thought, but it does seem to me that this is a distinctive way in which his choice is affectively hard. On the other hand, I do feel the intuitive pull of a view of the will in which it can not only act from grounds that it comprehends,<sup>16</sup> but is also the originator of grounds of action—the unmoved mover in the space of reasons, so to speak. This kind of view has been proven attractive to many philosophers, and Chang provides an especially lucid and compelling version of such an idea; here I have only tried to hint at possible reasons for resistance.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are difficulties in leaving behind the option not chosen, but this is the hardness that is present also in some choices that are trichotomously related (Andreou 2024). But there is no pressure to *commit* in the opposing direction (as there is no reason to do so).

<sup>14</sup> See Andreou (2024).

<sup>15</sup> Needless to say, this is the example Sartre brings up for different purposes in Sartre ([1945] 2007).

<sup>16</sup> The idea of reason as capacity to comprehend has been recently developed, as an interpretation of Kant, in Schafer (2023).



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