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Jon Elster
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Ulysses Unbound

Common sense suggests that it is always preferable to have more options than fewer, and better to have more knowledge than less. This provocative book argues that, very often, common sense fails. Sometimes it is simply the case that less is more; people may benefit from being constrained in their options or from being ignorant.

The three long essays that constitute this book revise and expand the ideas developed in Jon Elster's classic study *Ulysses and the Sirens*. It is not simply a new edition of the earlier book, though; many of the issues merely touched on before are explored here in much more detail.

The first chapter is a survey of the ways in which and the reasons for which an individual might limit his or her freedom of action, with examples ranging from religious fundamentalism to addiction. The second chapter criticizes Elster's own influential theory that political constitutions can be regarded as precommitment devices. His view is now that in politics people mainly want to bind others, not themselves. The third chapter discusses constraints in the creation of works of art, with examples taken from novels, films, and jazz.

In the conclusion Elster shows how these seemingly disparate examples reveal similar patterns, so much so that he proposes a new field of study: constraint theory.

The book is written in Elster's characteristically vivid style and will interest professionals and students in philosophy, political science, psychology, and economics.

Jon Elster is Robert K. Merton Professor of Social Science at Columbia University. His most recent book with Cambridge was *Alchemies of the Mind*.

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JON ELSTER
Columbia University

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For Aanund, Steve, and Tom – partners in self-binding

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The title essay of *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1979, rev. ed. 1984) was a discussion of precommitment or self-binding, in which I tried to characterize the concept and illustrate it with examples from various domains of human (and animal) behavior. In the present volume I take a fresh look at the question.

In Chapter I, I make a stab at a more systematic analysis than the one I provided in the earlier treatment. The main analytical idea is a distinction between reasons for precommitment and devices for precommitment. As it turns out, some of the phenomena I discuss appear both as reasons and as devices. People may precommit themselves against anger, but also precommit themselves to anger to get their way.

Chapter II reflects a change in my views about *constitutions* as precommitment devices. I have been much influenced by a critical comment on *Ulysses and the Sirens* by my friend and mentor, the late Norwegian historian Jens Arup Seip: "In politics, people never try to bind themselves, only to bind others." Although that statement is too stark, I now think it closer to the truth than the view that self-binding is the essence of constitution-making. Ulysses bound *himself* to the mast, but he also put wax in the ears of the rowers. Similarly, Plutarch tells us, "The friends of Satyrus the Samian, when he was to plead, stopped up his ears with wax, that he might not spoil his case through temper at the insults of his enemies" (*On the Control of Anger*).

Chapter III explores the idea that self-imposed or externally imposed limitations may enhance the value of *works of art*. In art, as elsewhere, less can be more. Artistic choice, to be meaningful, cannot be exercised in a field of possibilities unlimited. Although my expertise in this field is far from extensive, to put it mildly, I hope the application of some rudimentary economic ideas, notably that of

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maximization under constraints, may prove useful to readers who know more about aesthetics than I do.

The ideas in Chapters I and II have been developed in close and regular collaboration with several groups of colleagues. The general framework of these chapters owes much to the discussions in the Working Group on Intertemporal Choice, organized by George Loewenstein and supported by the Russell Sage Foundation. Members included George Ainslie, Robert Frank, the late Richard Herrnstein, George Loewenstein, Walter Mischel, Drazen Prelec, Howard Rachlin, Thomas Schelling, and Richard Thaler. Their influence will be evident, notably in Chapter I. The influence of Aanund Hylland and Ole-Jørgen Skog has also been considerable. Douglass Baird and Richard Epstein advised me on the use of law as a precommitment device.

After the fall of Communism in 1989, I worked closely with Stephen Holmes, Aanund Hylland, Claus Offe, Wiktor Osiatynski, Ulrich Preuss, and Cass Sunstein in studying the creation of new political systems in Eastern Europe. By observing the process of constitution-making in Eastern Europe I was led to think about constitutions more generally, from Athenian democracy through the Federal Convention to the present. My work on constitutionalism has been supported by the Center for the Study of Constitutionalism in Eastern Europe at the University of Chicago Law School and by the IRIS project at the University of Maryland. I have also benefited much from discussing the politics of precommitment in the "Chicago–New York group on political theory": Robert Barros, James Fearon, Russell Hardin, Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, Adam Przeworski, and Susan Stokes. I am grateful, finally, to Mogens Herman Hansen for his comments on an article closely related to the discussion of Athenian politics in Section II.6.

The ideas about art developed in Chapter III have evolved in a more haphazard manner. I am grateful to G. A. Cohen, Hans Fredrik Dahl, Jakob Elster, Martin Elster, James Fearon, Claudine Frank, Joseph Frank, Diego Gambetta, Karen Marie Ganer, Alastair Hannay, Stein Haugom Olsen, and Thomas Pavel for their comments on early (in some cases very early) versions of that chapter. I also benefited much from discussing this chapter in a group that included Brian Barry, John Ferejohn, Stephen Holmes, Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, Adam Przeworski, Jack Rakove, and John Roemer.

I received written comments on earlier versions of this book from George Ainslie, Tyler Cowen, James Fearon, Robert Frank,

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Brian Glenn, Avram Goldstein, Olav Gjelsvik, David Chambliss Johnston, David Laibson, David Laitin, Jørg Mørland, Claus Offe, Wiktor Osiatynski, John Roemer, Michel Troper, Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, Ole-Jørgen Skog, Arthur Stinchcombe, and Cass Sunstein. Their comments, while sometimes chastising and critical, were enormously helpful. I am particularly grateful to Robert Frank for detailed written comments on Section I.5, to John Alcorn for numerous observations, and to Ulrich Preuss, who took the time to write an essay on precommitment in response to the manuscript. I am also grateful for the comments by two anonymous reviewers, one of whom in particular forced me to rethink many issues. Finally, I want to thank Aida Llabaly for helpful and competent assistance, my research assistants Mark Groombridge and Joshua Rosenstein, as well as Cheryl Seleski and the marvelously efficient library staff at the Russell Sage Foundation, which provided me with a fellowship to finish this book.

The book is dedicated to Stephen Holmes, Aanund Hylland, and Thomas Schelling. My discussions with them over the last twenty years have helped me flesh out – and revise – the sometimes programmatic and sketchy arguments of the earlier book.

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