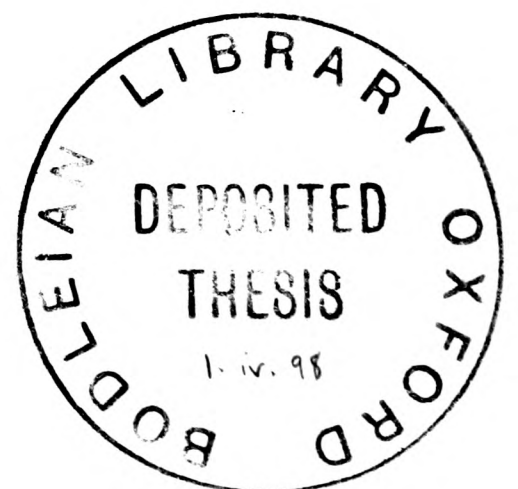


# **Incomparability and Practical Reason**

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The number of words *in* the main body of this thesis including endnotes is exactly 75,000.

**Abstract**  
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In this thesis I aim to answer two questions: Are alternatives for choice ever incomparable? and, In what ways can items be compared? I argue that there is no incomparability among bearers of value and that the ways in which items can be compared are richer and more varied than commonly supposed. The two questions are closely related; in arguing against incomparability a positive picture of comparability emerges. The case against incomparability is a case for a new conception of comparability more capacious than has been traditionally conceived. This 'broad' conception of comparability has three distinctive features: it distinguishes incomparability from *non*comparability, it includes the possibility of 'emphatic' comparability, or comparisons between 'higher' and 'lower' goods; and it makes logical space for a fourth generic value relation – what I shall call 'on a par' – beyond the standard trichotomy of relations of 'better than', 'worse than', and 'equally good'. Each of these features arises out of defects of certain incomparabilist arguments. Indeed, the approach to the broad conception of comparability via examination of incomparabilist arguments makes clear that much of the intuitive pull of incomparability depends on a narrow and impoverished conception of comparability.

Investigation of comparability and incomparability is motivated by a proposed substantive account of practical justification according to which there can be no justified choice without the comparability of the alternatives. The existence of widespread incomparability, then, undermines the rationality of practical life. This thesis' argument against incomparability and for a broad conception of comparability serves to vindicate the role of practical reason in choice.

*To Derek Parfit*

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- ◆ **We may take Fancy for a companion, but we must follow Reason as our guide.**

-Samuel Johnson: Letter to Boswell, 3/15/1774

## Introduction

There is a growing interest among moral, political, and legal philosophers in what is called ‘the incommensurability of values’. This label, however, is doubly unfortunate. For one thing, the interest is not usually in values *per se* but in the items that bear value and, specifically, in bearers of value that figure as alternatives for choice. For another thing, there is disagreement over what ‘incommensurability’ means.<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers define as ‘incommensurable’ items that cannot be precisely measured by a single scale of units of value.<sup>2</sup> Others understand ‘incommensurable’ to mean ‘incomparable’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, almost all philosophical discussion of incomparability has been conducted under this label.

It is sometimes thought that the first idea entails the second – that if there is no single scale of value in terms of which two items can be precisely measured, they are incomparable.<sup>4</sup> But it is a platitude of economic and measurement theory that the lack of such a scale does not entail incomparability. Given that the two ideas are distinct, let us henceforth reserve the term ‘incommensurable’ for items that cannot be precisely measured by some common scale of units of value and the term ‘incomparable’ for items that cannot be compared.<sup>5</sup>

Recent discussions of incommensurability have revolved around its putative significance for the valuation of goods, maximizing theories of right action, akrasia, and even the very subject-matter of ethics. So, for example, legal theorists like Margaret Jane Radin, Cass Sunstein, and Richard Warner have argued that since the merits of certain items—e.g., body parts, pristine beaches, and love relationships – cannot be measured by money, it follows that economic approaches to valuation such as cost-benefit analysis are inappropriate for these goods.<sup>6</sup> John Finnis, Michael Stocker, and David Wiggins have argued variously that the existence of incommensurable goods sounds the death knell of maximizing theories of practical reasoning. Each has offered an alternative to maximization that is supposedly able to account for the existence of incommensurable alternatives for choice.<sup>7</sup> Wiggins and Martha Nussbaum have thought that the correct account of weakness of will essentially involves appeal to the incommensurability of good-making features of the alternatives.<sup>8</sup> Stocker has suggested that the existence of incommensurables invites us to rethink the very subject matter of ethics: the failure of maximizing, action-guiding ethics paves the way for an ethics that is instead non-maximizing and attitude-guiding.<sup>9</sup>

Interesting as these claims are, in this dissertation I set aside the first idea—incommensurability—and focus on the second—incomparability. I do so for two reasons. Despite recent interest in incomparability, philosophical investigation of the notion is almost nonexistent. More importantly, though, incomparability is ultimately the more significant notion. It is doubtful whether incommensurability has the significance that incommensurabilists attribute to it. The various views usually under attack—cost-benefit

valuation, maximization, and so on—have available to them ways of circumventing the problems that incommensurability poses; for precise measurability of items by a single unit of value is not essential to any of these views. Comparability, however, is essential. How could things be valued in terms of trade-offs between costs and benefits if costs and benefits are incomparable? How could value be maximized if its instances cannot be compared? The purported significance of incommensurability is less controversial if claimed for incomparability instead.

In this dissertation I argue that the comparability of alternatives is necessary for the possibility of justified choice among them; if alternatives are incomparable, there is no justification for choice. The defense of this claim requires making out a case for a substantive view of normativity and its connection with reasons. If the substantive view is correct, incomparability among alternatives has critical practical consequences. For wherever items are incomparable, practical reason cannot guide choice between them. And if incomparability is widespread, whether it is possible to lead a practically rational life is very much at issue.

The bulk of the dissertation is devoted to answering two questions: Is there any incomparability among bearers of value? and, In what ways can items be compared? I argue that we have good reason to think that there is no incomparability among bearers of value and that the ways in which items can be compared is richer and more varied than commonly supposed. The two questions are closely related; in the course of the critique of incomparabilist arguments, a positive picture of comparability emerges. The case against incomparability is a case for a new conception of comparability, one that is more capacious than has been traditionally conceived. This ‘broad’ conception of comparability has three distinctive features: it distinguishes incomparability from *non*comparability, it includes the possibility of ‘emphatic’ comparability, or comparisons between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ goods; and it makes logical space for a fourth generic value relation – what I shall call ‘on a par’ – beyond the standard relations of ‘better than’, ‘worse than’, and ‘equally good’. Each of these features arises out of considering the defects of certain incomparabilist arguments. Indeed, the approach to the broad conception via examination of incomparabilist arguments makes clear that much of the intuitive pull of incomparability depends on a narrow and impoverished conception of comparability.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 1 defines incomparability, offers an account of how comparisons are determined, and investigates one way in which comparisons might be numerically modelled. The proposed definition highlights an important feature of the intuitive notion. It is almost universally assumed that if two items are comparable, the first must be better than the second, worse than it, or the items must be equally good. Call this *The Trichotomy Thesis*. Just about every definition of incomparability assumes that the Trichotomy Thesis is true. But the Trichotomy Thesis is a substantive view about the logical space of comparability and is no part of the intuitive notion of incomparability. Indeed, as we see later in the thesis, the Trichotomy Thesis is false. Our definition of

incomparability maintains the required neutrality on this matter.

All comparisons must proceed with respect to a 'covering value'. The value with respect to which a comparison is made, and in particular, its structure, determines comparisons with respect to that value. An account of the determination of comparisons, then, requires an account of the structure of values. Thus, our investigation of comparisons involves resuscitation of an unfashionable field of philosophy, axiology. An account of the structure of values is proposed and a corresponding account of the determination of comparisons is given. If these accounts are correct, a striking claim about the connection between values and evaluative comparison follows. The structure of values is in part constituted by comparisons of their bearers. Any theory of value that treats value as logically prior to evaluative comparisons is thereby flawed.

Chapter 1 ends by examining a model for numerically representing comparisons adapted from the standard model used by economists and decision theorists for numerically representing preferences. It is argued that the Standard Model is more powerful than many philosophers commonly suppose. This is not to say that the Standard Model is a satisfactory, however. The Standard Model depends on the truth of the Trichotomy Thesis and therefore cannot capture comparisons between items not related by the standard trichotomy. An alternative, nonstandard model of numerical representation is proposed in chapter 5.

Chapter 2 takes up the task of motivating investigation of comparability and incomparability. Here the connection between practical reason and comparability is explored. The claim that the justification of choice depends on the comparability of alternatives is defended and a general account of the normativity of justifying reasons proposed. Without comparability, practical reason must fail to guide choice.

In chapter 3, the attack on incomparabilist arguments begins. Six common types of argument for incomparability are described and shown to be unconvincing. These are: (1) arguments from the diversity of values, (2) arguments from 'bidirectionality', that is, the condition that one item is better in some respects but worse in others, (3) arguments from the 'noncalculative' nature of practical deliberation (4) arguments from the rational irresolvability of conflicts, (5) arguments from the incomparability of values, and (6) arguments from the lack of an appropriate covering value. The important distinction between incomparability and *non*comparability is developed from discussion of the sixth type of argument, and a common practical predicament thought to be paradigmatic of incomparability is defused.

Though these incomparabilist arguments fail, three more promising lines of incomparabilist argument remain. These are taken up in turn in chapters 4, 5 and 6. In chapter 4, the thought that some goods are constitutively incomparable with others is examined. It is argued that the cases to which such a thought most plausibly applies are better understood as cases of 'emphatic' comparability, that is, the comparability that holds between certain 'higher' and 'lower' goods. An account of the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' goods is proposed.

Chapter 5 confronts what is perhaps the strongest ground for incomparability.

This is the plausibility of judging that there are some items, neither of which is better than the other, for which a small improvement in one does not thereby make the improved item better. That there are such cases, however, shows only that between some items, the traditional trichotomy of relations, ‘better than’, ‘worse than’ and ‘equally good’, may fail to hold, but it does not show that the items are incomparable. An argument for the claim that some such items must be comparable is offered. Thus, if none of the traditional trichotomy of relations holds and yet the items are comparable, they must be related by a fourth relation beyond the traditional trichotomy: on a par. The rest of the chapter is taken up with an intuitive account of parity and a sketch of a numerical model of comparison that provides an alternative to the Standard Model.

Chapter 6 considers the final type of incomparabilist argument which moves from the vagueness of values to the incomparability of items bearing those values. It is argued that the vagueness of values or value concepts cannot be grounds for incomparability. The bulk of the chapter is concerned with an ingenious argument recently made by John Broome that threatens both the possibility of parity and the possibility of incomparability. Broome argues that any failure of the standard trichotomy to hold must be an *indeterminate* failure, and in particular must be due to the vagueness of comparative concepts. Since parity implies a determinate failure of the standard trichotomy, if Broome is right, what has been thought to be a fourth relation – on a par – is not a *sui generis* fourth relation but the upshot of the vagueness of comparisons. And since incomparability, whether or not the Trichotomy Thesis is true, entails the determinate failure of the standard trichotomy, Broome’s argument blocks incomparability. It turns out, however, that Broome’s argument rests on a false principle. Therefore, the possibility of parity and of incomparability are, for the time being, secure. The dissertation closes with a suggestion for how judgements of parity might be resolved into practical choices.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is another idea that goes under the label but which does not apply to objects of choice. This is the idea, spawned by the writings of Thomas Kuhn, that understanding or evaluation across different conceptual schemata is impossible. Kuhn himself understood by ‘incommensurability’ the untranslatability of different theories of science. He saw his notion of untranslatability as a metaphorical rendering of the Pythagorean notion of incommensurability described below. See Thomas S. Kuhn, “Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability”, *Philosophy of Science Association* 2: (1982), 670-671. Illuminating discussion of the problem of incommensurability across ethical schemata can be found in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 1; Gopal Svreenivasan, “On Alien Moral Worlds” (unpublished ms.); Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 183-198; and Alasdair MacIntyre “Relativism, Power, and Philosophy,” in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> This use has an etymological pedigree. The Pythagoreans first determined as ‘incommensurable’ the diameter and side of a regular pentagon: the proportional lengths could not be expressed in terms of integers, and thus it was thought that there was no single scale of units in terms of which their lengths could be precisely measured. This is not an example of incommensurability by modern lights, however; unlike the Greeks who had not recognized irrational numbers as such, we can represent the ratios in terms of the reals. There is some disagreement among scholars as to when and with what mathematical object incommensurability was first discovered. There is no doubt, however, that the discovery was of profound importance to the Pythagoreans because, as one commentator puts it, “[the discovery] destroyed with one stroke the belief that everything could be expressed in integers, on which the whole Pythagorean philosophy up to then had been based.” Kurt von Fritz, “The Discovery of Incommensurability by Hippasus of Metapontum,” in David Furley and R. E. Allen, eds., *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 1:407. Legend has it that Hippasus of Metapontum, thought by many to have discovered the existence of incommensurables, was drowned at sea by the gods for making public his discovery. See also Thomas Heath, *A History of Greek Mathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 1:65, 154-157.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 167: “When a choice has been made between such competing alternatives it may be defended as proper on the ground that it was for the ‘public good’ or the ‘common good’. It is not clear what these phrases mean, since there seems to be no scale by which contributions of the various alternatives to the common good can be measured and the greater identified.” For a good summary of the line of reasoning leading to this conclusion (which he does not endorse), see Bernard Williams, “Conflicts of Values,” in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> For a catalogue of other notions which are sometimes confused with incomparability, see James Griffin, “Incommensurability: What’s the Problem?” in Ruth Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), henceforth cited as *IIPR*. See also my discussion in chapters 3 and 6 below where I distinguish the indeterminacy of comparison from incomparability.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Jane Radin, "Compensation and Commensurability," *Duke Law Journal*, 43 (1993): 56-86; Cass Sunstein, "Incommensurability and Valuation in Law," *Michigan Law Review*, 79 (1994):779-861 and "Incommensurability and Kinds of Valuation: Some Applications in Law," *IIPR*; Richard Warner, "How Shall I Compare Thee: Incommensurability in Law" (unpublished ms). See also Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Anderson and Richard H. Pildes, "Slingshot Arrows at Democracy: Social Choice Theory, Value Pluralism, and Democratic Politics," *Columbia Law Review*, 90 (1990): 2121-2214. Anderson and Pildes are concerned with incomparability, not incommensurability, but for reasons that will become clear in my discussion of Anderson in chapter 3, this difference may not be significant.

<sup>7</sup> John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), ch. 5, sec. 6, see esp. pp. 112-113, see also his "Commensuration and Public Reason", *IIPR*; Michael Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict and Maximization," *IIPR*; and his *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); David Wiggins, "Incommensurability: Four Proposals," *IIPR*; his "Deliberation and Practical Reason", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 76 (1975-1976): pp. 29-51, reprinted in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 221-240, and more generally his *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 215-238.

<sup>8</sup> David Wiggins, "Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 79 (1978-1979): pp. 251-277, reprinted in Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, pp. 241-266, and in his *Needs, Values, Truth*, pp. 239-267. See also Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 106-121. Compare Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ch. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict and Maximization," *IIPR*; and his *Plural and Conflicting Values*. See also Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*; and Gerald Gaus, *Value and Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> The strategy of broadening the conception of comparability invites the charge of verbal vacuity. But the account of comparability sketched does not define away incomparability; there is conceptual space for incomparability, but, as I argue, there is also good reason to think that it does not obtain.

## CHAPTER 1

### INCOMPARABILITY AND COMPARISONS

#### 1. Incomparability: The Basic Notion

We start with a rough definition of incomparability: two items are incomparable if there is no positive value relation that holds between them. The notion of a positive value relation and, correspondingly, of a positive comparison, rests on the general distinction between positive and negative claims (or facts). A positive claim describes how things are, while a negative claim describes how things are not. So, for example, the claim that Mary loves John is positive, while the claim that it is not the case that she loves him is negative. The distinction might be put metaphorically as follows: Imagine the world as a vast painting. The painting can be completely described by true claims about the colour of each region. Positive claims aim to report the colour of a region of the painting, while negative ones only aim to indicate how regions are not coloured. The claim that a positive value relation holds between two items – i.e., a positive comparison – attempts to say what the colour is in that part of the world; in saying that a positive relation holds between two items one is saying something about what their relation is, not merely saying what their relation is not. A negative comparison aims not to say what is the colour of part of the world but to say what it is not. ‘Better than’, ‘less kind than’, and ‘as cruel as’ are positive value relations, while ‘not better than’, ‘if kind, not much more kind than’ and ‘neither crueler than nor kinder than’ are not. If items are incomparable, nothing can be said about what value relation holds between them. This is not to say that nothing at all can be said about their relative merits. Though in Sartre’s famous case, going off to fight the war and staying home to care for one’s mother may be incomparable, it may nevertheless be true that going off to fight in the war is the more patriotic, that neither option is worse than the other, and that they may both be better than spending one’s days in a gambling hall. If items are incomparable, one can say what their relation is not and perhaps what their relation is to other items. But nothing can be said about what relation holds between them.

Although the distinction between positive and negative claims is deeply intuitive, some metaphysicians have denied its coherence. It may seem unwise, then, for our definition of incomparability to depend on it. I address this worry later in the chapter by offering an alternative, equivalent definition that does not rely on the distinction. However, because the distinction is so deeply intuitive and its rejection, I think, largely motivated by controversial theoretical pre-commitments, we shall persist in building our definition around it.

It is almost universally assumed that the logical space of positive value relations for any two items is exhausted by the trichotomy of relations, better than, worse than, and equally good. Call this assumption *The Trichotomy Thesis*. According to this thesis, if

one item is neither better nor worse than another and yet the items are not equally good, nothing affirmative can be said about what relation holds between them: they are incomparable. Thus, the Trichotomy Thesis gives rise to what we might call a ‘trichotomous’ definition of incomparability. But the Trichotomy Thesis is a substantive thesis that requires defense, and we should be careful not to build it into the definition of the intuitive notion of incomparability. Much of rational choice theory can be seen as making just this mistake, taking as definitional of the notion what is in fact substantive. Our definition of incomparability is neutral as to which positive value relations there are.

Just about every philosopher who writes about incomparability defines the notion as the failure of the trichotomy to hold, and many implicitly take the Trichotomy Thesis as true, whether definitionally or not. As I will argue in chapters 5 and 6, the Trichotomy Thesis is false; there is a fourth positive value relation – ‘on a par’ – not reducible to the traditional three. If this is right, we will have to adjust common understandings of positive value relations. ‘Better than’ is not necessarily equivalent to ‘not worse than, not equally good, and not incomparable’, for it may also require that the items for which it holds are not on a par. ‘At least as good as’ should not be understood as ‘better than or equally good’, since it may also be consistent with items being on a par; we might gloss it as ‘not worse than and not incomparable’, leaving open the possibility that the items for which it holds are better than, equally good, or on a par. ‘Not worse than’, in turn, is not equivalent to ‘better than, equally good, or incomparable’, for it may also allow for the possibility that items are on a par. And so on. The discussion throughout this dissertation should be understood as leaving open the possibility that the Trichotomy Thesis is false.

Incomparability involves some failure of comparability, but what sort of failure? A particular positive value relation may fail to hold between items determinately—it may be false of them—or indeterminately—it may be neither true nor false of them. Joseph Raz has urged that since incomparability seems not to be a consequence of the general indeterminacy of language, the failure of comparison is determinate.<sup>1</sup> Most incomparabilists talk as if the failure of comparability were determinate. One notable exception is John Broome, who seems to suggest that incomparability may be the result of the vagueness of comparative predicates.<sup>2</sup> Of course, an indeterminacy of comparison might have its source not in vagueness but in some other defect, a possibility we discuss in chapter 3.<sup>3</sup> In chapter 6, I argue that incomparability is not a matter of vagueness and that the failure of comparability that gives rise to incomparability is determinate.<sup>4</sup> The argument I give is *conceptual*, so if we take its success for granted, we should define incomparability as the determinate failure of comparison. Although we shall have more to say about Broome and these matters later, let us be satisfied here with the promissory note. We shall thus say that two items are incomparable if, for each particular positive value relation, it is false that it holds between them.

### 1.1. The covering value requirement

There is a further, crucial refinement we must make to the definition. Every comparison must proceed in terms of a value. A 'value' is any consideration with respect to which a meaningful evaluative comparison can be made. Call such a consideration the *covering value* of that comparison. Covering values can be oriented toward the good, like generosity and kindness; toward the bad, like dishonor and cruelty; general, like prudence and moral goodness; specific, like tawdriness and pleasingness-to-my-grandmother; intrinsic, like pleasurable and happiness; instrumental, like efficiency; consequentialist, like pleasurable of outcome; deontological, like fulfillment of one's obligations; moral, like courage; prudential, like foresight; aesthetic, like beauty; and so on.<sup>5</sup> How well an item does with respect to a value is its *merit*.

Value relations are either generic or specific. Generic relations, like 'better than', 'as valuable as', and 'worse than', presuppose a covering value. They are strictly three-place;  $x$  is better than  $y$  with respect to  $V$ , where  $V$  ranges over values. When  $V$  is specified, the generic relation is thereby relativized. Specific value relations, like 'kinder than', 'as cruel as', and 'tawdrier than', have their covering values built in. It is plausible to suppose (as implied by the Trichotomy Thesis) that every specific value relation has a relativized generic equivalent; 'kinder than', for example, is equivalent to 'better than with respect to kindness'. Thus, we can dispense with talk of specific value relations in favor of their relativized generic counterparts. 'Comparison' and 'value relation' shall refer to their generic, positive varieties.

That all comparisons necessarily proceed in terms of a value becomes evident once we attempt to understand a comparative claim that flouts the requirement. A bald claim that philosophy is better than pushpin, for example, cannot be fully understood without reference to some respect in terms of which the claim is made. Philosophy may be better in terms of gaining a kind of understanding or intrinsic worthwhileness but worse in terms of providing relaxation or developing hand-eye coordination. Although the respect in terms of which a comparison is made is not always explicit, some value must always be implicit for there to be any comparison to be understood.

To deny that comparisons must be relative to a value is to assert that there is a sensible notion of comparable simpliciter. But there is no such notion. Consider the nonevaluative relation 'greater than'. This rod may be greater than that one with respect to length or mass or conductivity, but it cannot be greater, period. Just as it makes no sense to say that one thing is simply greater than another, it makes no sense to say that one thing is simply better than another; things can be better only in a respect.<sup>6</sup> So it goes for all value relations. For convenience, I will often omit explicit mention of a covering value, but one should always be understood.

There are three lines of attack that might be made on the covering value requirement. Investigation of these lines of attack will help us to highlight some important structural features of comparisons. The first argues that certain meta-ethical views, namely monism and subjectivism, can make sense of nonrelativized comparisons. If there is ultimately only one value, or if comparisons are constituted by preferences,

then comparisons need not proceed in terms of any respect. The second argues that since practical reason sometimes requires us to make comparisons ‘all things considered’, and ‘all things considered’ is not a value, comparisons need not proceed with respect to a covering value. The third does not deny the requirement but argues that it brings relativization in only a spurious sense since every comparison can be understood as proceeding with respect to a very general covering value like ‘value’ or ‘goodness’ or ‘ought-to-be-doneness’. None of these attacks succeeds.

Monism, it might be thought, does not require that comparisons proceed with respect to a value. Since there is ultimately only one value, the supervalue, all comparisons with respect to any other value reduce to comparisons with respect to the supervalue. And there is no need to specify the supervalue when making a comparison since it is understood that all comparisons ultimately proceed with respect to it. However, that all comparisons ultimately proceed in terms of the same value does not show that some covering value is not required for the comparison to be that comparison. It might be thought, for example, that what it is for something to be simply better is for it to maximize happiness for the greatest number. Still, the bald claim that something is better than something else must be understood as relativized to some value, privileged or not. Moreover, any plausible monist will admit that the meaning of a comparison depends on the covering value with respect to which it is made, even if the comparison is reducible to one with respect to a single value; ‘ice cream is tastier than grass pudding’ says something different from ‘keeping one’s promises is morally better than not’. Though they ultimately reduce to comparisons in terms of, say, conduciveness to pleasure or happiness, what they mean depends on the covering values to which they are relativized.

It might also be thought that subjectivism is compatible with things being comparable simpliciter. Subjectivists maintain that something is valuable if and only if it is desired. By extension, a subjectivist might maintain that one prefers one thing to another if and only if the one thing is better than the other thing. Since the preferences are simpliciter, so is betterness. But preferences, if they are to constitute betterness, cannot be simpliciter. For betterness must be transitive, and if, as subjectivists would have us believe, the relation between preferences and betterness is biconditional, preferences must also be transitive.<sup>7</sup> However, preferences can be neither transitive nor intransitive unless they proceed in some respect. There is no genuine intransitivity if, for example, I prefer skiing to hiking because it is more pleasurable, hiking to a trip to the Bahamas because it is less costly, and a trip to the Bahamas to skiing because it is more exotic.<sup>8</sup> The notion of transitivity builds in the requirement that the transitive preferences be relativized to a common respect. In general, the standard axioms that subjectivists will want to abide presuppose that preferences are so relativized. Indeed, the relativization guarantees that the axioms are not empty; where preferences appear to violate those axioms, the respect in terms of which those preferences are relativized provides a substantive constraint on the reindividuation of the alternatives.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if preferences are to constitute value, they cannot proceed simpliciter but must themselves be relativized.

Neither monism nor subjectivism escapes the covering value requirement. But we have yet to investigate the other two attacks. Before confronting these directly, it will be helpful to explain something of the structure of covering values.

### 1.2. Covering values and contributory values

Comparisons usually proceed with respect to many values. If we are comparing two candidates for a philosophy job or two desserts to top off a delicious meal or two possible locations in which to spend a sabbatical, there are certain values deemed relevant to the comparison. In comparing Eunice and Janice for a vacant philosophy chair, we might attempt to compare their originality, creativity, clarity of thought, insightfulness, historicity, style, and so on. These values all contribute to the *content* of philosophical talent, that is, they make up the value of philosophical talent. The content of a value is what makes the value the value that it is. A value may in turn contribute to the content of other values; philosophical talent may, along with other values, like administrative skill, ability to satisfy the donor, ability to attract high-caliber graduate students, and so on, contribute to the content of 'goodness as the new philosophy chair'. A value that constitutes in part the content of another value is a *contributory value* of that value.<sup>10</sup> Thus, contributory values are important in two ways. They constitute values, and, through constituting covering values, they help to determine comparisons with respect to those covering values.

Most, if not all, covering values have contents constituted by multiple contributory values. Most, if not all, of these contributory values will in turn have multiple contributory values, and if value holism is correct, the regress can be circular. I doubt whether there are any value simples, but if there are, they are likely either very specific values, like the particular pleasure an individual has when eating a pineapple, or 'thick' values, like chastity or courage,<sup>11</sup> which do not plausibly form the foundation for the contents of other values. It is not surprising that values should have contents that do not 'bottom out'; reflection confirms that for any value we might take as foundational of another, we can list multiple values that contribute to the content of *that* value.<sup>12</sup>

The content of a value is not simply given by the contributory values that make it up. Every value has *structure*, that is, its content has a particular organization. (In the case of value simples, the structure is unitary.) This structure can be glossed in terms of comparisons among the value's contributory values with respect to greatness of contribution to the value. The comparative greatness of contribution to a value can be understood in two ways: one value makes a greater contribution to the content of V than another if (1) it is more significant in determining the merits of any item with respect to V, or (2) it is a larger part of an *ideal* or perfection of V.

Take, for example, philosophical talent. Its content is not given merely by its contributory values of originality, creativity, clarity of thought, insightfulness, historicity, style, and so on; philosophical talent has a structure. That structure can be roughly described by comparisons of its contributory values with respect to the greatness of their

contribution to philosophical talent. Originality makes a greater contribution to philosophical talent than does clarity of thought which in turn makes a greater contribution than historicity. In determining how philosophically talented someone is, we look first to the contributory values that make the greatest contribution – originality, insightfulness, and clarity, for instance. If you ask me, “How philosophically talented is Eunice?” and I extol the merits of Eunice with respect to historicity, you might reasonably reply, “Yes, but how original, insightful, and clear is she?” Conversely, if I tell you how original, insightful, and clear she is, you may reasonably neglect to inquire about her historicity, since you already have a good, albeit rough, idea of how philosophically talented she is. Similarly, our understanding of an ideal of philosophical talent – a perfection or zenith – shows originality in every case to be a larger part than historicity.

The comparisons of contributory values make philosophical talent the value it is. If historicity made a greater contribution than originality, we would have not what we understand as philosophical talent, but some other value. Nonetheless, comparisons of contributory values with respect to greatness of contribution to a value provide only a *gloss* of the structure of that value because the structure of a value is always more detailed than that described by these general, abstract comparisons. In the next section, I offer a detailed account of the determination of the structure of values that illustrates just how complex a value structure is.

Comparisons of contributory values with respect to their contribution to a value are significant in that they are the standard form of *value comparisons*. Like bearers of value, values themselves can be compared only with respect to a covering value. There are, it seems to me, only two ways value comparisons can be understood. Typically, a comparison of two values, like originality and historicity, is a comparison with respect to greatness of contribution to a value to which they contribute, like philosophical talent. In the typical case, value comparisons say something about the constitution of the value to which they contribute. Sometimes, however, values can be compared not with respect to the greatness of *contribution* to V, but with respect to V itself.<sup>13</sup> Sexual pleasure and accomplishment in work might be compared with respect to pleasure: which value ‘bears’ – or less awkwardly ‘is constituted by’ – the greater pleasure? Here we do not say something about the constitution of pleasure, but rather, we say something about the constitution of the values being compared. In this case, though, values play the role of bearers of value. If comparisons of value are to be understood as comparisons of value *qua* abstract values, they must, I believe, be understood as comparisons of their contribution to some V.

We can now return to the second attack on the covering value requirement. That attack, recall, points out that sometimes practical reason requires us to compare items *all things considered*. Perhaps option 1 is better with respect to efficiency, and option 2 is better with respect to moral goodness, but if choice between them is to be justified, we

must determine which is better with respect to both efficiency and moral goodness – that is, which is better, all things considered. (The same point can be put in terms of what we have most reason to do or to esteem.) But is ‘all things considered’ a value?

Note that the content of ‘all things considered’ shifts from comparison to comparison; indeed, there is no restriction on its content. Whether we are comparing job candidates, desserts, or sabbatical spots, then, we can compare the items, ‘all things considered’, but the things considered in one case – philosophical talent – are not the things considered in another case – nutritiousness. ‘All things considered’ is a placeholder for any value; it operates as shorthand for whatever values are relevant to the situation. Let us call considerations that operate as placeholders for any value *schematic* considerations. Schematic considerations are not themselves values; although they appear to be considerations with respect to which evaluative comparisons can be made, it is only in virtue of the values for which they stand that evaluative comparisons can be made with respect to them. Put another way, ‘all things considered’ has no structure. It makes no sense to say that one value makes a greater contribution to ‘all things considered’ than another. Whether efficiency makes a greater contribution than ‘kindness’ depends on what value ‘all things considered’ stands-in for. If it holds a place for ‘economic well-being’, efficiency will make a greater contribution; if the value it stands for is ‘moral goodness’, then kindness will.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, while ‘all things considered’ is not a value, comparisons, all things considered, proceed with respect to a value. The covering value requirement is not, then, undermined by such comparisons.

We can now see why the third line of attack is misguided. This opponent of the covering value requirement does not deny that comparisons must proceed with respect to a covering value, but instead urges that this relativization is empty. On this view, every comparison necessarily proceeds with respect to a very general consideration like ‘value’ or ‘ought-to-be-doneness’<sup>15</sup> or ‘what matters’, but such relativization does no work. Claiming that comparisons must be relativized to ‘value’ is like claiming that propositions must be relativized to ‘the true’ or to ‘the false’.

Either these comparisons proceed with respect to a proper value (‘value’ is either a proper value itself or a schematic consideration) or they are absolute comparisons. But how are we to understand the absolute claim that Eunice is better than Janice? Building relativization into the context in which a comparison is made so that the comparison itself appears unrelativized but its identity depends on the context in which it occurs, would be transparent abdication of the absolutist position. Without some such relativization, however, there is not one comparison rather than another to be understood.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3. The covering value requirement and incomparability

Just as comparisons must be relativized to a covering value, so must the failure of comparison. Our definition of incomparability, then, is this: *two items are*

*incomparable with respect to a covering value if, for every positive value relation relativized to that covering value, it is false that it holds between them.* Those who think the Trichotomy Thesis is true would say that two items are incomparable with respect to a covering value just in case it is false that the first is better than the second or that the second is better than the first or that they are equally good with respect to that covering value.

Failure to appreciate the relativization of incomparability to a covering value is responsible for certain mistaken claims of incomparability. These involve items as different as ‘apples and oranges’ or ‘chalk and cheese’. How can the samurai code of honor be compared with the Protestant work ethic? An act of patriotism and one of filial love? A novel and a war film? Once these questions are relativized to a covering value, comparison is no longer elusive: cheese is better than chalk with respect to goodness as a housewarming gift, and oranges are better than apples with respect to preventing scurvy.

But perhaps those who cite these examples do not mean to claim that no comparison can be made. Perhaps their claim is only that the *intrinsic* merits of these items cannot be compared. For example, the samurai code of honor might be comparable with the Protestant work ethic with respect to some instrumental value, like ‘efficiency in reducing the trade deficit’, but there is no covering value in terms of which their intrinsic merits can be compared. This is what Elizabeth Anderson has in mind when she says that attempts to compare the genius of a scientist and the honor of a gentleman must fail.<sup>17</sup> The claim that there is no covering value in these cases is, however, ambiguous between two claims: (1) that there is no covering value with respect to which the intrinsic merits of the items can be compared and (2) that there is such a covering value but the items are incomparable with respect to it. The first is not a claim of incomparability but rather the claim that a certain sort of covering value does not exist. It is not a claim of incomparability because incomparability must proceed relative to a covering value, and if there is no covering value with respect to which the intrinsic merits can be compared, then there can be neither comparability nor incomparability with respect to it.<sup>18</sup> The second, however, is a claim of incomparability. ‘Goodness as a moral code’ might be a covering value that pits the intrinsic value of the code of honor against that of the work ethic. And perhaps the honor code and work ethic cannot be compared with respect to goodness as a moral code. But this is not obvious. Indeed, we will see in subsequent chapters that providing grounds for such a claim is no easy task.

## **2. An Account of the Structure of Values and Comparisons of Bearers**

We now turn to the question, What determines comparisons of bearers of value? That is, what provides the basis for bearer comparisons? The account we provide is *componential*; it explains how these comparisons are determined in terms of the components of comparisons. The assumption that a componential analysis can be given is a substantive one, but weak enough, I believe, not to rule out any plausible account.<sup>19</sup>

How bearer comparisons are determined is something best understood, I believe through a theory of values. Axiology has long been out of fashion as a field of philosophical inquiry, but I suspect that any proper account of bearer comparisons will involve some axiological investigation. Here, we shall answer the question, What determines comparisons of bearers of value? by first answering the axiological question, What determines the structure of values?

Recall that the structure of a value is its organized content; it is what makes the value the value that it is. Providing an account of how such a structure is determined, then, is providing an account of what makes a value the value that it is. We have already seen that the structure of a value can be glossed by comparisons of the contributory values with respect to greatness of their contribution to that value. In the next few sections, we provide a detailed account of what forms the basis of that structure, one which shows, incidentally, why comparisons of contributory values provide at best a rough description of a value's structure. This route to bearer comparisons via value structure may appear both foolhardy and pointless. Why tackle one difficult question by tackling another, patently more difficult one, if it can be avoided? And how, at any rate, can investigation of the general question of what makes a value the value that it is shed any light on the question of how bearers of value are determined? As we shall see, approaching the account of bearer comparisons in this way simplifies the account and deepens it by illuminating a fundamental connection between values and bearer comparisons.

### 2.1. The structure of values

Values are manifested in the world in particular quantitative and qualitative ways. A manifestation of love, for instance, has a quantitative dimension: the amount of love may be small or large or of greater or lesser intensity, and so on. It also has a qualitative dimension: the love may be a particular quality of mature, romantic, unrequited, obsessive, innocent, and so on, love. Call a manifestation of a value with particular quantitative and qualitative dimensions an *aspect* of that value. An aspect of love is a particular 'package' of love with quantitative and qualitative dimensions – for example, this amount of mature love or that amount of intense romantic love. All values are manifested in aspects.

It is plausible to suppose that the structure of a value is determined by comparisons of these packages of the value with respect to the value.<sup>20</sup> So, for instance, the structure of philosophical talent is determined by comparisons of aspects of philosophical talent – a large amount of a particular quality of sublime philosophical talent is better with respect to philosophical talent than a small amount of a particular quirky philosophical talent. A complete set of comparisons between any two aspects of philosophical talent fully determines the structure of philosophical talent.<sup>21</sup> Such comparisons may seem more natural if we give the manifestations a 'home': a person bearing the sublime aspect would be better with respect to philosophical talent than a

person bearing the quirky aspect. In any case, if the large amount of particular sublime talent were worse than the small amount of the quirky talent, the structure of philosophical talent, and therefore its identity, would be very different.

More often than not, the greater the quantitative dimension of an aspect, *ceteris paribus*, the better that aspect with respect to the value. Other things equal, more of a value is better with respect to that value than less. But more is not always better. To paraphrase Aristotle, you can have too much of a good thing. A manifestation of too much of a particular quality of raw philosophical talent may be worse with respect to philosophical talent than a lesser amount of that raw quality. Some values are structured such that, beyond a certain threshold, more of a value as manifested in an aspect is worse. In general, we should not expect the trade-offs between value aspects to behave in a tidy, linear fashion.

The structure of a value is determined by comparisons of the aspects of that value with respect to that value. Can we break down aspects of a value into components? Take the aspect of philosophical talent – a large amount of a particular sublime philosophical talent. How is such an aspect to be understood? It is most plausibly understood as a bundle of, for example, certain amounts of particular qualities of sublime originality, pellucid clarity, deep insight, subtle historicity, and so on. Aspects of a value are constituted by bundles of aspects of contributory values of that value. A comparison of aspects of  $V$  with respect to  $V$ , then, is a comparison of two bundles of contributory value aspects with respect to  $V$ .

The relations between aspects of  $V$ , contributory values of  $V$ , and bundles of contributory aspects can be represented by the table in Figure 1, where  $v_i$  are the contributory values of some value  $V$ ;  $v^j$  the aspects of  $V$ ; and  $v_i^j$  the  $j$ th aspect of the  $i$ th contributory value.

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**Figure 1.**  
**The Constitution of Aspects of a Value and**  
**The Determination of the Structure of Its Contributory Values**

aspects of  $V$

		$v^1$	$v^2$	$v^3$	...
contributory values of $V$	$v_1$	$v_1^1$	$v_1^2$	$v_1^3$	...
	$v_2$	$v_2^1$	$v_2^2$	$v_2^3$	...
	$v_3$	$v_3^1$	$v_3^2$	$v_3^3$	...
	...	...	...	...	...

The table in Figure 1 describes the constitution of aspects of  $V$  and the determination of the structure of each contributory value of  $V$ . Each aspect of  $V$ ,  $v^1, v^2, \dots$ , heading a column is constituted by the contributory value aspects in its column. The structure of each contributory value,  $v_1, v_2, \dots$ , beginning a row is determined by comparisons of the contributory value aspects in its row. Similarly, the structure of  $V$  itself is determined by comparisons of its aspects.

It will help to illustrate the account by way of example. Take philosophical talent. For simplicity, let us suppose that philosophical talent has only two aspects,  $p^1$  and  $p^2$ , and two contributory values, originality,  $o$ , and historicity,  $h$ . The structure of philosophical talent is determined by the comparison of the two aspects of philosophical talent,  $o$  and  $h$ . Similarly, the structure of  $o$  and  $h$  is determined by comparisons of their aspects, respectively,  $o_1$  and  $o_2$ , and  $h_1$  and  $h_2$ . Each aspect of philosophical talent,  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  is constituted by a bundle of contributory value aspects – a particular aspect of originality and a particular aspect of historicity. We can represent these relations by the table in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

**The Constitution of Aspects of Philosophical Talent and  
The Determination of the Structure of Contributory Values of Philosophical Talent  
(Simplified)**

		aspects of philosophical talent	
		$p^1$	$p^2$
contributory values of philosophical talent	$o$	$o^1$	$o^2$
	$h$	$h^1$	$h^2$

The structure of philosophical talent is determined by comparisons of the bundles  $(o^1, h^1)$  and  $(o^2, h^2)$ . Formally,

The structure of  $V \Leftarrow C_v((o^1, h^1), (o^2, h^2))$ ,

where  $\Leftarrow$  is the symbol for 'is determined by', and  $C_v(x, y)$  is the comparison with respect to  $V$  of  $x$  and  $y$ .

The two-bundle case allows us to ignore certain complications that arise when there are finitely more than two bundles of contributory value aspects. Consider the three bundle case. Since comparisons are, we have stipulated, always pairwise, the structure of the covering value is determined by the *set* of comparisons of pairs of the three bundles.

Suppose philosophical talent is constituted by only three aspects, each of which is respectively constituted by the bundle of contributory values,  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ . The structure of philosophical talent is determined by the comparisons of  $x$  and  $y$ , of  $x$  and  $z$ , and of  $y$  and  $z$ . These comparisons can be represented by a function  $S$  relativized to philosophical talent,  $S_p$ , that takes ordered pairs of bundles of contributory value aspects as inputs and gives their comparison as outputs. Since a function is equivalent to the set of ordered pairs of its inputs and corresponding outputs,  $S_v$  is equivalent to a set of ordered pairs whose first member is an ordered pair of bundles and whose second member is the comparison of that pair. (In the two-bundle case, we could dispense with the function  $S_v$  because the comparison of the bundles just is the set of comparisons of all aspects of  $V$ .) We can formalize the three-bundle case as follows:

$$S_v(x, y, z) = \{ \langle (x, y), C_v(x, y) \rangle, \langle (x, z), C_v(x, z) \rangle, \langle (y, z), C_v(y, z) \rangle \}.$$

The account can now be generalized for any value  $V$  and any finite  $n$  such that  $V$  is constituted by a set  $\chi$  of  $n$  bundles of contributory value aspects. The structure of  $V$  is determined by the set of comparisons of all pairs in  $\chi$ , which can be represented by a function  $S_v$  of  $\chi$ , which is in turn equivalent to a set of ordered pairs, the first member being the pair of bundles taken as the argument of the function and the second member being the comparison of that pair given as the output of the function. Formally:

The Determination of the Structure of  $V$

$$\text{The structure of } V \Leftarrow S_v(\chi) = \{ \langle (x, y), C_v(x, y) \rangle : x, y \in \chi \},$$

where  $\chi$  is a set of  $n$  bundles of contributory value aspects, each of which constitutes an aspect of  $V$ ;  $S_v(\chi)$  is the set of comparisons of members of  $\chi$ ;  $x$  and  $y$  members of  $\chi$ ; and  $C_v(x, y)$  the comparison of  $x$  and  $y$ .

The account, however, is far from complete. For we now have a new difficulty: What determines the comparisons of bundles of contributory value aspects? In other words, what determines  $C_v(x, y)$ ? The key to providing an account of the structure of values, I believe, lies in answering this question. We examine two possible answers below.

### 2.1.1. Comparisons and evaluative differences

But first, it will be helpful to introduce the notion of an *evaluative difference* and to explain its relation to comparisons.<sup>22</sup> An *evaluative difference* between two items is simply how the items differ with respect to some value, in our case, the covering value. I shall take evaluative differences to be abstract entities between pairs of items that do not depend on any particular unit or origin for their identity. Evaluative differences, that is, are independent of any system of measurement. The existence of abstract differences is common enough; there is an abstract difference in length between two uneven sticks: there is a difference in length independently of whether it is measured in inches, miles, or light years.

The evaluative difference between two items is equivalent to their comparability. This can hardly be controversial. If I tell you that the difference in musical talent between Mozart and Salieri is that Mozart is twice as talented, I have told you how Mozart and Salieri compare with respect to musical talent. The converse holds as well. Just as the existence of an evaluative difference between items is their comparability, the lack of an evaluative difference between two items is their incomparability. If I tell you that an evaluative difference does not exist between Mozart and Beethoven with respect to musical talent, I have told you that Mozart and Beethoven are incomparable with respect to musical talent.

This way of understanding evaluative differences highlights an ambiguity in the phrase ‘no difference’. Sometimes when we say there is no evaluative difference between two items we mean that the items are evaluatively identical, that is, equally good. But we might also mean that the items cannot be compared, as in ‘there can be no difference in goodness of career between a career in hang-gliding and one in accounting.’ Let us, for clarity, think of the former case as one in which there is a *zero* evaluative difference, and the latter as one in which an evaluative difference does not exist *tout court*. Two items that are equally good have an evaluative difference of zero, but two items that are incomparable have no evaluative difference at all. When I shall say there is ‘no difference’ between items, I shall take that to imply that the items are incomparable.

Although we shall have more to say about evaluative differences in a later chapter, it is worth mentioning some of their features here. All evaluative differences are either *biased* toward one item or *unbiased*, that is not biased toward any item. So, for example, if x is better than y, the difference between x and y is biased positively towards x and negatively towards y. If x and y are equally good, the difference between them is unbiased; neither alternative is ‘favoured’ by the difference. Some of these differences have a *magnitude*, that is, they can be more or less great. If two items are equally good, the magnitude of their difference is *zero*, as we have already mentioned above. It is plausible to think that if items can only be rank-ordered, e.g., as first, second, third, then there is no magnitude to their differences. Zero evaluative differences should be distinguished both from differences with no magnitude, where the items can only be rank-ordered, and from the nonexistence of differences, where the items are incomparable.

Now if there is no evaluative difference between items, it does not follow that *nothing* can be said about how those items evaluatively differ. We might be able to give their evaluative differences with respect to various contributory values or with respect to certain aspects of the covering value. What we cannot give is the evaluative difference between them with respect to the covering value.

Note that the equivalence between the existence of an evaluative difference and comparability gives rise to an alternative way of drawing the distinction between comparability and incomparability. We need not appeal to the distinction between

positive and negative claims, but can instead appeal to the existence and nonexistence of evaluative differences. For those who feel queasy about the distinction between the positive and the negative, we can offer an alternative definition of incomparability that does not rely on but is nevertheless consistent with that distinction: *Two items are incomparable with respect to a covering value if it is false that there is an evaluative difference between them with respect to that covering value.* The items are comparable if it is true that there is such an evaluative difference. Those who reject the distinction between the positive and the negative are thus free to understand the claim that two items are comparable not as the claim that there is a positive value relation that holds between them but rather as the claim that there is an evaluative difference between them. We can, moreover, frame the two central questions of concern in this dissertation in terms of evaluative differences: Are there always evaluative differences between items? and, What kinds of evaluative differences are there?

I myself have trouble understanding how the distinction between positive and negative claims could fail to hold, but trying to justify my conviction is beyond what I can do here. However, in order that the arguments of this dissertation not rely on what might be a controversial thesis, I present almost all of my arguments about comparisons and comparability in terms of evaluative differences. Where it is most natural or persuasive to present an argument in terms of positive and negative claims or value relations, I do so but take care to indicate either in the text or in an accompanying endnote how the parallel argument in terms of evaluative differences might go. This is not the cleanest backdrop against which to operate, but in this way I am able to express my conviction that the original proffered definition of incomparability in terms of the positive and the negative is correct without at the same time weakening my arguments either against incomparability or for the proposed conception of comparability.<sup>23</sup>

### 2.1.2. The atomistic account

We turn to the first account of how comparisons of bundles of contributory value aspects are determined. Since comparisons and differences are equivalent, our question might be put as follows: ‘What determines the evaluative difference between two contributory value aspect bundles?’

It is plausible to suppose that differences between bundles of contributory value aspects are determined by differences between the aspects that make up those bundles – how else could they be determined? I shall take this supposition for granted. But how the differences between those aspects are to be understood and combined to yield the difference of the bundles is not so clear.

The first account relies on what we might call the *atomicity assumption*. This assumption holds that the merit of any aspect with respect to V does not vary with the aspects with which it is bundled. The merit with respect to philosophical talent of a certain amount and particular quality of originality, then, is constant whether bundled with a great amount of a particular subtle historicity or a small amount of a particular

aspects, that is, the differences between the bundles of contributory value aspects that constitute them, is in turn determined by a function of the sum of the differences between individual aspects of a contributory value, belonging respectively to each bundle, with respect to that contributory value. Formally:

The Atomistic Account of the Structure of Values

The structure of  $V \Leftarrow S_v(\chi) = \{ \langle (x, y), D_v(x, y) \rangle : x, y \in \chi \}$ , and

$D_v(\alpha, \beta) \Leftarrow F_v(D_v(a^1, a^2), D_v(b^1, b^2), \dots, D_v(n^1, n^2))$

$= D_v(a^1, a^2) + D_v(b^1, b^2) + \dots + D_v(n^1, n^2)$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are two bundles of contributory value aspects belonging to the set  $\chi$  of bundles of contributory value aspects each bundle of which constitutes an aspect of  $V$ ;  $a, b, c, \dots, n$  are contributory values of  $V$ ;  $a^1$  is an aspect of  $a$  belonging to the first bundle  $\alpha$  and  $a^2$  is an aspect of  $a$  belonging to the second bundle  $\beta$ , and so on for each contributory value  $b, c, \dots, n$ ; and  $F$  is the function that adds the differences between contributory value aspects.

The atomistic account is not complete without some explanation of how  $F$  adds together component differences. It might be thought, for instance, that abstract entities are not the kinds of things that can be added. But there is no problem, in principle, with adding evaluative differences *qua* abstract entities. We can add two abstract lengths by imagining them placed end to end. Similarly, evaluative differences can in principle be added without presupposing some unit, like inches, in terms of which their sum is given.

The problem lies not in the abstract nature of evaluative differences but in whether evaluative differences can themselves be *coordinated*. Two differences are coordinated if there is some unit that measures both differences. So although the differences are unit-less, their coordination depends on their ability to be measured by a unit. The unit can be arbitrary; it can itself be an abstract difference between two items. Two abstract lengths can be added because they are both lengths and thus coordinated; any unit that measures the one measures the other. Two evaluative differences, however, might not be measurable by the same unit. One evaluative difference might, as it were, be measurable by pounds, ounces, or grams while the other, as it were, is measurable by inches, centimeters or light years. There is no way of coordinating weight and length – there is no unit that measures both – and thus no way to add weights and lengths.

To see how coordination might be achieved, return to our two-bundle example of philosophical talent. The atomistic account assumes that the differences between  $o^1$  and  $o^2$ , and between  $h^1$  and  $h^2$  can be coordinated, for the sum of these differences gives the difference between the bundles. Coordination of the component differences follows if there is an *equivalence* between some difference between aspects of originality on the one hand and some difference between aspects of historicity on the other. Suppose that the difference between two particular aspects of originality were equivalent to the difference between two particular aspects of historicity. That is,

$$D_p(o^i, o^j) = D_p(h^k, h^l), \text{ for some } i, j, k, \text{ and } l.$$

We can now take any system of measurement, R, by which the difference between  $o^i$  and  $o^j$  can be measured. Suppose that, according to that system of measurement, the difference between  $o^i$  and  $o^j$  is 3 R-units. Now we take any system of measurement, S, by which the difference between  $h^k$  and  $h^l$  can be measured. Suppose that according to S, that difference is 6 S-units. Given that we have determined that the two differences are equivalent, we now have a way to coordinate R-units with S-units: 1 R-unit = 2 S-units. We can thus coordinate every difference between originality aspects with every difference between historicity aspects; so long as we keep to our respective systems R and S, we simply multiply the number assigned to the historicity aspects by the system S by  $\frac{1}{2}$  to translate those S-units into R-units. In this way, we get a numerical representation of each component difference in terms of R-units. Each component difference, then, can be measured by the same unit, and thus the differences can be added.

This way of coordinating component differences, by assigning *weights*, is just one, perhaps the most obvious, way in which addition of the differences is guaranteed to succeed.<sup>26</sup> But it makes certain assumptions, such as whether component differences can be represented by real numbers that may not always hold. We examine whether differences can be represented by real numbers below. The issue of coordination is revisited at the end of the dissertation.

For now, we focus on a fundamental flaw of the atomistic account: the atomicity assumption.<sup>27</sup> This assumption likens the merit of an aspect to an independent atom whose trajectory does not depend on what other atoms are around it, and thus holds that the comparison of two contributory value aspects does not vary with the contributory value aspects with which each is bundled. The assumption (and its variations in other contexts) is motivated by the very good prospects for mathematically modelling comparisons which follow if it is true. But there is good reason to think that the atomicity assumption is false. Contributory value aspects are not plausibly atomistic in this way. How good a middling amount of a particular subtle historicity is with respect to philosophical talent, for example, varies with the other aspects with which it is bundled. If bundled with a small amount of quirky originality, it may not have much merit with respect to philosophical talent; if bundled with a small amount of sublime originality, however, its merit may be very great indeed, for the combination of a sublime originality and a subtle historicity is very powerful one with respect to philosophical talent.<sup>28</sup> Each aspect is not an atom unto itself; contributory value aspects when bundled together have interactive effects.

Values form an ‘organic unity’; that is, the components that determine their structure interact with one another in determining that structure. Every nonsimple value has an ideal balance (or several ideal balances) of contributory value aspects, that is, a bundle (or several bundles) of contributory value aspects than which no other bundle is better. There is, for example, an ideal of philosophical talent – an ideal combination of

aspects of originality, insightfulness, clarity, historicity, style, and so on, and it is against this ideal that comparisons of aspects of the value, and of the contributory value aspect bundles that constitute them, are determined.

How well a contributory value aspect does with respect to the covering value depends on how close it brings the bundle to which it belongs to an ideal of the covering value. The closer the aspect brings the bundles to an ideal, the better the aspect. The middling amount of the particular subtle historicity above has greater merit when belonging to a bundle that is thereby brought closer to an ideal of philosophical talent than it does when belonging to a bundle that is not brought as close to an ideal. Suppose we are comparing two philosophers, Kant and Fichte, with respect to philosophical talent. Each bears a particular bundle of contributory value aspects. Now remove Fichte's originality and substitute it with Kant's. The merit with respect to philosophical talent of the aspect of originality borne by Kant is better when bundled with the Fichte-bundle than with the Kant-bundle. For the contribution of the aspect of originality to the Fichte-bundle is very great – without it, the Fichte-bundle is only so-so with respect to philosophical talent but with it, the Fichte-bundle skyrockets close to an ideal of philosophical talent. But the aspect of originality does not contribute as much to the merit of the Kant-bundle. Without it, the Kant-bundle is still rather good with respect to philosophical talent; with the aspect, it becomes much better, to be sure, but not in the same spectacular way that the Fichte-bundle becomes better. In this way, the merit of a contributory value aspect, and thus comparisons of those aspects, depend on the context in which they occur.

That values are organic unities explains why a greater quantity of a contributory aspect is not always better with respect to the covering value. Too much of a contributory value aspect, and the ideal balance is overshoot. Any account of the structure of values must allow that values form organic unities. This allowance, of course, makes providing an account of the structure of values more difficult. For simple pairwise comparisons of individual aspects will no longer do; any such comparisons must be relativized to the context in which the aspect occurs.

### 2.1.3. The organic account

I want now to propose an account of the structure of values that allows for the possibility that aspects interact in ways that affect their comparative merit with respect to V. Call this the *organic* account. The organic account holds that differences between bundles of contributory value aspects are determined by a function of differences between individual contributory value aspects *contextualized* to the aspects with which they are bundled.

To see how this contextualization works, we need to introduce the notion of *mono-variant* bundles of contributory value aspects. Two bundles are mono-variant if they are made up of identical contributory value aspects save one. Take a bundle of contributory values of philosophical talent – a bundle of a large amount of a particular

sublime originality, a middling amount of a particular shallow historicity, and so on. Call this bundle  $\alpha$ . Now change one of its contributory value aspects – we might substitute the middling amount of the particular shallow historicity with a middling amount of a particular subtle historicity. Call this bundle  $\alpha'$ . According to the organic account, the difference between  $\alpha$  and  $\alpha'$  is equivalent to the difference between the middling amount of the particular shallow historicity and the middling amount of the particular subtle historicity *contextualized* to the other contributory value aspects they share in common.

Now it follows by simple mathematics that between any two bundles of contributory values, there is a shortest series of mono-variant bundles ‘connecting’ the original, multi-variant bundles. (The caveat that the series is a shortest guarantees that the changes in each contributory value aspect are only those that are necessary to get from  $\alpha$  to  $\beta$ .) The organic account holds that the difference between any two bundles,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , of contributory values is determined by a function of the contextualized differences between variant contributory value aspects of a shortest series of mono-variant bundles connecting  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ .

Return to our two-bundle case of philosophical talent. The bundles  $(o^1, h^1)$  and  $(o^2, h^2)$  are connected by a series of mono-variant bundles, namely  $(o^1, h^1)$ ,  $(o^1, h^2)$  and  $(o^1, h^2)$ ,  $(o^2, h^2)$ . The difference between each pair of mono-variant bundles is equivalent to the difference between the variant aspects contextualized to the aspect they share in common. So the difference between the first pair of mono-variant bundles is the difference between  $h^1$  and  $h^2$  in the context of  $o^1$ ; and the difference between the second pair is the difference between  $o^1$  and  $o^2$  in the context of  $h^2$ . According to the organic account, the difference between the two bundles  $(o^1, h^1)$  and  $(o^2, h^2)$  is determined by a function of the two contextualized differences. The account can be generalized in the obvious way where there are finitely more than two aspects in each bundle.

We are left with two familiar questions. How are contextualized differences determined? And how does the function yielding the difference between multi-variant bundles combine the component contextualized differences?

The answer to the first question is that the contextualized differences are taken as given. That is, if there are such differences, we can in principle determine what they are. Suppose we must determine how philosophically talented Eunice is. Eunice bears a bundle,  $\alpha$ , of contributory value aspects – a certain amount of a certain quality of originality, and so on. Suppose now that we discover that she is more historically sensitive than we had thought; perhaps the middling amount of particular unremarkable historicity we thought she bore is actually a middling amount of a rather subtle historicity easily overlooked. Eunice is now Eunice'. We can in principle, says the organic account, determine what difference this change in Eunice's historicity makes to her philosophical talent.

The second question also has a familiar answer. The function that combines the component differences between mono-variant bundles is, like the function  $F$  of the

atomistic account, one of *addition*. An analogy with length shows how this is almost inevitable. For the difference in length between two points, 1 and 5, is an additive function of the differences between successive unit pairs between 1 and 5. Similarly, it is plausible to think that any function of differences between mono-variant bundles that gives the difference between multi-variant bundles is one that adds the differences between mono-variant bundles that, in some sense, traverse the distance between them.

We can summarize the organic account as follows. The structure of a value is determined by a function which can be represented by the set of ordered pairs, whose first members consist of pairs of bundles of contributory value aspects constituting an aspect of the value, and whose second members consist of the difference between that pair of contributory aspect bundles. Each of these differences is in turn determined by a function of the sum of the *contextualized* differences between variant aspects of mono-variant bundles connecting the multi-variant bundles. Formally,

The Organic Account of the Structure of Values

The structure of  $V \Leftarrow S_v(\chi) = \{ \langle (x, y), D_v(x, y) \rangle : x, y \in \chi \}$ , and

$$D_v(\alpha, \beta) \Leftarrow F_v(D_v(\alpha, \alpha'), D_v(\alpha', \alpha''), \dots, D_v(\alpha''', \beta))$$

$$= D_v(\alpha, \alpha') + D_v(\alpha', \alpha'') + \dots + D_v(\alpha''', \beta)$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are two bundles of contributory value aspects belonging to the set  $\chi$  of bundles of contributory value aspects each bundle of which constitutes an aspect of  $V$ ;  $\alpha, \alpha', \alpha'' \dots$  is a shortest series of mono-variant bundles connecting  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ ; and  $F$  is the function of addition.

The organic account is not complete without an explanation of how differences between mono-variant bundles – the contextualized differences between their variant aspects – can be added. As in our discussion of the atomistic account, we sidestep the problem of coordination for now since an examination of the numerical representability of differences may make any worries about coordination moot. For if differences can be represented by real numbers, coordination follows. Let us here take for granted that if there are component differences, those differences can be added.

## 2.2. Comparisons of bearers

The organic account of the structure of values translates easily into an account of bearer comparisons. Bearers of value bear values not abstractly but in particular aspects. An act is kind or pleasurable or life-saving not abstractly but as a particular manifestation of those values. Bearers of value bear aspects of a value, and since aspects of value are bundles of contributory aspects of the value, a bearer of value bears bundles of contributory value aspects. When we compare bearers with respect to a value, we compare the aspects of the values they bear. And when we compare the aspects they bear, we compare bundles of contributory values that constitute those aspects. Thus, a comparison between two bearers just is a comparison between two bundles of

contributory value aspects.

The organic account of the structure of values, then, translates easily into an organic account of bearer comparisons. A comparison of bearers just is a comparison of two bundles of contributory value aspects. We have seen that a comparison of two bundles of contributory value aspects is equivalent to the difference between the bundles, which in turn is determined by a function of the differences between successive mono-variant bundles leading from one of the bearers to the other. The function, we said, was one of addition.

We can recapitulate by way of an example. Suppose we are to compare Eunice and Janice with respect to philosophical talent. Let us take philosophical talent to be simplified as above, with only two contributory values, originality,  $o$ , and historicity,  $h$ . The comparison between them with respect to philosophical talent is the difference with respect to philosophical talent of the two bundles of contributory value aspects they bear. The difference between those two bundles of contributory value aspects is determined by a function of the differences between mono-variant bundles connecting those bundles. Suppose Eunice bears the bundle  $(o^1, h^1)$  and Janice bears the bundle  $(o^2, h^2)$ . Then,

$$C_p(\text{Eunice}, \text{Janice}) = D_p((o^1, h^1), (o^2, h^2)) \\ \Leftarrow F_p[D_p(\langle o^1, h^1 \rangle, \langle o^1, h^2 \rangle), D_p(\langle o^1, h^2 \rangle, \langle o^2, h^2 \rangle)].$$

We can formalize the organic account of bearer comparisons generally as follows:

The Organic Account of Bearer Comparisons

$$C_v(\alpha, \beta) \Leftarrow F_v[D_v(\alpha, \alpha'), D_v(\alpha', \alpha''), \dots, D_v(\alpha^{(n)}, \beta)]$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  range over bearers of value that could be compared with respect to  $V$ ;  $\alpha$  and  $\alpha'$  are mono-variant bundles belonging to a shortest series of mono-variant bundles connecting  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ ; and  $F_v$  is a function that adds differences between those mono-variant bundles.

### 2.3. Two objections

Two objections to the organic account suggest themselves. First, it may have been noticed that in our discussion of the organic account we implicitly assumed that bundles of contributory value aspects being compared always consist in the *same* contributory values, although in different aspects. But aspects of a value, and typical bearers of value that bear those aspects, are not so conveniently constituted. Suppose we are comparing Eunice, a modal logician working on the system S4, and Janice, a philosopher of history working on Hume's notion of reason. Historicity is irrelevant to determining Eunice's philosophical talent but not to determining Janice's. When comparing bearers of philosophical talent, then, we may find ourselves faced with a bundle of aspects of originality, insightfulness, clarity, historicity, and style on the one hand and a bundle of aspects of originality, insightfulness, clarity, and style on the other. How are two bundles of aspects of *different* contributory values to be compared? How

can we be sure that there is a series of mono-variant bundles connecting two multi-variant bundles of different contributory value aspects?

But our assumption was one for simplicity only. It is in no way essential to organic accounts that bundles of contributory value aspects be of the same contributory values. Recall that mono-variant bundles are bundles identical in all contributory value aspects save one. In our examples of mono-variant bundles, we assumed that the bundles bore the same contributory values, but that they differed in bearing different aspects of one of those contributory values. This assumption, however, is not required by the definition of mono-variant bundles. The variation between mono-variant bundles, after all, can be in that one bundle bears an aspect of historicity and the other bears no aspect of historicity. All that matters to the organic account is that the difference between such bundles – for example  $(o^1, h^1)$  and  $(o^1)$  – is plausibly taken as given. The difference made to Eunice's philosophical talent if we add to the aspects she bears an aspect of a new contributory value is not any less plausibly given than the difference made to her philosophical talent if we change the aspect of one of the contributory values she already bears.

If mono-variant bundles can be understood in this way, it easily follows that any two multi-variant, differently-valued contributory value bundles can be connected by a series of mono-variant bundles. Thus, the difference between two bundles of aspects of different contributory values is accounted for just as the difference between two bundles of aspects of the same contributory values; both are a function of the differences between the mono-variant bundles respectively connecting them.

There is another possible objection whose investigation helps to clarify the account. This is the thought that the organic account guarantees the comparability of all bearers of value. Since comparability and incomparability are substantive results, not something that is built into the structure of values or the basis of bearer comparisons, any account that guarantees one or the other must be rejected.

It might be thought that it is in the nature of mono-variants that they are always Pareto-better or Pareto-worse than one another, and that, therefore, they are always comparable. After all, isn't every change in a contributory value aspect either an improvement or detraction with respect to that contributory value? By substituting a middling amount of shallow historicity borne by Eunice with a large amount of a subtle historicity, don't we thereby improve Eunice's historicity? If each change is an improvement (or detraction) in that contributory value, it follows that the new bundle is at least as good as the original bundle in every respect but better (or worse) in one, i.e., Pareto-better (or Pareto-worse). Thus, it might be thought, every pair of mono-variant bundles is comparable, and the comparison of the bearers, which is their sum, seems assured.

But this line of thought goes wrong in several places. First, it is not clear that a change in a contributory value aspect always involves an improvement in or a detraction from that contributory value.

If it does, then it must be because every aspect of a value is either better or worse than every other aspect with respect to that value. But we have no reason to think this is the case. For one thing, a change in a contributory value aspect may make no evaluative change in the contributory value; increasing slightly the quantity of a quality of historicity may make no difference with respect to historicity. For another, there is no reason to think *a priori* that every aspect of a value is comparable with every other aspect of that value. Second, even if mono-variant bundles are Pareto-better or Pareto-worse, it does not follow that the bundles are comparable.<sup>29</sup> For the improvement (or detraction) in one contributory value is an evaluative change with respect to that contributory value, not with respect to the covering value. As we have already noted, values may be organic unities; a very large improvement in Eunice's historicity may make her more of a historian than a philosopher. Whether we can then compare the improved Eunice with her original self with respect to philosophical talent is an open question.

#### 2.4. Two conclusions

The organic accounts proposed embody a particular componential approach both to the structure of value and to bearer comparisons. Even if the organic accounts are mistaken, the general componential approach they take is plausible. Assuming the componential approach is correct, we should highlight two large-scale conclusions.

First, for the purposes of comparison, bearers of value can be treated as bundles of contributory value aspects. In asking whether Janice is more philosophically talented than Eunice, for example, we take each item to be a bundle of aspects of originality, creativity, clarity, insight, and so on; the comparison of the two philosophers is the comparison of the bundles of contributory value aspects they bear. The converse also holds; comparisons of bundles of contributory value aspects with respect to *V* are comparisons of possible bearers of *V*. Understanding bearers of value in componential terms makes them appear less monolithic and their comparison potentially less mysterious.

Second, given that the structure of a value is determined by comparisons of aspects of that value, that aspects of a value are constituted by bundles of contributory value aspects, and that bundles of contributory value aspects can, for the purposes of comparison, be treated as bearers of value, it follows that the structure of value depends on comparisons of bearers of value. For the components of organic accounts of value structure are comparisons of bundles of contributory values, that is, possible bearers of the covering value. Indeed, the fundamental components of both accounts are comparisons of (or differences between) mono-variant bundles of contributory value aspects, and each of these mono-variant bundles is, *ex hypothesi*, a bearer of the covering value. Thus, if the componential approach is correct, the structure of a value is determined by comparisons of bearers of that value.

This result undermines the usual assumption about the relation between value and evaluative comparison. It is usually assumed that value is conceptually prior to

evaluative comparison; that is, we understand comparisons in terms of our understanding of values and not vice versa. Once we have figured out what, say, philosophical talent is, comparisons of philosophers with respect to philosophical talent can then follow. But the componential accounts of value and bearer comparisons entail that what makes a value the value that it is depends on comparisons of bearers of that value; we cannot fully understand philosophical talent without first understanding how some items compare with respect to it. This is not to say, however, that evaluative comparison is conceptually prior to value. For all comparisons must proceed with respect to a value, and thus evaluative comparisons in turn depend on values; comparisons of philosophers with respect to philosophical talent already presuppose the notion of philosophical talent, for that is the value in part in virtue of which the comparison is the comparison that it is. Thus, the componential approach suggests an *interdependence* between value and evaluative comparison. What makes the value the value that it is depends on comparisons of bearers with respect to that value; but at the same time, a comparison of two bearers of a value depends on the covering value being the value that it is.<sup>30</sup> If the componential approach is correct, the persistent focus in ethics on *value* at the expense of *evaluative comparison* requires correction.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Numerical Representation: The Standard Model

We now turn to the issue of how and whether comparisons – evaluative differences – can be *numerically represented*, that is represented by real numbers.<sup>32</sup> If differences can be numerically represented, then coordination follows, and their addition, as required by the componential account we favoured, is a straightforward matter. Numerical representability, then, is not an isolated property of any one difference but rather a property over a domain of differences. If the differences in a domain can be represented by real numbers, then comparisons in that domain can be mathematically modelled. This in itself is an important result, but it also bodes well for the prospects of mathematically modelling items that depend on comparisons, such as, arguably, practical choices. Finally, how comparisons are numerically representable tells us something about the structure of those comparisons; not any number can represent a given comparison, but only one with a significance that reflects the structure of that comparison.

We narrow our focus here to a particular model of numerical representation, one which is standardly used by economists to represent individual preferences or social choice functions. Our question then is whether the *Standard Model* provides an adequate model of the comparisons we make.

#### 3.1. The Standard Model and the Trichotomy Thesis

The central element of the Standard Model is the real-valued utility function, that is, a function taking alternatives into real numbers. We have, so far, encountered only ‘difference’ functions, that is, functions taking differences between alternatives into some output. The discussion of the numerical representability of differences, however, is better

framed in terms of functions over alternatives rather than functions over their differences, since the former provides the more general case and thus allows for a more comprehensive discussion of the possible varieties of numerical representation on the Standard Model.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Standard Model, comparisons of items can be represented by a family of utility functions, each function of which assigns real numbers to the alternatives being compared.<sup>34</sup> So, suppose we have the items  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ . There is, according to the Standard Model, a family of functions, each of which assigns a real number to  $x$ , a real number to  $y$ , and a real number to  $z$ , that represents the comparisons of  $x$  and  $y$ , of  $x$  and  $z$ , and of  $y$  and  $z$ . Now suppose  $x$  is better than  $y$  which is better than  $z$ . One function in the family might assign respectively the numbers 3, 2, 1. Another might assign respectively the numbers 835, 100, 40. And so on. No one function in the family strictly represents the comparisons between the items, but together, the family of functions does. This is because the *significance* of the numbers assigned depends on what other numbers can be assigned to an item, and this information is given by all the functions that could represent the comparison. ‘Representation’, then, is *full* representation, that is representation of all the evaluative information there is concerning the given items.

Every utility function gives an ordering of the items it takes as arguments. That is, items can be ranked in a list allowing for ties. Every such function obeys the *ordinality condition*. That is,

The Ordinality Condition

$U_V(x) > U_V(y)$  iff  $x$  is better than  $y$  with respect to  $V$ , and

$U_V(x) = U_V(y)$  iff  $x$  and  $y$  are equally good with respect to  $V$

where  $x$  and  $y$  are alternatives and  $U(x)$  is the number assigned by the utility function  $U$  to alternative  $x$ .

The Ordinality Condition highlights the connection between the Trichotomy Thesis and numerical representability on the Standard Model. If the Trichotomy Thesis is true, then any comparable items will form an ordering and will be numerically representable by some family of functions each of which satisfies the Ordinality Condition. If the items form a mere rank-order, then the family of functions that represents their comparisons is one containing every function that satisfies the Ordinality Condition. If the ordering of the items contains more information than their mere rank-order, some subset of that family of functions will represent the ordering. In any case, once it is established that the Trichotomy Thesis holds, then numerical representability of any comparisons follows. The converse is true as well. The Standard Model presupposes that the Trichotomy Thesis is true, for at the Ordinality Condition at its heart presupposes that comparability is trichotomous. Note too that on the Standard Model, the Trichotomy Thesis holds generally for all items, whether alternatives themselves, their differences, or the differences between those differences, and so on.

Many philosophers have resisted the Standard Model because they assume that

numerical representability commits them to the ontological view that values are quantities of something. But the Standard Model commits one to no such thing. The thought that it does might be traced to two mistakes. First, is a failure to take seriously the notion of *representability*. Those who think that the relative merits of items can be numerically *represented* need not assume that the good or the right can be ontologically reduced to quantities of value. Value may be qualitative in nature and yet qualitative differences in value might still be *representable* by real numbers.<sup>35</sup> Just as physicists can give a numerical representation of the curve of a Ming vase or the hue of a morning sky at sunrise, qualitative nuances in the evaluative differences between items might be representable by real numbers.

Second, those who resist the Standard Model might have a misconception of what representation by a *number* entails. It might be thought that if the evaluative differences of items can be represented by a *number*, that number must be a number of *units* of the value, and thus representation by a number commits one to there being ‘units’ of value. And naturally, since the number of units of value is that in terms of which the comparison with respect to the covering value is given, it must be the number of units of value each item respectively bears that matters in assessing their comparative merits with respect to that covering value. But numerical representability need not entail the existence of value units. Items ranked on a list can be represented by the counting numbers according to their successive positions on the list without assuming there is any unit by which each is measured. Indeed, as we have just seen, the fact that the standard trichotomy of relations holds over a domain of items entails that any comparisons within that domain can be numerically represented.

A defense of the Standard Model will involve investigating what sort of comparative structures it can represent. The central question is, What constraints might there be on the family of utility functions that represents comparisons? Put another way, what evaluative information beyond the mere rank order of items can be represented by a family of utility functions?

### 3.2. Mere ordinality

One possible answer to these questions is that there is no further constraint other than the ordinality condition itself. That is, the comparison involves no information beyond the mere rank order of the items being compared. The representation of such comparisons is given by a family of utility functions whose assignment of number is constrained only by the number’s order.<sup>36</sup> Call such comparisons *merely ordinal*.

We can illustrate mere ordinality by way of example. Start with a nonevaluative case. Moh’s criterion gives a comparative criterion for the hardness of minerals: *x* is harder than *y* just in case *x* scratches *y* and is not scratched by *y*; and *x* and *y* are equally hard if neither scratches the other or they both scratch one another.<sup>37</sup> According to Moh’s, the ease or extent of the scratching is irrelevant; so long as there is some

scratching, the mineral is scratched. If we apply Moh's criterion to rubies, sandstone, and diamonds, we will end up with a ranked list of those minerals according to their relative hardness. But there can be no further information about the comparative hardness of items that does not itself derive from the rank ordering. Although implicit is the further information that the difference between the first and second items in the rank order is smaller than the difference between the first and third which includes it, we cannot say, for example, that diamonds are a lot harder than sandstone or that the difference in hardness between diamonds and rubies is small in comparison with the difference in hardness between rubies and sandstone.

Now consider an evaluative example. Modifying an example of Larry Temkin, 'goodness of baseball team' might be understood as 'beats and is not beaten by'. Thus, a baseball team is better than another if it beats but is not beaten by the other team.<sup>38</sup> Such a criterion would yield a rank list of baseball teams (assuming transitivity!) with no independent information about how the differences between teams compare.

But we should ask whether comparisons are plausibly merely ordinal. Neither hardness nor goodness as a baseball team normally admit of merely ordinal comparison. There are degrees of hardness and of goodness as a baseball team; diamonds scratch sandstone easily, and the Twins beat the Padres handily. These covering values naturally admit of comparisons with more structure than that allowed by mere ordinality.

This raises an important point. The numerical representability of a comparison is determined by the covering criterion with respect to which it proceeds. The covering value of a comparison determines whether that comparison is merely ordinal or has a richer evaluative structure. Moh's criterion for hardness and Temkin's criterion for goodness as a baseball team limit the structure of comparisons that proceed with respect to them to one of mere ordinality. But Moh's and Temkin's criteria are far from our natural understandings of hardness and goodness as a baseball team, both of which naturally admit of more information than mere rank order of items that bear these criteria. Indeed, most evaluative and nonevaluative criteria, at least as they are naturally understood, admit comparisons with more than a merely ordinal structure. I cannot think of any nongerrymandered covering value that gives rise to merely ordinal comparisons. Values, as they are ordinarily understood, admit of comparison in degrees; the ways in which something can be beguiling, lascivious, good, proud, and so on admit of representation in terms of more or less. Merely ordinal comparisons will be the exception rather than the rule. Mere ordinality, then, will not figure centrally in any defense of the Standard Model.

### 3.3. Precise cardinality

At the other end of the spectrum of possible comparative structures are comparisons with a great deal of information beyond the rank order of the items they relate. I shall call these comparisons *cardinal* to indicate that their structure has significance beyond mere ordinality. For instance, x may be twice as V as y. Or the

difference between  $x$  and  $z$  may be three times as great as the difference between  $y$  and  $z$ .

The numbers assigned by the family of utility functions that represent cardinal comparisons have cardinal significance. Suppose  $x$  is twice as good as  $y$  with respect to  $V$ . Each function that is a member of the family of functions that represents this comparative structure must assign numbers to  $x$  and  $y$  that respect their ratio, 2:1. So a function that assigns the numbers 40 to  $x$  and 20 to  $y$  will be a member of the family, but one that assigns the numbers 6 and 2 will not.<sup>39</sup> Such comparisons are *ratio cardinal* comparisons; the numbers assigned to alternatives by the functions in the family that represents them are significant in their ratios. Ratio cardinality assumes that there is an absolute, nonarbitrary zero which can be regarded as the merit of an item bearing no  $V$ , but the choice of units is arbitrary. Length is a simple nonevaluative example of a covering criterion that admits of ratio cardinal comparisons.

Sometimes, however, there is no absolute, nonarbitrary zero merit with respect to  $V$ , but there is nonetheless ratio cardinality on the *differences* between items. In this case, we can stipulate some zero and pick any arbitrary unit by which any item is measured. So, for example, we can say that the difference between  $x$  and  $y$  with respect to  $V$  is 5 p-units, if  $x$  is 10 p-units and  $y$  is 5 p-units or 2 q-units if  $x$  is 80 q-units and  $y$  is 78 q-units, and so on. Such comparisons can be represented by a family of functions, each function of which assigns numbers giving the number of x-units of the items.<sup>40</sup> Such comparisons are *interval cardinal* comparisons, since the interval difference between their merits has significance. Temperature in degrees Fahrenheit is a simple nonevaluative example of a criterion admitting of interval cardinal comparisons.

Some evaluative comparisons clearly have a ratio cardinal structure. For example, two acts might be ratio cardinally compared with respect to 'goodness of number of lives saved': one act may be twice as good with respect to number of lives saved than the other. Again, we see that it is the structure of the covering value that determines whether comparisons with respect to it admit of ratio cardinal representation. For 'number of lives saved' has the appropriate form of cardinality built into it.<sup>41</sup> It might be thought that we can get ratio cardinality for all items that are 'multiples' of one another. So, for example, we might think that we can ratio cardinally compare Eunice, Twice-Eunice, Thrice-Eunice, and so on. That is, by doubling or tripling etc. the component merits of Eunice, we end up with an infinite number of super-Eunices (and sub-Eunices) which can be ratio cardinally compared with one another. And so on for every item. Even apart from diminishing marginal utility, given the organic nature of many values, we cannot assume that doubling the component merits of an item will make that item twice as good. Triple the brilliance of a sunset and instead of more beauty, one gets momentary blindness. Moreover, it is hard to believe that many values have a natural zero. What has zero beauty or zero philosophical talent? These must be the kinds of thing that could have beauty or philosophical talent but just happen to have none. It is difficult to make sense of the idea of a natural zero for most values, and thus, ratio cardinal comparisons of alternatives with respect to those values is precluded.

There is a general argument against understanding most of the comparisons we make in terms of ratio or interval cardinality. Both kinds of cardinality imply ratio cardinal comparison of the *differences* between items.<sup>42</sup> While it may be plausible to think that the difference between saving one life and two lives is half as great as the difference between saving two lives and four lives with respect to number of lives saved, it is doubtful that something of the same sort can be plausibly thought about pairs of pairs of items with respect to beauty or philosophical talent. There is something about most values that do not permit ratio cardinal comparisons of the differences between items with respect to them. If this is right, then both interval and ratio cardinal comparisons of the underlying items are blocked.

The basic problem with ratio and interval cardinality is the assumption that there can be some arbitrary unit that *precisely* measures the merit of an item with respect to some V.<sup>43</sup> Both ratio and interval cardinal comparisons are what we shall call *precise cardinal* comparisons. That is, they assume there is some unit that precisely measures the merit of an item in much the same way that the inch-unit precisely measures the length of any stick.<sup>44</sup> The unit is given by some arbitrary difference between two items. Take, for example, philosophers with respect to philosophical talent. Take as the unit of measurement, the difference in philosophical talent between Aristotle and Plato. There is a natural zero for differences, e.g., the difference between Aristotle and himself. Now, according to precise cardinality, we can precisely measure the merit of Malebranche, Fichte, Kant, Locke, Wittgenstein, and Rawls in terms of ratios of this unit. This is a highly implausible assumption, to say the least. What is not implausible, however, is the assumption that such an arbitrary unit might *imprecisely* measure the merit of all or some of these philosophers. But once we move to the idea of *imprecise* measurement, we leave ratio and interval cardinality of the items themselves behind.

We now face a predicament. Mere ordinality does not capture the structure of the comparisons we make nor does precise cardinality. It is hard to believe that there is some unit that precisely measures the difference between a career as a ski-instructor and one as a management consultant. At the same time, it is surely true that the difference between these two careers is greater than the difference between two careers in accounting and less than the difference between a career as a corporate lawyer and one as a homeless, one-limbed beggar in Calcutta. There is some cardinality among the differences between items, but to think that we can say that one difference is exactly 2.56 times another is highly implausible. There is more than mere ordinality to comparisons, but there is not as much as precise cardinality; typical evaluative comparisons are neither merely ordinal nor precisely cardinal. What we need is something stronger than mere ordinality and weaker than precise cardinality, namely, *imprecise cardinality*.

### 3.4. Imprecise cardinality

If two items are imprecisely cardinally comparable, there is some magnitude to

their difference – that is, the difference can be greater or less than other differences – but there is no unit by which differences can be precisely measured. Precise measurement is precluded because there is a lack of fit between any possible unit and the merits of items with respect to certain values. The merits of items and the differences between them are not the kinds of thing with precise boundaries.

A little reflection makes clear that most of the evaluative comparisons we make are imprecisely cardinal. When comparing careers or vacation spots or moral acts, there is more than a mere ordinal ranking of such items, and yet it is hard to believe that there is some unit by which the merits of the items can be precisely measured, or, put differently, that one difference between such items can be 3.57 times as great as another difference. We say that this item is *a little* better than that one or that the difference between these two items is *very great* or that this item is *much* worse than that one, and so on, without for a moment expecting that there is some unit by which one can, even in principle, determine *precisely* how much better or worse.

The thought that the cardinality of evaluative comparisons might be imprecise was suggested over sixty years ago by John Laird, but the idea has been taken seriously only recently by moral philosophers. The most detailed treatment is given by James Griffin in his book, *Well-Being*, and the idea is implicit in some of what Derek Parfit says in his *Reasons and Persons*.<sup>45</sup> What I want to emphasize here is that, contrary to what some modern-day authors have supposed, the notion of imprecise cardinality is compatible with the Trichotomy Thesis and the Standard Model.

Imprecise cardinality might be understood as follows. The imprecision is in the ratio by which items are related; instead of saying that *x* is precisely twice as good as *y*, we say that *x* is between two and three times as good as *y*. Thus, instead of constraining our family of functions by the rule, ‘Any number assigned to *x* must be twice that assigned to *y*’, we constrain by the rule, ‘Any number assigned to *x* must be between two and three times as great as any number assigned to *y*’. So we increase the number of functions that can be members of the representative family, but not to the point where the family is composed of every function that satisfies the Ordinality Condition. In this way, we can have imprecise cardinal comparability while keeping intact the Ordinality Condition, the Trichotomy Thesis, and the Standard Model.

This is not a surprising conclusion. For the Standard Model starts with the family of functions that satisfy the ordinality condition and throws out functions which do not meet the further conditions imposed by a cardinal structure. Precise cardinality involves throwing out very many of those functions; mere ordinality involves throwing out none. It should not surprise us that there are many possible middle courses. The sort of imprecise cardinality we described is just one way in which imprecise cardinality might be understood in a way consistent with the Standard Model.<sup>46</sup>

But it would be hasty to conclude that the Standard Model has been vindicated. For although most of our evaluative comparisons are imprecisely cardinal, that is, neither precisely cardinal nor merely ordinal, it is not clear that they can be made consistent with

the Trichotomy Thesis. This is because there are other features of the imprecisely cardinal comparisons we make that suggest the Trichotomy Thesis is too narrow an understanding of the logical space of comparability. Put differently, imprecise cardinality can be understood in a way that requires rejection of the Trichotomy Thesis. We shall have more to say about imprecise cardinality in the final chapters of this dissertation. For now, we should note that there is a conception of imprecise cardinality that does not *require* rejection of the Trichotomy Thesis. The Standard Model, more powerful than it might at first seem, can accommodate a whole range of imprecision in cardinality by adding successively looser constraints on the family of functions that represents such comparisons.

This chapter has been concerned with the structure of comparisons and of incomparability. We fine-tuned a definition of incomparability, offered an account of the structure of values and of bearer comparisons, and explored one model of how the structure of comparisons might be numerically represented. Our discussion raises many questions, some of which we will answer in due course. In the next chapter, however, we take up a different issue altogether: why does any of this matter? As we shall see, the spectre of incomparability among alternatives strikes at the very heart of practical reason.

<sup>20</sup> Note that the covering value is the value itself, not ‘contribution with respect to the value’. Aspects are worldly manifestations of abstract values, and as such cannot contribute to the value itself, but they can be compared with respect to the value itself.

<sup>21</sup> Where comparisons of the aspects fail, the structure is thereby fragmented. We shall have more to say about the fragmentation of a value – and the incomparability of contributory values it entails – in chapter 3.

<sup>22</sup> I suspect that the difference between two items is a primitive notion; any plausible way of analysing differences seems to me to lead back to the idea of a difference. But the only sense of ‘primitive’ I take for granted in presenting a componential account is the nonontological, anemic one of being the starting place of the account.

<sup>23</sup> There is a somewhat puzzling fact about the epistemology of differences on the one hand and comparisons on the other. It seems to me that the existence of an evaluative difference is often more easily intuitively grasped than the existence of a comparison. This is true even though it is clear that the existence of an evaluative difference is equivalent to the existence of a comparison. Take two careers, say, one in hang-gliding and one in farming. We are much more confident in asserting that there is an evaluative difference in goodness of career between them than we are in asserting that they can be compared. This is because, I think, we have more difficulty separating the existence of a comparison from its content than we do separating the existence of an evaluative difference from the content of that difference. The greater intuitive confidence we have about evaluative differences is a fact that an account of value structure or of bearer comparisons might fortuitously exploit. In presenting such an account, then, a shift from talk of *comparisons* of contributory value aspects to talk of the *evaluative differences* between them may leave the reader on firmer intuitive ground.

<sup>24</sup> An assumption analogous to the atomicity assumption, what is commonly known as ‘separability’, is familiar in the economic literature. An example of an account of the good that makes the separability assumption can be found in John Broome, *Weighing Goods*, see especially ch. 4.

<sup>25</sup> This view of social choice functions is a bit like classical utilitarianism – a traditional view that moderns have not quite abandoned but nevertheless considered too simplistic to be correct.

<sup>26</sup> So, for example, Isaac Levi assumes that a weighted average of components (in his case ‘values’) yields the resolution of any conflict. And where conflict cannot be resolved, Levi urges that all possible resolutions of the conflict – that is, all possible weighted averages of the components relevant to choice – must be entertained. How such weighted averages are to be determined is a question about whether the conflicting components can be coordinated. Isaac Levi, *Hard Choices: Decision Making Under Unresolved Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Isaac Levi and John Broome make something like the atomicity assumption in different contexts. By assuming that components of his choice function can be given weights, Levi assumes that an improvement in one component has a constant merit no matter what it is bundled with. (Putting the point in terms of Levi’s central example, an improvement in typing skills is just as good with respect to goodness as a secretary in someone who is a rotten stenographer as it is in someone who is a skilled stenographer). John Broome makes this criticism of Levi in his review of Levi’s book. But Broome himself seems to make an analogous assumption in his *Weighing Goods*. He suggests that utility functions are ‘additively separable’, that is, that the ordering can be represented by a function of the sum of sub-utilities. (Although Broome is careful to say that his discussion is one of form, not content, it is natural to think that Broome embarks on the

discussion of additively separable utility functions because he thinks that they are.) See Isaac Levi, *Hard Choices*; John Broome, 'Review of *Hard Choices*', *Economics and Philosophy*, 8: 169-176,(1992); John Broome, *Weighing Goods*, ch. 4.

<sup>28</sup> An alternative approach might contextualize the *identity* of an aspect to the bundle to which it belongs rather than the merit of the aspect. Since this alternative leads to a strained metaphysics of contributory value aspects, the approach here is preferable.

<sup>29</sup> Note that the usual direction of inquiry has us asking whether betterness just is Pareto-betterness. The claim here is that Pareto-betterness may not entail betterness.

<sup>30</sup> Some metaphysicians doubt whether such interdependence makes sense. The best case for such an interdependence to my knowledge is made by Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons*.

<sup>31</sup> I hope to be able to explore in future work the relation between value and evaluative comparison.

<sup>32</sup> My discussion here as above is intended to be intuitive, not technical. A clear, technical account of the basic notions discussed in this section can be found in John Broome's *Weighing Goods*, chapter 4 and James Griffin's *Well-Being*, pp. 81ff, 91ff. My aim in this section is to explore certain philosophical issues in a way which gives the reader unfamiliar with basic decision theory a flavour of how a model of comparability might be constructed. I attempt to construct the beginnings of a nonstandard model in chapter 5.

<sup>33</sup> So, for instance, representation in terms of difference functions would not in any straightforward way allow representation of the idea of a natural zero. Thus, employment of difference functions would not enable us to get at the idea that one thing is twice as good as another.

<sup>34</sup> Those who don't like talk of 'representation' by a 'family' of functions can think in terms of the equivalent formulation: comparisons are 'represented' by a utility function *in virtue of* its membership in the maximal family of such functions that 'represent' the comparisons. I talk in terms of a 'family' 'representing' because I think understanding representation in this way rather than as encumbered by conditions posed on a single function is more intuitive to the layperson. Every 'family' is *maximal*, that is, it contains all the functions that satisfy the appropriate constraints.

<sup>35</sup> Maximizers, against whom this charge is most vigorously levelled, have not usually made this distinction, but it is one that is in principle available to them. Indeed, the spirit of maximization is kept in tact while the problems associated with a quantitative ontology of value or substantive view of justification are avoided.

<sup>36</sup> Economists would say that a function unique up to increasing monotonic transformations represents the comparisons.

<sup>37</sup> This example is taken from Griffin, *Well-Being*.

<sup>38</sup> Larry Temkin, "Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox" *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16:138-187 (1987). Temkin does not endorse such a criterion.

<sup>39</sup> Economists say that ratio cardinal comparisons are represented by a function unique up to  $ax$  where  $a$  is greater than zero.

<sup>40</sup> Economists say that interval cardinal comparisons are represented by a function unique up to positive linear transformations (i.e.,  $U(x) = ax + b$ , where  $a > 0$  and

b ranges over the reals).

<sup>41</sup> Of course, it might be thought that ‘number of lives saved’ is not an evaluative criterion at all, but rather a nonevaluative one. But the number of lives saved is something with intrinsic normative significance so I shall grant that it is an evaluative criterion.

<sup>42</sup> If the number assigned to  $\alpha$  is  $ax_1 + b$  and the number assigned to  $\beta$  is  $ax_2 + b$ , their difference is  $a(x_1 - x_2)$ . All differences between items interval cardinally compared will be some multiple of  $a$ , where  $a$  is positive.

<sup>43</sup> There are broader notions of ratio and interval cardinality that need not require precision. These reject the understanding of cardinality in terms of standard utility functions. I explore one such possible form of interval cardinality in chapter 5.

<sup>44</sup> There are some metaphysicians who claim that length can only be imprecisely measured as well.

<sup>45</sup> See John Laird, *An Enquiry Into Moral Notions* ( London: Allen & Unwin), 1935; James Griffin, *Well-Being*, pp. 81, 96-98, 104; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 431; and Derek Parfit, *Practical Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming.

<sup>46</sup> Another possibility is to claim mere ordinality on the differences rather than the ratio cardinality on the differences implied by precise cardinality on the underlying alternatives. One obvious way to achieve mere ordinality on the differences is to deny the continuity assumption. Since this possible way of understanding imprecise cardinality is much more complicated than what I have outlined above, for our purposes we can ignore it. For a discussion of mere ordinality on the differences and its distinction from ratio cardinality on the differences, see Tore Ellingsen, “Cardinal Utility: A History of Hedonometry”, draft, 1990; Kranz, David H., Duncan R. Luce, Patrick Suppes and Amos T Tversky, *Foundations of Measurement: Volume I, Additive and Polynomial Representations*. (Academic Press, 1971), p. 433.

◆ **To compare is to choose.**

-Anon.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE NORMATIVITY OF COMPARISONS

With the basic notion in hand, we can ask, why is incomparability significant? In this chapter, I argue that incomparability has critical implications for practical reason, and in particular, for the possibility of justified choice.

#### 1. What Justifies Choice?

There is a strikingly persistent division on the question, What justifies choice? Among economists, rational choice theorists, and decision theorists, it is almost universally assumed that what justifies a given choice is a comparison of the alternatives, and in particular, that the chosen alternative is better than or as good as each of the others.<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers, however, especially those in the business of trying to understand the nature of practical reason, take for granted that the justification of choice need not be a comparison of the alternatives. The fulfillment of duties, the satisfaction of desires, the noncomparative intrinsic or instrumental merits of the chosen alternative, the dictates of good character, and so on, might be justifying reasons for choice, and none of these considerations, it seems, is properly understood as a comparison of the alternatives. Indeed, the debate among these philosophers is framed not in terms of *whether* noncomparative considerations can justify choice but in terms of *which* noncomparative considerations can.

The significance of this division between economists and philosophers has been largely overlooked. This is because the disagreement is widely taken to be a mere reflection of a more general disagreement between ‘teleologists’ and ‘nonteleologists’ about right action. ‘Teleology’ is usually glossed as the view that a right action is one that ‘promotes the good’, however ‘the good’ is understood. But this way of understanding teleology is either nearly empty or too narrow to explain even *prima facie* the disagreement about justifying reasons. For ‘promotion’, at least on its ordinary understanding, is neutral as to its object, and so all putative alternatives to teleology *can*, albeit with varying degrees of ease, be characterized as ‘promoting’ the good. So, for example, deontological views might be said to hold that agents should promote obligation-satisfyingness, and their peculiar Kantian varieties that agents should promote the autonomy of will through the proper exercise of practical reason. Virtue theories might be said to hold that agents should promote good character. Adopting a capacious view of ‘action’, ‘expressivist’ theories might be said to hold that agents should promote proper emotions, feelings, and other judgement-sensitive attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Similar descriptions can be offered for less mainstream views, such as ones according to which a right action is one favoured by the best theory of the relevant values at stake<sup>3</sup> or expresses one’s love for something.<sup>4</sup> If, on the other hand ‘teleology’ is to mark out a distinct approach to right action, ‘promoting’ the good must be understood as a term of art. This might be done by restricting the object of promotion to ‘purposes’ as opposed to

'the good'. But then it becomes more difficult to see how the disagreement between philosophers and economists about justifying reasons could have been thought to be a mere reflection of a disagreement about promoting purposes or promoting something else. For why should we think, even *prima facie*, that the special status afforded to purposes implies that justification must be a matter of comparisons of the alternatives?

Perhaps then the disagreement has been thought to reflect the divide between consequentialists and nonconsequentialists.<sup>5</sup> It might seem that comparisons of alternatives with respect to some value can be justifying reasons only if consequentialism is correct. If I am justified in choosing x over y because x is in some way better than y, doesn't that justification amount to the fact (or belief in the subjective case) that the world with x in it is better in the relevant respect than the world with y in it? Tim Scanlon writes that on the most plausible interpretation of decision theory, the economist's account of the justification of choice "is applicable only to situations in which the only relevant reasons concern the desirability of various states of affairs."<sup>6</sup> But the disagreement between economists and philosophers over justifying reasons is not a reflection of a disagreement about whether consequences are all that matters. The two disagreements cut across one another. That justifying reasons are always comparisons of the alternatives can be separated from the view that all that matters are states of affair. For one thing, actions, strictly construed, need not be the only things compared; judgement-sensitive attitudes, things, persons, events, etc., *themselves* can be objects of choice. For another thing, the values with respect to which items are compared need not be goodness of states of affair. I may compare two alternatives with respect to which fulfills my moral obligations better and be justified in choosing one not because the state of affairs in which I choose it is better than the one in which I don't (though that may be true), but because the one option is itself better with respect to fulfilling my moral obligations. What matters to a choice need not be goodness of state of affairs *per se*, though the justified choice, once chosen, may lead to or constitute one.

I shall argue that the disagreement over whether justifying reasons are comparisons of the alternatives helps to illuminate a fundamental feature of practical justification. My aim in this chapter is to sketch and defend an account of practical justification which highlights this feature. If the account is correct, there is a natural way in which we can understand the disagreement between economists and philosophers, one in which the economists' view of justifying reasons is, in an important sense, vindicated.

## 2. Comparativism, Justifying Reasons, and Choice Situations

The account of practical justification I shall defend is a version of a general view we might call *comparativism*. Comparativism holds that in any choice situation, a comparison of the alternatives with respect to an appropriate covering value is necessary to the justification of choice. If comparativism is correct, the significance of incomparability among alternatives is very great indeed. For if alternatives are incomparable, justified choice is precluded. Widespread incomparability seriously undermines the possibility of leading lives of reason.

It might strike some that comparativism is trivially true given the nature of choice.

After all, choice is essentially *for* one alternative *as opposed* to another;<sup>7</sup> if one must choose a dessert, one does not strictly *choose* lemon tart if that is all there is on the menu. For there to be choice, there must be more than one option available, even if the only other option is to refuse to choose the given option. Choice of one option as opposed to another suggests that the merits of the alternatives must be compared against one another, for how else can one choose this as opposed to that? Thus, it might be thought that comparativism follows trivially from the very concept of *choice*; making a choice requires making a comparison, and in this way the justification of choice is derivatively dependent on a comparison. This is too hasty. Choice requires more than one alternative, but this is not to say that it requires that an agent compare the alternatives. At the very most, choice requires that all the options be, in some sense, ‘taken into account’, but this falls short of requiring a comparison of their merits. I may choose a life of quiet contemplation, having considered what alternative sorts of lives would be like, but I can choose without comparing: the quiet life moves me. If comparativism is to be won, it cannot be won trivially by appeal to this conceptual feature of choice.

There is another way in which comparativism might be thought to be trivially true. A justified choice is always one which there is *the most* reason to choose. So a justification of choice is always ‘it was best with respect to justification/rationality/ought-to-be-chosenness’. In this way, justification of choice depends on a comparison of the alternatives. But this is to misunderstand comparativism. It is not a claim about the structure of practical rationality. Indeed, we may grant that practical rationality has this structure – that every justified choice is one that is in some sense ‘best with respect to justification’. But it is still an open, substantive question as to how ‘best with respect to justification’ is to be understood. Some think that a ‘best justified’ choice is the one that is ‘good enough’. Others think that a ‘best justified’ choice is one that meets some noncomparative standard, for example, fulfills a duty or is what the *phronimos* would choose. Comparativism is a substantive view about practical justification, one that must be defended by substantive argument, not by appeal to the concept of practical reason itself.

Before we begin our investigation of comparativism, we need to do away with some preliminaries. Start with the idea of a *justification* of choice. A justification of choice is a choice’s *justifying reason*, that is, a reason that justifies choosing the chosen alternative. A justifying reason serves as a recommendation for the chosen option and is theoretically distinct from both an agent’s *motivation* for choosing and the reason *for which* she chose as she did, though in any given case all three may coincide. Every reason has *normative force*: if one has a reason to choose x, then, *ceteris paribus*, one ought to choose it. A justifying reason has sufficient normative force to satisfy the demand for justification. By ‘satisfy the demand for justification’, I do not mean anything mysterious but rather the intuitive idea of providing a satisfactory answer to the normative question, ‘Why should one choose x?’. For example, one might ask ‘Why did you tell Mary that her husband was having an affair?’. A justifying reason might be ‘Because she deserves to know the truth’. Or a student might want to know why his paper should receive a failing grade. A satisfactory response might be ‘Your paper is devoid of argument, poorly written, dysfunctionally organized, and it has no

redeeming philosophical qualities'. A justifying reason silences the demand for justificatory explanation.

The account I offer is of *objective* practical justification. That is, by 'justification', I mean the warrant there is for an agent's choosing one alternative among a given set in a choice situation, whatever her epistemic state, at least where her epistemic state is not relevant to the warrant. Though I fashion my arguments for a thorough-going objectivist view, the arguments can, with little modification, be applied to justification relative to an ordinary agent with all or some of her foibles.

All choices are made in the context of a *choice situation*. Roughly, a choice situation is any actual or possible<sup>8</sup> situation in which an individual agent must choose only one of the multiple alternatives available<sup>9</sup> to her. I shall take for granted the notion of a choice situation; we know one when we see one. Therefore, I will not be troubling myself with pathological cases, such as ones in which there are an infinite number of alternatives or the alternatives are hopelessly ill-defined.

Every choice situation is governed by a value. Call this the *choice value*. A choice situation is not well-defined, either objectively or subjectively, unless there is some value that determines what matters in that situation. So, for example, a list of alternatives does not make a choice situation; there must be a value that indicates what relevance those alternatives have to the situation at hand. The choice value helps to individuate one choice situation from another. A choice situation involving two philosophers governed by the choice value of 'philosophical talent' is very different from one involving those philosophers governed by 'sartorial elegance'. One is what one might encounter in trying to fill a philosophy post, and the other while trying to fill the title of 'Nattiest Philosopher'. The choice value must be well-defined, but this is not to say that it cannot be vague. We might know that what matters in a particular choice situation is kindness, but *kindness* may be a vague concept.

Not only are choice situations governed by a value, but choice itself must be understood relative to the choice value (either as it is or as it is taken to be). We might distinguish 'selection' – opting for one thing over another for no reason – from 'choice' – opting for one thing over another on the basis of a reason. Selection is explained without recourse to any reason the agent believed she had; choice can only be explained by appeal to the reason the agent believed she had – it is the reason *for which* she *chose* as she did. I might have selected to go to London simply because I got on the wrong train, but if I chose to go to London, I did so on the basis of a reason. It may not have been a good reason, and I may even be mistaken in thinking that I had a reason, but to call my opting a 'choosing', it must be true that I believed I had a reason. Now I cannot believe I have a reason to choose something unless I have in mind some value in terms of which that choice is to be made. Choice implies belief in a reason which in turn implies a value in terms of which the choice is made. An explanation of an agent's choice, then, must make reference to the choice value that governs the choice situation. We might explain a choice between two philosophers in terms of the value of philosophical talent. Or we might explain it in terms of sartorial elegance. It makes no sense, however, for one philosopher to be chosen *simpliciter*.<sup>10</sup>

Not only does choice conceptually presuppose a choice value, but the justification of choice is constrained by the choice value. So, for example, “Because one wears polyester and the other does not” might be a justification where the choice value governing a choice between two philosophers is nattiness, but it will not be a justification if the choice value is philosophical talent.

Talk of a choice value is reminiscent of our discussion of covering values in the previous chapter. A choice value makes the choice the choice it is just as a covering value makes a comparison the comparison it is. And just as the choice value constrains the justification of choice, the covering value constrains the truth of the comparison in terms of which the comparison is made. As in the previous chapter, we here assume that where there are multiple values that matter in a choice situation, those values are contributory values of a single choice value. (We see why such an assumption is warranted in the next chapter). While it is worth noting the parallels between choice values and covering values, it is also worth emphasizing that the requirement that choices be relative to a value does not by itself entail comparativism. For there is nothing in the requirement that there be a choice value that implies that there must be a comparison of the alternatives in order for there to be justified choice. Thus, the conceptual framework is neutral on the substantive question of whether comparativism is true.

### 3. Comparativism

Comparativism holds that a comparison of the alternatives is necessary to the justification of a choice between them. In what way the comparison is necessary, however, is left open. The most common form of comparativism understands the necessity relation in the strictest possible way: a comparison is necessary in that it is identical to the justification. We begin our examination of comparativism by exploring this form of it. This strict form, however, is commonly held to suffer from various defects, each of which motivates an alternative, noncomparativist account of justifying reasons. As we will see, however, none of these accounts provides a genuine alternative to comparativism. Indeed, the investigation of these putatively alternative accounts naturally gives rise to a less strict form of comparativism which illuminates an important distinction between justification and normativity.

#### 3.1. Optimizing

Comparativism in its standard form holds that justifying reasons are *optimizing*, that is, they are considerations that the chosen alternative is better than or as good as the others with respect to the choice value. A justified choice is thereby ‘optimal’. Thus, according to these accounts, the justification of choice is a comparison of the alternatives, and in particular, that the chosen option is better than or as good with respect to the choice value than any of the other alternatives. Optimization understands the necessity of a comparison to justification in the strictest possible way: a comparison of the alternatives *just is* the justification. This view is nearly universal among economists and rational choice and decision theorists.<sup>11</sup> Even philosophers who oppose optimization grant that optimizing

reasons are justifying reasons but maintain only that they are not the only kind of justifying reasons there are. Sometimes optimization is thought to be definitional of practical rationality.<sup>12</sup> But as we have already pointed out above, choosing what there is most reason to choose is merely the formal structure of practical rationality, and optimization is offered as a substantive account of what it is for there to be the most reason to choose.

We must be careful not to dismiss optimizing accounts by thinking, wrongly, that they commit us to the view that what matters to choice is quantity of value, and specifically, the more, the better. The thought is that since optimizing accounts represent a justified option as one that bears the greatest quantity of whatever value is at stake, optimizing must presuppose that what matters in choice is amount of value. The charge has been most vigorously levelled against *maximizing*, a form of optimizing that represents a justified choice as that which bears the greatest number of *units* of whatever value is at stake. Classical forms of utilitarianism, for example, have been traditional targets of this attack. But the attack does not succeed. For optimizing accounts, whether maximizing or not, need not hold that *what it is* for a choice to be justified is for it to bear the greatest quantity of whatever value is at stake. Optimizers, if they hold that there is complete comparability, need only assume that the justification of choice can be *represented* by, not reduced to, quantities of value.<sup>13</sup> As we saw in chapter 1, the Trichotomy Thesis, which optimizing accounts assume, guarantees such numerical representability. And if they think there is some incomparability, then they need not assume even that; for where there is incomparability, there can be at best only partial numerical representation.

Optimizing has great intuitive appeal. Surely if one alternative is better than all the others or two are equal-bests with respect to what matters in the choice situation, then choosing any of those alternatives is for that reason justified. And how can a choice be justified if no alternative is as meritorious as or more meritorious than any of the others?

There is, I believe, a general underlying intuition about the nature of choice situations that explains the appeal of optimization. This is the thought that choice situations are by their very nature ‘competitive’. Take, for instance, a choice situation in which one must choose the winner of a poetry contest or the victor of a gymnastics meet or ‘Best Play’ for a Tony Award. Where the choice situation is itself literally a competition, the justifying reason for choice *must* be a comparison. It will not do to choose “The Last Night of Ballyhoo” on the grounds that it displays insightfulness about prejudice. For “A Doll’s House” displays in a more profound way an even greater insight into prejudice. If one is justified in choosing “Ballyhoo”, it must be because that play is at as good as or better than the others with respect to the choice value. Such is the nature of choice in the context of competitions.

Other choice situations, though not literally competitions, might also be seen as pitting alternatives against one another with respect to the choice value. Take, for instance, a choice between two possible hobbies and a choice value of worthwhileness. You could take up the harpsichord or learn Chinese. There is a sense in which the alternatives compete against one another by vying for the appellation ‘most worthwhile’. If they can be compared with respect to worthwhileness, it is plausible to suppose that the justification for

choosing one over the other will be that comparison. That learning to play the harpsichord, is a worthwhile pursuit will not justify your choice. For learning Chinese may be even more worthwhile. Perhaps all choice situations are competitive in this way.

One should not think that optimization is not at work simply because a comparison need not be *cited* as a justifying reason. Noncomparative considerations can, for instance, operate as shorthand – that is, as abbreviations – for the relevant comparison. We know we have an abbreviation for a justifying reason if the reason offered does not, given the choice value, satisfy the demand for justification. So, for example, in the hobbies case, I might offer ‘Because the harpsichord is a subtle keyboard instrument’ in response to the demand for justification. But if worthwhileness is what matters in the choice situation, this will not satisfy the demand for justification. One might reasonably press me on my response by asking, ‘But do you think it’s more worthwhile?’ Now my response would satisfy the demand for justification if it is understood as an abbreviation for the claim that taking up the harpsichord is more worthwhile; my highlighting the subtlety of the instrument may indicate why I find it more worthwhile. This is not to say, of course, that the claim is true; I may have underestimated the worthwhileness of being able to communicate with over half the world’s population.

That noncomparative considerations may operate as abbreviations for comparisons is suggested also by the fact that, if we do not know what choice value is at stake, we understand an agent’s reply to the demand for justification as indicating a comparison of the items with respect to the choice value. Suppose that my reply in the hobbies case is ‘Because playing the harpsichord is a special skill’. Without any notion of what the choice value might be, we naturally take this response to indicate that the choice value is something along the lines of ‘specialness of skill’, and the justifying reason to be that playing the harpsichord is better with respect to specialness of skill than speaking Chinese. Ordinary language considerations of this sort, then, should not be taken to undermine optimization.

Some will find the idea that all choice situations are competitive intuitive. But there are some choice situations which are decidedly not competitive. If I must choose between saving my child’s life and a million dollars, it would be odd to think that the alternatives ‘compete’ against one another with respect to the choice value. I have a duty to save my child and my duty – not a comparison of the alternatives – justifies my choice. Staying home to tend my ailing mother rather than attend the philosophy conference I want to attend might be justified because that is my filial duty. Assigning one’s students Hume’s *Treatise* instead of secondary literature might be justified because one ought to have students read primary literature. Choosing lemon tart rather than pumpkin flan for dessert may be justified just because that is what one feels like having. Sometimes, the reason justifying a choice can be a matter of some absolute, noncomparative feature of the chosen alternative or one’s simply ‘feeling like it’. If this is right, then optimizing is not the correct account of justifying reasons since not all justifying reasons are comparisons. Since optimizing cannot plausibly account for these counterexamples, we will have to look elsewhere for a defense of comparativism.

### 3.2. Alternatives to optimizing

Several thinkers have offered accounts of justification that are alternatives to optimization and to comparativism in general. These rival views hold that the justification of choice does not depend – or at least does not always depend – on a comparison of the alternatives, either because there are noncomparative considerations that may justify choice when comparative considerations run out or because comparisons are in some way irrelevant to justification.

Joseph Raz, for example, thinks that the ‘will’ can justify choice when comparative reasons run out.<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Anderson argues that in certain cases of incomparability, norms of rationality provide justification for choice.<sup>15</sup> James Griffin maintains that prudence as well as legal or moral consensus help to ‘shape’ and ‘extend’ the moral norms which provide the standards according to which we may justifiably choose between morally incomparable alternatives.<sup>16</sup> Others argue that certain practical norms demand that justification be noncomparative. Steven Lukes, for example, points out that a monk’s choice of celibacy is not justified by a comparison of the alternatives but is instead a sacrifice demanded of him by the sacred values involved.<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Anderson,<sup>18</sup> Richard Pildes,<sup>19</sup> and Cass Sunstein<sup>20</sup> think that certain alternatives have a ‘higher’ status than others, and that choosing them on the basis of a comparison violates their integrity. Instead, choice between goods of different status is justified by practical norms of some kind that have as their basis the intrinsic merits of the goods at stake. Still others find other reasons to think that justification need not be comparative. John Finnis thinks that incomparability, far from precluding justified choice, is a pre-requisite of it, at least in cases of morally significant choice. His idea seems to be that if the justification of a morally significant choice depended on comparison, the agent would not be truly “free” to express his moral agency since the comparative fact would determine the correct choice.<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor explains how “articulation” of goods and a keen sense of the “shape” of our lives and of the way different goods fit within it provide us with the reasons we need for justified choice.<sup>22</sup> The specificationism of Henry Richardson and David Wiggins, and its variants, such as Elijah Millgram’s ‘incrementalism’, maintain that justifying reasons can be garnered from practically specified understandings of the values or alternatives at stake with an eye on what really matters.<sup>23</sup> Isaac Levi thinks that choice is justified in cases of “unresolved conflict” if the chosen alternative is “admissible”, that is, not worse than any of the other alternatives.<sup>24</sup> Michael Slote thinks that a choice is justified if it is “good enough”.<sup>25</sup> And Michael Stocker thinks that justifying reasons can be based on the absolute, “concrete” merits of the chosen alternative.<sup>26</sup>

As far as I am aware, every existing nonoptimizing account of justifying reasons, with a difficult class of exceptions to be discussed below, falls into one of three categories: *satisficing*, *maximalizing*, or *absolutizing*. Each in turn can be seen to be motivated by some putative defect of optimizing.

First is the thought that optimizing is too demanding. Why should rationality require that we always go for what is comparatively best? Sometimes one is justified in choosing what is ‘good enough’, even though there may be something better in the offing.

Such accounts hold that justifying reasons can be *satisficing*, that is, they might be the consideration that the chosen alternative is good enough. Second is a worry about whether the alternatives can be ranked by the standard trichotomy of relations. Perhaps though none of the standard trichotomy holds, the assertion that one is *not worse* than the others is sufficient justification for choosing that one. So the consideration that the chosen alternative is *not worse* than the others may be a justifying reason; that is, justifying reasons might be *maximalizing*.<sup>27</sup> Third, and by far the most common, is the worry that justifying reasons need not be comparative at all; a justifying reason is not – perhaps cannot be – a comparison of the alternatives. It is instead an ‘absolute’, i.e., noncomparative, merit of the chosen alternative. Justifying reasons, that is, might be *absolutizing*.<sup>28</sup> Absolutizing considerations might be taken to form a large and diverse class, including considerations that the chosen alternative satisfies or expresses or constitutes some good, duty, desire, virtue or good character. ‘Because the chosen alternative satisfies my desire’, ‘because it is my duty’, ‘because it is good’, ‘because it expresses my self-ideal’, ‘because it is what the *phronimos* would choose’, and so on might be taken to be *absolutizing* considerations.

Each of these alternatives purports to be an improvement on optimizing in that it does not depend on the comparability of the alternatives; each explains practical justification in a way that does not, supposedly, depend on the comparability of the alternatives. But, as we will see, none has the advantage over optimizing in this regard.

### 3.2.1. A pragmatic problem

Any alternative to optimization holding that choice can be justified among incomparables is subject to a practical worry. This worry most commonly surfaces in cases of unknown dynamic choice, where the identity of alternatives relevant to the justification of choice now, become known only later. If choice among incomparables can be justified, practical reason could, in principle, justify a series of choices analogous to cyclical preferences with disastrous ‘money-pump’ consequences.

Take a hum-drum example. Suppose I am about to enjoy a tall, cool glass of freshly squeezed lemonade. You intervene, offering your tumbler of freshly-squeezed orange juice. Suppose too that the lemonade and orange juice are incomparable with respect to goodness of taste. According to alternative views, choice between incomparables can be justified. *Ex hypothesi*, my trading the lemonade for the orange juice may be justified. So I make the trade. But just as I am about to drink the orange juice, you again intervene, this time offering me a glass of not-quite-as-fresh lemonade. The slightly less fresh lemonade, only marginally less delicious than its fresher counterpart, is still incomparable with the orange juice, and again I make the *ex hypothesi* justified trade. I am thus left with less fresh lemonade, but I began with fresher lemonade, which by my lights is definitely tastier. I have, through a series of choices sanctioned by practical reason, moved from something I consider more meritorious to something I consider less meritorious. Iterated across alternatives and covering values, such a pattern of choice may leave us with lives barely worth living. All those who would oppose optimizing, then, must provide a well-motivated, non-ad-hoc account of how practical reason prohibits agents from becoming ‘merit

pumps'.<sup>29</sup>

The more serious challenge to nonoptimizing accounts, however, is theoretical. As we shall see, each alternative account of justifying reasons cannot escape appeal to comparativism; all justifying reasons depend on a comparison of the alternatives.

### 3.2.2. Satisficing

Begin with satisficing – choosing an alternative that is ‘good enough’. Michael Slote, for example, urges that the seller of a house may be justified in accepting an offer within a satisfactory range even though she knows that a better offer will be forthcoming.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that it is hard to make sense of satisficing in choice situations in which the given alternatives are immediately available. If confronted with a choice between a \$159,000 offer and a \$169,000 offer, it would be very bizarre indeed to think that, *ceteris paribus*, choosing the former was justified. The fact that satisficing is hard to justify where the better alternative is at hand (or certain to be available in the future or available without transaction cost) suggests that something fishy is going on – perhaps some non-zero probability that the better alternative will fail to materialise or will involve some cost is surreptitiously being assumed.

Some satisficers, however, dig in their heels at this point. A seller may be perfectly justified, they insist, in accepting the lower offer. How can this be? Slote urges that “we find it humanly understandable and not intuitively unreasonable that someone should lack an interest in the greatest heights of well-being or happiness and should actually reject the latter in favor of moderate or sufficient comfort or well-being.”<sup>31</sup> So our seller may just be someone who sets his sights at \$159,000, although he would not deny that the extra \$10,000 would increase his enjoyment of the choice value. What accounts for the rationality of such a person? Clearly, it is the goodness of having moderate ends that accounts for the rationality of satisficing.<sup>32</sup> Put differently, a different choice value governs the situation for the satisficer than for the optimizer. For the optimizer the choice value might be ‘getting as much money as I can’ and for the satisficer, ‘getting a reasonable amount’.

If we understand satisficing in this way, it is natural to take as the justifying reason a comparison of the alternatives with respect to that moderate choice value. So, for example, if the offers I receive are \$109,000, \$159,000 and \$169,000 and \$159,000 is a reasonable amount, then I may be justified in going for \$159,000 because \$159,000 is as good as or better than the alternatives with respect to getting a reasonable amount. Perhaps \$159,000 and \$169,000 are equally good with respect to getting a reasonable amount, i.e., getting \$159,000. (Indeed, perhaps \$169,000 is worse since it is less perfect in meeting the choice value). In this case, the justifying reason is not that the chosen alternative is good enough, but that it is as good as or better than all its rivals with respect to what is good enough.

But satisficing need not be understood in this way. We can take seriously the idea that the choice value is ‘getting as much money as I can’; nevertheless, accepting \$159,000 in face of a higher offer is justified because \$159,000 is good enough with respect to getting as much money as I can. In this case, we need to understand what it is for something to be ‘good enough with respect to the choice value’.

There are two possibilities here. Either being good enough with respect to *V* is itself generated by a comparison of the alternatives or of all possible counterfactual alternatives, i.e., all possible bearers of *V* that could be alternatives for choice, *or* being good enough with respect to *V* is a noncomparative, ‘absolute’ matter. Take the first possibility. ‘Good enough’ might be understood as ‘around the mean of the alternatives’ or ‘the median of the available alternatives’ or ‘between the 85th and 90th percentile of all possible bearers of *V* that could be alternatives for choice’. So, in the case where I have offers of \$109,000, \$159,000 and \$169,000, I may be justified in going for \$159,000 because that is ‘good enough’, where what is ‘good enough’ is whatever is the median of the available alternatives. The justifying reason in this case is not that \$159,000 is as good as or better than the alternatives with respect to ‘getting the median of the available alternatives’ – that was the case we considered above when the moderate end was itself the choice value – but rather a different consideration, namely, that of the three alternatives, \$159,000 is better than one and worse than the other. In this case we have a modified version of comparativism; the justifying reason is not the consideration that the chosen item is as good as or better than the others but rather that it is better than some of the alternatives or counterfactual alternatives and worse than other alternatives or counterfactual alternatives. On this first possibility, then, something’s being good enough can be a justifying reason only if its being good enough is understood as its standing in certain comparative relations with the alternatives or counterfactual alternatives. Though we do not have optimizing, we still have a form of comparativism.

The second possibility collapses satisficing into a form of absolutizing. What is good enough with respect to *V* is given by some absolute, noncomparative standard; the justification of choice is an absolute consideration, viz., that the alternative is good enough with respect to *V*. As we will see, absolutizing accounts do not pose a challenge to comparativism. If this is right, then we can conclude that satisficing does not present a real alternative to comparativism.

### 3.2.3. Maximalizing

Maximalizing considerations fare no better. Note that something’s being *not worse* is not a comparative consideration, for it is not a *positive* comparison (or, put differently, something’s being *not worse* does not entail any evaluative difference between them). Isaac Levi offers a maximalizing account of justifying reasons.<sup>33</sup> I may be justified in choosing the legal career over the philosophical one, where the choice value is goodness as a career, on the grounds that the legal career is not a worse career than the philosophical one. But that the chosen alternative is not worse than the alternatives cannot justify the choice. For ‘*x* is not worse than *y* with respect to *V*’ may be true *because* *x* and *y* are incomparable with respect to *V*. But the incomparability of *x* and *y* is no reason for choosing *x*; that *x* and *y* are incomparable does not justify choosing one over the other. This is not to say that choice between incomparables cannot be justified, only that that they are incomparable can’t be the justifying reason. Given that being incomparable is not a justifying reason, being not worse than, which is entailed by it, cannot be one either. And if we exclude the case in which the

alternatives are incomparable from our understanding of ‘not worse than’, then, assuming Trichotomy, maximalizing reasons reduce to optimizing ones. For ‘not worse than’ will be equivalent to ‘better than or as good as’.

There is something plausible about maximalizing, however. Conflict situations like the careers case above are common. It seems there is no comparison of the alternatives with respect to the choice value. And there is something intuitively rational about a policy which requires that we choose only what is not worse. But the rationality of a *maximalizing policy* is one thing, and *maximalizing justifications* another. We can understand maximalizing, in other words, as a general pragmatic policy for determining what the choice value is in situations in which, no matter how carefully we deliberate, there seems to be no comparison of the alternatives with respect to the covering value. So, for instance, in our careers case, it may be rational to adopt a maximalizing policy in the face of conflict. In this case, the choice value shifts: we no longer see the choice as one in which what matters is *V*, but rather as one in which what matters is *maximalizing V*. If we cannot determine which career we ought to choose, where what matters is goodness of career, then it may be rational to conceive of the choice situation differently, as one in which what matters is choosing a career that is not worse than the others with respect to goodness of career. But notice that the justifying reason in such cases is a comparison of the alternatives with respect to *maximalizing the original choice value*. Maximalizing reasons, then, turn out to be comparisons of the alternatives with respect to maximality and so pose no challenge to comparativism.

#### 3.2.4. Absolutizing

The largest category of accounts that challenge comparativism are absolutizing. According to these accounts, noncomparative considerations can be justifying reasons. Unlike satisficing reasons, absolutizing reasons, by definition, involve standards that are noncomparative. And unlike maximalizing reasons, considerations like, ‘it is good’ are not plausibly understood as comparisons of the alternatives. It would be rather strained to think that ‘it is good’ reduces to ‘it is better with respect to goodness’. So perhaps comparativism has met its match at last.

Absolutizing reasons are *essentially* noncomparisons. Michael Stocker explains his version of absolutizing as follows: “[Absolutizers] can ... be understood as advocating concrete sorts of lives, projects, courses of action, friendships, and so on. These are advocated because of what they concretely are – that is, the sorts of lives, projects, and so on they are....I choose [an alternative] because of the concrete ways it is good – how it will fit into my life, what I will then be able to do, and so on.”<sup>34</sup> Absolutizing reasons treat the comparison of alternatives as irrelevant to choice.

Absolutizing relies on the idea that it is the *noncomparative* goodness (concrete or not) of the chosen alternative that justifies choosing it. But absolutizing accounts differ according to how this noncomparative goodness is understood. Some accounts see justifying reasons as deriving from a standard that is not a normative *requirement*. Call these ‘non-regulative standards’. So for example, Stocker’s form of absolutizing, according

to which justifying reasons are those that meet some concrete excellence, does not appeal essentially to a requirement telling us what we ought to do but rather to a non-regulative standard of goodness of a life, that is, an evaluative description of what a good life is. A regulative standard, in contrast, is a rule about how one should act, feel, intend, and so on. So, for example, Anderson's absolutizing according to which justifying reasons are the expression of normative requirement of rationality, appeals essentially to a rule about how one should regard objects of choice. Roughly, non-regulative standards are those that appeal to 'values' as that term is normally, narrowly understood, plus virtues of character and the satisfaction of desires; while regulative standards are those that appeal to normative requirements of rationality or morality, understood as deontological requirements.

There is something very appealing about absolutizing reasons. Here is a case from Stocker:

“[S]uppose that I am content because I have achieved a good life. Suppose further that I am now offered an opportunity to make my life even better by changing jobs. I think that it need not indicate any moral or rational failing to decline the offer....What...seems important is that I have achieved a certain sort of life – a good life – and that having achieved such a life....what justifies my doing what is nonmaximizing is how doing that fits into my life – a life that is good enough, and that is good enough because of what it is like, not because it is better than other lives open to me.”<sup>35</sup>

This is an example in which 'good enough' is understood in absolutizing terms. My life is 'good enough' in that it bears a certain, concrete goodness. This concrete goodness is sufficient grounds for my choosing my current life over one I recognize is better. Now if the life that I could have bears all the same contributory values as my current life but is better in every contributory respect than the life I currently lead, and if the choosing is costless, then it is likely that turning down the better life would be irrational.<sup>36</sup> If, on the other hand, the offered life is better even though it lacks some of the contributory values my current life bears, then Stocker's case has some plausibility. Perhaps the contributory value merits specific to my current life are sufficient grounds for sticking with it in the face of an alternative that would, with respect to 'goodness of life', be an improvement.

But we can understand this to be so only if we understand the choice value as 'goodness of a life with such-and-such concrete merits' as opposed to 'goodness of the best life possible'. For if the fact that my life has such-and-such concrete merits can provide grounds for rejecting another life that is better with respect to a value of which 'goodness of a life with such-and-such concrete merits' is a contributory value, it must be because that value makes essential reference to the concrete merits of my life. But then the choice takes on an entirely different cast; we have a choice between two lives, the offered one of which is *worse* with respect to 'goodness of a life with such-and-such concrete merits', for the offered life is missing some of those concrete merits.<sup>37</sup> Stocker's case has plausibility only if

we do not make clear what the choice value in the choice situation is. Once the choice situation is well-formed, the attack on optimizing is not so persuasive.

Although Stocker's form of absolutizing may not be entirely convincing, it does not follow that absolutizing in general must reduce to optimizing. For the persuasiveness of the reduction may depend on whether the standard to which the putative justifying reason appeals is regulative or non-regulative. Indeed, there is good reason to think that the reduction will be most plausible for accounts that rely on non-regulative standards of goodness. This is because the fact that the chosen item meets some standard – whether itself an intrinsic or instrumental goodness – can only plausibly satisfy the demand for justification if it is understood as an abbreviation for the claim that the chosen item best satisfies the standard. This is true whether the operational verb is cognitive, like 'satisfying', or noncognitive, like 'expressing'. If I ask you to justify your decision to stick with your current life in the face of the opportunity to make your life better by changing jobs, and you reply that your life allows you to work only four days a week, I can understand this as a justification only if I understand you to take the relevant value as one with respect to which the alternative life is *not* better. So, for instance, I might understand you to take 'freedom to spend time with the kids' to be what matters in the choice situation. If I think the choice value is 'goodness of the best life possible', instead of accepting your proffered reason, I will point out that the alternative life is better.

Suppose, in contrast, that the putative justifying reason were something along the lines of 'I have a duty to my boss to stay in my present job'. In this case, the proffered reason does silence the demand for justification. This seems true even if the choice value is understood as 'goodness of the best life possible'.

I think that any attempt to reduce absolutizing reasons that appeal to regulative standards of goodness to comparisons of the alternatives must fail. This is because appeal to the regulative goodness of an alternative *does* satisfy the normative demand for justification. Duties and obligations satisfy the demand for justification and cannot plausibly be reduced to comparisons of the alternatives.<sup>38</sup> Thus, there is a form of absolutizing that successfully holds that justifying reasons need not be comparisons of the alternatives.

But this result should not be taken to imply that comparativism is false. Although some absolutizing reasons are not themselves comparisons, as we shall see, they nevertheless depend on comparisons. I believe that any justifying reason ultimately depends for its *justifying force* on a comparison of the alternatives. Where the justifying reason is itself a comparison of the alternatives, there is a coincidence of justifying reason and justifying force. Where the justifying reason is not a comparison of the alternatives, a comparison is nevertheless required for there to be any justifying reason at all. The 'justifying force' of a justifying reason is the consideration in virtue of which that reason justifies, that is, the consideration in virtue of which the reason *is* a justifying reason. Put differently, the source of a reason's justifying force is the source of *normativity* of the justifying reason. If comparisons provide the justifying force for every justifying reason, they are a basic source of the normativity of practical reason.

### 3.3. Justifying force

Without justifying force, a reason cannot justify a choice. We should ask two questions. First, how is the justifying force of a justifying reason distinct from the justifying reason itself? Second, why should we think comparisons of alternatives provide justifying force?

Take the first question first. Consider an analogy with inferences. What justifies the inference  $q$  from the premises that  $p$  and if  $p$  then  $q$ ? The premises support the conclusion, but that in virtue of which they support it is the rule of inference, modus ponens. The rule of modus ponens is not any part of the support for the conclusion but is instead that in virtue of which the premises support the conclusion. Or take an analogy closer to hand. Nagel argues that Hume was wrong in thinking that beliefs could not motivate without the aid of a desire. For while it is true that a belief that there is reason to  $x$  may motivate me to  $x$  only in virtue of a disposition to be so motivated in the face of such a belief, that disposition need not be understood as a desire, nor, in any case, as part of the motivation.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, a reason may justify in virtue of something which is no part of the reason but is a condition for the reason's having the force that it does. The justifying force of a reason is a kind of background condition that must be true in order for the reason to satisfy the demand for justification. Consider the following examples. I may justifiably choose to go out to dinner rather than grade papers because I promised to show my friend a good time. The fact that my choice fulfills a promise silences the demand for justification, but it can do so only if it is true that going to dinner is at least as good with respect to fulfilling that promise as grading papers would be. Or take my choice to live near my parents rather than in an exciting new city. I may justifiably so choose because staying close to home expresses my filial obligation. There is no need to press me for further reasons; that it expresses my filial obligation silences the demand for justification. At the same time, it silences the demand only if it is true that staying close to home is at least as good with respect to expressing my filial obligation as moving far away to the big city. We might put the point this way. Some considerations are of a *type* that satisfies the demand for justification. Thus, they can be justifying reasons. But they justify only in virtue of a background comparative fact about the alternatives.

To see that comparisons provide reasons with their justifying force, suppose the opposite. If certain absolutizing reasons justify independently of comparisons, we should be able to substitute an unchosen alternative with a new alternative (or the new alternative could simply be added to the original set) and, regardless of the merits of the new alternative, the original choice would still be justified. But there is good reason to think this is false. An obligation to keep a promise may justify my choice to go out to dinner if the only other option is grading papers, but it may fail to do so if rollerblading on the beach is also on offer, for rollerblading on the beach may better fulfill my promise to show my friend a good time. And my filial obligation justifies my choosing to live near my parents, when the only other option is to move far away, but throw in the possibility of building an extension to the house or having them move in, and it no longer justifies the choice. It is a

necessary condition for a duty or obligation to justify choice that the chosen alternative is at least as good as the alternatives with respect to fulfilling, expressing, etc., that duty or obligation. In general, it is only in virtue of a comparison of the alternatives with respect to whatever consideration is the justifying reason that there can be any justification in the first place.

The claim that the normativity of practical justification derives from a comparison of the alternatives vindicates comparativism, but only by loosening the connection between comparison and justification. The justification need not be identical to a comparison, but the normativity of any justification – its justifying force – will be a comparison of the alternatives. Note that this way of defending comparativism goes beyond optimizing in two ways. First, unlike optimizing, it denies that all justifying reasons are comparisons of the alternatives. It is not true that the chosen alternative, to be justified, must be optimal with respect to the choice value. Now, it might be thought that our favoured form of comparativism is simply optimization at a higher level – at the level of justifying force. After all, we have said that whatever consideration is a justifying reason, it can justify only if the chosen alternative is ‘at least as good’ as its rivals with respect to fulfilling, expressing, etc., that consideration. But while optimizing assumes the Trichotomy Thesis, our defense of comparativism does not. For all that is needed for a reason to justify is the comparison that the chosen alternative is ‘at least as good’ as the others. ‘At least as good as’, we pointed out in chapter 1, should be understood as leaving open the possibility that items may be related by some positive relation beyond ‘better than’ and ‘equally good’. It is this general idea of being comparable and yet not being worse that is needed for our argument to go through, not the more specific idea that is tied to the Trichotomy Thesis.

It might be thought that our preferred form of comparativism is simply a form of maximalizing at the level of justifying force. The normativity of any justifying reason is given by the consideration that the chosen alternative is not worse with respect to maximalizing the choice value. But the view is rather that the normativity is given by the positive comparison between the alternatives with respect to the choice value. If it is a positive comparison that provides the normativity – if, that is, the evaluative difference between the alternatives with respect to the choice value provides the justifying force – then understanding normativity in terms of maximalization is overbroad.

If our form of comparativism is correct, the economists’ basic intuition that a comparison of alternatives is crucial to the justification of choice is correct. Of course, philosophers have rightly criticized economists for thinking that justifying reasons must be comparisons. Even so, as we have seen, in most cases justifying reasons are comparisons. The one kind of case in which putative justifying reasons cannot be plausibly reduced to comparisons of the alternatives is that where the reason is a consideration that the chosen alternative meet or expresses or constitutes, etc., some regulative standard of goodness. In the final section, we turn to another kind of case which we set aside at the outset of our discussion.

#### 4. A Challenge to Comparativism: Whims

There is one class of exceptions to our four-part categorization of types of justifying reasons. These are the cases in which *whims* and *desires* – themselves, not their satisfaction – are justifying reasons for choice. ‘That I feel like it’ or ‘Because I want to’ seem to have normative force independently of any comparison of the alternatives.

Consider a choice between two confections for dessert. The choice value might be gustatory pleasure or novelty. Here, a comparison is not necessary for justification; indeed, a comparison of the alternatives is irrelevant. I may be justified in choosing the lemon tart rather than the pumpkin flan simply *because I feel like it*. This is so even if the flan tastes better, or I’ve had lemon tart every day for the past month, or if the desserts are incomparable. If you say to me, “Look, what matters is gustatory pleasure, and the pumpkin flan will give you more”, I might reasonably rejoin, “But I feel like lemon tart”. The demand for justification in such a choice situation is satisfied by the reason, “because I feel like it”. In such cases, whims are justifying reasons for choice and comparisons of the alternatives with respect to the choice value are irrelevant.

Now it might be wondered why the fact that ‘I feel like it’ silences the demand for justification doesn’t indicate that the choice value is not gustatory pleasure but ‘what I feel like’? Perhaps reference to a whim must be understood as shorthand for ‘because the chosen alternative is better with respect to satisfying my whim’. As we saw above, the satisfaction of desires is a non-regulative standard, and any putative justifying reason that appeals to a non-regulative standard can be reduced to a comparison. The question then is whether there is conceptual space for ‘Because I feel like it’ that is distinct from ‘Because it satisfies my desire’. Clearly there is. ‘Feeling like it’ need not be a comparative matter at all. Put another way, ‘feeling like it’ is attached to the chosen item: what one feels like is what one has chosen. It makes no sense to wonder whether pumpkin flan is better with respect to ‘feeling like lemon tart’ than lemon tart is. ‘Feeling like it’, then, precludes the possibility that the other alternatives are better with respect to what one feels like. (This is not to deny that one can be mistaken about what one feels like).

Some philosophers have argued that whims and desires, insofar as they are noncognitive, that is brute or ectic states, can never be reasons, let alone justifying reasons, for choice. So, for example, Warren Quinn queries how we can ‘rationalize’ the actions of someone who turns on radios whenever he sees one simply because he wants to – not because he thinks turning on radios is conducive to some end, but just because he has the brute desire to do so.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Raz points out that the agent himself will be unable to make sense of a brute desire to paint potatoes green, unless there is “something in the action, his beliefs about it, or its circumstances and consequences which appears to him to make the action sensible”.<sup>41</sup> Brute desires cannot make sense of actions, and so they certainly cannot justify them. Quinn and Raz argue instead that some cognitive evaluation of the goodness of the alternative, where the ‘goodness’ in question is non-regulative, must be the justifying reason if we are to make sense of the choice; I am justified in going for the tart not because that is my whim but because the tart tastes good. That it tastes good, or that I believe it does, may give rise to my whim, but it is the evaluation that justifies my going for the tart. Put

differently, the Quinn-Raz suggestion is that “Because I feel like it” should be understood as shorthand for the non-regulative evaluation “Because it is good”. This view is also held, with variations, by Tim Scanlon and Derek Parfit.<sup>42</sup>

The implications for comparativism of the Quinn-Raz view of whim cases depends on whether evaluations of the form “Because it is good” depend on comparisons. Indeed, the motivation for the Quinn-Raz understanding of whims derives from general cognitivist commitments; Quinn, Raz, and others think that reasons in general are evaluations of the alternatives. By understanding feelings-like-it as evaluations, these reasons-cognitivists can offer a unified account of reasons. Put differently, whim cases on the Quinn-Raz view can be generalized; what’s true in whim cases is true in all other cases – the justifying reason is an evaluation of the alternatives in terms of some non-regulative standard. If all reasons, i.e., non-regulative evaluations, depend on comparisons, then reasons-cognitivism will entail comparativism. I argued above that justifying reasons of the form “Because it is good” reduce to comparisons. If those arguments are correct, the Quinn-Raz understanding of whim cases will pose no threat to comparativism. What looks like a hostile kind of case for comparativism – whims as justifying reasons – turns out, if the Quinn-Raz understanding of them is correct, to be friendly after all.

There is, however, another way to understand whims as justifying reasons. On this view, whims *are* justifying reasons, but only *in virtue* of an evaluation of the choice as trivial, that is, as one in which it does not much matter which alternative one chooses.<sup>43</sup> This view is highly plausible. For reflection reveals that whims cannot justify unless the choice is a trivial one.<sup>44</sup> For careers, life partnerships, places to live and so on are not – usually – justifiably chosen on the basis of a lark. Consider our desserts case. Suppose we change the situation so that the choice is of great significance. The choice value might be ‘avoidance of death’; perhaps one of the desserts is poisoned, and I am victim to a game of gourmand roulette. My ‘feeling like it’ in these circumstances would not be a justifying reason; rather, considerations about which dessert was more conducive to my longevity would be required to justify my choice. Whims justify choice whenever choice is trivial. That a choice is trivial provides the justifying force for the reason.

There are two ways in which a choice can be trivial, that is, two ways in which it can fail to matter which alternative one chooses. If there is very little difference in merit between the alternatives, then choice between them is in a *comparative* sense trivial. So a choice between two careers, just about equally meritorious, is trivial in this sense, with the limiting case being one of evaluative identity. These cases pose no problem for comparativism since the judgement that the choice is trivial depends on a comparison of the alternatives. In many of these cases, whims will not justify the choice. But there is also a noncomparative, *absolute* sense of triviality. In this sense, a choice between two careers or lives or life-partners will be nontrivial. Choices that have significance for one’s life or in the grand scheme of things are nontrivial in the absolute sense. Our modified desserts case is another example of nontriviality in the absolute sense. In these cases, the evaluation of a choice as trivial does not depend on a comparison.

Although a declared proponent of comparativism, I think there are two compelling

reasons for adopting the ‘triviality’ view of whims over the Quinn-Raz view.<sup>45</sup> First, the absolute-triviality view keeps intact our ordinary understanding of whims as justifying reasons in absolute-trivial cases. This is not to say that ordinary intuitions should never be displaced by theoretical grounds. (In blackjack, you had better stand on 12 when the dealer has 6.) But our notion of reasons is very likely primitive,<sup>46</sup> and our intuitions about it should not, as a methodological matter, be disturbed for reasons of mere theoretical unity.

Second, the Quinn-Raz view can make sense of only one kind of whim case – that in which an agent has a whim based on beliefs about the alternatives. Many cases of whims are like this. In deciding between the desserts, I may, by imagining how the tangy, cool filling mingles with the light, delicate shell, form beliefs about how the lemon tart would taste and the pleasure I would get from sinking my teeth into a piece. But some whim cases are not informed by beliefs about the alternatives. Sometimes we are justified in choosing on a whim where the merits of the alternatives are uncertain. If you give me two desserts in black boxes, I might justifiably choose one box on a whim, not because I formed any beliefs about what the box contained or about which box would be more conducive to my gustatory pleasure, but simply because I felt like choosing *that* one. Alternatives need not be in black boxes for an agent to justifiably choose on the basis of an uninformed whim. I may form no beliefs about the lemon tart and yet have a hankering for it. Such whims can justify choice so long as the choice is absolutely trivial. It might be said in reply that choosing on the basis of uninformed whims is equivalent to choosing for no reason. But even an uninformed whim expresses an inclination that choosing for ‘no reason’ does not.

So we must adopt the absolute-triviality view over the Quinn-Raz view. There are then some choice situations in which the justifying reasons are not comparisons and that the justifying force of those reasons are not comparisons. The normativity of a whim as justification derives not from a comparison of the alternatives, but from an absolute judgement of the triviality of a situation. Comparativism is to that extent limited in scope.

There are two considerations that limit the impact of these counterexamples for comparativism. One is that the choice situations that pose a problem for comparativism are *ex hypothesi* of absolute trivial significance. They cannot be generalized to nontrivial choice situations because an intrinsic constraint on such cases is that they be absolutely trivial. So the problem they pose for comparativism is restricted to cases of absolute unimportance. We should perhaps not shy away from comparativism on that account, especially if comparativism captures all other cases. Another consideration is this: there is no convincing account of justifying reasons that unifies all our intuitions about what can be a justifying reason. Some of the leading reasons cognitivists admit that whims pose a special challenge to their case, and other theorists simply ignore the bump in the carpet. My own suspicion is that no universal account of practical justification is possible; there always <sup>will</sup> be some basic intuitions that cannot be theoretically accommodated.

Ignoring the problem of whims, the account of practical justification offered naturally suggests two striking meta-theoretical claims. First, if comparisons of the alternatives are that in virtue of which a consideration can justify a choice, then, assuming there are normative facts, these comparisons are plausibly basic normative facts, that is,

normative facts that cannot be reduced to any other normative fact.<sup>47</sup> For whatever else might be true of basic normative facts, it is plausible to suppose that they are that in virtue of which considerations have normative force.<sup>48</sup> Through our account of justified choice, then, we have secured a claim about what normative reality, if it exists, is like.

Second, if comparisons are necessary to the justification of every choice, it follows that they are a necessary condition for the existence of a justified choice. Our defense of comparativism is then also a defense of the following existence condition:

*Existence of Justified Choice:* A comparison of the alternatives is necessary for the existence of a justified choice in any choice situation.

This claim is important to determining the scope of practical reason and the significance of incomparability among alternatives for choice. As I will argue in the subsequent chapters, we have good reason to think there is no incomparability among alternatives for choice. If this is right, then no matter how conflict-ridden or dilemmatic the situation, practical reason in principle determines a justified choice. Views holding that reasons sometimes run out or that choice itself is a contradictory, normless whirl, are therefore wrong-headed.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although economists think justification is a matter of one's suitably constrained preferences, I shall take them to be concerned not with preferences for alternatives but with their goodness. This extension of the economist's standard model is explored by John Broome in his *Weighing Goods*.

<sup>2</sup> I take the term 'judgement-sensitive attitudes' from Tim Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, draft, ch. 1 (Harvard: Harvard University Press, forthcoming). Roughly, any attitude that can be created, altered or extinguished by judgement, such as certain desires, intentions and feelings, is a judgement-sensitive attitude. (The necessary and sufficient conditions Scanlon offers for such attitudes seem to me neither necessary nor sufficient, but the idea of an attitude that is judgement-sensitive is intuitive enough on its own for our purposes so that no precise definition is needed.)

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons*.

<sup>4</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, "Some Thoughts About Caring", unpublished ms, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Compare John Broome, *Weighing Goods*, ch. 1, who thinks that even consequentialism can be seen to be empty since each of its alternatives can be defined in terms of promoting the best consequences.

<sup>6</sup> Scanlon, *What we Owe to Each Other*, Draft, ch. 1, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Philip Pettit, "Satisficing Consequentialism", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 58, pp. 165-176, who does not seem to think this is a conceptual feature of choice.

<sup>8</sup> The sense of possibility is limited by the cases of where failure of comparison is formal as discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> An alternative is available to an agent if in some ordinary, nonmetaphysical sense, she could have chosen it. Choice is always 'free' in the correlative ordinary sense, even if it is made under duress or evaluatively overdetermined. If free choice in the ordinary sense presupposes the compatibility of free will and determinism, then I assume compatibilism. Note too that an agent need not be aware of the alternatives available to her.

<sup>10</sup> The distinction between 'choice' and 'selection' is far more complex than I have made out here. Any adequate explanation of the difference must explain the connections among intentions, reasons, and values, a task I do not attempt to undertake here.

<sup>11</sup> It is possible to interpret standard decision theory as holding that it is the mere preference itself that justifies, but I shall treat the view as holding that a preference can be justification only in virtue of some implied comparison that is true or believed to be true.

<sup>12</sup> See David Schmidz, "Rationality Within Reason", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 89, 1992, pp. 445-466.

<sup>13</sup> Still, many philosophers might oppose maximizing on the grounds that it is implausible to think that value can even be precisely *represented* by units. While some values, like 'goodness of salary' or 'number of lives saved' are amenable to precise cardinal representation, most values -- such as 'goodness as a career', 'pleasure', 'kindness', 'moral

goodness', 'tackiness' and so on -- are not. How many tacky ties does a tacky sofa make? See also chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Raz, "Incommensurability and Agency", *IIPR*.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods", *IIPR*, and *Value in Ethics and Economics*.

<sup>16</sup> James Griffin, "Incommensurability: What's the Problem?" *IIPR*, and *Value Judgement: Improving Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Steven Lukes, "Comparing the Incomparable: Tradeoffs and Sacrifices", *IIPR*.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, *op cit*.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Pildes and Elizabeth Anderson, "Slingshot Arrows at Democracy".

<sup>20</sup> Cass Sunstein, "Incommensurability and Valuation in Law", *79 Michigan Law Review* 779, 1994, and "Incommensurability and Kinds of Valuation: Some Applications in Law", *IIPR*.

<sup>21</sup> John Finnis, "Commensuration and Public Reason", *IIPR*, and *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). This is a modification of his view; Finnis has as his target proportionalist ethics and so is concerned to argue for the existence of incommensurability, not incomparability.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life", *IIPR*.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason"; Millgram, "Incommensurability and Practical Reason", *IIPR*, and *Practical Induction* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> This is not how Levi characterizes 'admissibility', but I think his theory is improved if he understands admissibility in this way, so I rather misleadingly describe his account in these terms. Levi gives three ways in which an alternative might be admissible. First, if it is as good as or better than each of the other alternatives with respect to each and every contributory value. This, leaving aside the problem of the atomicity assumption it presumes, might be understood as straightforward optimizing. Second, if it is as good as or better than each of the other alternatives with respect to some one contributory value. This is highly counterintuitive; in a choice among philosophers with respect to philosophical talent, for example, it makes admissible a very bad philosopher who is nevertheless the most prolific.

Now Levi has a way of modifying the set of admissible alternatives that may be thought eventually to take care of these counterintuitive cases; he thinks that weights can be assigned to each contributory value and so each alternative can be assigned a number by a function that gives the weighted average of each alternative. Since prolixity is not of great importance to philosophical talent, perhaps our publishing fiend would drop out of the choice set. This maneuver gives rise to a third way in which an alternative can be admissible: any alternative that is as good as or better than any other on some possible assignment of weights to the contributory value is admissible. Now, the first way is straight optimization and the second way is highly counterintuitive. This third way, however, poses an interesting alternative to optimizing. We can understand the third claim supervalueationally: each alternative that is as good as or better than each of the others according to some legitimate weighting of the contributory values is admissible. This claim, in turn, is most plausibly understood as the claim that an alternative that is *not worse* than any of the others (that is, not worse on any possible weighting of the contributory values) is admissible. (In describing Levi's position, I am assuming that the Trichotomy Thesis is true.) See Isaac Levi, *Hard Choices*. I have been unable to find any author who explicitly understands justification as maximalizing. But I think it is at the heart of Levi's view.

<sup>25</sup> Slote, *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict and Maximization" *IIPR*.

<sup>27</sup> I borrow the term 'maximalizing' from Amartya Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, (San Francisco: Holden Day, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> The terminology is an extension of Stocker's.

<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that no alternative cannot provide such an account. Indeed, if the Trichotomy Thesis is false, it remains an open question how agents can avoid being turned into merit pumps. I do not have space to address this question here, but my initial inclination is to go with a Bayesian solution (although this approach has recently been questioned by John Broome in his "Normless Practical Reasoning", draft, 1997, and I am not at all convinced that my initial inclination is right). Discussion of a related phenomenon is suggestive of other possibilities. See Edward McClennen, *Rationality and Dynamic Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially chs. 2 & 10, and Warren Quinn, "The Puzzle of the Self-Torturer", *Philosophical Studies*, 59 (1990): pp. 79-90, reprinted in Quinn, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 198-209.

<sup>30</sup> Slote, *op cit*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> If rationality is simply means-end, there is no issue about the rationality of satisficing since the moderate end is an end like any other.

<sup>33</sup> See long note about Levi above.

<sup>34</sup> Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value", ms. p. 22

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ms. pp. 17-18.

<sup>36</sup> I say only that it is 'likely' because I have already cast doubt on whether Pareto-betterness is necessarily a form of betterness in chapter 1. We argued there that an improvement with respect to one contributory value need not make the improved item better with respect to the covering value. The same goes for super-Pareto-betterness. But whether the organic nature of values is at play here depends on the specifics of the case. I suspect that there are many cases of good lives where forgoing a Pareto-better life would be like choosing to save two of one's children instead of all three, where what matters to the choice is number of lives saved.

<sup>37</sup> Note that the case in which the offered life contains all the concrete merits of my current life and other merits as well, we have a choice between two lives, both of which are *equally good* with respect to 'achieving a life with such-and-such concrete merits'.

<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that duties and obligations cannot be equivalently expressed in terms of comparisons of alternatives with respect to 'fulfilling my duty' and so on. See also the discussion at the outset of this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), ch. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Warren Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place", in *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 228-255.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Raz, "The Moral Point of View", in J.B. Schneewind, ed., *Reason, Ethics, and Society: Themes from Kurt Baier, with His Responses* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp. 71-72.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Scanlon, *What we Owe Each Other*, draft of ch. 1; Derek Parfit, *Practical Realism*, forthcoming.

<sup>43</sup> Note that this account achieves unity of a different sort. The ordinary understanding of what provides an adequate response to the demand for justification is preserved, but there may be disunity in the considerations in virtue of which a justifying reason justifies.

<sup>44</sup> Or unless the choice involves some prior deliberation that failed to yield a justified choice. Whims, may, in other words, justify choice if considerations of a more standard sort fail. The cases with which I am concerned, however, involve whim as justifying reasons in the first instance, 'pre-emptively', as it were.

<sup>45</sup> The differences between the Quinn-Raz view and the triviality view in other respects is rather slight. Both hold that an evaluation is necessary for justification in whim cases. The triviality view says that the evaluation is either of the comparative merits of the alternatives or of the choice situation as a whole. The Quinn-Raz view says that the evaluation, as in every case, is of the absolute merits of the alternatives. Both views are cognitivist insofar as whims depend on evaluations of thing or another.

<sup>46</sup> Both Tim Scanlon and Derek Parfit think the notion is primitive. See *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> I am not talking about the 'ultimate' source of normativity in Korsgaard's sense – her explanation of the sources of normativity locates them in 'reflective endorsement' and one's 'practical identity'. This suggestion is compatible with my claim that the normativity of any justifying reason is a comparison of the alternatives. See Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that normative facts are required, for normative force may derive from naturalistic features of agents or alternatives.

◆ **Comparisons are odious.**

-John Fortescue: *De laudibus legum Angliae*, c. 1462

◆ **Comparisons are odorous.**

-Shakespeare: *Much Ado About Nothing*, c. 1599

## CHAPTER 3

### IS THERE INCOMPARABILITY?

If two alternatives are incomparable with respect to an appropriate covering value, justified choice between them is precluded. But are alternatives ever incomparable?

I examine the leading arguments for incomparability that exist in the literature. These arguments can be divided into nine related types. Each type appeals to one of nine putatively sufficient grounds for incomparability: (1) the ‘diversity’ of values; (2) the ‘bi-directionality’ of comparative merits, that is, the condition that one item is better in some contributory respects of the covering value but worse in others; (3) the ‘noncalculative’ practical deliberation required in some choice situations; (4) the rational irresolvability of conflicts between items; (5) the incomparability of values borne by the alternatives; (6) the lack of a common value in terms of which specific merits of the items can be compared; (7) constitutive features of certain goods; (8) the rationality of judging in some choice situations that neither alternative is better than the other and yet a slightly improved version of one is not better than the other; and (9) the multiplicity of legitimate rankings of the alternatives. Although arguments of the first six types have currency and influence, I shall argue in this chapter that they are intrinsically fatally flawed, rely on some general, controversial philosophical doctrine, or confuse incomparability with a rather different phenomenon. Arguments of the last three types raise interesting and illuminating questions about how we are to understand comparability. Seeing why these last three types of arguments fail involves defending a conception of comparability broader than that commonly assumed. I therefore treat them separately in the following three chapters.

#### 1. The Diversity of Values

The most commonly cited ground for incomparability among alternatives is the diversity of values they respectively bear. This diversity is understood in myriad ways. Some understand it as a plurality of ontologically irreducible values.<sup>1</sup> Others understand diverse values to be of different ‘types’ or the goods that bear them of different ‘genres’, whether ontologically reducible or not. Nagel, for instance, thinks that values come in six types—obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends, private commitments, and self-interest—and that this fragmentation explains the existence of genuine dilemmas between

alternatives bearing one type of value and those bearing another type.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Raz claims that some goods, like novels and war movies, cannot be compared because they belong to different “genres”.<sup>3</sup> Still others explain the diversity of values in terms of their occupying different “dimensions” or “scales”.<sup>4</sup> The underlying idea of diversity arguments is that some items are ‘so different’ that there is no ‘common basis’ on which a comparison can proceed. Assuming that incomparability must be relative to a covering value, diversity arguments should be understood as turning on the diversity of the contributory values of the covering value borne. So, for example, Mozart and Michelangelo are incomparable with respect to creativity if the contributory values of creativity borne by Mozart are so different—that is, irreducibly distinct, or of a different type or genre, or occupying a different scale or dimension—from those borne by Michelangelo that comparison is impossible.

Diversity arguments, regardless of their substantive differences, are subject to a compelling objection. The objection turns on what we might call ‘nominal-notable’ comparisons. Call a bearer ‘notable’ with respect to a value if it is an exceptionally fine exemplar of that value and ‘nominal’ if it is an exceptionally poor one. Mozart and Michelangelo, for instance, are notable bearers of creativity and Talentlessi, a very bad painter, a nominal one. Nominal-notable comparisons succeed by definition; notable bearers are always better than nominal ones with respect to the value in terms of which they are respectively nominal or notable. Now suppose that Talentlessi bears the same contributory values of creativity as Michelangelo—only in a nominal way. Both, for example, bear the value of technical skill, but Talentlessi bears it in a markedly nominal way. If Mozart and Michelangelo are incomparable in virtue of the diverse contributory values of creativity they bear, then so too are Mozart and Talentlessi. But we know that Mozart is better than Talentlessi with respect to creativity. If Mozart and Michelangelo are incomparable with respect to creativity, it cannot be for the reason that they bear diverse contributory values. For any two items putatively incomparable in virtue of the diversity of contributory values they respectively bear, it is plausible to suppose that there are notable and nominal bearers of the same values that are *ipso facto* comparable. Therefore, it cannot be the diversity of the values borne *per se* that accounts for bearer incomparability.

Arguments from the diversity of values fail because they are not sufficiently fine grained to differentiate cases of putative incomparability from ones of certain comparability. To meet the nominal-notable objection, proponents of these arguments must either explain why nominal-notable comparisons are exceptions or give a more nuanced account of diversity that relies not on values borne but on something more

specific, like the way in which a value is borne.<sup>5</sup> But the first response will probably be *ad hoc*, and the second, insofar as it no longer relies on the diversity of values *per se*, will amount to a different account of what makes bearers incomparable.

In any case, there is good reason to think that Mozart and Michelangelo are comparable with respect to creativity, given that Mozart and Talentlessi are. We start with the idea that Talentlessi and Michelangelo differ in creativity only in the way they bear creativity; they bear the same contributory values of creativity, but one bears them in a notable way and the other in a nominal way. Consider, now, Talentlessi+, just a bit better than Talentlessi with respect to creativity and bearing exactly the same contributory values, but a bit more notably. This small improvement in creativity surely cannot trigger incomparability; if something is comparable with Talentlessi, it is also comparable with Talentlessi+. Thus we can construct a 'continuum' of painters including Talentlessi and Michelangelo, each bearing the same contributory values of creativity but with increasing notability. No difference in creativity between any contiguous painters can plausibly be grounds for incomparability; if Mozart is comparable with one item on the continuum, he is comparable with all items on the continuum. Therefore, given that Mozart is comparable with Talentlessi, he is comparable with Michelangelo, who differs from Talentlessi only by some notches on the continuum. How can Mozart be incomparable with Michelangelo if Mozart is comparable with something that differs from Michelangelo only by successive increments of notability in the way in which the covering value is borne? The argument has a striking conclusion. Whenever a continuum of the above sort can be constructed and a comparison made between any item on the continuum and some other item, every item on that continuum is comparable with that other item.<sup>6</sup>

A digression here is useful before turning to the other incomparabilist grounds. We have seen that value pluralism does not entail incomparability. It turns out that there is also good reason to think that value monism does not entail comparability. According to monism, all values ultimately reduce to a supervalue. Comparability follows, it is thought, because if there is in the end only one value, evaluative differences between items must always reduce to differences in amount of the supervalue, and quantities of the same thing can always be compared. Thus, if monism is correct, complete comparability follows. Many philosophers who assume the soundness of this argument have, as a consequence, thought that incomparability defeats classical forms of utilitarianism. Insofar as utilitarianism is committed to the idea that all goods are a matter of amounts of utility, it is committed to complete comparability.

The inference from monism to comparability, however, is mistaken on two counts. First, monism need not be this crude. As J. S. Mill pointed out long ago, values have qualitative as well as quantitative dimensions. Although pleasure is one value, there is the luxurious, wallowing pleasure of lying in the sun and the intense, sharp pleasure of hearing much-anticipated good news.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there may ultimately be one supervalue, but like all other values, it may have qualitative dimensions that could, in principle, give rise to incomparability among its bearers. Accordingly, there could be sophisticated, monistic forms of utilitarianism that allow for incomparability.<sup>8</sup>

Second, even the crude form of monism need not entail complete bearer comparability, for it is a mistake to assume that all quantities of a single value are comparable. The mistake probably derives from an ambiguity in the phrase ‘more valuable’. Something can be ‘more V’, where V ranges over values, in an *evaluative* or a *nonevaluative* sense.

The nonevaluative sense is quantitative and is the same sense in which one item can be ‘more S’, where S ranges over nonevaluative considerations like length or weight. This stick is longer than that one if it has a greater quantity of length. Items that bear quantities of a value like friendliness are thereby nonevaluatively comparable with respect to that value; the one with a greater quantity of friendliness is more friendly. But a greater quantity of a value is not necessarily equivalent to betterness with respect to that value; a greater quantity of friendship may be worse with respect to friendship—one can be too friendly. Thus, while a greater amount of a value makes something ‘more valuable’ in a nonevaluative sense, it need not make it ‘more valuable’ in an evaluative sense.

Some values are essentially quantitative, that is, the nonevaluative sense of ‘more V’ is equivalent to the evaluative sense. A greater quantity of ‘the number of lives saved’ is always better with respect to the number of lives saved. And a particular increase in the amount of a value may turn out to be better with respect to that value, but there is no general equivalence between evaluative and nonevaluative notions of ‘more V’ for all V. Let us refer to the nonevaluative, quantitative notion of ‘more V’ as ‘*q*more V’. Since the argument from *q*more V to comparability relies on the supposed entailment of ‘better than with respect to V’ from ‘*q*more V’, and since, as we have just seen, *q*more is not always better, it is *possible* that different quantities of a single value are incomparable. Thus, monism may not be sufficient for comparability. The debate between value pluralism versus monism cuts across the one between bearer incomparability versus comparability.

## 2. Bi-directionality

A common thought among incomparabilists is that if one item is better with respect to some aspects of the covering value but worse with respect to other aspects of the covering value, the items must be incomparable with respect to the covering value. Commuting to work by car is more relaxing than going by train in that it is more reliable, but going by train is more relaxing in that one need not worry about negotiating freeway traffic.

‘Bidirectionality’, however, cannot be grounds for bearer incomparability. Suppose that, because the tracks are rickety and the switches rusty, the arrival and departure times of the trains are thoroughly unreliable. While it is true that commuting by train is more relaxing in one respect - one need not worry about negotiating freeway traffic - and less relaxing in another - the train is very unreliable - it is clearly the less relaxing option. In general, bi-directionality cannot be a ground for incomparability since there are nominal-notable comparisons in which the nominal bearer is better than the notable one in some respect but worse in another.

## 3. Calculation

Confusion over the locution ‘more valuable’ may be responsible for another set of incomparabilist arguments. According to these, the fact that practical deliberation is not always a matter of ‘calculation’—that is adding and subtracting quantities of a unit of value—gives us grounds for thinking that items are incomparable. Arguments from calculation have the following form: (1) comparison is simply a matter of adding and subtracting quantities of a unit of value; (2) if comparison is quantitative in this way, then proper deliberation about which to choose must take the form of ‘calculation’, ‘balancing’, ‘weighing’, or ‘trading off’; (3) in some situations, proper deliberation cannot take this form; 4) therefore, some items are incomparable. These arguments confuse comparability with commensurability.

Elizabeth Anderson and Steven Lukes offer arguments of this type. Anderson argues that those who believe that rational choice depends on comparisons of the alternatives must believe that “the sole practical role of the concept of value is to assign *weights* to goods [and] . . . that all values are scalar” (emphasis original). To ask whether a value is “scalar” is to ask “whether it is a magnitude, whether various mathematical relations and operations apply to it.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover “[d]eterminations of weight are continuous, require a common unit of measurement for the goods being compared, and place those goods on the same plane.” But, she argues persuasively, intrinsic values are not scalar and yield the assignment of a “status”, not a “weight”, to goods. So, for

example, she thinks that a friendship and the life of one's mother are intrinsic goods with different status, and therefore cannot be compared; the choice between them must proceed instead on principles of obligation.<sup>10</sup>

Steven Lukes also seems to assume a similar view of comparability. He confronts the issue of comparability and calculability squarely in an endnote: "It may be claimed that comparison need not involve calculation. But I find this claim hard to accept for normal cases. To the extent that it is claimed that if *X* is better than *Y*, there is some answer, however imprecise, to the question 'how much better?' I assume that comparison implies calculation."<sup>11</sup> Like Anderson, Lukes seems to think that comparison can proceed only in terms of a common quantitative unit of value. According to Lukes, 'sacred' goods cannot be assessed by calculation. Since comparison entails calculability, if goods cannot be assessed by calculation, they must be incomparable. Lukes concludes that the sacred is incomparable with the secular.

We have already seen that comparison is not a matter of *q*more of some value; *a fortiori*, it is not a matter of quantities of some *unit* of the value. Once we recognize that the evaluative sense of 'more *V*' is not in general equivalent to the quantitative sense, we have no reason to think that comparison is a matter of arithmetic operations on amounts of value. Put another way, an answer to Luke's quantitative question, 'How much better?', is not required by comparison. Perhaps the questions 'In what way better?' or 'To what extent better?' are, but the answers to these questions need not be quantitative. Although there is no general equivalence between betterness with respect to a value and a greater quantity of it, there are some values for which the greater the quantity of units, the better with respect to the value. For instance, the greater quantity of the number of lives saved, the better something is with respect to number of lives saved, and an option saving four lives is twice as good as an option saving two, with respect to number of lives saved. But in these cases, when comparison *is* a matter of adding and subtracting quantities of a value, deliberation *is* properly calculative in form. If confronted with a choice in which what matters is number of lives saved, surely the right way to deliberate, assuming deliberation is appropriate, is to calculate which alternative saves the greater number of lives.

This type of incomparabilist argument misconceives comparability as presupposing that value is scalar and, thus, that deliberation is calculative. Comparability does not require that comparison be a matter of quantities of a value, let alone quantities of some unit of a value. To think that comparability requires a single quantitative unit of value according to which items can be measured is to mistake commensurability with comparability.

#### 4. Rational Irresolvability of Conflict

An incomparabilist argument often appealed to but left unexplained holds that rationally irresolvable conflict between alternatives is sufficient for their incomparability. There are two possible ways to understand this argument. Either a ‘rational resolution’ of conflict is understood independently of the determination of what comparative relation holds between the items, though it may entail such a determination, or it is understood simply as the determination of what comparative relation holds between them. Take the first possibility first. Perhaps a rational resolution of conflict consists in the possibility of making a choice of one over the other that involves no rational regret or compunction.<sup>12</sup> But rational regret or compunction is, arguably, consistent with the comparability of the alternatives. I may realize that it is morally better for me to donate my kidney to a cousin but rationally regret the pain, inconvenience, and infringement of my bodily integrity such a donation, though voluntary, would involve.

Perhaps a rational resolution of conflict is the *rational choice* of one alternative over another. We saw in chapter 2 that according to comparativism, rational choice is precluded by the incomparability of the alternatives, and so the existence of a rational choice is sufficient for the comparability of the items. The view here, however, is that the lack of a rational choice is sufficient for the incomparability of the alternatives. This direction of the implication, however, does not have much going for it. There may be no reason to choose, a la Buridan’s ass, one bale of hay rather than its twin; we do not rationally choose but rather ‘select’, and yet the alternatives are not incomparable, they are equally good. Or perhaps it is not the incomparability of the alternatives but rather the plurality of values at stake in the choice situation that is required for the lack of a rational choice. Where the merits of one alternative are included in the merits of another, rational choice is guaranteed, but where the alternatives bear irreducibly distinct merits, there may be room for the failure of rational choice even though the items are comparable. As we have seen above, irreducible plurality is not in itself sufficient for incomparability.<sup>13</sup> I cannot think of any plausible way to understand rational resolvability without appealing to the comparative merits of the alternatives in which rational irresolvability guarantees the incomparability of the alternatives.

Rational resolution might instead be understood simply as the determination of the value relation <sup>that</sup> holds between the alternatives. The argument then becomes: If we cannot in principle know how two items compare, then they are incomparable. Such an argument, however, presupposes verificationism, which is, to say the least, highly dubious as a general account of truth.<sup>14</sup> Even if verificationism is correct, there is the

problem of how we can know we are not in principle capable of knowing how two items compare. If the argument is to get us to the conclusion that there are incomparable items, it will have to tell us when we cannot in principle know how items compare. This is a notoriously difficult problem.

In any case, the argument may not yield incomparability. For if it presupposes that a conflict cannot be rationally resolved unless one alternative is better than the other or the two are equally good, then it presupposes the substantive Trichotomy Thesis, which requires defense. Perhaps the alternatives are related by a fourth relation beyond the traditional trichotomy. If, on the other hand, it understands rational resolvability to encompass every possible value relation, then irresolvability does force us to conclude that the items are incomparable. But in this case, the plausibility of judging that conflicts are rationally irresolvable is greatly diminished. For we now have the possibility that the items are comparable by a fourth relation. Thus, it is far from clear that the argument gives us grounds for concluding that there is incomparability.

## 5. The Incomparability of Values

Discussion of incomparability often slides between the incomparability of values and the incomparability of bearers of those values. How these are connected has not been explored. We gave in chapter 1 an account of comparisons of bearers but set aside the question of how comparisons of values are to be explained. Incomparabilists often assume that these comparisons are connected: the incomparability of values entails the incomparability of bearers of those values. As we shall see in this section, there is good reason to think that such an entailment does not hold.

### 5.1. Value incomparability

The incomparability – or, as it is *usually* put, the ‘incommensurability’ – of values is, for the most part, a widely accepted phenomenon. But what it is for one value to be incomparable with another is not understood in any but the most vague terms. People will say things like, ‘liberty can’t be compared with equality’ or ‘how can you compare justice and mercy?’ As we noted in chapter 1, the comparison of abstract values *qua* abstract values makes sense only if the values are compared with respect to greatness of *contribution* to the content of some value. We know that every comparison must proceed relative to a covering value. If the things compared are values, then they are either being compared *qua* abstract values with respect to their contribution to a value or they are being compared as bearers of values with respect to some value. Liberty and equality, for instance, are comparable or incomparable with respect to greatness of

contribution to, say, justice. And while, for instance, justice and sexual pleasure can be compared with respect to nobility, that comparison treats the values as bearers of nobility – justice ‘bears’ (or less awkwardly, ‘is constituted by’) more nobility than sexual pleasure does.

Value incomparability is often understood in terms of value ‘fragmentation’. Some incomparabilists who think values are incomparable have in mind a radical fragmentation among values. Thomas Nagel thinks that there are two fundamentally irreducible points of view, the personal and impersonal, which reflect five “fundamental types” of value -- obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends, and private commitments – each of which is incomparable with the others.<sup>15</sup> The lack of comparability here is not the incomparability of two values with respect to some covering value, but the lack of a covering value that covers both values. Rights and utility, for example, might be thought to occupy two separate, nonoverlapping ‘spheres’, and, as a result, there is no common basis between them from which one can intelligibly ask, “Which is the greater value?” We know that if the values being compared do not both contribute to any third value, they cannot be incomparable; incomparability is always relative to a covering value. Inter-value fragmentation, far from indicating their incomparability, precludes it, and thus will not help explain how values might be incomparable.

If we are to see fragmentation of values as giving rise to value incomparability, the fragmentation must be within a value and not across values. Insofar as contributory values cannot be compared with respect to a value to which they contribute, the structure of the covering value is to that extent internally fragmented. John Finnis has suggested that there are seven “basic” values that contribute to well-being – roughly, life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness and religion – which are “equally fundamental” and yet “objectively incommensurable”.<sup>16</sup> According to Finnis, the many values that contribute to the value of well-being are incomparable with one another, and well-being is to that extent internally fragmented.

Just what the incomparability of contributory values involves is not obvious. Three possibilities suggest themselves. The first defines value incomparability in terms of lexicality. What it is for value *u* to be incomparable with value *w* is for *u* to be *lexically superior* to *w*. Value *u* is lexically superior to value *w* just in case, perhaps beyond a certain threshold amount of *u*, any amount of *u* will always be better than any amount of *w*. There are gaps – discontinuities – between contributory values (perhaps beyond certain thresholds) which account for the fragmentation of the covering value. That one value is lexically superior to another, however, gives us grounds for thinking not that the values are incomparable, but that one value is better than another.

Moreover, it is highly implausible to think that lexical superiority holds given that any quantity of value must have its qualitative accompaniment. Should we really think that the quality of value does not matter? We might naturally move to a second suggestion making use of the notion of an *aspect* of value introduced in chapter 1. Aspects are manifestations of value with both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The structure of each contributory value is constituted by comparisons of its aspects with respect to that value. Each contributory value, then, is a structured bundle of its aspects. The comparison of the bundles is given by the comparison of the aspects that make up those bundles.

Typically, an aspect of one contributory value will be better than some but not all aspects of another contributory value, and there may be no threshold of quantity, whatever the accompanying quality, beyond which an aspect of the one is always better – the comparative relations among the various aspects of two contributory values are more complex than that given by anything like lexical superiority. A small amount of very intense philosophical originality, for instance, may be better with respect to philosophical talent than a large amount of a particular unimaginative historical sensitivity; but a small amount of a particular trivial philosophical originality may be worse than a large amount of a particular impressive historical sensitivity. Sometimes the contribution of philosophical originality to philosophical talent will be greater than the contribution of historical sensitivity, but sometimes it will not be as great, depending on the aspects of the contributory values involved.

The second suggestion for understanding the incomparability of contributory values is this: the uncategoricity of comparisons of their aspects entails that the bundles of aspects they constitute – the contributory values themselves – cannot be compared. Since not all aspects of one contributory value are better than or as good as all aspects of another, even beyond a certain threshold, there is no categorical sense in which one contributory value makes a greater contribution than or the same contribution as another, and thus, the view goes, the values cannot be compared with respect to their contribution. The mere uncategoricity of comparative relations between aspects cannot, however, account for incomparability of the values. To think that uncategoricity of aspect comparisons is sufficient for value incomparability is to think that something akin to lexical superiority among aspects is required for comparability among values. But there are concrete cases that falsify the criterion. Although philosophical originality and historical sensitivity are related in an uncategorical way, it cannot be denied that philosophical originality makes a greater contribution. The mere complexity of relations

pairs of aspects and focus instead on the greatness of contribution of each incomparable aspect with respect to the value to which it contributes.

Recall that each value has a structure determined by comparisons of their aspects. The structure of philosophical talent is determined by comparisons between aspects of philosophical talent. In chapter 1 we gave an account of how that structure is determined by breaking down comparisons of aspects of philosophical talent into component comparisons of aspects of contributory value bundles, each bundle of which constitutes an aspect of philosophical talent. Notable aspects of originality are those that are better than most other aspects of originality and, as it were, come at the 'top' of the structure of originality. In general, notable aspects of a value are the aspects that contribute the most to the ideal of that value. If notable aspects of two values are incomparable, the values themselves are. Because values are variously structured, some values may require all their notable aspects to be incomparable while others may require only some. Moreover, while sufficient for value incomparability, the incomparability of at least some notable aspects may not be necessary; perhaps some values are incomparable so long as all but their notable aspects are.

The gloss of value incomparability, then, is as follows: Two values are incomparable with respect to greatness of contribution to some *V* if (some of) the notable aspects of one value are incomparable with (some of) the notable aspects of the other value with respect to *V*. Of course, we have not said what determines the incomparability of such aspects. But, for present purposes, we need not try to answer this difficult question;<sup>20</sup> the incomplete account is sufficient to show that value incomparability does not entail the incomparability of bearers of those values.

## 5.2. Bearer incomparability

In chapter 1 we proposed the organic account of comparisons of bearers which holds that bearer comparisons are determined by a function which adds the differences between a shortest series of mono-variant bundles of contributory value aspects that connected the bundle of contributory value aspects borne by one bearer and the bundle of contributory value aspects borne by the other. If bearers are incomparable, then, the function representing their comparison must somehow fail to yield a comparison of them. The only plausible way in which the function might yield their incomparability is if the function were to contain some gap. Gappy functions, then, may determine the incomparability of bearers.

A gap in the function would arise if there were no difference between some component mono-variant bundles. (There can be no gap from a failure of coordination

since the organic account assumes that if the component differences exist, they can be coordinated.) Because there may be multiple shortest series of mono-variant bundles connecting one bearer to another, we must focus on the conditions under which every shortest series of mono-variant bundles yields a gap in the function. The most obvious way in which there could be such a gap is if there are two aspects respectively borne by the bundles such that regardless of the context, there is no contextualized difference between them, that is, they are incomparable. There may be other, more complicated ways in which the conditions hold, but we need not examine them here. For what is clear is that the incomparability of two values borne by the bearers will not ensure bearer incomparability, even if those bearers bear the aspects that render the values incomparable in the first place.

Suppose style is incomparable with historicity because notable aspect  $s^1$  is incomparable with notable aspect  $h^1$ . Now suppose further that Eunice bears, among other aspects,  $s^1$  and Janice bears, among other aspects,  $h^1$ . Does it follow that Eunice and Janice are incomparable? The answer is no, for Eunice may be so much more original, insightful and clear than Janice that Eunice clearly has the greater philosophical talent. The same holds even for contributory values that are themselves in some sense 'notable' contributors to the covering value. Suppose that Eunice's originality is incomparable with Janice's insightfulness. Does it follow that Eunice and Janice are incomparable with respect to philosophical talent? Janice may be so much worse than Eunice in every other respect that it is clear that Eunice is more philosophically talented. So the incomparability of contributory value aspects which render contributory values incomparable does not necessarily entail the incomparability of bearers of those aspects.

This is because what makes two contributory values incomparable may be very different from what makes bundles of various contributory value aspects incomparable. The organic nature of values are again at work. Two contributory value aspects may make their respective contributory values incomparable, but because there are other contributory values borne by the bearers, those aspects may not make the bearers of them incomparable. The other contributory values borne have organic effects such that incomparability cannot be presumed of the bearers just because two of their aspects make their respective contributory values incomparable. Put differently, the comparability or incomparability of aspects is always an organic matter; two aspects are comparable are incomparable with respect to some  $V$  only in a certain context.  $S^1$  and  $h^1$  may be incomparable when bundled with other aspects of style and historicity respectively, but they may not be incomparable when bundled with various aspects of originality, insightfulness, clarity, and so on.

Therefore, the incomparability of values does not entail the incomparability of bearers of those values, even when those bearers bear the aspects that render the values incomparable in the first place. There is no *a priori* link from the one to the other.

There is one harmless qualification to this last claim. If what it is for two values to be incomparable is for certain contributory value aspects to be incomparable, and if two bearers of value respectively bear *only* those incomparable aspects, the incomparability of those values does entail the incomparability of bearers of those values. Suppose, for instance, that what it is for a certain contributory value  $v_1$  to be incomparable with a certain contributory value  $v_2$  with respect to a certain  $V$  is for a certain aspect of  $v_1$ , say,  $a^1$ , to be incomparable with a certain aspect of  $v_2$ , say,  $b^1$  with respect to  $V$ . Given that  $v_1$  is incomparable with  $v_2$ , we can conclude that two bearers which respectively bear only  $a^1$  and  $b^1$  are incomparable; every shortest series of mono-variant bundles between them will involve a failure of comparison. In this case, there is an *a priori* link between value and bearer incomparability. But the only kinds of case in which there will be entailment <sup>ones in which</sup> ~~is~~ the *only* aspects borne by two bearers of a covering value are the two aspects which happen to render their respective contributory values incomparable. Typically, however, bearers – at least the ones that occur naturally in life – are not so parsimonious.

## 6. The Lack of a Common Value

It is sometimes thought that incomparability holds between items that are so different that there is no value they have in common. This type of argument can be seen as a version of the diversity of values type of argument, but because it is not subject to the same objection, I treat it separately. The intuitive idea is this: How can two items be compared if they do not bear a common value? If there is no common value borne, there is no common basis for comparison.

In chapter 1, we saw that incomparability must proceed with respect to a covering value; unless there is some value stated or implied, no comparison can be understood. But the covering value requirement also requires that the relevant value ‘cover’ the items at stake. ‘Gustatory pleasure’ does not cover chalk and cheddar, but it does cover cheesecake and cheddar. In this section, I argue that the failure of a putative covering value to cover gives rise not to incomparability but to a different phenomenon: *noncomparability*. Noncomparability is distinct from incomparability in that it <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ what we shall call a *formal* failure of comparison, while incomparability is a *substantive* failure. We shall also note that practical reason tracks the distinction between formal and substantive failures – that is, practical reason never presents ~~us~~ with a choice situation in

which comparison of the alternatives could fail on formal grounds. Thus noncomparability can be further distinguished from incomparability on the ground that it does not have any real significance for practical reason.

### 6.1. Noncomparability

We start with the idea that every predicate has a domain of application. Since comparability is always relative to a covering value, we can take the third place of the argument as fixed and focus on two-place predicates like ‘comparable with respect to beauty/prudence/moral goodness, etc.’ For each two-place comparability predicate, there is a domain of pairs of items to which the predicate can apply.

The distinction between comparability and incomparability on the one hand and noncomparability on the other can be regarded as an instance of the distinction between the applicability and nonapplicability of a predicate. Two items are comparable or incomparable if the pair belongs to the domain of application of the comparability predicate; they are noncomparable if it does not. A pair of items, it is plausible to suppose, falls within the domain of a comparability predicate if both members of the pair belong to the domain of the associated covering value predicate. Take, for instance, the comparability predicate, ‘comparable with respect to aural beauty’. The pair <fried eggs, the number nine> does not belong within the domain of the comparability predicate because fried eggs and the number nine do not belong within the domain of ‘aurally beautiful’. Similarly, the pair falls outside the domain of application of the incomparability predicate. We shall say that the value of aural beauty does not ‘cover’ fried eggs.

Although I shall take the distinction between applicability and nonapplicability of a predicate for granted, two points of clarification are in order. First, nonapplicability may derive from either essential or contingent features of the item. We know, for example, that the number nine, in virtue of being an abstract object, cannot be aurally beautiful. But there are also contingent features of objects in virtue of which application is ruled out; Michelangelo, who never happened to give a musical performance in his life, is not within the domain of ‘success in musical performance’. (Of course, some contingent features do not rule out application but only make the application false; an ugly building, contingently ugly, falls within the domain of ‘beautiful’, though it is false that it is).

Second, it is plausible to suppose that if items belong to the domain of application, then, as a rule, the predicate will be true or false of the items; while if they do not belong—since it is natural to think truth and falsity presuppose application—there

will be indeterminacy in truth value. I say that there will be truth or falsity where there is application ‘as a rule’ since vagueness in the predicate (or in the value to which it refers) may give rise to indeterminacy in truth value even though the predicate applies. ‘Phil Collins is bald’ may be neither true nor false, but Phil Collins falls within the domain of ‘bald’. Other, typical sources of indeterminacy, however, I think plausibly give rise to nonapplication rather than application. So, for example, it might be thought that a claim that lamps are better than windows with respect to gustatory pleasurableness makes a false presupposition; this error, I shall assume, is one way in which a predicate can fail to apply. Other kinds of error giving rise to nonapplication are reference failure and category mistakes.<sup>21</sup>

We can thus distinguish *formal* from *substantive* failures of comparability. The failure is formal if some condition necessary for both the possibility of comparability and the possibility of incomparability fails to hold. The formal condition encountered in chapter 1 held that every comparison must proceed with respect to some covering value. We saw one way in which this formal requirement might not be met: if no value is stated or implied. We now see another way in which that formal requirement could fail to be met: if the value stated or implied does not cover the items. In both cases, we cannot understand what is being said. Without some value with respect to which the comparison proceeds, no comparison can be understood. And unless the comparability or incomparability predicate applies to the items at stake, we cannot understand that anything is being said about them. A substantive failure of comparability, in contrast, presupposes that the conditions for the possibility of comparability and of incomparability hold but maintains, as a matter of substance, that the items cannot be compared with respect to the covering value.

The requirement that the putative covering value cover the items is, I suspect, what incomparabilists have in mind when they insist that comparison can succeed only if there is some ‘common basis’ for comparison. The covering value predicate must apply to the items at stake; if the items are ‘so different’ that the relevant value does not cover them, they cannot be compared. But this failure of a value to cover is formal, and so it cannot entail incomparability. Noncomparability is neutral between comparability and incomparability.

## 6.2. Formal failures of comparison and practical reason

This distinction between formal and substantive failures of comparability is basic to the scope of practical reason. Practical reason never confronts agents with comparisons that could formally fail. It is evident that practical reason does not require us

to compare noncomparables; as rational agents, we will never be confronted, for example, with a choice between French toast and the city of Chicago for breakfast or between a lamp and a window for prime minister. Indeed, no choice could ever have as its justification or its justifying force a comparison of the alternatives with respect to a value that does not cover them. Noncomparability, for this reason, cannot threaten practical reason, but incomparability, as we have seen, can.

That practical reason never requires agents to compare noncomparables provides a response to two possible objections to our account of noncomparability. First, there are those who deny the distinction between applicability and nonapplicability; every predicate applies to every item (but may apply falsely), and, thus, there will be no room for noncomparability as we have described it. Second, assuming there is nonapplicability, it might be denied that both items need be in the domain of the covering value predicate in order for there to be either comparability or incomparability; French toast might be better than Chicago with respect to gustatory value, or perhaps the two are incomparable. To both objections we can make the same response. Even if there is never a failure of applicability, we would still want to make a distinction between cases that practical reason might present to us and ones beyond its scope. So we have an equivalent distinction, not made in terms of applicability and nonapplicability. Similarly, even if, assuming now there is nonapplication, only one item need be in the domain of the covering value predicate for there to be either comparability or incomparability, the fact that none of those cases ever arises in practical deliberation is worth marking in some way. Given each denial, we nevertheless have reason to make the distinction we have between noncomparability and incomparability.

Practical reason never asks us to compare where there is noncomparability. But what of the other way in which the covering value requirement can fail? Does practical reason ever require us to compare items where there is no value stated or implied in terms of which the comparison can proceed? There are two cases here. The straightforward case is the largely theoretical one in which there is no restriction on the content of the covering value; any value, so long as it covers the items, will satisfy the requirement that there be some value. But there is another more complicated case. A choice situation will put restrictions on the content of the covering value. If we are comparing philosophers for a job, for instance, intelligence, insightfulness, clarity of thought, and so on will be relevant, while sartorial elegance will be irrelevant. In some choice situations, what is relevant to choice are intrinsic values; in other situations, it is instrumental values; in still others, it is the values of utility and of duty. In a given choice

situation, we are not looking to make any comparison whatever, but a comparison of the alternatives with respect to a value that reflects what matters in the choice situation.

Sometimes, however, it seems that there is no such covering value. Suppose we know that both the enjoyment to be gained and the duty owed to others are relevant to a choice. There seems to be no value in terms of which the merits of alternatives with respect to both of those values can be compared - no value with respect to which we can say that, given enjoyment and duty, one of the alternatives is better 'overall'. Thus, it seems that practical reason sometimes asks us to compare alternatives where there is no covering value, and comparison must fail on formal grounds. The claim that practical reason tracks the distinction between formal and substantive failures of comparability would then be mistaken.

We have already seen why the lack of a covering value with respect to which the relevant merits of alternatives can be compared cannot give rise to incomparability. If there is no covering value with respect to which the relevant merits of the alternatives can be compared, there can be neither comparability nor incomparability with respect to it. But there is another way in which we can defuse the incomparabilist intuition: by showing that practical reason never confronts us with such cases.

Consider, as a typical example, the following simplified case. Suppose you must decide between two ways of spending your Christmas bonus: either donate the money to feed starving children in a faraway land or invest the funds as a nest egg for your retirement. The donation option has great moral merit, and the nest egg option has great prudential merit. Perhaps, as well, the donation option has nominal prudential merit and the investment option nominal moral merit. Practical reason seems to require an answer to the question, 'Given that the values relevant to choice are morality and prudence, which alternative is better overall?'. We can say which is better with respect to morality and which is better with respect to prudence,<sup>22</sup> but there does not seem to be any way to say which is better with respect to both morality and prudence. Put another way, there seems to be no covering value that has both moral and prudential value as parts. And yet it seems that practical reason might require us to compare with respect to this nonexistent value.

The response to the challenge has two steps. First, there is often reason to think that, despite appearances, there is such a covering value. And second, in cases where there is no such covering value, it is plausible to think that the choice situation has been misconceived; practical reason requires not *that* comparison but a different one – one that is not, as a formal matter, guaranteed to fail.

What reason might there be for thinking that there is an appropriate covering value in the present case? One suggestion might be that there are always very general considerations like ‘what there is most reason to do, all things considered’ or ‘betterness, all things considered’, in terms of which a comparison of any two alternatives can proceed. Such considerations, however, have no content apart from that given to them by the choice situations in which they figure. They are *schematic*. A schematic consideration, like ‘what there is most reason to do, all things considered’ amounts to intrinsic moral values in some cases, instrumental aesthetic values in others, and consequentialist economic values in still others. Schematic considerations cover the same ground as what Bernard Williams has called ‘the deliberative ought’.<sup>23</sup> They are placeholders for any value whatever. Since they are mere placeholders, they are not themselves values, for it is only in virtue of the values they stand for that there is any meaningful evaluative comparison with respect to them. We are left with the same question with which we began: Is there a covering value with respect to which the moral and prudential merits of alternatives can be compared?

There is good reason to suppose there is such a covering value. Consider the following case. You can either save yourself <sup>from</sup> a small inconvenience, or you can save a remote stranger <sup>from</sup> severe physical and emotional trauma. Suppose that the one act bears only nominal prudential (and perhaps nominal moral) value, while the other bears notable moral value (and perhaps nominal prudential value). We can say more than that the one act is better morally and the other is better prudentially. We can also say that, with respect to both prudential and moral value, the latter act is better: given both values, saving the stranger is better *overall*. In general, a notable moral act is better with respect to both morality and prudence than a nominal prudential one. There must therefore be a covering value in terms of which comparisons of moral and prudential merits proceed, one that has both moral and prudential values as components. We know it exists because we know something about its structure: certain moral merits are more important than certain prudential ones. We cannot make a judgement about the relative importance of these considerations without there being some value, however indefinite, in terms of which the judgement proceeds. In general, nominal-notable comparisons help us to find covering values where they seem elusive.

What makes recognition that there is a covering value difficult in these cases is that, unlike other values, these values are typically *nameless*. (Put differently, the only name for such values are the names of schematic considerations; as placeholders for any value, their names provide alternative names for every value.) It is through the ‘nominal-notable test’ that we can see there are such values. Some varieties of intuitionism and

specificationism might be understood as devoted to determining the contours of nameless values. And talk of ‘what is really important’, ‘self-ideals’, ‘integral human fulfillment’, and the like by Charles Taylor, Elizabeth Anderson, John Finnis, James Griffin, David Wiggins, and others, might be illuminatingly understood as attempts to work out the content of some of these nameless values. If my suggestion that the structure of a value is constituted by comparisons of bearers of that value <sup>is correct</sup> then this project will require further examination of comparisons among bearers of those values.<sup>24</sup>

This is not to say that in all instances in which it appears there is no appropriate covering value, a nameless value can be revealed. But it is plausible that the cases in which the nominal-notable test fails are ones in which the agent has misconceived what practical reason requires. Suppose I am contemplating two possible birthday gifts for a friend: a handsome copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and an elegant chiffon scarf. I assume that the choice turns on the answer to the question, ‘Which is intrinsically better?’ The book has, among other intrinsic merits, literary merits and the scarf, among others, sartorial merits. But there is no nominal-notable comparison of a literary masterpiece and a sartorial banality. It makes no sense to say, given that literary and sartorial values are the only relevant ones, *War and Peace* is better than a pair of seersucker bell-bottoms overall. Therefore, there is no covering value with respect to which all the respective intrinsic merits of the book and scarf can be compared.<sup>25</sup>

In light of this, it is natural to conclude that I have misconceived the choice situation as requiring such a comparison. I might, for instance, have fixed on an inappropriate choice value. On reflection, I might realize that the choice between the gifts is not governed by intrinsic value but by my friend’s tastes, or intrinsic beauty, or any number of choice values with respect to which comparison is formally possible. Just as we need never compare candy bars with pencils with respect to moral goodness, we need never compare with respect to a value that does not exist. How can practical reason, as a part of rationality in general, require an exercise of deliberation that cannot, on formal grounds, succeed?

The practical predicament we started with is this: We determine which values are relevant to choice, but there does not seem to be any covering value with respect to which the merits of the alternatives with respect to those values can be compared. We can now diagnose the predicament as follows. Either there is a covering value, or there is not. If there is a covering value, its existence can presumably be discovered by the nominal-notable test. If it exists, it will likely be nameless. Whether the items are incomparable with respect to it is, then, a further question. If there is no covering value, the covering value requirement has not been satisfied, and we have therefore misunderstood the

choice situation as one requiring that comparison. The items are not incomparable since there is no covering value with respect to which they could be incomparable. In either case, it is a mistake to think that the difficulty in finding an appropriate covering value is grounds for concluding that items are incomparable.

None of the above arguments is convincing. Any attempt to develop these lines of argument, however interesting they are in their own right, will not yield a successful argument for incomparability. Each makes a fundamental error: diversity and bidirectionality arguments run afoul of nominal-notable comparisons; calculation arguments wrongly presuppose that comparison must be cardinal; rational irresolvability either misunderstands the relation between choice and comparability or turns on the dubious theory of verificationism; arguments from the incomparability of values misunderstand the relation between value and bearer incomparability; and arguments from the lack of a covering value fall from an impoverished understanding of the formal features of both comparability and incomparability. We outlined three other arguments, however, that warrant, for one reason or another, more careful attention. In the remaining chapters, we turn to those arguments.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Guttenplan, "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemmas," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 80 (1979-1980): 61-80.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Raz, "Mixing Values," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (suppl.) (1991): 83-100. Compare James Griffin, "Mixing Values," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (suppl.) (1991): 101-118.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald de Sousa, "The Good and the True," *Mind* 84 (1974): 547-548; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 66-68.

<sup>5</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong, for example, maintains that "the multiplicity of scales" is a source of incomparability among some, but not all, items that are rankable only by different scales, but he does not explain why only those items and not others are thereby incomparable. See his *Moral Dilemmas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 69. Charles Taylor suggests that it is the diversity of goods that gives rise to incomparability between certain instances of different goods. But it is difficult to see how the mere fact of diversity can explain incomparability among only some instances of the diverse goods when it is compatible with comparability among other instances. See his "The Diversity of Goods," in A.K. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and his "Leading a Life" *IIPR*.

<sup>6</sup> That the argument is put in terms of a continuum should not be taken to entail that the difference in creativity between contiguous items on the continuum is purely quantitative. I defend this argument in some detail elsewhere. Compare John Broome's "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?" *IIPR*, in which a continuum argument is used to argue for the indeterminacy of comparison.

<sup>7</sup> See also Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods"; Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting values*; and Anderson, *value in Ethics and Economics*. Thomas Hurka has argued that a single value can differ in ways that allow for rational regret over a forgone, less valuable alternative. See his "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," *Ethics* 106 (1996): 555-575. On the question of whether the recognition of different aspects of a value lands us with pluralism, compare Hurka, and Michael Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict and Maximization," *IIPR* especially nn. 7-10.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Amartya Sen, "Plural Utility," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81 (1980-1981): 193-215. Also, indirect forms of utilitarianism can allow for incomparability among the values that reduce to the supervalue.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson's definition of 'scalar' is not the common mathematical notion of being representable by a scale of real numbers which does not presuppose magnitude.

<sup>10</sup> See her "Incommensurability and Practical Reason", *IIPR*.

<sup>11</sup> The text accompanying this footnote is puzzling: “Trade-off suggests that we compute the value of the alternative goods on whatever scale is at hand, whether cardinal or *ordinal*, precise or rough-and-ready” (emphasis added). See Steven Lukes’ “Comparing the Incomparable: Trade-offs and Sacrifices” *IIPR*. But an ordinal scale need not involve calculation. Ordinal comparisons can be quantitative without being cardinal, that is, committed to the existence of some unit of value by which the items can be measured. We have already seen that comparison need not be a matter of quantities of some value.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Isaac Levi, *Hard Choices*. This is not to say that the rational resolution is to be understood in terms of the possibility of rational choice, for choice without rational regret may not be sufficient for rational choice.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Stocker, “Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict, and Maximization”, *IIPR*.

<sup>14</sup> There is the general argument that verificationism cannot be the correct theory of truth: Take the claim ‘P and no one knows that P’. This claim could be true and yet no one could know it to be true since no one could know both P and that no one knows that P.

<sup>15</sup> See Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value”. (The sixth type, which Nagel identifies but does not discuss, is self-interest.)

<sup>16</sup> Finnis’ notion of well-being is what he calls “integral human fulfilment”, or the well-being (fulfilment) of all human persons and communities. By “objectively incommensurable”, Finnis means “incomparable”. Finnis is not, as he makes clear, thereby committed to the view that *particular aspects* of these basic values cannot be compared or that the values cannot be related in certain ways. What he is committed to is the idea that the values themselves cannot be ordered as making greater or lesser contributions to integral human fulfilment. See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 86-90 and 113-115; and his “Commensuration and Public Reason”, *IIPR*.

<sup>17</sup> We have already encountered an analogous argument in the context of bearer comparisons: we saw that the bi-directionality of bearer comparisons with respect to aspects of the covering value ignores the existence of nominal-notable comparisons where such bi-directionality holds.

<sup>18</sup> I shall have more to say about this in chapter 4 when we discuss the notion of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ values.

<sup>19</sup> Note too that it could never be the case that every aspect of every contributory value was incomparable with every aspect of every other contributory value, for then there would be no value to which they all contributed. For something cannot be a value unless it has a structured content, and structure entails that there is *some* comparability among its components.

<sup>20</sup> One may imagine how such an account might go given the organic accounts of the structure of values and bearer comparisons offered in chapter 1. But it should be pointed out that there is no easy extension of those accounts to the present case of value comparisons.

<sup>21</sup> There are other possible sources of indeterminacy that are thorough-goingly substantive which we can set aside here. For example, verificationism, which holds that a sentence is neither true nor false if it is in principle unknowable, might hold certain comparisons neither true nor false where the predicate does indeed apply to the items at stake. I assume that we have enough of an independent grasp of what it is for a predicate to apply such that we can see that typical sources of the indeterminacy of sentences, barring vagueness, give rise to nonapplication but non-typical sources, e.g., verificationism, do not.

<sup>22</sup> Note that even if the one option bore only moral value and the other only prudential value, this would probably not be a case of noncomparability with respect to either moral or prudential value; acts that are moral are typically the kinds of things that belong to the domain of 'prudential', and *vice versa*.

<sup>23</sup> See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> For exemplary work of this kind with respect to the value of (objective) morality, see Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality*, vol. 1, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 12. Kamm's discussion can be understood as an attempt to illuminate a murky part of the notion of morality through an investigation of the comparative relations holding between its "rights and duties" contributory values and its "well-being/pursuit of conceptions of the good" contributory values.

<sup>25</sup> Note that if intrinsic literary value and intrinsic sartorial value are not parts of any other value, then there is no nameless supervalue that has all values as parts.

- ◆ **It was hard work betraying all my friends,  
but, in the end, it was worth it.**

- Genet

- ◆ **Comparisons turn friends into enemies.**

- Philemon: Fragment c. 310 B.C.

## CHAPTER 4

### EMPHATIC COMPARISONS

I have a close friend called Eve. One day I meet an eccentric billionaire. Purely on a whim, but with utmost seriousness, she offers me a million dollars to end my friendship with Eve. Are my friendship with Eve and the million dollars comparable? Most proponents of incomparability answer this question in the negative. But none of the six types of incomparabilist arguments we examined in the last chapter can explain why we should think this.

The seventh type of incomparabilist argument purports to provide the explanation for just such a case. Arguments of this type locate the grounds for incomparability in the attitudes that agents must have if they are to realize the goods in question. These attitudes are thus thought to be *constitutive* of certain goods. So, for example, Joseph Raz argues that it is a constitutive feature of friendship that friends have certain attitudes which imply that friendships and money are incomparable – if one does not have such attitudes, one is not capable of being a friend.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he concludes, the incomparability of friendships and money is a constitutive feature of friendship. Elizabeth Anderson thinks that there are norms determining the attitudes it is appropriate to have towards goods, and that sometimes these norms fail to provide any “good reason” to compare them. As a pragmatist, she thinks that that the structure of value is constituted by such norms, and thus holds that the lack of a good reason to compare two goods is what it is for them to be incomparable.<sup>2</sup> Both Raz and Anderson think that attitudes supposedly constitutive of certain goods provide grounds for their incomparability: incomparability is part of what it is for certain goods to be the goods that they are.<sup>3</sup> As we will see in this chapter, arguments from constitution confuse incomparability with a particular kind of comparability, what we shall call ‘emphatic’ comparability. Emphatic comparability, far from being incomparability, is comparability between particular goods of a certain nature.

In discussing the possibility of ‘constitutive’ incomparability, we shall focus primarily on cases involving friendships and money. We do this not only because such cases are standard examples to which incomparabilists appeal but also because discussion of constitutive incomparability cannot be satisfactorily conducted at a high level of generality; the intuitive force of some of the arguments depends on the nature of the particular goods in question. This is not to say that the arguments are limited to this application; indeed, we can describe the class of cases to which the arguments are intended to apply as those involving a good with significant intrinsic value (e.g., friendships, love relationships, beautiful landscapes, human lives, master artworks, human freedoms, understanding, and so on) on the one hand and goods with merely instrumental value (e.g., money). Let us call these the ‘target cases’. It is these target cases that proponents of constitutive incomparability take as their paradigms.

Given this characterization of the target cases, we should note that with a purely instrumental good on offer, no comparison could proceed without some assumption about what the purely instrumental good is instrumental to. The merit with respect to any value of a purely instrumental good is transparent; its merit is the merit of its end (perhaps also of its opportunity costs). Suppose the only way I can save my dying mother is by ending my friendship with my dear friend Eve. It would be very odd to think, at least under normal circumstances, that it would be wrong for me to give up that friendship in order to save my mother. Clearly, I ought to trade the friendship for my mother's life. And it is just as clear that the reason I ought to trade the friendship is that my mother's life is more valuable (with respect to the range of plausible choice values). So my friendship with Eve can be compared with and properly traded off against the life of my mother.<sup>4</sup> Now suppose that my mother is dying of a rare disease and needs a million dollar operation. There is no question that if I have a million dollars, I should trade it for the operation that will save my mother's life: her life is more important than the million dollars. In this case, I ought to judge that the money is more valuable than my friendship with Eve and, thus, choose the money. But if the money is to be used instead to buy myself a luxury yacht, a summer home in St. Tropez, my own ski slope in the Alps, or some other extravagance, the comparison and choice between my friendship and the money does warrant pause. Since money has no intrinsic value, arguments for the incomparability of friendships and money crucially depend on what the money is to be used for. Granting the incomparabilist her strongest case then, we should assume that any transparent good involved will be used for luxuries or extravagant comforts.

### 1. Constitutive Incomparability

Joseph Raz writes,

“Certain judgments about the [in]comparability of certain options and certain attitudes to the exchangeability of options are constitutive of relations with friends, spouses, parents, etc. Only those who hold the view that friendship is neither better nor worse than money, but is simply not comparable to money or other commodities are capable of having friends. Similarly only those who would not even consider exchanges of money for friendship are capable of having friends.”<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of constitutive incomparability is the following idea. Certain good things in life – relations between friends, spouses, parent and child, for example – are in part constituted by attitudes about that good and other goods. That certain attitudes are constitutive of goods is thought to be shown by the fact that those attitudes are required for an agent to participate in those goods. This, in itself, is a questionable move, but I will take it for granted. According to Raz, there are two attitudes constitutive of the friendship good – that is, are required for one to be capable of having friends. First is a refusal to consider a choice between a friendship and money. One must not be willing to entertain such a choice on its merits – one must refuse to deliberate about which alternative might be better, but must instead walk away from such choice situations.<sup>6</sup> Second is a belief that

friendships and money are incomparable.

There is an obvious tension between these two attitudes. For the judgement that the goods are incomparable is naturally seen as the upshot of deliberation about their comparative merits: they cannot be compared. But the refusal to consider implies that no such deliberation is to take place. The tension forces us to understand the belief that the items are incomparable as something more like a prejudice than a reasoned conclusion following upon careful deliberation. We can then treat the refusal to consider and the ‘belief’ that the alternatives are incomparable as much the same attitude. In the alternative, we might modify Raz’ claim to be disjunctive: one or the other attitudes but not both is constitutive of certain goods. Either one *judges*, and not merely ‘believes’, that the items are incomparable or one refuses even to consider whether they are comparable. In order to give the incomparabilist the widest possible range of argument, I shall take Raz’ argument to be of this disjunctive form.

There are other serious interpretive difficulties in Raz’ argument.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, for instance, Raz writes as if the incomparability of friendships and money is relativized to an agent’s capacity to realize friendship. As he is careful to note, the attitudes constitutive of friendship are not required by rationality. So I may be perfectly rational in judging that friendships and money are comparable. All that can be said of me is that I am incapable of having friends.<sup>8</sup> But this suggests the unhappy result that friendships and money may be incomparable for you but comparable for me.

The most charitable reading of Raz’ argument is, I believe, as follows. It is a constitutive feature of friendship that friendships are incomparable with money. That it is a constitutive feature of the friendship good follows from the fact that constitutive of being a friend is either a judgement that friendships and money are incomparable or a refusal to consider a choice between them. Those who judge that they can be compared or who are willing to entertain the possibility of a trade are incapable of being friends.<sup>9</sup>

We raise two questions about Raz’ argument. Are the Raz attitudes really constitutive of friendship – must one have one of the Raz attitudes to be capable of friendship? And even if these attitudes are constitutive of friendship, does it follow that the incomparability of friendship and money is constitutive of friendship?

### 1.1. Attitudes constitutive of friendship

Are judging that friendships and money are incomparable or refusing to consider the choice between them constitutive of friendship? It is hard to believe that one’s capacity for being a friend depends on having either of the Raz attitudes. Suppose I am faced with a choice between a friendship and a dollar. If I judge that the friendship is worth more than a dollar, have I thereby lost all of my friends? How can my judgement that my friendships are worth more than a dollar *render me* unfit for friendship? Now return to our billionaire’s offer. If I judge that my friendship is worth more than a million dollars, does it follow that I am incapable of being a friend? Indeed, the more plausible attitude constitutive of friendship is the judgement that friendships are worth more than money.

Refusal to consider is a little trickier. Suppose I become friends with a stranger whom I meet every day at the bus stop. We exchange pleasantries, show each other pictures of our children, discuss the politics of the day. We are friends, but not by any means great friends. In this case it seems a little odd to say that my very *willingness* to consider giving up that friendship for a million dollars makes me incapable of friendship *writ large*. Some friendships have a nature such that a mere willingness to consider a trade with money does not preclude one from having that kind of friendship. After all, a willingness to consider trading is simply ‘keeping an open mind’ about the possibility that a trade might be justified. One can ‘keep an open mind’ about whether heavy metal is as aesthetically valuable as classical music while having a strong inkling that it is not so. So it is too crude to say that a willingness to consider shows an incapacity for friendship generally.

Now take my friendship with Eve. Eve is one of my closest friends. Here it may seem plausible that even a willingness to consider a trade is off-limits. Perhaps I am morally obligated to refuse to consider the billionaire’s offer. Or, perhaps I should not be willing to consider the trade because the comparison would have damaging expressive significance. Or perhaps my willingness to consider would hurt Eve if she were aware of it.

Let us, for now, grant that there is a prohibition against being willing to consider a trade between friendships and money. Is the prohibition constitutive of close friendships? It is hard to believe that my ability to have close friendships turns on my refusing to consider trading those friendships for money. A thought experiment might help. Take any of the close friendships you currently have. Now consider whether you would be willing to entertain an offer of a million dollars in exchange for that friendship. Does the nature of your friendship change depending on your answer to that question? The closeness of friendships does not plausibly turn on such considerations. One’s commitment to a friendship – and to certain intrinsic goods generally – is not captured by one’s *willingness to consider* trading that good for other goods.<sup>10</sup> One’s *actually* making a trade, however, *may* be another matter. Being willing to consider a trade and actually making a trade should not be confused. Moreover, even if we assume that a willingness to consider a trade is a betrayal of a close friendship, it does not follow that refusal to consider is constitutive of close friendships. For a friendship can be deepened, not destroyed, by a betrayal. One’s capacity to be friends with the person one has, *ex hypothesi*, betrayed is not necessarily extinguished by the betrayal.

Thus, a refusal to consider trading close friendships for money is not constitutive of close friendships. Being willing to consider a trade may lay one open to blame, but does not consign one to a friendless existence. Therefore, since neither of Raz’ attitudes are plausibly constitutive of friendship, a crucial step of Raz’ argument fails.

## 1.2. Practical versus theoretical warrant and truth

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that a judgement that my friendship

with Eve and a million dollars are incomparable is constitutive of friendship. Still, a judgement of incomparability in the practical context of choosing does not imply the same judgement detached from a practical context. It might, for instance, be a constitutive obligation owed to one's friends that when confronted with a choice between a friendship and a sum of cash, one judge that they are incomparable. This judgement, made with an eye toward deciding what to do, is, however, consistent with the recognition that there is a different theoretical judgement about whether they are incomparable – a judgement that is true regardless of one's capacity to realize certain goods or special obligations to others. How one answers the question, 'Are they comparable?' when confronted with the choice may be very different from how one answers the question in philosophical discussion. I take it that it is the theoretical judgement – a judgement true 'for' everyone – that the incomparabilist needs to establish.

Of course, it might be insisted by way of reply that the judgement constitutive of friendship is the theoretical one: taking the philosophical position that friendships and money are incomparable is constitutive of being a friend. This is highly implausible, but let us grant the claim for the sake of argument. There is still the question of whether the theoretical claim of incomparability is true. To see that there is this further question, consider an analogy from Moore. It is conceptually impossible for one to believe that one falsely believes, but there nevertheless is a real question as to whether one does falsely believe; it may be true that one does. Similarly, it may be conceptually impossible for one to be a friend and to judge—*theoretically or practically*—that friendships and money are comparable, but there is nevertheless a real question as to whether they are, and it may be true they are.

An even stronger argument can be given in the case of the refusal to consider. That one must, if one is to be a friend, refuse to consider a choice between a friendship and money does not imply any warrant – practical or theoretical – for the claim that the alternatives are incomparable. Perhaps I must consider a choice simply because something justified must be done in the situation,<sup>11</sup> or I must refuse to consider a choice because I promised that I would or because I do not have time. In any case, the considering and refusing to consider have no implications for comparability. Pointing out that a friend must refuse to consider a choice between a friendship and a million dollars does not establish that the alternatives are incomparable. Whether one must consider or refuse to consider is one thing; whether the alternatives are comparable or incomparable is another.

Note that even if we understand the Raz attitudes not as constitutive of friendship but as following upon independent deontic requirements that attach to certain friendships, those requirements do not give us theoretical warrant for the claim that friendships and money are incomparable. An obligation to judge that alternatives are incomparable or to refuse to consider the choice between them cannot entail the theoretical conclusion that the alternatives are incomparable. Comparability and

incomparability have content beyond whatever practical content is implied either by constitutive features of the goods or by nonconstitutive duties we have as participants in those goods.

## 2. Constitutive Incomparability and Pragmatism

The distinction between practical and theoretical warrant on the one hand and truth on the other loses its bite if one thinks, as do pragmatists like Elizabeth Anderson, that value is a construction of practical reason. (Thus, I do not think that Raz' argument can get off the ground without assuming pragmatism.) According to Anderson, the structure of value is determined by what we have reason to judge, do, or feel; comparative value is constituted by appropriate attitudes towards goods. What it is for one thing to be better than another is for there to be an attitude such that it "makes sense" to have that attitude to a greater degree for the better thing than for the worse thing. What it is for things to be incomparable is for the appropriate attitudes towards the alternatives to give no good reason to compare them, that is, it "makes no sense" compare them. The lack of a good reason – it making no sense – to compare two goods is all there is to the fact that they are incomparable.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1. Ubiquitous pragmatic value

There are, according to Anderson, two ways in which it might "make no sense" to compare goods. It may be "silly, boring, and arbitrary" to make comparisons between all the artworks there are. There is no practical point, it seems, in judging the comparative aesthetic merits of Susie's pencil sketch of her dog Spot and Roger's paper-mache' sculpture of the Eiffel Tower or in comparing a first-rate limerick with a first-rate concerto. As Anderson urges, the project of compiling a Michelin guide to *The Ten Billion Greatest Artworks of All Time* and any project that might conceivably make use of such a guide are the projects of "philistines, snobs, and prigs, precisely those least open to a free exploration and development of their aesthetic sensibilities".<sup>13</sup> Since we have reason not to be such people, there are no practical situations reflectively endorsed by practical reason in which such comparisons have any use. Since there is no good reason – that is, no good practical reason, and since practical reasons are the only kind there are when we are talking about value, no good reason fullstop – to compare the goods, the goods are incomparable.

But is it so clear that there are no practical pursuits worth having that could make use of comparisons that, in the abstract, do seem silly and boring and perhaps even arbitrary? Insofar as aesthetic worth can be relevant to a choice between two artworks – great or small – it seems that the Michelin guide would be very useful indeed. This is not to say that any practical decision could simply be given by the Michelin ranking. So in choosing between Sunday enjoyments, say, a trip to the museum to see a Picasso sculpture or a concert in Carnegie Hall, the choice value might not be aesthetic merit, since aesthetic merit may not be what matters in a choice between Sunday enjoyments. But aesthetic merit may be a contributory value of the choice value; it may be one

relevant value in terms of which the choice must proceed. As a first-grade teacher, I may have to decide which of the children's artworks deserves a coveted gold star sticker. While aesthetic merit is not all that matters to the choice situation – how hard the child tried, whether he will be beaten at home for not receiving the gold star, whether a child needs a confidence boost, and so on may be other relevant considerations – surely aesthetic worth matters too. Insofar as what does matter to the choice situation includes comparative aesthetic worth, the Michelin guide will be very helpful indeed.

Anderson overlooks the practical use of these comparisons because she assumes that if they are to have practical use, they must be the sole grounds for a choice. Since they can have practical import as part of what matters to a choice situation, by her own pragmatist lights, Anderson must conclude that the artworks are comparable. I cannot think of any comparison that, although perhaps on its face boring or silly if made in the abstract, does not have practical import in this way.

## 2.2. Status versus weight: incomparability and incommensurability

There is, according to Anderson, another way in which there might be no good reason to compare items. This is if the goods involved (or the values they instantiate) are not both scalar. For Anderson thinks that scalarity is a necessary condition for comparability. Since intrinsic goods, like friendships, are not scalar like money, the attitudes appropriate towards friendships preclude thinking of the friendship as something to be maximized or pursued along a scale of value.

As Anderson says, practical reason assigns scalar goods *weight* and nonscalar goods *status*. Comparing goods makes sense, Anderson thinks, only if the goods have weight; it makes no sense to compare a good with weight against a good with status or to compare two goods with different statuses. As we saw in the last chapter, by 'scalar' Anderson means 'precisely cardinally comparable', and so the 'weight' assigned to scalar goods is represented by any number assigned by any function of the family of precisely cardinal functions that represents the merits of those goods. But, as we also saw, to think that only goods representable by a family of precise cardinal functions can be comparable is to think that the only kind of comparability there is is precise cardinal comparability. Goods can be ordinally comparable without being precisely cardinally comparable. Put another way, Anderson confuses comparability with commensurability.<sup>14</sup> So even if we grant that friendships have status and money has weight, it does not follow that they cannot be compared.

## 3. Is There a Norm against Comparing?

We have so far assumed, *arguendo*, that there is a prohibition against comparing friendships and money. But is there?

Suppose I am offered a job in the Australian outback to do something I find utterly uninspiring but pleasant – chopping down large weeds, say – for a million dollars (I'm very good at chopping down weeds). I accurately foresee that taking the job will certainly lead to loss of a my close friendship with Eve. (Perhaps we will send each other

holiday cards and talk on the phone occasionally, but the special closeness we now have will be lost.) Let us suppose that I willingly undertake to compare the merits and demerits of taking the job, which includes ending my friendship with Eve, against those of continuing the status quo, which includes continuing my friendship with Eve. Most would think I do nothing wrong by comparing the options. And yet incommensurabilists maintain that there is something wrong in comparing the options in the billionaire case. There must be some distinguishing feature that explains why there is a norm against comparing in the one case but not in the other.

It might be thought that the cases can be distinguished by the 'directness' of the trade. The billionaire's offer presents me with a direct trade – friendship for cash – while the outback case presents me with alternatives, one of which only eventually leads to the end of my close friendship with Eve. Such a trade is then 'indirect'. But now the question becomes, Is there some evaluative difference between the two cases that explains the significance of one trade being direct and the other not?

One explanation of the evaluative difference might be that indirect trades involve other values. Moving to a new place and undertaking a new job carry with them other values that a mere cash offer does not. Employment in the Australian outback may involve some new pleasures (peace and quiet), a small sense of accomplishment (if I chop weeds well), some valuable knowledge (about Australian flora) in addition to the million dollars. But how can these additional values explain why we think it is wrong to make a comparison in the one case but not in the other? Moreover, we can tighten the example to minimize the effect of added values – make the chopping neither pleasurable nor painful, my skill minimal, and the knowledge useless. The fact that indirect trades often involve additional values will not provide the needed explanation.

Perhaps the difference between the cases turn on the harm to Eve resulting from my making the comparison in the billionaire case but not in the Australian outback case. Eve might be hurt by my even considering the reasons for or against taking the million from the billionaire, whereas she might be more tolerant in the Australian outback case. But the question is what grounds she has to be more tolerant in the outback case. Appeal to the fact that she would regard the cases differently does not itself provide grounds for treating the cases differently if her reaction is unjustified. This is not to say that a friend's unjustified reactions have no weight. The point is rather that it is hard to believe that they have sufficient weight to explain why think we are precluded from comparing in the one case but not the other.

Perhaps making the comparison in the billionaire case is constitutive of a defective character while making the comparison in the Australian outback case is not. By being willing to consider the reasons for and against the billionaire's offer, I show myself to have a weak moral character. Someone who is open to thinking about trade-offs between her friendships and money is someone who perhaps thinks everything is fungible, that there are no special intrinsic values, that life is about maximizing her advantage even if it means hurting her friends. The wrongness of being willing to make a comparison is the wrongness of having this type of character. But the question at issue is

precisely why there is wrongness in the one case but not in the other. Locating the wrongness in an agent's character will not help matters.

I doubt that there is any evaluatively relevant ground on which we can distinguish the direct billionaire case from the indirect Australian outback case. If there is no norm against comparing in the outback case, there can be no norm against comparing in cases that are evaluatively indistinguishable. Thus, we have reason to think that there is no norm against comparing friendships and money.

Now it might be thought that the Australian outback case shows more than that there is no norm against comparing; it also shows that there is no norm against *trading*. For we normally think it acceptable to take a new job that has as its upshot the end of a close friendship. But the normal case – the kind of case that occurs in the real world with some frequency – is not evaluatively indistinct from our billionaire's offer or from the Australian outback case. For new jobs involve many additional values that our special weed-chopping job does not. If I move to Australia and give up my friendship with Eve, it does seem that I have violated a norm of friendship. Although there is no norm against considering the trade between the Australian job and my friendship with Eve, there may well be a norm against making the trade.

#### 4. Asymmetry and Incomparability

Although neither Raz' nor Anderson's arguments are successful, there is something deeply intuitive about the considerations to which they appeal. It cannot be denied that there are norms governing appropriate attitudes toward friendships. There does seem to be a norm, as we have just seen, against trading close friends for cash, and surely there is a norm against regarding one's friendships as intersubstitutable with or replaceable by money – one should not think of one's friends as potential solutions to a cash-flow problem. Perhaps these norms are constitutive of friendship. Reflection on the norms plausibly governing attitudes toward goods like close friendships, however, shows that, far from giving us reason to think that items are incomparable, such norms give us reason to think just the opposite. For the norms entail, or at the very least are compatible with, an asymmetry in the merit of the two goods while incomparability entails that there is no such asymmetry.

We have already noted that the most persuasive examples in support of arguments from constitution or norms involve a significant intrinsic good on the one hand, such as friendship, and some insignificant instrumental or intrinsic good on the other, such as extravagant comforts or luxuries. This is not an accidental feature of the most intuitive cases; indeed, it is crucial to their proper interpretation.

Consider the norms against trading close friendships for money and against considering the goods intersubstitutable. Part of the content of these norms is the thought that trading or regarding as intersubstitutable somehow 'sullies' or fails to show the appropriate respect for the friendship good. Raz himself says that a refusal by parents even to consider exchanging their children for money is "an expression of the very high value which they place on having children."<sup>15</sup> And Anderson thinks that friendships may

be “hierarchically [incomparable]” with money, since friendships have “status” and so are superior to money, which has only “weight”, according to some hierarchy of goods.<sup>16</sup> These lines of explanation already go a long way toward suggesting that these cases are not ones in which there is incomparability but ones in which the friendships are *better than* the money. Trading or regarding as intersubstitutable sullies the friendship good because the close friendship is a ‘higher’ good than money.

Note, however, that these attitudes do not sully the money good. There is, in other words, an implied asymmetry in the merits of the two goods; these norms essentially depend on the idea that the friendship good is, in some sense, a ‘higher’ good than money, and the thought that one good is ‘higher’ than another – or, put differently, bears ‘higher’ value. A close friendship is a higher good than money; indeed, we shall say that it is *emphatically better*. Understanding our friendship case as a case of emphatic comparability explains why it is so odd to insist that someone with an appropriate attitude toward friendship must refuse to judge that a friendship is better than a dollar or refuse to choose the friendship over the dollar. How can making that comparison or choosing to keep one’s friendship display an inappropriate attitude towards friendship? The norms governing appropriate attitudes towards friendship entail not that there is no good reason to compare friendships and money but rather that there is good reason to think that friendships are worth more. Incomparability, however, holds the opposite: if two items are incomparable, neither is better than the other. Therefore, norms of friendship cannot be grounds for the incomparability of friendships and money since they are inconsistent with it.

The norms governing friendship, whether constitutive of friendship or not, give us reason to think that my friendship with Eve is emphatically better than the million dollars. In the next section, I explore the structure of emphatic comparability and show how emphatic comparability holds of the target cases.

## 5. Emphatic Comparability

Emphatic comparability obtains between items just in case the ‘better than’ relation holds between them emphatically. Emphatic comparability is often confusingly expressed in terms of ‘incomparability’: it might be said that Le Quatre Saison and Wimpy’s are ‘incomparable’ with respect to goodness of food, where what is meant is that the former is emphatically better. Sometimes emphatic judgements are expressed by the oxymoronic ‘incomparably better’ – Le Quatre Saison is incomparably better than Wimpy’s – but such an expression, whether understood attributively or predicatively, only makes sense as a metaphor that gives emphasis to a comparative judgement.<sup>17</sup>

Since emphatic comparisons hold between higher and lower goods, our account of the structure of emphatic comparability is also an account of how the distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ goods should be understood. We should, then, say something about that distinction.

### 5.1. Higher and lower goods

The distinction between the 'higher' and the 'lower' does not, in the first instance, strictly apply to goods but to *values*. Goods are only higher or lower derivatively, in virtue of bearing higher or lower values. The distinction between higher and lower values has been around for a long time, but there is still no compelling account of it.<sup>18</sup>

Traditionally, higher values have been understood to be absolutely higher, that is, higher simpliciter. Some philosophers, for example, have offered lists of 'higher' or 'basic' or 'primary' values in a way that implies that these values are higher absolutely.<sup>19</sup> Love, inner peace, accomplishment, beauty, deep understanding, friendship, and so on are often included in such lists of the higher values, while pleasure, convenience, sartorial elegance, and so on provide the contrast of the lower. But to think that values can be higher or lower simpliciter, without reference to a value in terms of which they are higher or lower, is to overlook the fact that the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' holds *within* most values. Take, for instance, pleasure. Pleasure is usually thought to be a lower pleasure. But there are different types of pleasure, some of which are 'higher' than others. Sexual pleasure may be 'higher' than gustatory pleasure. The one type of pleasure has, suppose, a certain sublimity that the other lacks. Thus, with respect to the value of pleasure, the value of sexual pleasure is a higher value than the value of gustatory pleasure. Or take what is traditionally thought to be a higher value: accomplishment. Lifetime accomplishment – e.g., achieving a level of virtuosity in musical performance – is a higher accomplishment than quotidian accomplishment – e.g., managing to tie one's shoelaces. For most values, there are typically 'higher' and 'lower' types of it. Each type is itself a value, but also a type of some other value.

Now it cannot be denied with any plausibility that this distinction between higher and lower types of value is the same distinction between putatively absolute higher and lower values. If sexual pleasure is a higher value in just the same way that knowledge is a higher value, then the usual examples of higher values should instead be understood relative to a value. The value to which such higher values are higher is very plausibly *well-being*. The value of knowledge, for example, is a type of well-being value.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, every offered list of higher values of which I am aware can be understood as relative to well-being.<sup>21</sup> Note that this is not to say that the only kind of values there are are those that are *actually* 'good for' an agent, since even non-agent-relativized values, such as the beauty borne by a sunset that no one could ever experience, is a type of well-being value. To say that something is a well-being value is simply to say that it *could* in principle be good for an agent, not that it must actually be.<sup>22</sup>

The requirement that higher and lower values be relativized to a value supports our conclusion that the target cases are ones of comparability, not incomparability. The norms attaching to the goods in these cases essentially depend on the idea that one good is 'higher' than another. A good is higher if it bears a higher value, and a value can be higher only relative to a value (or a range of values). Now, given that the 'higher' nature of the good is relevant to either the choice or comparison of the alternatives, it is plausible to think that the higher good is better with respect to the covering or choice

value.<sup>23</sup> Thus the comparability of the alternatives is guaranteed. Thus, the relativization requirement helps to make vivid just how far off the mark the conclusion of arguments from constitution and norms really is.

## 5.2. Lexical superiority

We might try to understand the distinction between higher and lower values in terms of lexical superiority. One value is lexically superior to another just in case any amount of that value is better than any amount of the other value (with respect to the relevant covering value).<sup>24</sup> Understanding emphatic comparability in these terms involves understanding the distinction between higher and lower values quantitatively and categorically. Higher and lower values are distinguished by facts about their quantities, and they form distinct categories in the sense that any good bearing the higher value will be better than any good bearing the lower value. My friendship with Eve is a higher good because it bears the friendship value which is a higher value than the value of money with respect to a choice value of, say, well-being; in other words any amount of the friendship value is better with respect to well-being than any amount of the money.<sup>25</sup>

There is good reason to think that lexical superiorities, if they exist at all, are very rare. Return to our friendship case. If the value of friendship were lexically superior to the value of money, then any item bearing the friendship value, however slight in amount, would be better, *ceteris paribus*, than any sum of money. (The *ceteris paribus* clause is needed since the item might bear other values that render it worse with respect to well-being. But we can easily imagine items that fit the bill so the clause is harmless.) So meeting Eve for coffee or talking to her on the telephone, activities which bear small amounts of friendship, would be better than twenty million dollars, which could be used to provide great comforts for many people. This, even given that I may have coffee and talk on the telephone with her the next day.<sup>26</sup> The categorical nature of lexical superiority leaves it open to nominal-notable challenges. Is the tiniest amount of a higher value always better than a huge amount of a lower value? Most of those who argue for lexical superiorities have escape clauses for disasters, but as our example shows, a disaster is not required in order for lexicality to break down.

Although the claim that friendship and money are lexically related is unpersuasive, perhaps other target cases can be explained by lexical superiority. Consider, for instance, Larry Tribe's choice between desserts and the functionality of one's limbs (suppose, with respect to well-being).<sup>27</sup> Here it seems we have a clear case of lexical superiority: even an infinite number of desserts could never be worth the tiniest loss of functionality in one's limbs. James Griffin, however, has offered an insightful diagnosis of the attraction of such cases: some cases appear to be lexical superiorities due to the contingent limitations of human experience.<sup>28</sup> Suppose that we were immortal and could experience the subtle, ambrosial delights of an infinite range of Vivoli's ice cream, French pastries, and first-growth clarets without the effects of diminishing marginal value. Might it not then be possible that the loss of a bit of range of motion in one's little toe – indeed the loss of the whole of one's little toe – would be worth such gustatory

ecstasies? I suspect that the most plausible cases of lexical superiority rely on the limits of human experience. For God, then, there may be no lexical superiorities.

Moreover, while we may judge that certain values are lexically superior to others, we are quite willing to judge that a high probability of obtaining a lower good is better than a low probability of losing a higher good. For example, I may judge that it is worth the small risk to life and limb in crossing a busy intersection in order to get a post-prandial sweet.<sup>29</sup> Or I may order the dessert ‘Death by Chocolate’ on the assumption that although it constitutionally contains the seeds of coronaries, strokes, and other precursors to the loss of full functionality of one’s limbs, the certainty of chocolate-induced euphoria is worth the risk. If no number of desserts could be at least as good as any amount of limb-functionality, then surely taking such risks would be irrational. But they are not irrational. So finding genuine lexical superiorities is not as easy as it may seem.

Given that lexical superiority is at best rare and that higher and lower values common, we know that the former cannot provide an account of the latter. But there is another reason for rejecting lexical superiority as an account of the distinction. Higher and lower values are not plausibly distinguished by *quantities* of those values. The distinction between the ‘higher’ and the ‘lower’ implies some irreducibly *qualitative* difference. We might then try modifying lexical superiority as follows: one value is lexically superior to another if any *quality* of the one is better than any *quality* of the other. Call this lexical *hierarchy* to indicate the shift to quality. But the same problems of nominal-notable comparisons arise for lexical hierarchy as for lexical superiority. Indeed, the examples above in the friendship case can be easily interpreted as qualities of friendship and qualities of the luxuries money will buy.

### 5.3. Threshold lexical hierarchy

The problem of nominal-notable comparisons for lexical superiority has led to the suggestion that lexical superiority be constrained by a threshold amount of the higher value. Thus, threshold lexical superiority holds that beyond a certain threshold amount of higher value, no amount of the lower value is better.<sup>30</sup> Combining this suggestion with the modification of amounts to qualities of the higher value, we have *threshold lexical hierarchy*: beyond a certain threshold quality of the higher value, no quality of the lower value is better. I believe that threshold lexical hierarchy provides an adequate account of the distinction between higher and lower values and therefore of emphatic comparability.

#### 5.3.1. Selling friends

Consider our friendship case. If my friendship with Eve bears a certain quality of the friendship value, what we might roughly characterize as ‘closeness’, then no quality of money will be better than that friendship, and thus it would be wrong for me to sell the friendship. That is, given a certain threshold closeness of friendship, even a luxury with the most sublime quality – for example, a villa in Tuscany complete with four-star chef, masseuse, and so on – will not be better. The appeal to a quality threshold blocks the implication that any item bearing any quantity or quality of friendship is better

than any sum of money. At the same time, it allows for the possibility that twenty million dollars is better than my bus-stop friendship.

Threshold lexical hierarchies are neither quantitative nor categorical. These features of threshold lexical hierarchies capture our intuitions about the comparative worth of certain items displaying the friendship value. Consider the feature that quantity of value is irrelevant. According to threshold lexical hierarchies, *any amount of close friendship*, i.e., the particular close quality of the friendship value, will be above the threshold and therefore better than any amount of money. What matters is the close quality of the friendship value borne. Thus, donating one's kidney to a friend, listening to her pour out her troubles, supporting her in her first public appearance, and so on bear this quality of the friendship value while meeting her for coffee typically does not; the former are better than any sum of money but the latter is not. How much of this quality of the friendship value is borne is irrelevant. So it does not matter if one listens to one's friend pour out her troubles for a minute or for two hours; insofar as the listening bears the close quality of friendship, it is better than any amount of money. Keeping in mind that money here means luxuries or extravagant comforts, such judgements conform to our intuitions.<sup>31</sup> Now take the noncategorical nature of threshold lexical hierarchies. Because higher values are not categorically higher, it cannot be assumed that a higher good, i.e., a good that bears a higher value, is better than a lower good. While we recognize that all friendships of whatever variety are 'higher' than all luxuries, we don't mean that every friendship is better than every luxury. My bus-stop friendship is a higher good than twenty million dollars, but still, the twenty million is better. Parallel considerations apply in other target cases. Threshold lexical hierarchies give us a way of understanding the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' values without running afoul of our intuitions about the relative merits of particular bearers of those values.

Not only do threshold lexical hierarchies capture our intuitions about target cases, but they are neutral between competing substantive theories of value. For such hierarchies need not be understood as constitutive of the distinction between higher and lower goods but rather as representative of that distinction. For example, the expressivist might say that our attitudes towards higher values are expressed by a network of comparisons with the given structure.<sup>32</sup> The deontologist might say that the special obligations we have towards friends is represented by that network of comparisons. And so on.

Understanding our target cases as emphatic comparabilities, then, captures our substantive intuitions about selling friends without committing us to any particular substantive ethical theory.

### 5.3.2. Buying friends

There is an obvious objection to our claim that the target cases should be understood as emphatic comparabilities. Take our friendship case. If friendships of a certain closeness are emphatically better than any sum of money, then why shouldn't I, assuming I have lots of money, go about buying friends?<sup>33</sup> After all, the lack of

friendship must be emphatically worse than any sum of money. Shouldn't I then be willing to buy a close friendship for any sum? At a million dollars, a friendship with Eve would be a bargain. If the target cases are emphatic comparabilities, then agents should go around putting their money where their mouth is.

That we should not, *ceteris paribus*, go about buying friendships may have little to do with the relative worth of money and friendships. There are two lines of thought here. First, it might be thought that buying a friendship is conceptually impossible; friendships are <sup>not</sup> the kinds of things that can be bought. Second, it might be argued that other things are not on a par, that is, there are things I should do with my money rather than buy friendships.

The claim of conceptual impossibility is intuitive but I think mistaken. While it is true that as a conceptual matter, a whole friendship, complete with history, cannot be bought, a friendship can be initiated or deepened by giving up money. One can relinquish luxuries in order to pursue or deepen friendships. I may give up summers in my Tuscany villa in order to spend time with Eve. I may do so because a close friendship with Eve is emphatically better than the weekly massages and gourmet food I would get at my villa. Or I may pay someone to be my companion. The money does not guarantee that a friendship will develop, but it is likely that some sort of friendship will. (Perhaps I will have to go through many applicants). I may pay for a companion because I judge that even a chance of a close friendship is emphatically better than the salary I am willing to pay. Thus, friendship goods can be bought with money.

This way of thinking about friendships may strike some as crude or confused. Indeed, Raz' thought that a person who thinks along such lines is incapable of having friends might seem appropos. But this reaction would be nothing more than self-righteous squeamishness. Take a person who desperately wants to have a child but is unable to have one of her own. Suppose her only option is to arrange to pay for an adoption through a foreign country. Children are bought in a fairly direct way through some adoption and surrogacy arrangements.<sup>34</sup> She takes her life savings and buys an infant from China. Do we really think that she is precluded from having the same loving parent-child relation that someone who does not buy a child may have? Under the right conditions, the chance for loving relations should be bought. Similarly if one can spend money in order to make a friendship close, under the right conditions, one should.

Now this is not to say that normally one ought to seize every opportunity to initiate or deepen a friendship through cash payment. Though I recognize that my monthly paycheck is worth emphatically less than a certain chance of a close friendship, other things may not be on a par: I might have other needs or desires, the fulfillment of which might be better with respect to my well-being. I might, for instance, ~~have~~ have enough close friendships. The goods in a life should be balanced; if I spent all my money on friendships I would have to forgo the other things that make life worthwhile.<sup>35</sup> So even though it is true that with respect to well-being generally, any amount of money is emphatically worse than a certain chance of a close friendship, it does not follow that one should go out and buy as many chances as one can.

Therefore, the objection does not amount to much. That my friendship with Eve is emphatically better than a million dollars does not imply that I ought to go around buying friendships.

## 6. Reasons and Value

I end the chapter with a brief consideration of the underlying picture of reasons and value that motivates constitutive incomparability. According to the constitutive incomparabilist, a willingness to compare a close friendship with a million dollars violates a putative norm constitutive of friendship. We saw above reasons to think that there is no such norm. But even if there were, there are general theoretical and normative grounds for rejecting the view that value is constituted by practical norms. The theoretical ground turns on the connection between practices and value. The normative ground turns on the connection between value and reasons.

The brute claim that value is constituted by practical norms cannot tell the whole story of value. A practice according to which we think one thing better than another does not, by itself, end the matter of whether it is better. A practice according to which we refuse to compare items does not, by itself, end the matter of whether the items are incomparable. Even the pragmatist must allow that our practices might be mistaken. Some evaluative practices are better than others; some are based on confusion and error. Now, any constraint on evaluative practices must, if they are to have force, be substantive – that is, they must appeal to values. As constraints on the practices, however, these values must be independent of the evaluative practices they constrain. So a simple view according to which value is straightforwardly constituted by evaluative practices cannot be an adequate view of value. What we do is not necessarily what is valuable.<sup>36</sup> How such a simple view could be modified to take care of the basic problem, however, is not altogether clear.

At any rate, we have good normative reason to reject the constitutive incomparabilist's view of certain goods. According to that view certain goods, like close friendships, love relations, religious devotion, and so on are constituted by a prohibition against comparing those goods with other goods. Such goods, then, are like black boxes; being a close friend requires that we climb into a black box, thereby rendering ourselves blind to reasons that someone outside of the black box might see for our getting out. If one is a close friend, reasoning about whether one ought to give up that friendship for a million dollars is constitutively blocked. The black box view of goods holds that certain goods block, as a constitutive matter, the exercise of deliberative reason in certain matters. Such a view of goods restricts the scope of practical reason. It is more radical than the mere 'silencing' of reasons,<sup>37</sup> for it silences *reasoning*. Such a view of goods is morally dangerous.

I doubt that something can be a good and block, as a constitutive matter, reasoning about how that good compares with other goods. In order for something to be a good, participation in it must always be open to reasons and rational deliberation *tout court*. An openness to reasons is a necessary condition of goods; indeed it is this rational

inquiry that defines, develops, and deepens such goods. Genuine devotion to God, for instance, cannot constitutively require one to turn away from reasons there are to question that devotion.

Understanding our target cases as emphatic comparabilities avoids the theoretical and normative difficulties of constitutive incomparability. As well, our explanation of these cases is more true to how we value things. We value things such as friendships, love relationships, and natural beauties as higher goods than goods like money. We should reject the incomparabilist account of the target cases and the black box view of goods that goes with it.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, ch. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods” *IIPR*, and *Value in Ethics and Economics*.

<sup>3</sup> For Raz, appropriate attitudes towards friendships and money include the non-cognitive refusal to choose over the other and the cognitive judgement that the items are incomparable, but these attitudes are not required for rationality. For Anderson, the appropriate attitudes towards these goods merely fails to give us good reason to compare them; it does not require that we refuse to consider the trade or even judge that they are incomparable. Rather, the attitudes simply fail to give us reason to do so. However, for Anderson, this attitude is required by rationality, and coupled with her pragmatist assumptions about what the lack of a good reason to compare implies, leads to much the same place as Raz would take us.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson takes me to task for “underdescribing” the situation. Though I do give the caveat, ‘under normal circumstances’, she thinks that one cannot determine what one ought to do in the case without further detail about the obligations owed to Eve and to my mother. I do not disagree with this. Other things being on a par, however, I do not see how she can deny that the merits of saving my mother’s life are greater than the merits of continuing my friendship with Eve under any plausible covering value. See her “Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods”.

<sup>5</sup> Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 352.

<sup>6</sup> As Raz writes, “the very willingness to exchange such incomparables has grave consequences to the life of that agent[:] it undermines his ability to succeed in certain pursuits.” See *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> I find it unclear whether Raz is simply stating a position – that it is conceptually impossible for friends to judge friendships and money comparable – or attempting to provide a ground for the conclusion that friendships and money are incomparable, at least for friends. I will take as my target the latter claim since given our purposes it is of greater interest and because others have endorsed it (see Lukes’, “Trade-offs and Sacrifices: Comparing the Incomparable, *IIPR*). At any rate, the first attack on Raz’ argument defeats as well the bare claim of conceptual impossibility. See Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, pp. 346-352. A similar view about incommensurability is held by Cass Sunstein. See his “Incommensurability and Kinds of Valuation: Some Applications in Law” and “Incommensurability and Valuation in Law”. We shall have more to say about Raz’ appeal to attitudes as the basis of incomparability in the next chapter.

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear just how ‘McDowellian’ Raz intends to be here. McDowell might think certain attitudes are rationally required of those capable of being friends though, like Raz, deny that one who does not ‘see’ the world a certain way, viz., as a friend, is irrational in failing to have such attitudes. See John McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1978, pp. 13-29, and “Might There Be External Reasons?” in J. Altham and B. Harrison, eds., *World, Mind, and Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also n. 3.

<sup>9</sup> The argument as a whole can be characterized in terms of conceptual truth: It is a conceptual truth that friendships and money are incomparable. This conceptual truth is demonstrated by another conceptual truth: that agents capable of being friends must either judge that friendships and money are incomparable or refuse to consider a choice between them. Those who judge that they can be compared or who are willing to entertain the possibility of a trade are incapable of being friends in the sense that they have not correctly grasped the concept of friendship. Those who understand what

friendship is have one of the Raz attitudes, either of which shows that friendships and money are, indeed, incomparable.

<sup>10</sup> Mere willingness cannot be sufficient, for it might be akratic.

<sup>11</sup> I am here assuming that a whim will not justify a choice.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson's claim that items are incomparable if there is no good practical reason to compare them does not strictly depend on her quantitative view of comparison, which we took issue with in chapter 3. The degree of cogency of the claim does, however; it is more plausible to think that there is no good reason to compare a friendship and money if comparison requires cardinal units measuring their merits. At any rate, we can interpret her 'no good reason' principle without the quantitative assumption.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods", p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Or still, put yet another way, she thinks that the only way one thing can be better than another is by their being commensurable. See *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>15</sup> Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 348.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods", pp. 20-24.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor holds that goods like integrity, liberation, and charity are 'incommensurably higher' than those like wealth or comfort. See Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods".

<sup>18</sup> John Stuart Mill made the centerpiece of his break with Bentham his distinction between higher pleasures, which engage the mental faculties, and lower ones, which consist largely of bodily sensations. See J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mary Warnock, Fontana Press, first published 1851, Ch. II, pp. 259ff. Of course, Mill did not think of higher and lower values as giving rise to a form of incomparability; indeed his account is the forerunner of 'lexical superiority', discussed below.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Parfit calls these 'Objective List Theories'. See his *Reasons and Persons*.

<sup>20</sup> Some types of V are also contributory values of V. But not all types of a value are properly regarded as contributory values of that value. Sexual pleasure is not a value that contributes to the content of pleasure; it is rather a type of pleasure.

<sup>21</sup> Some Objective List Theorists explicitly relativize their lists to a value. So, for example, Finnis explicitly says his seven basic values (life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability, practical reasonableness and religion) are ones conducive to well-being, i.e., what he calls "integral human fulfilment". See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, pp. 86-90 and 113-115; and his "Commensuration and Public Reason", *IIPR*. See also discussion in chapter 3. Griffin too relativizes his list. See Griffin, *Well-Being*.

<sup>22</sup> Thus, the way I am understanding 'well-being' takes a substantive stand on the issue of whether there is 'good simpliciter' as well as or instead of 'good for'. I do not see how the non-agent-relativized notion of 'good simpliciter' can mean anything apart from what *could* be 'good for'. But see Donald Regan, "The Incoherence of 'Good For'", unpublished ms.

<sup>23</sup> This is a little trickier than it may seem. As we will see below, not all higher goods are better than lower goods with respect to the value in terms of which the values they bear are higher or lower. So, for example, although the value of friendship is higher than the value of money with respect to well-being, among other values, a particular friendship good, although a higher good in virtue of bearing a higher value, may not be

better than a particular sum of money with respect to well-being. The argument for this claim is made below.

<sup>24</sup> Lexical superiority raises problems for those who think the merits of goods can be represented by a standard utility function. Standard social welfare economics depends on the assumption that there are no widespread lexical superiorities that disrupt numerical representation of preferences.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most famous cases of lexical superiority are from Mill, Kant, and Rawls. The mental pleasures in whatever amount are better than the physical pleasures in any amount according to Mill, since one with experience of both would always choose the higher, mental pleasure. See his *Utilitarianism*. Kant gives priority to 'dignity' over 'price' in the kingdom of ends. See Kant, *Grundlegung*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981). Rawls insists that the principle of equal liberty must be satisfied before the second principle of justice, and his difference principle gives priority to the worst-off. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Harvard University Press, 1971), secs. 39, 82. There are other views that can be understood as appealing to the idea of lexical superiority. John Finnis thinks some goods, like those of life, play, friendship, and religion are more basic than others. See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, chapter IV. Larry Tribe urges that the value of limbs is so much greater than those of desserts that it would be irrational to trade any of one's limbs for any number of desserts. See Lawrence Tribe, "Policy Science: Analysis or Ideology?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, no. 1, 1972, p. 90. Ronald Dworkin says rights are 'trumps'; and Robert Nozick sees rights as side-constraints on the pursuit of maximal social utility. See Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, (Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 184-205 and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), pp. 28ff. Both the idea of trumps and side-constraints might be understood in terms of lexical superiority, but I suspect that those notions are better captured by the idea of threshold lexical hierarchy below.

<sup>26</sup> The same point holds for harms to friendship: is a somewhat short reply to a friend's query worse than giving up twenty million dollars?

<sup>27</sup> See Tribe, *op cit*.

<sup>28</sup> Griffin's doubts about Tribe's example are found in James Griffin, "Are There Incommensurable Values?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 7, no. 1, 1977, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of how maximizing expected utility in the face of lexical superiorities when considering probabilities leads to unhappy results, see Roger Crisp, "Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue", *Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 42, no. 167, April 1992, pp. 150-152.

<sup>30</sup> See Griffin, "What's the Problem?", *IIPR*, and Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. See also J. Griffin, *Well Being*, pp. 85-89. Griffin talks about the threshold being one of amount.

<sup>31</sup> Of course whether they do conform depends on the covering value. I am here assuming that the covering value is well-being or one that is naturally taken to apply in the envisioned choice situations.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*; Pildes and Anderson, "Slinging Arrows at Democracy". See also Franz Bretano, *On the Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) (first published in 1889).

<sup>33</sup> Raz raises this question in defense of his claim that these are incomparabilities.

<sup>34</sup> For example, adoption by a British citizen of a child from an adoption home or orphanage in some foreign countries requires a "donation" of a specified sum to that

foreign organization so that it may continue its “good works”.

<sup>35</sup> On balancing goods, see Tom Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 7.

<sup>36</sup> This is not to say, of course, that value realism is correct. The constraints on an evaluative practice might wholly derive from some other evaluative practice. The point is rather that there is room for rational criticism of any one of our evaluative practices.

<sup>37</sup> See McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”, *The Monist*, Vol. 62, 1979, pp. 331-350.

- ◆ **The worst and best are both inclined  
To snap like vixens at the truth.  
But, O, beware the middle mind  
That purrs and never shows a tooth!**

-Elinor Wylie: Nonsense Rhymes

## CHAPTER 5

### THE POSSIBILITY OF PARITY

The final type of incomparabilist argument is, I think, the most powerful. It has as its ground the putative rationality of judging that neither of two items is better than the other and yet a small improvement in one of them does not make it better than the other. Arguments of this type appeal to what I shall call *The Small Improvement Argument*. Incomparabilists who have employed this argument include Joseph Raz, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and Ronald de Sousa.<sup>1</sup>

I want to defend the Small Improvement Argument against what looks to be a decisive objection, but also to deny its conclusion that there is incomparability. In other words, I shall argue that the premises of the Small Improvement Argument do indeed establish the existence of items between which the standard trichotomy of relations fails to hold, but that it is a mistake to conclude that the items are therefore incomparable. Instead, I shall argue, the items are related by a fourth, *sui generis* relation beyond ‘better than’, ‘worse than’ and ‘equally good’: ‘on a par’.

#### 1. The Small Improvement Argument

Let us start with a formal feature of the relation ‘equally good’. Items that are equally good with respect to *V* are substitutable for one another—substitution preserves the comparative relation of the comparison. If *A* and *B* are equally good with respect to *V*, then *A* and *B* stand in the same value relations to all other items with respect to *V*. It follows that a small improvement in *A* with respect to *V*, no matter how small, makes the improvement *A+* of *A* better than *B* with respect to *V*.<sup>2</sup> If an improvement in one item does not make it better than the other, the original items cannot be equally good. That is, it must be *false* that they are equally good; there is no indeterminacy possible about the matter. This formal feature of evaluative equality has been exploited by the incomparabilist putatively to show that there are incomparable items.

##### 1.1. Rational attitudes

Consider the argument put forward by Joseph Raz for incomparability. Raz thinks that a certain pattern of attitudes towards alternatives for choice shows that there are alternatives for which the trichotomy fails to hold. Since he *defines* incomparability as the failure of the trichotomy of relations to hold, he concludes that there are incomparable items. Raz’ argument has the following form:

Imagine that I am indifferent as between a cup of French roast and a cup of earl grey with respect to, say, pleasure providingness. It is possible that though I will definitely prefer a cup of slightly more fragrant earl grey to the original, less fragrant cup, I am indifferent as between either and the cup of coffee. This establishes that I judge the coffee and teas to be incomparable.

And it is hard to believe my judgments in these matters are always mistaken. Therefore, there are some items that are not better than one another and yet not equally good.<sup>3</sup>

Raz' argument divides into two parts; first, a move from attitudes of indifference and preference to judgments about how the items do or do not compare, and second, a move from judgments about how the items do or do not compare to the truth about how they do or do not compare.<sup>4</sup> This structure of argument at least requires that the attitudes and judgments be *rational* (or in some normative sense, appropriate). That the attitudes are rational is necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) for those attitudes to entail judgments which in turn entail the corresponding truth; and that the judgments are rational is necessary for those judgments to entail the corresponding truth.

Let us grant that the attitudes Raz identifies are jointly and severally rational. My rational attitude of indifference between C and T entails the rational judgment that neither item is better than the other; my rational preference for T+ over T entails the rational judgment that T+ is better than T; and my rational indifference between T+ and C, in light of these other rational attitudes, entails the rational judgment that T and C are neither better nor worse than one another and yet not equally good. For if I rationally judged that T+ was better than C, my attitude of indifference between them would be irrational; and if I rationally judged that they were equally good, my attitude of indifference as between T and C, in light of my judgment that T+ is better than T, would be irrational. My attitudes are, however, *ex hypothesi* rational. Therefore, Raz concludes, this pattern of rational attitudes entails the rational judgment that T and C are neither better nor worse than one another and yet not equally good. Raz thinks that this structure of attitudes obtains not only among items of trivial import but also commonly among careers, lives, love relationships, and other items of great practical significance.

Presented in terms of attitudes towards options in the context of choice, the argument promises us more or less ready access to rational judgments about how items compare through the attitudes we might rationally have towards them. But the move from rational attitudes to judgments is unwarranted. As Donald Regan points out, an agent's rational attitudes towards objects need not entail any judgment that the items stand in such-and-such relation; they may be rational given the agent's uncertainty about which relation, if any, holds.<sup>5</sup> The uncertainty may have as its source ignorance about the facts or about the values at stake. Faced with an immediate need to make a choice between the two items, an ignorant agent may rationally be indifferent between them. Or, if the agent rightly judges that no matter how hard she tries, she will never know everything relevant to determining the comparative merit of two items, indifference may, again, be rational. Thus, Raz' argument confuses failure of the trichotomy of relations to hold with uncertainty.

### 1.2. Rational judgements

We might try to avoid the skeptical attack by jettisoning the appeal to attitudes and arguing directly from rational judgments about how items compare.

Since we are interested in potential cases of practical significance, let us change the example to one between careers:

Imagine that I rationally judge that a particular career as a corporate lawyer is neither better nor worse than a particular career as a philosopher (with respect to goodness of careers). It is possible that though I rationally judge that the legal career with an extra \$1000 per annum in salary is better than the legal career without, I rationally judge that the legal career with the \$1000 is not better than the philosophical career. And it is hard to believe my judgements in these matters are always mistaken. Therefore, there are some items that are not better than one another and yet not equally good.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike attitudes of preference or indifference which can be explained by the agent's uncertainty about what to believe, judgments that items do or do not stand in some relation cannot be so undermined. There is, of course, room for doubt about whether the judgments entail the truth of the matter. We can attack, in other words, the second part of Raz' argument—the move from rational judgments about how particular items compare to truths about how they do, if they do, compare.

The dependence on rational judgments about how *particular* items compare lays the argument open to a special skeptical attack. Although my best judgment, the determination that, with respect to goodness of careers, a particular corporate career as a lawyer is neither better nor worse than a particular academic career as a philosopher may nevertheless be erroneous; perhaps the philosophical career is better, but I have simply failed fully to appreciate the importance of philosophical insight. The attack here is not a general skepticism of the Cartesian form but rather a special doubt that attaches to judgments which purportedly are the product of difficult substantive deliberation.

Indeed, the items which are most plausibly not better than one other and yet not apparently equally good are evaluatively very different—that is, they bear diverse contributory values or the same contributory values in very different aspects. A particular career as a corporate lawyer and one as a philosopher, or a specific policy that generates certain revenues and one that preserves certain natural resources, or a certain medieval song and a contemporary painting might be examples. In these 'hard' cases, the opportunity for error is very great. However, because comparisons in such cases are hard to get right, an erroneous comparative judgment may well be *rational*. Given my cognitive and non-cognitive limits and the demands of the case before me, my judgment may reflect the best I could have done in the circumstances. In short, judgments about particular items may be 'subjectively' rational and thus not support an inference to their truth.<sup>7</sup> Raz' suggestion, then, that rational judgments in these sorts of cases are not always mistaken is itself open to doubt.

### 1.3. Rational judgements *in abstracto*

We should revise the argument again, this time to avoid reliance on judgments about particular items:

Take the class of pairs of items, neither of which is better than the other

with respect to some or other V. It is plausible to suppose that for at least some pairs, a small improvement in one item of the pair with respect to a given V does not thereby make it better than the other item with respect to that V. Therefore, there are some items which are neither better than one another nor equally good with respect to the given V.

Call this the *Small Improvement Argument*. Unlike its above variant, the Small Improvement Argument starts with a guarantee that the items under consideration are neither better nor worse than one another; there is no reliance on any judgment about particular items and thus no susceptibility to the special doubt that attaches to them.<sup>8</sup> And unlike Raz' argument which assumes that rational attitudes entail some judgment about how items compare, this argument assumes no such connection.

The Small Improvement Argument turns on the plausibility of judging *in abstracto* that for at least some pairs of items, neither of which is better than the other with respect to some or other covering value, a small improvement in one does not thereby make it better than the other. It assumes that for all possible pairs of possible items, neither of which is better than the other with respect to some or other V, it is plausible that for some pairs and a given V, there is a small improvement in one of the items that does not make it better than the other with respect to that V. It concludes that there are some items that are neither better nor worse than one another and yet not equally good.

The argument most persuasively applies to pairs of evaluatively very different items. Take the covering value 'goodness of careers' and the class of pairs of possible careers in which one career is in corporate law and the other is in philosophy (or one is in sculpting and the other is in accounting, or one is in strip mining and the other in fashion design). Of those pairs of possible careers, some have members that are not better than one another with respect to goodness of careers. The Small Improvement Argument asks us to believe that of at least some of these, the merit brought by an increase in salary of one dollar in one of the careers does not thereby make that career better than the other. Or take rather different Sunday enjoyments. It is hard to believe that for all possible pairs of sailings-on-the-lake and stayings-home-with-a-book, neither of which is more pleasurable than the other, a small increase in the amount of pleasure due to an extra ray of sunshine or a delightful turn of phrase would make the one option more pleasurable than the other. For evaluatively very different careers, Sunday enjoyments, places to live, activities to pursue and so on, it is hard to believe that a small improvement in the form of an extra dollar in salary, an extra minute of life, an extra ray of sunshine, or an extra day of work experience, could make the one item, which before the improvement was neither better nor worse than the other item, better than the other item.

But the persuasive force of these examples depends on the assumption that there *are* certain pairs of very different careers, enjoyments, job candidates and so on, neither of which is better than the other. Perhaps all pairs of items neither of which is better than the other are pairs that are obviously equally good, and so a small improvement in one *does* make it better than the other. Or perhaps evaluatively different items to which the

argument seems most readily to apply are ones between which the 'better than' relation always holds. Although it may seem that there could be two very different careers, lives, policies, and so on, that were not better than one another, one *is* always better.

Doubt that some evaluatively diverse items are neither better nor worse than one another is, however, untenable. Take any two evaluatively different items for which there is a *prima facie* case that neither is better than the other. Call such an arbitrary pair ( $r$ ,  $s$ ). Now take a dollar, or a head of cabbage, or a pleasurable tingle or something of trivial merit which when aggregated has significant merit with respect to the given covering value. Add enough dollars or cabbages or tingles to  $r$  until  $r+$  is clearly better than  $s$ . Subtract enough of these units of merit until  $r-$  is clearly worse than  $s$ . The 'subtraction' might take the form of imposing debt in the form of dollars, cabbages or tingles owed. (In at least some cases, the diminishing marginal merit or demerit of such items will not preclude the possibility of an  $r+$  or  $r-$ .) If  $r$  and  $s$  must be better or worse than one another, the spectrum of  $r$ -items starting with  $r-$  through  $r$  and up to  $r+$  must contain some point where the  $r$ -items suddenly switch from being worse than  $s$  to being better than  $s$ . But it is hard to believe that a dollar, a head of cabbage or a single pleasurable tingle *could* make an  $r$ -item that was worse than  $s$  better than  $s$ . So there must be some other way the items can relate besides one always being better than the other. Thus, it *is* plausible to suppose that some evaluatively diverse items are neither better nor worse than one another. The Small Improvement Argument shows that there are at least some of these that are also not equally good. Let us call these cases in which none of the trichotomy of relations holds 'small improvement cases'. Our question, then, is whether small improvement cases are cases of incomparability.

## 2. A Note on Vagueness

Before turning to this question, it is worth noting that small improvement cases cannot be cases of vagueness in trichotomous comparison. For, *ex hypothesi*, the relevant judgements are of the determinate failure of a relation to hold. When we start with all the pairs of items, neither of which is better than the other, we mean that for each pair it is *false* that one is better than the other. And when we say that it is plausible to judge *in abstracto* that for at least some of those pairs, a small improvement in one does not thereby make it better than the other, we mean that a small improvement does not make it determinately better. The inference that can be drawn, namely, that they are not equally good, is the inference that it is *false* that they are equally good. There is no room for vagueness in trichotomous comparison here, for the only plausible interpretation of vagueness would insist that it must be neither true nor false that the given relation holds, but small improvement cases are ones in which, *ex hypothesi*, for each given relation it is *false* that it holds.

## 3. Against Incomparability

The Small Improvement Argument gives us good reason to think that there are items between which each of the standard trichotomy of relations determinately fails to

hold. But we need not conclude that there is incomparability, for it has to be shown that the Trichotomy Thesis, crucial to the incomparabilist argument, is true. Indeed, as we shall now argue, there is good reason to think that the items are comparable, and thus, that the Trichotomy Thesis is false.

### 3.1. The Pareto Argument

We start by highlighting a particular way in which one item can be better than another. Suppose A and B are bundles of the same aspects of contributory values except that, with respect to a single contributory value, A is better—it bears a greater quantity or quality of that contributory value. If two bundles of the same contributory values are the same in all their aspects save one, the bundle whose aspect is a quantitative or qualitative improvement over the other is, in most cases, *mono-Pareto-better* with respect to the covering value; that is, it is as good with respect to every contributory value save one, and better with respect to that one and therefore better. I say ‘in most cases’ because, as we have seen, given the organic nature of values, an improvement in one contributory value, though rendering the item better with respect to that contributory value, may not always make the item better with respect to the covering value.<sup>9</sup> Although such cases exist, they are not significant for our purposes here. Where we rely on items are mono-Pareto-better, it is plausible to think that there are such items.

#### 3.1.1. The Mono-Pareto Difference Principle

Now consider the small improvement cases – those pairs of items for which ~~the~~ judgements *at issue* hold. Let  $x$  be the first member of such an arbitrary pair,  $y$  the second, and  $x+$  be an item mono-Pareto-better than  $x$  with respect to  $V$ .

Now suppose that  $x+$  is comparable with  $y$ . If  $x+$  is comparable with  $y$ , then so is  $x$ . Call this the *Mono-Pareto Difference Principle*. According to this principle, a mere mono-Pareto difference in merit cannot give rise to incomparability. If one item is better (or worse) than another in virtue of an improvement (or detraction) with respect to one contributory value, comparability (and incomparability) is preserved. How can something become incomparable with something else simply by making that thing better by improving its merits with respect to one contributory value?

Given the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle, we can, through a series of inductive steps, reach a striking conclusion. Let  $x_1$  be mono-Pareto-better than  $x_{i-1}$ . Using the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle, we can then chain from  $x_1$  to  $x_n$ : if  $x_1$  is comparable with  $x$ , then so is  $x_2, x_3, \dots$  and  $x_n$ , where  $x_n$  is *Pareto-better* than  $x$ . That is, although  $x_n$  may differ in merit from  $x$  along many—perhaps every—contributory value, it is not worse with respect to any contributory value and better with respect to at least one. The mere difference in merit resulting from mono-Pareto superiority or inferiority cannot give rise to incomparability, and, thus, chaining preserves comparability. The striking conclusion is evident: if  $x_n$  is Pareto-better (or Pareto-worse) than  $x$  and is comparable with  $y$ ,  $x$  is comparable with  $y$ .

Now for at least some arbitrary pair  $(x, y)$  not related by the traditional

trichotomy, it is plausible to suppose that there is an  $x_n$  that is Pareto-better or Pareto-worse than  $x$  and comparable with  $y$ . And we know through serial application of the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle that if  $x_n$  is comparable with  $y$ , so is  $x$ . Thus,  $x$  and  $y$  are not related by the traditional trichotomy and yet  $x$  and  $y$  are comparable. Call this the *Pareto Argument Against Incomparability*. In conjunction with the premises of the Small Improvement Argument, the Pareto Argument establishes the possibility of parity.

The Pareto Argument has the form of *modus ponens*: for any pair of items  $(x, y)$  (determinately) not related by the traditional trichotomy of relations, if  $y$  is comparable with anything that is Pareto-better or Pareto-worse than  $x$ ,  $y$  is comparable with  $x$ ; and for some  $(x, y)$  there is an  $x_n$  Pareto-better or Pareto-worse than  $x$  that is comparable with  $y$ ; therefore for some  $(x, y)$ ,  $y$  is comparable with  $x$  though not by any of the standard trichotomy of relations. The argument crucially depends on the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle and the existential claim. While both claims are intuitive we can shore them up with argument.

### 3.1.2. Small mono-Pareto differences and the existential claim

Consider the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle. Why should we believe it is true? We might appeal to another principle, the *Small Mono-Pareto Difference Principle*. A *sufficiently small* Pareto improvement in (or detracting from) one contributory value cannot give rise to incomparability. Take any two items,  $(x, y)$ , that are comparable. A sufficiently small mono-Pareto improvement,  $x+$ , in  $x$  cannot make  $x+$  incomparable with  $y$  if  $x$  is comparable with  $y$ . But if  $x+$  is comparable with  $x$ , then  $x++$  is comparable with  $x+$ , and  $x+++$  is comparable with  $x++$ , and so on, where each improvement in the one contributory value is sufficiently small. If a sufficiently small improvement in one contributory value cannot give rise to incomparability, a large improvement—no matter how large—in one contributory value cannot give rise to incomparability. By chaining sufficiently small improvements (or detractions) in one contributory value, we arrive at the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle.<sup>10</sup>

Successive application of the Small Mono-Pareto Difference Principle gives rise to an argument that has the form of a sorites: since one sufficiently small evaluative difference cannot give rise to incomparability, finitely many sufficiently small evaluative differences cannot give rise to incomparability. Whether the argument *is* a sorites depends on whether comparability is a matter of degree; that an adjectival predicate (or property on which it depends) applies in degrees is necessary (though not sufficient) for the argument employing it to be a sorites.<sup>11</sup> The predicate, ‘is bald’, for example, applies in degrees: someone may be more or less bald. It is this feature of baldness that makes it plausible to think that a small addition to the amount, length, or density of cranial hair does not make a head that is bald into a head that is not (and vice versa): add a few cranial hairs and the head is slightly *less* bald than before, but not thereby not bald. Application of the predicate ‘is comparable’, in contrast, is not a matter of degree.<sup>12</sup> Something cannot be more or less comparable with something else. If we improve an item, it may be *better* than the other by a greater degree, but it is not thereby *comparable*

by a greater degree. The Small Mono-Pareto Difference Principle iterated as a defense of the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle is not a sorites argument.

Now turn to the existential claim. Is it plausible to think that for at least one pair of items not related by the trichotomy, there is some item Pareto-better than (or Pareto-worse than) one and unequivocally comparable with the other? Take any two items which are *prima facie* candidates for incomparability (with respect to some *V*), for example, a career in corporate law and one in philosophy, or an act that creates jobs and an act that preserves natural beauty, or a musical composer and a painter. The claim is that for at least one such pair of items, (*x*, *y*), a sufficient improvement in (or detracting from) contributory values born by *y* will yield an item that is unequivocally comparable with *x*. To deny this is to hold that for *all* pairs of items not related by the trichotomy, any improvement in (or detracting from) the contributory values, however great, cannot make that item comparable with the other. This is an extraordinary claim.

At its most plausible, the claim implies that items bearing rather different contributory values are *ipso facto* incomparable; no improvement in or detracting from those contributory values can render them comparable. It might be thought, for instance, that Beethoven is incomparable with Titian with respect to creative genius because Beethoven bears contributory values of creative genius having to do with music and Titian bears ones having to do with painting.<sup>13</sup> While they may bear some of the same contributory values, the fact that they bear certain different ones is sufficient, the thought goes, to guarantee their incomparability; no improvement in or detracting from the contributory values of one can make it comparable with the other. But as we have already seen in chapter 3, this view is mistaken. If we detract from the contributory values of Titian enough, we are left with Talentlessi, who is definitely comparable with Beethoven with respect to creative genius. In general, the mere fact that two items bear different contributory values does not warrant the conclusion that they are incomparable.

Given the Mono-Pareto Difference Principle, the existential claim is almost incontrovertible. For if Pareto-betterness and Pareto-worseness preserve comparability, for any pair (*x*, *y*) not related by the trichotomy we can Pareto-improve *y* significantly while Pareto-detracting from *x* significantly until we find some *x*-, Pareto-worse than *x*, comparable with some *y*+, Pareto-better than *y*.

This last point, though, raises a worry about the Pareto Argument. Does it show too much? For perhaps the existential claim is too plausible; perhaps the Pareto Argument shows that there is complete comparability. Even if there is complete comparability, as I believe, we should emphasize that the Pareto Argument itself does not establish any such thing; it is only with the addition of substantive argument about whether we can always find some such *x*- and *y*+ that the existential claim can be said to have universal scope. In the absence of any compelling arguments for incomparability, we might reasonably conclude that the substantive arguments are indeed there, waiting to be discovered. There is substantive room for incomparability, but little reason to think it obtains.

### 3.2. Examples

Like the Small Improvement Argument, the Pareto Argument does not rely on judgements about particular pairs of items. It might be helpful, however, to illustrate how the Pareto Argument works with some specific examples.

Let us begin with a simple case. Suppose you are asked to compare the shoes you are now wearing with \$200 with respect to, say, prudential value. (Imagine if you like that an eccentric millionaire with a penchant for old, worn shoes offers you \$200 cash for yours, and you want to compare the shoes with the money in order to determine which option is better with respect to prudence.) Now, suppose that these are your favorite shoes and are not easily replaced. Perhaps they have great sentimental value—you were wearing those shoes when you met your spouse; perhaps you believe they are lucky shoes – you tend to win at the local bingo club when wearing them; or perhaps they are just very comfortable—your oddly shaped big toes make most shoes painful to wear. According to your best judgement, your shoes are neither better nor worse than \$200 and yet, you are certain that they are not equally good either—after all, you wouldn't judge that \$201 was better than your shoes. Are the shoes and \$200 comparable with respect to prudential value?

Although the merit of money with respect to prudential value depends on what the money is used for, how much money one already has, and so on, we can imagine things so that \$1000 is Pareto-better than \$200. We might imagine, for instance, that \$1000 bears the same aspects of all contributory values except one—providing financial security—and with respect to that one, \$1000 is better. Now, it is clear that, with respect to prudential value, \$1000 is better than your shoes (increase the amount if you are especially fond of yours). If \$1000 is comparable with your shoes and \$1000 is Pareto-better than \$200, it follows according to the Pareto Argument that your shoes and \$200 are comparable. *Ex hypothesi*, none of the traditional trichotomy of relations holds; therefore there must be some fourth value relation that holds between them.

Let us now consider a more complicated case. Suppose you are faced with the task of comparing our two careers—one as a corporate lawyer and one as a philosopher—with respect to 'goodness of careers'. Let us simplify a bit and suppose that the legal career, call it L, bears only three contributory values of 'goodness of careers', which do not themselves have contributory values. Let contributory value  $v$  be wealth,  $u$  be the probability of not being a victim of crime, and  $w$  be direct positive contribution to the economy. Suppose L is a bundle of the following aspects,  $a_1$ ,  $b_1$ , and  $c_1$ , corresponding to each of the contributory values, roughly characterized as:

$a_1$ . \$100,000 p.a. salary

$b_1$ . high probability of not being a victim of crime

$c_1$ . a single important contribution to the strength of the economy.

Now take the philosophical career, P. Suppose too for simplicity, that the philosophical career bears only three contributory values,  $v$ ,  $u$ , and  $t$ , where  $t$  is 'gaining understanding of a philosophical nature' and its aspects are denoted as  $d_i$ . The philosophical career can be treated as the following bundle of aspects:

- a<sub>2</sub>. \$35,000 p.a. salary
- b<sub>2</sub>. middling probability of not being a victim of crime
- d<sub>2</sub>. a small amount of only marginally important philosophical insight.

According to your best judgement, neither career is better than the other and yet they are not equally good. (The details of the case can be adjusted to make the example as persuasive as possible). According to the Pareto Argument, if there is some legal career which differs from L by being Pareto-better or Pareto-worse and which is unequivocally comparable with P, L is comparable with P. It is plausible to suppose there is such a legal career, L<sup>+</sup>, with something like the following aspects:

- a<sub>6</sub>. p.a. salary of several million
- b<sub>9</sub>. extremely high probability of not being a victim of crime
- c<sub>23</sub>. single-handedly bringing the country out of a recession.

(We can also find a certain legal career, L<sup>-</sup>, which is clearly worse than the philosophical career: a \$7,000 a year schtick doing due diligence at a drug-dealing corner in Detroit.) If P is comparable with something that differs from L only by being Pareto-better or Pareto-worse, P is comparable with L. Thus, given that P is comparable with L<sup>+</sup> (or L<sup>-</sup>), P is comparable with L. And it is plausible to think that P is comparable with L<sup>+</sup>. In case there is any doubt about this, we can simply detract from P until we find some P<sup>-</sup>, Pareto-worse than P, which is unequivocally comparable with L<sup>+</sup>. Imagine, for instance, a philosophical career involving a pittance in pay, a near certainty of being a victim of crime, and only the barest and most trivial of philosophical understanding. Since mono-Pareto differences preserve comparability, if P<sup>-</sup> is comparable with L<sup>+</sup>, P is comparable with L. Assuming that L and P are (determinately) not related by the trichotomy, they are therefore related by some fourth value relation beyond the traditional trichotomy.

Let us review the arguments so far. The premises of the Small Improvement Argument show that some items are not related by the traditional trichotomy of relations. For at least some items that are neither better nor worse than one another, a small improvement in one does not entail that it is better than the other, and therefore the items are not equally good. But this claim is consistent with the Trichotomy Thesis since all such pairs of items could be incomparable. The Pareto Argument shows that at least some such items are comparable. It assumes that mere Pareto-betterness or worseness preserves comparability; for any pair (x, y) not related by the trichotomy, if there is some item Pareto-better than x and comparable with y, x is comparable with y. Since it is plausible to suppose that for at least one pair (x, y) there will be such an item, the items must be related by a fourth relation. If these arguments are sound, it follows that the Trichotomy Thesis is false.

#### 4. Parity

What is this fourth relation? Since, like 'better than', 'on a par' is primitive, no analysis can be given.<sup>14</sup> But we might try to elucidate the concept. I give a brief intuitive sketch of what I believe are its essential features. This sketch invokes a general schema

for understanding different ways in which items might be comparable. Insofar as parity fits as part of this more general schema, its possibility is made all the more plausible. What I say about parity is far from complete. My aim, however, is not to give an account of it but to defend the possibility of its existence. I close the chapter with a consideration of a possible idealized numerical model of broad comparability that rejects the Ordinality Condition and provides a possible alternative to the Standard Model introduced in chapter 1.

#### 4.1. The intuitive notion: evaluative differences revisited

The core idea of parity can be approached by focusing on the idea of an *evaluative difference* with respect to a covering value. We introduced this notion in chapter 1 and made it the centerpiece of our alternative definition of incomparability.

Where there *is* some evaluative difference between items, that difference is (1) *zero* or *nonzero*, and (2) *biased* or *unbiased*. A difference is zero if it exists but does not have magnitude. A difference is biased if it favors one item and, correspondingly, disfavors the other. A zero difference, then, must be unbiased. The traditional trichotomy of value relations can be explained in these terms. If a difference is nonzero and biased, one of the items is better than the other. If it is biased in favor of  $x$  and against  $y$ ,  $x$  is better than  $y$ . And if the difference is very great, then  $x$  is very much better than  $y$ . If, instead, a difference is zero and therefore unbiased, the items are equally good.

If we take the idea of evaluative differences as explanatory of value relations, the question naturally arises, Why should we think nonzero, biased differences (better than and worse than) and zero (unbiased) differences (equally good) are the only kind of differences there are? In particular, why should we rule out the possibility of nonzero, *unbiased* differences? Such differences will be kin to zero unbiased differences in that they are unbiased but will differ from them by having a magnitude. If two items are on a par, their evaluative difference is unbiased and yet nonzero.

The notion of a nonzero, unbiased difference is familiar. We might want to know the unbiased difference in the time it takes to get to London by two different routes. Is the difference between going via Oxford and going via Cambridge greater than an hour? Or we might want to know the nonzero, unbiased difference in length between two novels or in price between two kitchen appliances or in mass between two heavenly bodies. In mathematics, the unbiased - 'absolute' - difference between 3 and 5, and 5 and 3, is 2. Of course, these examples of unbiased differences correlate with an underlying biased difference. I want to suggest that in the evaluative realm there can be unbiased differences without there being underlying biased differences. If we analogize evaluative differences between items to distances between points, an unbiased evaluative difference between two items is like the absolute distance between two points. The absolute distance between London and Glasgow is 345 air miles—not 345 *northerly* air miles. Like biased differences, unbiased differences can be lesser or greater. The unbiased difference with respect to philosophical talent of Eunice and Janice may be greater than the unbiased difference between Eunice and Eunice\*. Items that differ evaluatively but in an unbiased

way cannot be incomparable, for if two items are incomparable, there is no evaluative difference – zero or nonzero – between them. There may be differences with respect to contributory values but no difference with respect to the covering value. *A fortiori*, incomparable items cannot differ by more or less with respect to the covering value. Indeed, unbiased, nonzero differences can be seen to be a kind of equality; if two items are on a par, neither of them is favoured with respect to the covering value, and yet their difference is not exactly zero.

#### 4.2. Why has parity been overlooked? A new picture of comparability

If parity, and therefore broad comparability makes so much intuitive sense, why has it been overlooked? I think there is a simple explanation. Comparability has been unreflectively assumed to be linear, and a particular linear ‘picture’ of its structure has prevented us from seeing that comparability is not as we have always imagined.<sup>15</sup> If someone is given three items *x*, *y*, and *z* ranked from best to worst, she will more often than not conceive of the items as arranged on a vertical line, with *x* at the top, *z* at the bottom, and *y* in between. (Or a horizontal line with *x* far to the right if she reads left to right and far to the left if she reads right to left as the Chinese do). This linear picture of comparability is something we have been taught to adopt as almost a reflex. But broad comparability requires that we think of comparable items arranged in some other way. Is there an intuitive picture of broad comparability that can take the place of the erroneous linear picture we unreflectively assume as natural?

The structure of broad comparability is nicely captured by modifying a model of incomparability proposed by Adam Morton.<sup>16</sup> Morton asks us to imagine four items configured as points so that if we connected them we would have the shape of a diamond. Call the point at the top *A*, the point at the bottom *C*, and the points horizontally across from one another *B1* and *B2*. *A*, connected to and above *C*, is better than *C*, and *C* is worse than *A*. Similarly, *A* is better than *B1* and *B2*, and *C* is worse than them. How far apart two connected items are from one another on the vertical axis may, though it need not, reflect the extent to which one item is better than another. So if the distance between *A* to *B1* is greater than the distance between *A* and *B2*, we know that *A* is better than *B1* by more than it is better than *B2*. *B1* and *B2*, however, are unconnected, and the distance between them is therefore irrelevant. Although they can each be compared with *A* and *C*, they cannot be compared with one another; they are incomparable, according to Morton. Let us add a point *D*, occupying the same space as *C* to indicate that *C* and *D* are equally good.

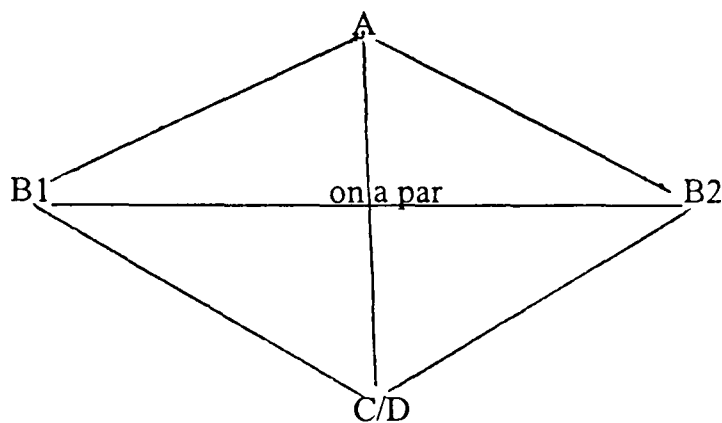
Now, departing from Morton’s model, we draw a horizontal line connecting *B1* and *B2*. The distance between *B1* and *B2* is reflective of the difference between them, just as the distance between *A* and *B1* is reflective of the extent to which *A* is better. *B1* and *B2* are connected, and thus comparable with one another, but their difference is measured on the horizontal, not vertical, axis. Differences measured on the vertical axis are biased, differences measured on the horizontal axis are unbiased. *B1* and *B2* are not incomparable, they are not equally good, since the difference between equally good items

is not nonzero to begin with, and one is not better than the other, since their difference is not measured along the vertical axis. Any two points connected on a horizontal axis are related by a fourth value relation.

We illustrate the picture associated with broad comparability in Figure 3.

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**Figure 3.**  
**Diamond Picture of Broad Comparability**



A is better than B1, B2, C and D. C and D are equally good. C/D are worse than B1, B2, and A. B1 and B2 are on a par.

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With the diamond picture of broad comparability in mind, parity becomes strongly intuitive. And like the linear picture associated with trichotomous comparability, the diamond picture leaves room for incomparability. Any two items not connected by a line are incomparable. The diamond picture vividly depicts the possibility of unbiased differences with magnitude that the linear picture overlooks. Thus, the introduction of parity requires us to adopt a different picture of comparability, but one just as natural and easily grasped as the linear picture.

#### 4.3. A nonstandard model of comparability

I shall conclude this chapter with a sketch of an idealized numerical model of parity which will give us further understanding of how 'on a par' is distinct from the relations of the traditional trichotomy.

As we argued in chapter 1, most comparisons are neither merely ordinal nor precisely cardinal: they are *imprecisely* cardinal. Now 'better than' and 'worse than' can be understood as imprecisely cardinal relations. 'Equally good', however, cannot, for if two items are equally good, their difference has no magnitude – precise or imprecise. We now, however, can see parity as an imprecisely cardinal relation. Like equality, parity involves unbiased differences. Unlike equality, however, differences between items on a par have magnitude. Parity, then, can be seen as – roughly put – imprecise cardinal equality. This is not to say that parity can be reduced to equality. Indeed, the logical properties of 'on a par' are different from those of 'equally good'; while, for example,

'equally good' is transitive, 'on a par' is not. Parity is a fourth, *sui generis* relation beyond 'better than', 'worse than', and 'equally good'.

A full understanding of imprecise cardinality, then, requires inclusion of parity. We said in chapter 1 that imprecise cardinal comparisons could be represented by a family of standard utility functions with the appropriate constraints. But that was assuming that we had trichotomy. But once we allow for parity, we can no longer represent imprecisely cardinal comparisons by the Standard Model. For items that are on a par cannot be represented by any family of functions that respects the Ordinality Condition. This is because the Ordinality Condition essentially relies on the Trichotomy Thesis, and parity requires its rejection. Is there a way numerically to model the intuitive idea of imprecise cardinality that does not rely on the Ordinality Condition?<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.3.1. Interval representation

We might understand how to model imprecise differences by 'roughing up' precise differences. Suppose that A and B are precisely cardinally comparable. If A is better than B, their difference is given by a precise positive number of units; if A is worse, their difference is given by a precise negative number of units; if they are equally good, their difference is zero units. One approximate way to model 'roughing up' is to replace precise numbers of units with an *interval* range of units whose boundaries are positive if the first item is better than the second and negative if the first item is worse. The intervals are constructed in accordance with the following rule: the ceiling of an interval is the smallest number of units which the difference is less than or equal to, and the floor is the largest number of units which the difference is greater than or equal to.

Given this interpretation of the upper and lower boundaries of interval representations of imprecisely cardinal differences, we should model imprecisely cardinal relations as follows. If A is imprecisely cardinally better than B, the difference between them is represented by some range of positive numbers whose floor is greater than zero and whose ceiling is some greater positive number. For if A is better than B, the difference between them is greater than zero, and so the largest number of units than which the difference is greater or equal to—the floor—is greater than zero. If A is worse, the difference is represented by an interval whose ceiling is less than zero and whose floor is some lesser negative number of units. For if A is worse than B, the difference between them is less than zero, and so the smallest number of units than which the difference could be less or equal to—the ceiling—is less than zero. If A and B are equally good, the difference between them is zero, and the ceiling and floor are zero.<sup>18</sup>

There is, as yet, another possibility. The ceiling of an interval might be positive while the floor non-positive or the ceiling non-negative while the floor negative. That is, there may be intervals enclosing zero that represent differences between items. We might think that this is just another case of equality. But it is clear that an interval that encloses zero cannot be a representation of the difference between items that are equally good. If items are equally good, we know that the difference between them is represented by the interval whose ceiling and floor are zero.

What we need is a new concept, what I have been calling *on a par*. If two items are on a par, the difference between them might be represented by an interval enclosing zero. Note that in extreme cases this interval might be very tightly bounded around zero. The incomparabilists would have us believe that the failure of the trichotomy here entails that the items are incomparable. But how can the items be incomparable when their difference is so close to zero?

The above sketch of imprecise cardinal comparability suggests one way in which parity might be numerically represented.<sup>19</sup> Interval representation, however, is idealized since it contentiously presupposes that there are precise cardinal units of the evaluative criteria at stake (as given by certain rankings on differences), while many evaluative criteria will not yield such units.<sup>20</sup> But this idealization is in many ways the best place to start in illuminating parity. Other forms of imprecise cardinality and their corresponding representations of parity can, I believe, be uncovered by variously relaxing the requirement that the intervals be composed of precise cardinal units. We might, for instance, think that in some cases we can only merely ordinally rank some differences and not others over a given domain of items. The difference between items on a par can then be represented by an interval which encloses zero and whose ceiling and floors bound differences that reflect a partial, merely ordinal ranking. There is, in this suggestion, no commitment to precise units.

#### 4.3. 2. The Supervaluational Interval Model

We have not said anything about how the interval of real numbers representing imprecise cardinal differences is itself generated. Here, borrowing the idea of multiple legitimate sharpenings from the supervaluational account of vague concepts or predicates will be helpful. Note that our small improvement cases all have something in common. They are cases in which we might say that there are different legitimate conceptions of the covering value concept. (We shall have more to say about this in the next chapter). If we conceive *philosophical talent* in one way, Eunice is better than Janice. If we conceive it another way, Janice is better than Eunice. And both ways of conceiving *philosophical talent* are legitimate.

Each legitimate way of conceiving the covering value concept might be represented by a standard utility function. *Taking units as given*,<sup>21</sup> each such utility function assigns a real number to each alternative. The family of legitimate utility functions, i.e., the set of legitimate ways of conceiving the covering value concept, gives us the interval representing the difference between items on a par by the following:

##### Interval determination

$$d(x, y) = \{\delta(x) - \delta(y) : \delta \in F\}$$

where  $d(x, y)$  is the evaluative difference between  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $\delta(x)$  is the merit of  $x$  where  $\delta$  is a member of the family of functions  $F$  that represent the legitimate ways of conceiving the covering value concept.

Putting together all evaluative differences in an interval gives us a representation of the

difference between items on a par. Thus, we have an interval representation of evaluative differences between items on a par that derives from the set of legitimate ways in which items can be ranked according to the covering value. Call this the Supervaluational Interval Model.

Note that the Supervaluational Interval Model provides a way to model all imprecise cardinal comparisons, not just ones of betterness or worseness. If  $x$  is imprecisely cardinally better than  $y$ , then there are legitimate rankings of  $x$  and  $y$  such that the extent to which  $x$  is better varies according to how one legitimately conceives the covering value concept. So there will be an interval range of nonnegative numbers representing the difference between them. If  $x$  and  $y$  are on a par – that is, ‘imprecisely cardinally equally good’ – then the interval range of numbers representing their difference will properly include zero. The Standard Model is able to model only imprecise betterness and worseness. A complete modelling of imprecise cardinality, including imprecise cardinal equality, is inconsistent with the Standard Model because parity cannot be reconciled with the Ordinality Condition. For the utility functions representing each legitimate conception of the covering value concept do not respect what we might call ‘The Function Order Condition’ implied by the Ordinality Condition. That condition holds that all utility functions must assign the same order to items.

The Function Order Condition

$$u(x) \geq u(y) \rightarrow u'(x) \geq u'(y)$$

where  $u$  and  $u'$  are utility functions belonging to the family of functions that represents the legitimate conceptions of the covering value.

In the case of items on a par, some utility functions will assign a higher number to  $x$  than to  $y$ , while others will assign a higher number to  $y$  than to  $x$ . Thus, imprecise cardinality, completely understood, is inconsistent with the Ordinality Condition.

We are now in a position to suggest two possible modifications to the idea of interval representation of imprecisely cardinal comparisons. These modifications will yield yet another reason why imprecise cardinality cannot be captured by the Standard Model. Whether a conception of the covering value concept is legitimate or not is a conceptual matter. Some covering value concepts are essentially contested. So there can be intractable disagreement about whether a conception is or is not legitimate. Some conceptions will clearly be illegitimate – *well-being* may be essentially contested, but if someone thinks that idle pleasures have lexical priority over all other contributory values, they’ve got the wrong concept – while other conceptions will be less clear. Thus, the interval range of numbers that represent the evaluative differences between imprecisely cardinally comparable items may not itself be a precise interval. It may have no determinate endpoints, for example. Or, in the interval  $[-3, 2]$ , for example, whether the number 1 is included in the interval, may be a matter of dispute. The Standard Model cannot represent this kind of indeterminacy.

Moreover, there may be gaps in the intervals representing imprecisely cardinal differences. Perhaps there will always be a gap at zero; perhaps if items can be

imprecisely cardinally comparable, they can never be precisely cardinally equal (we have already shown that mere ordinality is implausible). I doubt that this will be true across the board; certainly on some legitimate conceptions of *creative genius*, for example, Mozart and Michelangelo (plausibly a small improvement case) are equally good. We would not think someone who insisted they were as having failed to grasp the concept of creative genius. At any rate, there may be gaps in the intervals at zero and elsewhere.

The Supervaluational Interval Model as presented here is radically incomplete but, I hope, suggestive a possible fruitful line of inquiry.

We should end by raising a possible worry about parity. In what sense is ‘on a par’ a *sui generis*, primitive fourth relation? We have, for one thing, said that parity is imprecise cardinal equality. We have, for another, offered a numerical model of parity that represents it in terms of trichotomous rankings relativized to legitimate conceptions of the covering value concept. These points may suggest that parity is reducible to or a species of equality.

Although parity is imprecise cardinal equality, this is not to say that ‘on a par’ is not primitive, for the idea of imprecise cardinal equality is itself, I suspect, resistant to analysis. Nor does the fact that parity can be modelled in terms of trichotomous rankings show that parity is reducible to the standard trichotomy. Models, after all, are merely representations. ‘On a par’ is genuine a ‘fourth’ relation in that between any two items, one of four logically distinct relations could hold between them: ‘better than’, ‘worse than’, ‘equally good’, and ‘on a par’. We shall have more to say about the problem of reduction at the close of the thesis.

The possibility of parity has been obscured by unreflective adoption of the Trichotomy Thesis and by inattention to the full implications of imprecise cardinality. Once we understand the implications of imprecise cardinality, we see the need for a fourth relation beyond the traditional trichotomy. The view that small improvement cases are cases of incomparability is due to a failure to recognize the possibility of parity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, ch. 13; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas*, pp. 65-66, also his “Moral Dilemmas and Incomparability,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1985): 321-329, 327; Ronald de Sousa, “The Good and the True”, *Mind*, 84: (1974), pp. 544-546.

<sup>2</sup> Though ‘small’ and ‘large’ suggest quantities, a ‘small’ improvement need not be quantitative. ‘Small’ may mean ‘not radical’ or ‘insignificant’, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 328.

<sup>4</sup> There is a real question as to how Raz’ argument should be interpreted. His text supports many variants of the argument I attribute to him. Since the important notion of ‘constitutive incommensurabilities’, that Raz introduces depends – if part of an argument for incomparability – on the same move from the rationality of attitudes to truths about the items’ incomparability, there are grounds for this interpretation. And, as we will see immediately below, I am not alone in interpreting Raz in this way. See also the discussion of Raz in the last chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Regan, “Authority and Value: Reflections on Raz’ *Morality of Freedom*” *Southern California Law Review*, 62: 995, 1060ff, March-May 1989. Even in choices of marginal practical import, such as that between two Sunday enjoyments, indifference may have as its source uncertainty. As the choice becomes more and more trivial, however, the thought that indifference is due to uncertainty becomes less and less plausible. But Raz’ argument is meant to show that incomparability is “a feature of sound practical reasoning generally”. Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 328.

<sup>6</sup> See also de Sousa, “The Good and the True”; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> It might be thought that comparisons with respect to covering values over which there is first person authority are immune from this sort of skepticism. But it is controversial whether there are any such comparisons. Comparisons between pains and pleasures, for instance, are subject to error insofar as there are indiscernible differences. For an interesting discussion of how practical reason can deal with indiscernibles, see Warren Quinn, “The Puzzle of the Self-Torturer”, *Philosophical Studies*, 59: 79-90, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Because the Small Improvement Argument turns on an abstract intuition about what is true about a class of pairs of items, it does not rely on the intuitions discredited in the above variants. One should not confuse reliance on a belief about how some pairs of a class of pairs of items compare with reliance on a belief about how two particular items compare. We have already seen that relying on a belief that neither of two particular items is better than the other may be relying on rational error. The present argument, however, does not rely on a belief about a ‘hard’ case; the judgment that some pairs of a class of pairs compare or do not compare in a certain way does not presuppose answers to difficult substantive questions about how particular bundles of aspects should or should not be compared with respect to the covering value.

<sup>9</sup>The value-bound notion of improvement appealed to here should be distinguished from its more neutral counterpart. A dessert might be ‘improved’ with respect to sweetness if it is made more sweet or if its sweetness is made more intense. And yet the ‘improved’ dessert may not be *better* with respect to sweetness. It may, as it were, be *too sweet*. This notion of ‘improvement’ according to which an item may be ‘improved’ with respect to a value and yet not be better with respect to that value is one I set aside for present purposes. Any improvement in a value in the relevant sense here necessarily entails that the item is better with respect to that value. It does not, though,

entail that the item is better with respect to a value to which the value contributes.

<sup>10</sup> This argument uncontroversially assumes that a large mono-Pareto difference can at least in some of the relevant cases be broken down into smaller mono-Pareto difference without running afoul of the Aristotelian proviso.

<sup>11</sup> This is not true of sortal predicates like 'is a heap' or 'is a child'.

<sup>12</sup> Though perhaps 'is precisely comparable' is, but that is not relevant here.

<sup>13</sup> See the companion papers by Joseph Raz and James Griffin, "Mixing Values", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 65, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Hurka and James Griffin endorse a notion of 'rough equality', which appears to be close to indeterminacy. See Tom Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 87, and James Griffin *Well-Being*, p. 81, 96-98, 104. Some of what Griffin says is of a piece with the notion of imprecise cardinality sketched here. See especially p. 104 of *Well-Being*. Both Hurka and Griffin believe that rough equality should be treated as a kind of equality and that the appropriate deliberative response to items roughly equal is the same as that for items that are equally good. Derek Parfit has proposed that where there is imprecise cardinality, items are 'imprecisely equal' or 'blurredly equal'. (In conversation). Others have suggested ideas that are more remotely related but might be seen as expressing the same anti-trichotomous spirit of parity. Amartya Sen, for instance, discusses the possibility of 'overcompleteness' according to which A can be better than B and B better than A. See his *On Ethics and Economics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). Still others have suggested that an item can be better than, worse than, and as good as another. See T.K. Seung and Daniel Bonevac, "Plural Values and Indeterminate Rankings", 102 *Ethics* 799 (1992).

<sup>15</sup> Derek Parfit calls this the 'Model of Linear Precision'. See his *Reasons and Persons*.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Morton, *Disasters and Dilemmas* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991), pp. 34-35. Note that since I take Morton's 'diamond pattern' to be a model of biased and unbiased differences, we should not expect to find room within the diamond configuration for incomparable items, which have no evaluative differences.

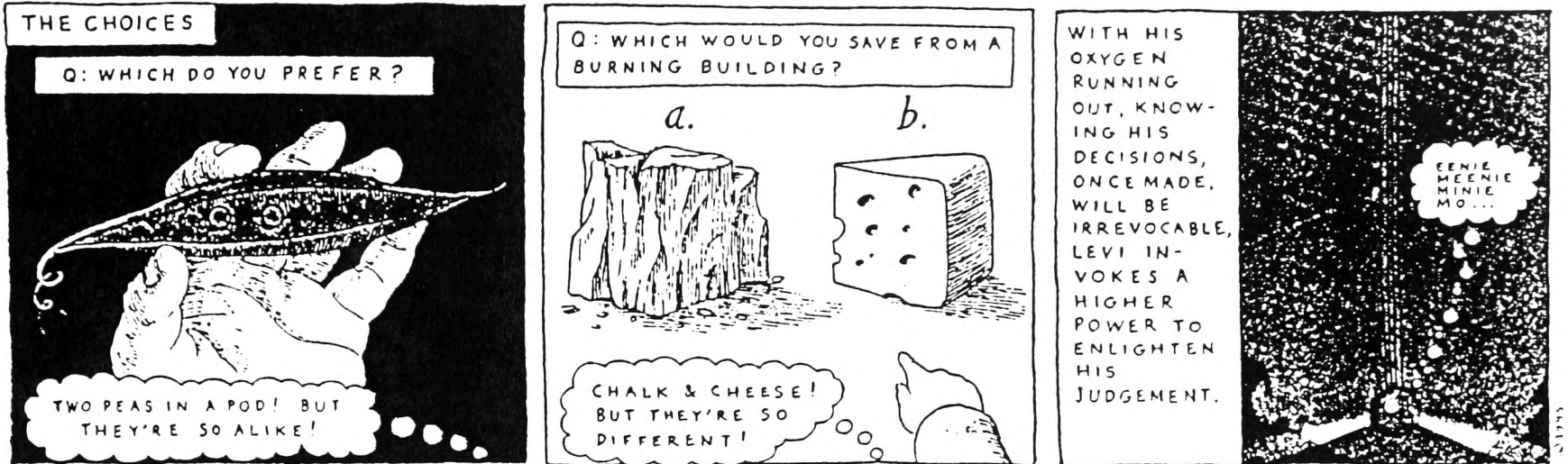
<sup>17</sup> See also Jim Griffin, *Well Being*, p. 104 and Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 431.

<sup>18</sup> Note that this interval representation nicely generalizes to include precise cardinality. Precise cardinal comparisons are ones in which the same rules for the standard relations holds, but the floor and ceiling of the interval are identical.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 67, who tries to model the merits of items rather than their differences by intervals. This does not work well for a variety of reasons I cannot go into here.

<sup>20</sup> There is a real question as to what extent evaluative criteria support precise cardinal comparisons over some limited domain of hypothetical items.

<sup>21</sup> I make this assumption so as to avoid the inconvenience of having to talk in terms of families of functions.



-Peter Blegrad, 'Leviathan', excerpt  
*The Independent on Sunday*, February 19, 1995

## CHAPTER 6

### VAGUENESS, INCOMPARABILITY, AND PARITY

#### 1. Incomparability as Vagueness

There is one final type of incomparabilist argument left to examine. Perhaps items are incomparable if there are multiple legitimate rankings of them, none of which is privileged. Take, for example, a comparison between Eunice and Janice with respect to philosophical talent. There are multiple contributory values of philosophical talent: originality, insightfulness, clarity of thought, and so on. But perhaps there is no single correct way to ‘weigh’ these aspects of philosophical talent; each contributory value contributes to the covering value in multiple, alternative ways.<sup>1</sup> We can put the point generally as follows: there are different ways we can ‘sharpen’ a covering value, and different sharpenings may yield different comparisons of the items. On one sharpening of philosophical talent, for example, certain aspects of originality may be better with respect to philosophical talent than certain aspects of insightfulness which are, in turn, better than certain aspects of clarity. On this sharpening, perhaps Eunice is more philosophically talented than Janice. On another sharpening, however, the contributory value aspects may compare differently, and Janice is more philosophically talented than Eunice. Since each sharpening is legitimate, each of comparison of Eunice and Janice is legitimate. Since there is no single legitimate comparison of Eunice and Janice, they must, the argument goes, be incomparable.

Arguments from multiple rankings are most naturally understood as arguments from the *vagueness* of the covering value. John Broome, in what is the most important article to date on comparison and vagueness, has argued that ‘incommensurability’ should be understood as the vagueness of comparative concepts.<sup>2</sup> T. K. Seung and Daniel Bonevac have maintained what I suspect is roughly the same position in a different guise; they argue that two items are incomparable if one is better than the other, worse than, *and* just as good.<sup>3</sup> Others have taken the ‘multiple rankings’ approach but have not made the connection with vagueness. So, for example, Isaac Levi has argued that ‘irresolvable’ conflict is characterized by a multitude of possible rational resolutions; Lewis Kornhauser has argued that we should understand ‘incommensurability’ as the failure of plausible conditions on orderings of alternatives to determine a single correct ordering; and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has suggested that moral requirements are incomparable if their strengths are not exact.<sup>4</sup>

The vagueness giving rise to multiple rankings might be in language, concepts, or reality. Since the thought that incomparability is merely a linguistic phenomenon detracts from its significance and since the ontology of vague objects, in our case values themselves, is still a mystery to metaphysicians, let us examine the argument in terms of vague concepts (though analogous remarks can I think be made with respect to the other possible locations of vagueness). I shall assume that the vagueness is in the covering

value concept.<sup>5</sup> Although strictly, the vagueness of a value concept need not give rise to multiple rankings of items compared with respect to it, I shall understand 'vagueness' in a way such that it always does. (There may be borderline cases of baldness, to take a nonevaluative case, but there may be determinateness in comparisons of baldness; x is definitely balder than y just in case y has fewer hairs than x.) Thus, if *philosophical talent* is a vague concept, there are multiple sharpenings which favour different comparisons of some items with respect to philosophical talent.

The problem of multiple rankings seems to be at the heart of many, perhaps most, practical predicaments. When comparing two items with respect to some V, we might find ourselves judging that the comparison might 'go either way', depending on how much significance we attach to particular contributory value merits borne by the items. So, for example, as a member of an appointments committee, one might be in a quandary over which of Eunice and Janice has the greater philosophical talent. There is a conception of philosophical talent according to which Janice, whose work is large-scale, raw, undisciplined, original, but not always insightful, is more philosophically talented than Eunice, whose work is careful, rigorous, original and insightful but rather small-scale, but there is also one according to which the converse is true. Both conceptions of philosophical talent are legitimate, and it seems that one cannot decide between them. If these are cases of incomparability, practical life is rife with it.

On the face of things, the fact that items are multiply ranked according to different legitimate understandings of a covering value can provide only the most peculiar grounds for *incomparability*. For arguments from multiple rankings hold that incomparability obtains when there are conflicting comparisons, not when there are no comparisons to be found. Why should we think that Eunice and Janice are incomparable with respect to philosophical talent just because there are multiple legitimate ways to compare them?

To see why arguments from multiple rankings are wrong-headed, consider Eunice and her imaginary near-twin, Eunice\*. These philosophers are very nearly equally good; they differ only in that Eunice\* is ever so slightly more technically proficient and ever so slightly less clear in expression than Eunice. On some sharpenings of philosophical talent, Eunice\* will be ever so slightly better than Eunice. For example, we can understand philosophical talent in a way such that the improvement in technical proficiency (e.g., a slight deepening of the grasp of the rules of deduction) renders Eunice\* more philosophically talented than Eunice, despite her slightly less clear expression (e.g., her proclivity for run-on sentences). On other sharpenings, however, Eunice\* will be ever so slightly worse. One can imagine someone having an understanding of philosophical talent that gave great significance to clarity of expression, so the slight detraction from Eunice's clarity of expression was enough to make Eunice\* worse than Eunice. Perhaps on other sharpenings, Eunice and Eunice\* will be equally good. Thus, there are multiple legitimate rankings of these philosophers. But, ex hypothesi, Eunice and Eunice\* are not incomparable with respect to philosophical talent, for their evaluative difference with respect to philosophical talent is very slight. Indeed,

we can imagine their difference in philosophical talent to be so small that for all practical purposes, the two are equally good.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is possible that different sharpenings of philosophical talent permit multiple rankings of them. Therefore, if Eunice and Eunice\* are not incomparable on the grounds that they can be multiply ranked, then neither are Eunice and Janice on those grounds. Multiple rankings, then, do not provide grounds for incomparability.

We can now discharge the promissory note issued in chapter 1, where, without argument, we ruled out the possibility that incomparability is the *indeterminate* failure of comparison. We defined incomparability as holding between two items with respect to a covering value just in case for each positive, generic value relation relativized to that covering value, it is false that it holds between them. We have just seen that any indeterminacy due to vagueness cannot be grounds for incomparability. And we suggested in chapter 3 that sources of indeterminacy other than vagueness, *viz.*, false presupposition, reference failure, and category mistake, gave rise to noncomparability, not incomparability. Thus, incomparability is properly understood as the determinate failure of comparison.

Though arguments from multiple rankings do not establish that items are incomparable, they do give us reason to think that none of the trichotomy of better than, worse than, and equally good holds between such items. Since there is no privileged sharpening, there are no grounds for thinking that any particular one of the trichotomy holds. Now, we might understand multiple rankings as arising from the vagueness of comparative concepts. But we might also understand them in a different way. Perhaps multiple rankings arise when items are on a par. This is not to say that parity is to be analyzed in terms of multiple rankings, but it may be consistent with two items being on a par that there are multiple rankings of them in terms of the standard trichotomy of relations. This raises the question of reducibility left unanswered in the last chapter. We return to this point at the close of the thesis.

But first, I want to examine an ingenious argument recently put forth by John Broome that, if correct, has devastating implications for the possibility of parity – as well as for the possibility of incomparability. For according to Broome, the standard trichotomy of relations never *determinately* fail to hold between items; they can only *indeterminately* fail to hold. Since incomparability is the determinate failure of relations to hold, Broome's argument blocks the possibility of incomparability. And since parity is supposedly a fourth *sui generis* relation, if two items <sup>are</sup> on a par, it is *false* – not neither true nor false – that one is better than the other and false that they are equally good. So parity too entails the determinate failure of the standard trichotomy. Broome's argument concludes that such failure is impossible.

## 2. Determinate and Indeterminate Failure Revisited

In his forthcoming "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", Broome argues that whenever the standard trichotomy of relations, 'better than', 'worse than', and 'equally

good', fail to hold of two items, those failures are *indeterminate*. That is, it is always *neither true nor false* that one is better than the other and *neither true nor false* that they are equally good, but it is never *false* that one is better than the other and *false* that they are equally good. Whether or not we assume that the Trichotomy Thesis is true, Broome's conclusion that any failure of the trichotomy is indeterminate gives rise to a very striking argument indeed; it is one which fells in one great swoop all arguments for the existence of incomparability – whether trichotomous or not – and all arguments for the existence of parity. For incomparability, whether trichotomous or tetradic, requires the determinate failure of the traditional trichotomy; and parity, if it is a genuine fourth relation, must entail the determinate failure of the traditional trichotomy to hold.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1. Artificial and natural comparatives

Broome gives two arguments for his claim that all failure in comparison is indeterminate. First, he says that the difficulty of finding even 'artificial' comparatives that allow for determinate failure suggests that "there is something fishy about [determinate failure of comparison] in general." Such comparatives give rise to incomplete orderings, "and that suggests it may be a fragment of a complete comparative rather than a comparative in its own right."<sup>8</sup>

Some points of clarification. By 'comparatives', which he denotes generically as 'Fer than', we can understand Broome to mean generic relations relativized to covering criteria, cognates of 'F', equivalent to specific relations with built-in covering criteria.<sup>9</sup> A determinate failure of a comparative, Fer than, obtains when it is false that x is Fer than y, false that y is Fer than x, and false that x and y are equally F; thus, Broome assumes the Trichotomy Thesis. A comparative is 'artificial' if there is no 'natural' property it picks out. As examples of artificial comparatives, Broome offers 'mucheavier than', that is, heavier by more than one kilo, and, in the evaluative case, 'Pareto-better than', that is, better for some and not worse for any. Two items that differ by less than a kilo presumably provide an instance of determinate failure of 'mucheavier than'; and ones that differ by being better for some and worse for some provide an instance of determinate failure of 'Pareto-better than'.

Broome thinks constructing artificial comparatives permitting determinate failure "may not be as easy it seems", and that therefore we should be suspicious about whether there are any such comparatives. But it is easy to construct such comparatives. We can use Broome's own device: take any natural comparative, Ner than, and restrict it with a condition that requires it to be Ner than by a certain amount. So something is 'muchmoral than' something else if it is at least twice as moral, and something is 'lessbeautiful than' if it is half as beautiful, and so on. We can construct artificial comparatives that meet Broome's condition *ad infinitum*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, if both determinate and indeterminate failures are possibilities then it is unclear how, prior to any argument, Broome can declare with any assurance that it is hard to find any natural or artificial examples of determinate failure. Given that a comparative fails, the question just is, what

sort of failure is it? Finally, suggesting that incomplete comparatives, i.e., comparatives with determinate failure, are incomplete fragments of complete comparatives begs the question at issue. The incompleteness of comparatives should suggest nothing at all, for if there are natural incomplete comparatives, they will not be fragments of natural complete ones.

## 2.2. The Collapsing Principle Argument

Broome's main argument for his conclusion is rather more involved. The argument might be summarized as follows. Suppose the failure of a comparative were determinate. Given what Broome calls the 'collapsing principle', it follows that there can be no vagueness in the comparative. But it is hard to believe that a comparative has no vagueness at all. Therefore, for there to be any vagueness in a comparative, the failure of comparison must be indeterminate, not determinate. Let us call this the *Collapsing Principle Argument*. My strategy for examining this argument is first to make the argument appear as strong as possible. This will involve what may look like pointless nit-picking of Broome's presentation of the argument, but the nit-picking is part of an attempt to improve and deepen our understanding of the argument. I will then argue that the core principle upon which the argument relies – the collapsing principle – is in error and therefore that the argument fails.

The argument essentially relies on what Broome calls the 'standard configuration', that is, a continuum of items,  $x^1, x^2, x^3 \dots$  that are better and better as one goes along the continuum with respect to  $V$ ), and an item not on the continuum, call it  $y$ , which is (determinately) better than the items at the bottom of the continuum and (determinately) worse than the items at the top of the continuum with respect to  $V$ . In the middle of the continuum is a region of items for which comparison with respect to  $V$  fails either determinately or indeterminately. That is, for each item,  $x$ , in the middle zone, it is either false that  $x$  is better than  $y$ , false that  $x$  is worse than  $y$ , and false that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally good (determinate failure), *or* it is neither true nor false that  $x$  is better than  $y$ , neither true nor false that  $x$  is worse than  $y$ , and neither true nor false that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally good (indeterminate failure).

The argument also essentially relies on the 'collapsing principle'. This principle, in its general version, holds that "for any  $x$  and  $y$ , if it is more true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  than that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , then  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ ."<sup>11</sup> If a proposition is neither true nor false, it is 'less true' and 'more false' than a proposition that is true. Similarly, it is 'more true' and 'less false' than a proposition that is false. So, for example, if it is true that an item  $x$  on the continuum is better than  $y$  with respect to  $V$ , but it is neither true nor false that  $y$  is better than  $x$  with respect to  $V$ , then, according to the collapsing principle,  $x$  is better than  $y$  with respect to  $V$ . A special version of this principle holds that if it is false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$  and neither true nor false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , then it is true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ .

### 2.2.1. The collapsing principle - I

Let us grant, for now, that the collapsing principle is true. What is the best support we can muster for the principle? Broome writes, “My only real argument is this: If it is false that  $y$  is  $F$ er than  $x$ , and not false that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$ , then  $x$  has a clear advantage over  $y$  in respect of its  $F$ ness. So it must be  $F$ er than  $y$ . It takes only the slightest asymmetry to make it the case that one thing is  $F$ er than another. One object is heavier than another if the scales tip ever so slightly toward it. Here there is a clear asymmetry between  $x$  and  $y$  in respect of their  $F$ ness. That is enough to determine that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$ .”<sup>12</sup>

Broome’s argument for the collapsing principle is given in terms of the special version, but insofar as the special version is an instance of the general version, the argument for the one should be an argument for the other. We can understand Broome’s argument either in terms of degrees of truth or in terms of degrees of  $F$ ness. Take the case of truth first. Why should we think that a proposition that is neither true nor false is ‘more true/less false’ than one that is false? The argument in terms of truth presupposes a substantive view of truth. Correspondence theorists, for example, would deny that something neither true nor false is more true than something false. A proposition is true just in case it corresponds to something in the world; it is false if it does not. A proposition that is neither true nor false does not correspond ‘more’ to something in the world than a false proposition; correspondence drops out of the picture altogether.<sup>13</sup> Coherence theorists, on the other hand, could plausibly embrace degrees of truth. The more true a proposition, the greater the coherence it exhibits with other given propositions. The point here is that the collapsing principle understood in terms of truth depends on the substantive idea that there are degrees of truth, something which is, to say the least, controversial.

Broome explicitly says that the collapsing principle should not be understood as implying the existence of degrees of truth. He writes, “Its meaning is wider. For instance, [where  $P$  and  $Q$  are converse comparatives] if  $P$  is true and  $Q$  is false, then I would say  $P$  is more true than  $Q$ ...If  $P$  is definitely truth and  $Q$  is not definitely true, I would again say that  $P$  is more true than  $Q$ . In general, I will say  $P$  is more true than  $Q$  whenever  $P$  in any way rates more highly than  $Q$  in respect of its truth.”<sup>14</sup> But our point that the argument understood in terms of ‘more true’ presupposes a substantive view of truth stands. For however broadly ‘more true’ is understood, a correspondence theory of truth cannot make sense of it. The ‘degrees of truth’ upon which Broome’s argument relies, can be understood as broadly as need be; the collapsing principle understood in terms of truth nevertheless must make the substantive assumption that there are such degrees.

But the argument might be understood in a different way. We might attempt to justify the collapsing principle by appealing to the properties of  $F$ ness and to a special way in which an item can be more  $F$ . Perhaps  $F$ ness, like weight, is a continuous property that admits of precise cardinal comparisons; a little more  $F$ , and the item is clearly better with respect to  $F$ .<sup>15</sup> Moreover, perhaps an item can be a little more  $F$  under the conditions of the collapsing principle: if it is false that  $y$  is  $F$ er than  $x$  and neither true nor false that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$ , then  $x$  has a bit more  $F$  relative to  $y$ . Thus,  $x$  is a bit more  $F$  than  $y$ , and

that is enough to make it true that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$ . In other words, perhaps the special version of the collapsing principle holds although its general version, which relies on a controversial substantive assumption, does not. But the special version too relies on a dubious substantive assumption; as we saw in chapter 1, typical covering values like ‘beauty’, ‘kindness’, ‘moral goodness’ and so on are not like ‘length’, ‘weight’, and ‘volume’, paradigmatically nonevaluative criteria that admit of precise cardinal comparisons. If imprecise cardinality is the norm, then we have no reason to think that the bit of extra  $F$   $x$  has (in virtue of its being false that  $y$  is  $F$ er than  $x$ ) can tip the balance from its being neither true nor false that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$  to its being true that  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$ . Even if covering values did admit of precise cardinal comparisons, the idea that the conditions of the (special version of the) collapsing principle make the one item *more*  $F$  than the other is hard to fathom. How can the fact that it is neither true nor false that  $x$  is morally better than  $y$  and the fact that it is false that  $y$  is morally better than  $x$  give  $x$  extra moral goodness?

Broome’s argument for the collapsing principle is not all that convincing. But he has more to say in defense of the collapsing principle; he offers a thought experiment in which he says the principle applies. So although his argument is not convincing, perhaps the thought experiment shows that the collapsing principle is right, but for reasons we have yet to discover. The thought experiment is this. Suppose that we must choose between two Australians in a contest of greatness of Australians, with the winner receiving the prize of having a suburb named after her. Now suppose we judge to the best of our abilities that it is false that Wye is a greater Australian than Exe, but that it is neither true nor false that Exe is a greater Australian than Wye. The only right thing to do, Broome urges, is to award the prize to Exe. And if this is the right thing to do, it must be because Exe is greater than Wye. This example is supposed to show that the intuitive plausibility of the collapsing principle.

But the thought experiment goes awry. Consider the initial judgments that it is neither true nor false that Exe is greater than Wye and that it is false that Wye is greater than Exe. If the collapsing principle is true, what must follow? We must infer that one of our judgments is not true. For the collapsing principle tells us that we have made a mistake; both claims cannot be true and we must reject at least one of our judgments. Now perhaps it is true that choosing Exe is the right thing to do in the given circumstances, but if that is so, it will not have anything to do with our initial judgments implying that Exe is greater. For we know that at least one of those judgments is false, though we don’t know which, and so those judgments, if they are to provide grounds for choice, cannot do so by implying something about comparative facts concerning Exe and Wye. Thus, the thought experiment fails to bolster the collapsing principle.

This is not to say that the collapsing principle cannot be given any intuitive support. (Although, I shall show later that the collapsing principle *must* be erroneous). I think the intuitive force behind the principle might best be captured supervaluationally. Assuming trichotomy, if it is false that  $y$  is  $F$ er than  $x$ , then on all sharpenings,  $y$  is not  $F$ er than  $x$ , that is, either  $x$  is  $F$ er than  $y$  or  $x$  and  $y$  are equally  $F$ . If it is neither true nor

false that *x* is Fer than *y*, then on some sharpenings *x* is Fer than *y*, and on other sharpenings, *x* is not Fer than *y*, that is, either *y* is Fer than *x* or *x* and *y* are equally F. We can apply a Pareto principle on sharpenings to yield the desired conclusion: a comparison is true if for every sharpening on which its converse is true, it is true, and it is true on at least one other sharpening besides.<sup>16</sup> The comparison ‘*x* is Fer than *y*’ is Pareto superior to its converse ‘*y* is Fer than *x*’ in this way since ‘*x* is Fer than *y*’ is true on every sharpening on which ‘*y* is Fer than *x*’ is true, viz., none, and true on some other sharpening as well. Thus, if a comparative is neither true nor false and its converse is false, the original comparative is true by a principle of Pareto superiority on sharpenings. In this way, we can understand the intuitive force of the collapsing principle. Of course, the supervenient justification is in its own way substantive; it presupposes supervenience. But since supervenience is the least controversial assumption made by any of the three ways outlined in which the collapsing principle might be defended, I suggest it is the one that we should adopt.

### 2.2.2. Application of the collapsing principle

Broome thinks the collapsing principle shows that there can be no vagueness in the boundary between the top and middle and between the middle and bottom zones of the continuum. His argument runs as follows: Suppose there were vague boundaries between the top and middle regions of the continuum. Take an item, *x*, in the putatively vague boundary. It must be false that *y* is Fer than *x*, since for each item in the middle region and above it is false that *y* is Fer than it. But it cannot be false that *x* is Fer than *y*, for if it were false, then *x* would fall squarely in the middle region, where for each item it is false that it is Fer than *y* and false that *y* is Fer than it. Nor, however can it be true that *x* is Fer than *y*, for if it were true, then *x* would fall squarely in the top region, where for each item it is true that it is Fer than *y* and false that *y* is Fer than it. Thus, it must be neither true nor false that each point in the vague boundary is Fer than *y*.

Now according to the collapsing principle, if it is false that *y* is Fer than *x*, and neither true nor false that *x* is Fer than *y*, then it follows that *x* is Fer than *y*. But, ex hypothesi, *x* is in the vague region between the top and middle regions, not in the top region. We therefore have a contradiction, and so the initial assumption that *x* was in the vague boundary between the top and middle zones must be rejected. A parallel argument can be given for a putative vague boundary between the middle and bottom zone.

Broome’s argument, if correct, shows that if the middle region is to be understood as the determinate failure of comparison, it must be sharply bounded by the top and bottom regions. This is meant to be a significant result, for a sharp boundary between the determinate success (top zone) and determinate failure (middle zone) is thought to be highly implausible. Thus, determinate failure is thought to be highly implausible.

### 2.2.3. The problem of sharp boundaries

It is worth noting that even if Broome’s claim that determinate failure does not

admit of vague boundaries is correct, his argument for the conclusion that all failure is indeterminate is open to attack. Why should the view that there are determinate failures of comparison with sharp boundaries be dismissed out of hand? Broome's reason for thinking it should seems to be this: "I am sure there is no sharp transition when [y] is a reddish-purple [patch and the continuum goes from red to yellow].... [I]f there is a sharp transition, I cannot tell where it is. I know no way of detecting where it is, and I know of no one who can detect where it is. If there is a point of transition, it is undetectable, and I do not believe [comparatives] can have an undetectable boundary of this sort."<sup>17</sup>

There are two responses to this line of thought. First, the move from the claim that there is no detectable sharp boundary to the claim that there is no sharp boundary may have some plausibility for perceptually-based comparative concepts like 'redder than', but it does not hold much sway for common covering value predicates like 'morally better than' or 'more beautiful than'. I doubt we can reject *a priori* the possibility that moral goodness, as well as a whole host of other evaluative criteria, do not have an undetectable point of transition of the kind at issue. Moreover, if many evaluative concepts – even those that are perceptually based like 'gustatory pleasure', 'tackiness', and perhaps even 'beauty' – are, as it is fashionable to claim, 'essentially contested', we might well expect there to be no detectable transition.<sup>18</sup>

Second, and more importantly, the mere fact that there is a sharp boundary cannot be a reason to prefer indeterminate failure over a determinate one, for there is also a sharp boundary where failure is indeterminate. If the failure is indeterminate, we are saddled with a sharp transition from its being true that x is Fer than y to its being neither true nor false. If the failure is determinate, we are saddled instead with the sharp transition from its being true that x is Fer than y to its being false. In either case, we might hazard, Broome has no way of detecting where the sharp boundary is. Broome himself sees the problem. He suggests that we opt for the former sharp transition because it is "less abrupt" and "the lesser of two evils".<sup>19</sup> But if that is the reason for thinking that there is no determinate failure, the case is far from convincing.

Indeed, there is reason to think that Broome's general approach is misguided. There is, at present, no way of understanding vague boundaries that does not simply raise the problem of sharp boundaries at a higher level. It is this lack of a way of understanding vague boundaries, and not the collapsing principle, that guarantees that we will always be saddled with sharp boundaries. Broome's application of the collapsing principle piggybacks on this lack, for if we had a way of understanding vague boundaries that did not entail sharp boundaries at another level, it is unclear whether the collapsing principle would force us to conclude that boundaries between the three zones of the continuum were sharp.

At any rate, even if we grant Broome's move from the existence of sharp boundaries in determinate failure to the conclusion that there is no determinate failure, the claim that there must be sharp boundaries in determinate failure rests on a mistake. This is because, as we shall show, the collapsing principle is false.

#### 2.2.4. The possibility of indeterminate equality

But first it is worth pointing out an error in Broome's application of the collapsing principle. We start with an item  $x$  in the putative vague zone between the top zone and middle zones of the continuum. It must be false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , since it is false for all items in the middle zone and above. In order for the collapsing principle to apply, Broome must establish that it is neither true nor false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ . How does he do this? He claims that it cannot be true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , for if it were true,  $x$  would be in the top region. For in the top region, each item is Fer than  $y$ . He also claims that it cannot be false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , for if it were false,  $x$  would be in the middle region. For in the middle region, it is false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  and false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ .

We shall examine the latter of these claims. We know that it must be false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ . But why should we think that it cannot be false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ ? Broome argues that if it were false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , then  $x$  would be in the middle zone. But this does not follow. If it is false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  and false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , it does not follow that  $x$  is in the middle zone, for in order to be in the middle zone, it must be false that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally F. Broome needs to establish that it is false that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally F before he can assume that its being false the  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  forces the conclusion that  $x$  is in the middle zone.

Broome seems to think that he has dispensed with the possibility of equality by the following argument. If any item on the continuum is equally F as  $y$ , then it must be the only such item on the continuum and be the one item between the top zone and bottom zone. If there is an item on the continuum that is equally F as  $y$ , then there is no middle zone but only a middle point. Ex hypothesi, the standard configuration Broome appeals to in his argument involves a continuum with a middle zone, that is, with more than one item for which it is the case that it is neither Fer than  $y$  nor  $y$  Fer than it. If there is more than one item on the continuum for which it is true that it is neither Fer than  $y$  and that  $y$  is not Fer than it, then it cannot be true of any item on the continuum that it and  $y$  are equally F. This is fine as far as it goes. What Broome has shown, however, is only that it is *not true* that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally F, for if it were true, then there would only be one item between the top and bottom zones, and ex hypothesi there is more than one such item. Broome's mistake is in thinking that he has thereby established that for each item on the continuum it is *false* that it and  $y$  are equally good. It cannot be concluded from the fact that it is *not true* that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally F that it is *false* that they are equally F; being *not true* is compatible with being *neither true nor false*.

Thus, Broome's application of the collapsing principle turns on a failure to consider the case of equality. That it might be neither true nor false that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally F blocks the result that it is neither true nor false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  but false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ . We therefore have no reason to think the collapsing principle applies.

#### 2.2.5. How sharp is too sharp?

Given that, for each  $x$  in the vague zone, it may be *false* that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , there is no application of the collapsing principle. But this oversight may be seen to be harmless error. For the core of the Collapsing Principle Argument might be seen to be not in application of the collapsing principle to points in the putative vague boundary but in the claim that a transition from ‘it is true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ ’ to ‘it is false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ ’ is unacceptably sharp. So though there is no collapse, we end up with the same result, *viz.*, a putatively unacceptable sharp transition from its being true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  to its being false that it is.

Indeed, we can offer a more-streamlined version of the Collapsing Principle Argument that clearly renders Broome’s oversight harmless. The argument runs thus. We know that the claim that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$  must remain false as we move up the continuum from the middle zone where, *ex hypothesi*, there is determinate failure. Now consider the claim that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ . At the top of the continuum, it is true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ . As we move down the continuum, we must make some transition between its being true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  – the top zone – and its being false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  – the middle zone. There seem to be two possibilities. Either the transition goes from its being true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  at one point to its being false that it is at the very next point, or there is a zone of indeterminacy, where at one point it is true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  and at the next point it is neither true nor false. Now given that it is false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$  for all relevant points  $x$ , the transition cannot be of the second kind. For if it were neither true nor false that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ , then, given that it is false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , the collapsing principle would make it true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ . Therefore, if we assume that the middle zone is one of determinate failure, given the collapsing principle, we will be saddled with a true-false transition. And since a true-false transition is supposedly unacceptable, we must give up the possibility of a middle zone of determinate failure.

For this version of the argument to be persuasive, of course, we need to know why a true-false transition is too sharp. After all, the transition Broome does approve of, namely from true to neither true nor false is also sharp, but according to Broome, it is “less abrupt” and the “lesser of two evils”. Now there is some intuitive pull to the idea that a true-false transition is unacceptable. Do we really think there is some exact number of hairs less than which it is true that John is bald and otherwise it is false?<sup>20</sup> But the same intuitive unacceptability holds for the less sharp transition. How can 1,054 hairs make it true that John is bald and 1,055 make it neither true nor false that he is bald? Broome must motivate categorization of transitions into the ‘too abrupt’ and the ‘sufficiently smooth’. What is needed is an account of which types of sharp transition are unacceptable and why. Without such an account, we are left without reason to reject determinate failures, and without reason to reject the possibility of determinate failures of trichotomous comparability.

### 2.2.6. The collapsing principle - II

So far we have assumed that the collapsing principle is true. Even assuming that it is true, we have shown that we should not accept Broome’s conclusion that all failures

of comparison must be indeterminate without additional argument. As I shall now argue, the collapsing principle is false. Therefore, even if a transition from true to false is unacceptable, we have no reason to think that a middle zone of determinate failure entails one:

I want to raise two objections to the collapsing principle. The first point was suggested to me by Kit Fine.<sup>21</sup> Consider the following example. Suppose the comparative in question is ‘much heavier than’ – not in Broome’s artificial sense but in the ordinary intuitive sense. Now take any  $x$  and  $y$ , such that it is clearly false that  $x$  is much heavier than  $y$  and clearly false that  $y$  is much heavier than  $x$ .  $X$  might be a pencil and  $y$  a ballpoint pen. Now as we move up the continuum of pencils, making them heavier and heavier,<sup>22</sup> it is natural to think that we will pass through a point where it is indeterminate whether  $x$  is much heavier than  $y$ . According to the collapsing principle, there can be no such zone of indeterminacy – we must move from one pencil for which it is true that it is much heavier than the ballpoint pen to its neighbour, differing in weight by a milligram, for which it is false that it is much heavier than the pen. But this is an absurd result. So we must reject one of three claims: the claim that there are some items such that it is false that the one is much heavier than the other and false that the other is much heavier than it; the claim that as we move up the continuum of heavier items we must pass through a zone of indeterminacy; and the collapsing principle. It is clear that the collapsing principle is the claim that we should reject.

Now Broome might accept that the collapsing principle does not hold for predicates of the form ‘much Fer than’ and the like but insist that it holds for ‘better than’. So although the collapsing principle does not have general application, perhaps it applies to the comparatives of concern to us. But there is a general theoretical problem with the collapsing principle, whatever its scope of application.<sup>23</sup> The second point challenges the asymmetry implied by the principle.

The collapsing principle holds that if it is indeterminate whether  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  and false that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , it follows that it is ‘more true’ that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$  than that  $y$  is Fer than  $x$ , and thus, that it is true that  $x$  is Fer than  $y$ . Now strictly speaking, Broome does not need the collapsing principle to collapse to the truth of  $x$ ’s being Fer than  $y$ ; he could just as well say that the collapse is to the *falsity* of  $x$ ’s being Fer than  $y$ .<sup>24</sup> Broome’s argument is a *reductio*; he just needs a consequent that is inconsistent with the antecedent conditions, *viz.*, the indeterminacy of  $x$ ’s being is Fer than  $y$  and the falsity of  $y$ ’s being Fer than  $x$ . But why should we think that the indeterminacy of  $x$ ’s being Fer than  $y$  collapses either towards the truth of  $x$ ’s being Fer than  $y$  or towards the falsity of  $x$ ’s being Fer than  $y$  – even given the falsity of  $y$ ’s being Fer than  $x$ ? Indeterminacy is neutral between truth and falsity – it is indeterminate that  $p$  if it is neither true nor false that  $p$ . The relation between indeterminacy and truth on the one hand is perfectly symmetric to the relation between indeterminacy and falsity on the other. The collapsing principle, however, implies an asymmetry in these relations – there must be a collapse to either truth or falsity. Broome’s collapsing principle builds in an unwarranted asymmetry into indeterminacy and should on that ground be rejected.

If the collapsing principle is false, Broome's argument against determinate failures of comparison fails, and the possibility of parity and of incomparability is left intact. How then should we understand the middle zone of Broome's continuum? We have seen, in this dissertation, that there is no reason to think that the middle zone is one of incomparability. Indeed, it is most plausible to think that points in the middle zone are *on a par* with  $y$ , for these points and  $y$  will be small improvement cases. What then holds of the boundaries between parity and betterness on the one hand and parity and worseness on the other? Since the collapsing principle is false, we can admit of vagueness in those boundaries. So between the middle zone of parity and the top zone of betterness, we could have a vague zone according to which it is indeterminate that  $x$  is better than  $y$  though false that  $y$  is better than  $x$ . Since the zone is on the borderline between parity and betterness, it will be indeterminate that  $x$  is on a par with  $y$ . Now as for equality, I suggest we leave open the question of whether it is indeterminate that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally good or false that they are equally good since there are considerations in favour of each possibility that I am not in a position to settle here.<sup>25</sup> Our view of the standard configuration is given in Figure 5.

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**Figure 5.**  
**Parity and the Standard Configuration**

	$x > y$	$x=y$	$x \approx y$	$y > x$
Top Zone	T	F	F	F
Vague Boundary	I	I/F	I	F
Middle Zone	F	F	T	F
Vague Boundary	F	I/F	I	I
Bottom Zone	F	F	F	T

---

The third row – the middle zone – is the zone of parity. The third column gives the truth values of parity in the other zones.

It is worth noting that our understanding of the standard configuration makes logical space for both parity and vagueness in comparison. This helps to underscore the point that parity is a distinct, *sui generis* fourth relation and not merely the vagueness of trichotomous comparison.

### 3. Multiple Rankings and Parity

We close the thesis by returning to the question of whether parity can be reduced to the standard trichotomy of relations. That parity presented a fourth *sui generis* way in which items might be comparable was motivated by the fundamental idea of an evaluative difference. Nonzero, biased differences are expressed by the relations 'better

than' and 'worse than'. Zero, unbiased differences are expressed by the relation 'equally good'. Nonzero, unbiased differences are expressed by the relation 'on a par'. *A priori*, we can make sense of the idea of nonzero, unbiased differences. In practice, we can, it seems, recognize candidate cases of such differences.

But we also said that putative cases of parity were ones in which we recognized the existence of multiple rankings that derive from different legitimate 'conceptions' of the covering value concept. Indeed, the Supervaluational Interval Model of imprecise cardinal comparisons generated the intervals representing parity by trichotomous rankings given by legitimate conceptions of the covering value concept. Why should we not take the multiple rankings to be an analysis of parity? In other words, why should we not think that parity is a product of the vagueness of covering value concepts? To defend parity as a genuine fourth relation, we need to explain the difference between a legitimate conception of the covering value concept and a sharpening of a vague concept.

Our argument for the existence of cases of a fourth relation in the last chapter already precluded the possibility that the cases in question were due to vagueness, insofar as vagueness involves the indeterminate failure of a relation to hold. For the judgements upon which we relied entailed the *determinate* failure of 'better than', 'worse than', and 'equally good' to hold. But if the legitimate conceptions of the covering value concept that give rise to the multiple rankings associated with cases of parity are sharpenings of a vague concept, then we have reason to think that parity just is a product of the vagueness of trichotomous comparison. In other words, if parity is vagueness, then the small improvement cases we identified in chapter 5 must be cases of some genuine fourth relation we have yet failed to identify.

### 3.1. Essentially normative concepts

Legitimate conceptions of a covering value concept are not sharpenings of a vague concept. To see why, we need to introduce a distinction between *merely vague concepts* and *essentially normative concepts*. Essentially normative concepts can be vague; like merely vague concepts, they may admit of borderline cases. So there may be multiple legitimate sharpenings of the concept. But unlike merely vague concepts, essentially normative concepts also admit of multiple conceptions which are not sharpenings of the concept. That is, no conception can be stipulated as the meaning of the associated term; these multiple conceptions are not precisifications of the concept but are rather substantive ways of conceiving of it. In other words, the multiple legitimate conceptions of an essentially normative concept can be favoured or disfavoured purely on substantive grounds. One cannot arbitrarily stipulate that one conception is to be favoured over another while still remaining true to the concept, but must instead make out a substantive case for preferring one to another. The multiple sharpenings of a concept, in contrast, can be arbitrarily favoured or disfavoured; we can simply stipulate, without straying from the concept *bald*, for example, that by 'bald' we mean this sharpening as opposed to that. *Bald* is merely vague. *Morally wrong*, in contrast, is

essentially normative. The concept of moral wrongness admits of different conceptions according to which items can be variously ranked with respect to moral wrongness. We cannot, however, stipulate that by ‘morally wrong’ we mean one conception as opposed to another. Any favouring of one conception over another is a matter of normative argument, and cannot be a matter of stipulation. This is not to say that *morally wrong* is not vague. There may be multiple ways to sharpen the concept at the margins. Indeed, legitimate conceptions may be vague so there may be multiple sharpenings of them.

The legitimate conceptions that give rise to trichotomous rankings of items that are on a par are thus not sharpenings of a vague concept. Parity, then, is not a consequence of the vagueness of value concepts. This is not to say that parity precludes the possibility of vagueness in comparison. As we indicated in Figure 5, there may be both parity and vagueness in tetradic comparison. Essentially normative concepts may well be vague. All we have argued here is that parity is not to be reduced to the vagueness of trichotomous comparison.

### 3.2. Resolving parity into choice: a suggestion

If the multiple trichotomous rankings associated with cases of parity do not provide an analysis of parity, what work do they do? It cannot be mere fortuity that cases of parity are cases in which there are multiple trichotomous rankings deriving from multiple legitimate conceptions of the covering concept.

We end this dissertation with a suggestion. The multiple rankings associated with cases of parity are not logically prior to parity but are rather logically posterior. If items are on a par, their evaluative difference is unbiased and yet has magnitude. Whether items are on a par is given by facts independent of the existence of multiple rankings. But the multiple rankings associated with cases of parity may play a practical role once the comparison of items on a par is in place. The multiple rankings provide guides for resolving judgements of parity into practical choice.

Suppose, for example, that with respect to goodness of careers, our career in law is on a par with our career in philosophy. Since the careers can be compared – they are on a par – we know that there is a justified choice between them. But which choice is justified? And which should we choose? I want to argue that these questions, usually one in the same, are distinct in the case of parity.

Here we see that choice between items on a par is invested with a special practical significance that is lacking in choice between items related by one of the standard trichotomy. There is no need to resolve judgements of the standard trichotomy into choice; if one alternative is better, that is the alternative that is justified, if the alternatives are equally good, then either is justified and there is no further substantive question about which one ought to choose. What choice is justified and which one ought to choose are the same question. Like the case of equality, if two items are on a par, choice of either is justified.<sup>26</sup> And analogous to the case of equality, that they are on a par provides the justifying force to any justification for choosing one over the other. But unlike any of the standard trichotomous cases, when items are on a par, a further

substantive practical *ought* becomes available; there is a further question as to which one *should* choose, given that either choice is justified. Thus we talk of ‘resolving’ a parity judgement into choice.

The resolution of parity into choice involves taking a substantive stand on how the covering value concept should be conceived. If one favours a conception according to which one alternative is better than the other, then one should choose the favoured alternative, even though choosing the other would be justified. If one favours a conception according to which the alternatives are equally good, then one is justified in choosing either and that is the end of the matter. In any case, favouring one conception over another declares a substantive position on the value concept. In choosing the legal career over the philosophical career, I am declaring my stand on how the value of goodness of career should be conceived. Taking this substantive stand on how a covering value concept should be conceived has only *practical* and not theoretical import. For the theoretical truth is that the concept admits of multiple legitimate conceptions. My favouring one conception over another, then, is not a theoretical declaration that this is how the concept is correctly conceived; it is rather a *practical* declaration: in choosing between alternatives with respect to goodness of career, I shall understand *goodness of career – thus*. Given my substantive stand, the determination of which of two items on a par I should choose follows. My substantive stand may have implications for future choices I make.<sup>27</sup>

How this special normative significance is to be understood is a matter I leave for future investigation. Some possibilities, however, suggest themselves. Perhaps my taking a substantive practical stand on how certain values should be conceived is an expression of my evaluative character or freedom or agency. If character is at least in part determined by the choices one makes, how can my character be *mine* if a comparison of the alternatives always compels one choice or another or deems either choice as acceptable? Where is there room for me to assert my character or my agency? If items are on a par, the evaluative universe gives us a menu of legitimate ways in which we can resolve the judgement into choice. Which item from the menu we choose, however, is up to us.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Assuming the organic account of bearer comparisons is correct, we might put the point like this: there are multiple contextualized differences between aspects of contributory values belonging to mono-variant bundles, and since a comparison of two bearers is a function of these component differences, if there are many component differences, there are many comparisons of the given bearers.

<sup>2</sup> John Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", *IIPR*.

<sup>3</sup> T. K. Seung and Daniel Bonevac, "Plural Values and Indeterminate Rankings," *Ethics* 102 (1992): 799-813.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Levi, *Hard Choices*; Lewis Kornhauser, "The Hunting of the Snag"; and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas*, pp. 66-68.

<sup>5</sup> I assume that the vagueness of comparison derives from the vagueness of the covering value and not from some other part of the generic relation since whether a generic relation is vague seems to depend on the value with respect to which it is relativized. So, for example, it seems clear that 'better than with respect to number of lives saved' is not vague, but 'better than with respect to moral goodness' might well be. Broome takes the vagueness to be in the two-place, unrelativized relation and so must be denying the covering value requirement.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the organic structure of values is irrelevant here. Although a small change in contributory values may trigger a very large change in merit with respect to the covering value, the argument here only relies on the possibility that we can make small changes without triggering such large ones.

<sup>7</sup> Broome does not explicitly take himself to be arguing against the existence of incomparability or of parity but rather sees his argument as one about how incomparability should be understood, *viz.*, as a consequence of the vagueness of comparative concepts. Taking his conclusion that all failures of comparison must be indeterminate as a premise of a general argument against both trichotomous incomparability and parity, however, gives his conclusion its greatest significance. In any case, the general argument against trichotomous incomparability may be implicit in some of what he says. He notes that the indeterminacy of comparison is in some sense a kind of incomparability and in other senses a kind of comparability. His reason for thinking that it is a kind of comparability, however, is that where there is indeterminacy, it is *not false* that a value relation holds between the items. This suggests that he thinks that incomparability is properly understood as the *determinate* failure of comparison, for if being not false is compatible with comparability, it is incompatible with incomparability. But if being not false is incompatible with incomparability, being neither true nor false must be incompatible with incomparability. Thus, implicit in this remark is recognition that incomparability is the determinate failure of comparison. So perhaps Broome would not disavow the general argument against incomparability after all.

<sup>8</sup> Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", *IIPR*, ms., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Strictly, Broome thinks 'better than', presumably simpliciter, is a comparative. We examine his view modified to take on board our remarks on the necessity of a covering value.

<sup>10</sup> There is some reason for doubting that these artificial comparatives are comparatives at all. For the possibility that things are equally F does not even make sense

for these F's. For instance, what would it be for two items to be equally mucheavy or Pareto-better? Insofar as equality does not make sense on these comparatives, the standard 'at least as F' does not make sense, for 'at least as F' is presumably a symmetric relation but symmetry would fail for these artificial comparatives.

<sup>11</sup> Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", p. 13. See also p. 9. Broome notes that his collapsing principle derives from a condition offered by Adam Morton in his "Hypercomparatives", *Synthese* 111: 97-114, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Other difficulties with the truth account: How can it be more true that the present king of France is bald than that the present Queen of England is bald? And could it be more true that the number four is red than that this apple is red?

<sup>14</sup> Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of the argument does not essentially rely on the precise cardinality of F, but since Broome uses an analogy with weight in a way that suggests he has precise cardinality in mind, I formulate the interpretation to include that assumption.

<sup>16</sup> Strictly, of course, comparatives and their converses are 'supertrue', since the ordinary notion of truth is relativized to sharpenings.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1955-56.

<sup>19</sup> Broome, "Is Incommensurability Vagueness?", p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Compare Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> After many attempts to pinpoint what was wrong with the collapsing principle, I fortuitously mentioned the problem to Kit Fine who thought for about two minutes and then came up with a version of the example here showing why the principle had to be false.

<sup>22</sup> There is a formal difference between this example and Broome's standard configuration; the items in the continuum are heavier than one another, not much heavier. But this formal difference makes no difference to the argument.

<sup>23</sup> I suspect there is another general theoretical problem having to do with a failure to distinguish between levels or different ways in which a proposition can be 'more true'. If 'x is F<sub>er</sub> than y' is 'more true' at a meta-level, it does not seem legitimate to conclude that it is true at the object level. I do not have space here to pursue this thought.

<sup>24</sup> To think otherwise is to make the same mistake the Broome himself makes in his example of the great Australians.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, perhaps the right thing to say about this question is that both indeterminacy and falsity are possibilities.

<sup>26</sup> It is of course sometimes permissible to flip a coin between items on a par. If, for example, the items are absolutely trivial in importance, or if there are external constraints on deliberation that require treating the case as one of equality, then parity and equality are practically indistinguishable.

<sup>27</sup> It is by adopting a conception that money pump consequences in situations of unknown dynamic choice might be avoided. See discussion in chapter 3.

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