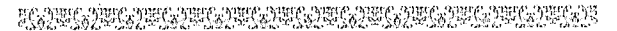


*Incommensurability,  
Incomparability,  
and  
Practical Reason*



*Edited by Ruth Chang*



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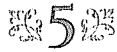
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TO THE MEMORY OF ISAIAH BERLIN



## Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods

ELIZABETH ANDERSON

To develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce.

—William James, *Pragmatism*

Call two goods incommensurable if neither one is better than or equal in value to the other.<sup>1</sup> The possibility that some goods are incommensurable is commonly held to pose serious problems for rational choice. This worry depends on two beliefs. One is that value judgments guide rational choice only through the principle that one must choose a good better than or equal in value to any alternative. This entails that there is no rational basis for choice between incommensurable goods. But this would pose no problem if we could somehow ensure that we could commensurate goods whenever we had to—that is, whenever we met them as *options*. Then the only incommensurable goods would be such things as worlds governed by different physical laws, between which we never have to choose. A second belief underlies worries about incommensurability: that the structure of values is independent of the requirements of practical reason. Only then would the possibility that goods are incommensurable stand to practical reason as the possibility that the external world is radically unknowable stands to theoretical reason: as a cause for alarm, confusion, and skepticism about reason.

I shall argue that incommensurability poses no problems for rational choice because both beliefs are false. Value judgments guide practical reason in many ways besides the optimization principle. I call the theory that explains how this can be so the *expressive theory of rational choice*. Moreover, the structure of values cannot be intractable to practical reason because it is generated by practical reason itself. I call the theory that explains how this can be so *pragmatism*. Pragmatism says that the meaning of a statement is exhausted by its practical implications. Whatever defects it may have as a general theory of meaning, it offers

an excellent account of value judgments. Pragmatism implies that goods are incommensurable whenever we have no reason to compare their values in practice. Sometimes it is boring or pointless to compare them, other times it makes sense to leave room for the free play of nonrational motivations like whims and moods, and sometimes goods play such different roles in deliberation that attempts to compare them head to head are incoherent. All of these cases generate incommensurabilities, but in ways that do not confuse practical reason, since they are its own conclusions.

Pragmatic theories of value are not widely understood. Debates about incommensurable goods have therefore focused on the optimization principle. But pragmatism offers the clearest way to ground alternatives to optimization. Kant constructed a pragmatic theory of value that proposed the same-kind of Copernican revolution for practical reason that he attempted for theoretical reason: Instead of trying to establish that practical reason could handle an independent structure of values, he showed how the structure of values was a construction of practical reason. I devote the next section to outlining the general principles of pragmatism, Kant's version of it, and my own pragmatic theory of value, which responds to problems in Kant's theory.

### Pragmatic Theories of Value

Practical reason is the power that agents have to adopt and revise their aims and attitudes in response to considerations they take to support or undermine them. Pragmatic theories of value claim that value judgments are constructions of practical reason that guide our reasoning about what to do and what to care about. This has two implications. First, value judgments have no proper application outside of practical reasoning, so it does not make sense to call things "good" that lack any relation to rational agents. To talk about what is good or to wonder how much value there is in the world outside of practical contexts is like talking about what is a point and wondering how many points there are in the world outside of sports and games. It does not make sense to affirm a value judgment that one thinks should never inform people's deliberations and attitudes. This is like supporting a rule that umpires should not count toward victory points fairly scored in an athletic contest. Just as there is nothing else for a point to be but something that counts toward victory in a contest, there is nothing else for a value to be but something that guides our deliberations and attitudes in practice.

Second, value judgments are justified by showing that they can perform their practical function well. This is done by showing that it is rational to use them to

intrinsic value. For the practical role of intrinsic values is neither to prescribe an end to be maximized nor to prescribe an attitude toward an aggregate. It is to prescribe discrete evaluative attitudes that we should take up toward each of their bearers. For a value to be aggregative is for there to be a rational principle that tells us either to maximize it or to tie the degree of one's response to the total number of its bearers or to the total amount of value contained in all instances taken together. The mark of a maximizing principle is its support of trade-offs of one intrinsic good for another for the sake of increasing an aggregate. If the principle guides action, it tells people to sacrifice some instances of a value if this increases the total number of instances or the total value of all taken together. If the principle guides attitudes, it tells people to neglect some instances if this will optimize one's responses to all instances taken together.

The principles for expressing our evaluative attitudes toward most kinds of intrinsic goods are not maximizing and do not support these kinds of trade-offs. Instead, they typically have a *distributive* form. This is clearly true for respect, admiration, and love. For parents to express their love for their children adequately, they must show affection and concern to *each* of their children. Parental love is not truly expressed by parents' orienting themselves to some aggregate child collective. If it were, there would be principles that would tell parents to "maximize" the total "amount" of their love by trading off affection for one child for affection for another. To govern one's attitudes according to such a principle is to withhold love from one child, not to express it more adequately to all. It also represents a misunderstanding of parental love to treat it as a finite resource to be economized in a zero-sum game.<sup>12</sup> That principles for expressing favorable attitudes are typically distributive rather than maximizing explains why it generally does not make sense to say that intrinsic goods even of a single kind can be aggregated.

### Incommensurable Goods: The No Good Reasons Principle

Now consider whether any goods are incommensurable. Two goods are incommensurable if neither one is better than or equal in value to the other. One can commensurate goods only in relation to some common valuable respect or "covering value."<sup>13</sup> So let us set aside nonsensical attempts to compare the intrinsic values of goods that are valuable in fundamentally different respects, such as the genius of a scientist with the honor of a gentleman.<sup>14</sup> To determine whether two goods are commensurable, pragmatists ask what practical attitude- or action-guiding function claims of commensurability can serve. There are two possibilities. Either it makes sense for us to take up a common attitude toward the objects

being compared, and to adjust the relative intensity of the attitude to the relative values ascribed to the objects. Or it makes sense for us to justify a choice of one over the other in terms of these relative values.

This analysis implies a simple test for incommensurability. If there is no point to comparing the overall values of two goods, the comparative value judgment about them will serve no practical function. Pragmatism says that if a value judgment serves no practical function, then it has no truth value or warrant. And if a comparative value judgment has no truth value or warrant, then the goods it compares are incommensurable. Therefore, if there is no good reason to compare the overall values of two goods, the goods are incommensurable. Call this the "no good reasons principle" for incommensurability.

Our practices of making overall goodness-of-a-kind judgments reveal wide gaps that reflect the negligible interest we take in comparing the intrinsic worth of many goods of the same kind. If a kind of good is broad enough, there will be radically different ways of being a good of that kind. As the points in common among goods of a kind become fewer and more abstract, our interest in comparing their overall intrinsic values declines. Consider cross-modal aesthetic evaluations. Is Henry Moore's sculpture, *Recumbent Figure*, as intrinsically good a work of art as Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*? What could be the point of answering such a question? It is doubtful that there are any illuminating *overall* comparisons of aesthetic worth here that help us refine our sensibilities or our understanding of art, or that reasonably guide any attitudes or actions. They are too different to support interesting comparative overall evaluations.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps we could say that Moore's work is as good a sculpture as Achebe's is a good novel. Chang proposes that in such cases, we should say that the two goods are, if not equal, then "on a par," so still commensurable.<sup>16</sup> If the aesthetic values of all artworks were commensurable in this way, then something like a Michelin guide to *The Ten Billion Greatest Artworks of All Time*, ranking all works on a scale from one to ten, would have to be a sensible undertaking. But to what end? It would certainly be silly, boring, and arbitrary to draw a line between seventh- and eighth-rate artworks. And is a first-rate limerick on a par with a first-rate concerto? With a fifth-rate concerto? No authentic aesthetic attitude would reasonably respond to such a unified ranking. Admiring contemplation is an aesthetic attitude that prevails in museums and classical concert halls. But aesthetic worth is not exhausted by the degree to which its bearers merit this attitude. Some music is aesthetically good because it makes you feel like dancing, limericks because they make you laugh. One could imagine various practical projects that could make use of such a guide. But these are the projects of philistines, snobs, and prigs, precisely those least open to a free exploration and