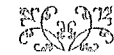
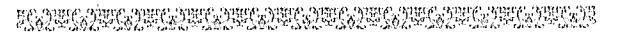


*Incommensurability,
Incomparability,
and
Practical Reason*



Edited by Ruth Chang



HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1997

Copyright © 1997 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Incommensurability, incomparability, and practical reason / edited by Ruth Chang.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-44755-7 (cloth)
ISBN 0-674-44756-5 (pbk.)
I. Comparison (Philosophy) I. Chang, Ruth.
BD236.I53 1997
121'.4—dc21 97-19161

BD
236
I53
1997

TO THE MEMORY OF ISAIAH BERLIN

nary human experience, which teaches us that quite commonly people do not survey all the options open to them before choosing what to do. Rather, they find an option that they believe not to be excluded by reason and that appeals to them and pursue it. At the very least, the case for this conception of practical rationality is to be taken seriously. That suggests that incommensurability of the value of options is a pervasive feature with far-reaching theoretical consequences.

Value, Comparability, and Choice

DONALD REGAN

In this volume I am the “designated eccentric”, appointed to take a position no one else would touch with a barge pole. I believe in what I shall term “the complete comparability of value” (or “complete comparability” or even just “comparability” for short). Specifically, I believe the following two propositions.

1. There is one and only one sort of value that matters to practical reason in the final analysis. This unique final value is G. E. Moore’s “good”.
2. Given any two items (objects, experiences, states of affairs, whatever) sufficiently well specified so that it is apposite to inquire into their (intrinsic) value in the Moorean sense, then either one is better than the other, or the two are precisely equal in value.

The thesis of “complete comparability” is both stronger and weaker than its name might suggest. The thesis is very strong in that it posits a complete weak ordering. There is no appeal to any sort of intransitive relation such as “rough equality”, which some have recently suggested is an important mode of comparison. On the other hand, the thesis says nothing at all about how far comparability obtains with respect to any value predicate other than Moorean “good”. In that way, the thesis is, if not weak, then at least drastically limited.

It is clear that my claim about the existence and centrality of Moorean good is far more significant and problematic than any specific claim about comparability. For myself, the only issue of comparability that I have more than a puzzle fancier’s interest in is the issue of comparability in terms of Moorean good, which most philosophers claim to find unintelligible. In the end, the crucial issue is not comparability but the nature of value, and how judgments of value figure in practical reasoning. Other chapters in this book, notably Elizabeth Anderson’s, also make it clear that to deal properly with the matter of comparability, we need a full-fledged theory of practical reason.

Unfortunately, I cannot simply produce at this point a complete theory of practical reason. Instead, I shall proceed as follows. In section 1, I shall offer

property "good". The point is not to maximize the occurrence of any property at all. *The point is simply to produce the best state of affairs we can.* To put it another way, we do not promote certain states of affairs because they are somehow carriers of something else (good, or value) that we *really* care about. Rather, we care about promoting these states of affairs because, in view of what they are, they are good. They are to be promoted. It is probably a mistake even to think of good as a property in a metaphysical sense, however convenient it is to treat it as a property grammatically. If "good" is the name of anything, it would seem nearer the truth to think of it as naming a ranking of possible objects or states of affairs in terms of to-be-promotedness. In his repeated references to good as a property, I suspect Moore was making his own view harder to grasp.

The idea of a nonnatural "ranking of states of affairs in terms of to-be-promotedness", however mysterious, does not seem *more* mysterious than a nonnatural property "good". And this much mysteriousness I have suggested is unavoidable if reflective deliberation and choice are to make sense. But the question remains just what the nature of this ranking is and how complete it is. That is the question of comparability.

2

Comparisons between goods of the same kind are relatively unproblematic. Nobody, I think, would balk at the idea that an extensive knowledge of Hittite archaeology is more valuable than a paltry knowledge of the same topic, even if the person with only a smattering knows a few isolated facts that have escaped the expert (so that there is no relationship of strict inclusion between the goods being compared). But how can we compare a knowledge of the Hittites and a knowledge of the halides? Or harder still, how can we compare, say, a friendship and research on beetles? Such different things may both be valuable, but how can we possibly say one is more valuable than the other?

The first thing to notice is that we often are willing to say things of just this sort. Imagine that what we are comparing is a deep and passionately committed knowledge of beetles, such as might result from a life's study, and a modestly rewarding but not especially intimate friendship, such as any fortunate person can expect to have a goodly number of. Whatever our worries about how comparisons of value are possible between such different things, do we really doubt that the knowledge of beetles is more valuable? (The reader who hesitates may just think knowledge is not all it is cracked up to be, and human relations are the very stuff of life. This reader should compare a richly developed friendship with a modest familiarity with, say, scarabaeids. If the reader says the friendship is

more valuable, while conceding the knowledge some value, my basic point is made.) James Griffin has given us some other examples. As he points out, we sometimes judge without hesitation that some accomplishment is worth the pain it required.⁹ Or we may give up some amount of political freedom to live in the country of someone we love.¹⁰

Michael Stocker, an eloquent proponent of value pluralism, is nonetheless quite explicit that plural values may be comparable.¹¹ In a specific example, he suggests that a particular increase in wisdom may more than compensate in value for the suffering by which one acquires it (even though he does not accept the maximizer's inference that if that is true, one ought to seek the wisdom at the price of the suffering).¹² Joseph Raz, who believes in the incomparability of some goods, nonetheless says that "more of one thing may be better than a certain amount of another, even if less of the first is incommensurate with that amount of the other."¹³ In context, the point is that a highly successful life of one kind may be more valuable than a modestly successful life of another kind, even though modestly successful lives of the two kinds might be incommensurable. So far as I am aware, no one in this volume claims that plural values are always incomparable. Such a claim would fly in the face of very common ways of thinking and talking.

It seems to be widely acknowledged, then, that we can often compare great values of one type against relatively slight values of another type. It could still be true, of course, that *most* intertype comparisons, between values from the middle of the scale in both types, should be impossible. (More precisely, it could still be true of most pairs of goods, where the members of the pair represent different types of value, that neither is better than the other, nor are they precisely equal in value.)

But the concession that intertype comparisons are sometimes possible seems to me to give away a great deal, and indeed to make it unclear why they should ever *not* be possible. Why should it not be so, that a particular middling-successful life as a clarinetist must be either better than, equal in value to, or worse than a particular middling-successful life as a corporate lawyer? The failure of comparison cannot be attributed to the *general* impossibility of intertype comparisons; that has already been abandoned. Nor does it seem that the failure of comparison can result from an insufficient fine-grainedness in the value scales. If we are comparing various lives-as-a-clarinetist with each other, it seems we can imagine gradations in value as small as we like (including gradations much smaller than it would normally be worth worrying about in practice, but that is a quite different point). The same is true of lives-as-a-corporate-lawyer. So if *some* comparisons are possible between particular lives-as-a-clarinetist and par-