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Comptes rendus philosophiques

Ruth Chang, ed.

Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997. Pp. ix + 303. US\$57.50 (cloth: ISBN 0-674-44755-7);

US\$24.95 (paper: ISBN 0-674-44756-5).

Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason is a major contribution to the literature on these topics. Two options for choice are 'incomparable' if it is not true that the first is better (more valuable) than the second, not true that the first is worse (less valuable) than the second, and not true that the two are equally valuable. Two options are 'incommensurable' (at least in a central sense of that term that properly makes it nonsynonymous with 'incomparable') if their comparative value cannot be represented by numbers on a cardinal scale — roughly, a scale with a unit of value, such that the number assigned to each option equals the number of units that the option realizes. 'Value' can be used narrowly, as meaning one particular type of choice-relevant consideration (for example, an axiological as opposed to deontological consideration), or broadly as meaning anything about an option that makes it choice-worthy. It is broad-value incommensurability and incomparability that are generally at issue in IIP. Objects other than options are sometimes described as 'incommensurable' or 'incomparable,' but IIP is fundamentally about the link between incommensurability, incomparability and choice. At the risk of homogenizing a rich and diverse volume, I suggest that all of the thirteen contributions can be seen as addressing one (or more) of the following questions: (1) Does incommensurability preclude rational choice? (2) Can options be, not just incommensurable, but incomparable? (3) If so, does incomparability preclude rational choice? Anyone interested in these questions should start here.

Does incommensurability preclude rational choice? Anderson, Lukes, Sunstein, and Wiggins argue, in effect, for a negative answer. Anderson offers a general, 'expressive' theory of rational choice, such that the choice-worthiness (value) of an option does not correspond to any property that defines a

cardinal scale. For example, if P is faced with the choice between saving her dying mother or continuing a friendship, the rational choice-procedure is not to measure how many units of pleasure, or happiness, or anything else the two options realize, but rather to decide 'how best to reconcile the expressive demands of the different kinds of concern we owe to' the two persons (103). (Although scales and scaling procedures are distinct — the value relations between options may have enough structure to define a common unit, even though the procedure of choosing between options by measuring units is not practicable or available — it is certainly possible for a theory of value, such as Anderson's, to deny cardinality in both senses.) In a similar vein, Lukes points to the existence of 'sacred' values (188), such as life or friendship, that cannot be commensurated with other values; instead, choice between an option instantiating a sacred value, and another option, is rational if it conforms with applicable cultural norms.

Sunstein, who explicitly uses the term 'incommensurability' as distinct from incomparability and in a way close to noncardinality, argues that 'choices among incommensurable options are the stuff [of] law [and of] everyday life' (240), and that 'extrinsic reasons,' 'expressive considerations,' and even 'overall intrinsic worth' can constitute reasons for choice between incommensurables (240-1). Wiggins, as I read him, sees noncardinality as one upshot of his particularist account of rational choice.

One might disagree with expressivism or particularism but accept the larger claims that (a) some options are incommensurable, and (b) incommensurability does not preclude rational choice. (For example, if value V1 is lexically ordered over value V2, options will be incommensurable but comparable with respect to the two values taken together: the rational approach will be to choose the option that is better with respect to V1 and, as between options that are equally good in that respect, the option that is better with respect to V2.) Indeed, as far as I can tell, every contributor to IIP accepts these larger claims. More controversial are the corresponding claims about incomparability. Can options be downright incomparable? At the threshold, Broome and Chang provide innovative accounts of what incomparability might consist in. I have defined incomparability as the case where it is not true that one option is better than another, not true that one option — the first — is worse than the other, and not true that the two are equal in value. The standard variant of incomparability, thus defined, is where it is false that the options are better, worse, or equal in value, and further, it is false that any other positive value relation holds between them. The innovative variant, developed by Chang, is where it is false that the options are better, worse, or equal, but they are 'on a par': 'the evaluative difference between [the] two items is nonzero and unbiased' (27). Broome's innovative variant involves vagueness: it is neither true nor false that the options are better, worse, or equal in value. Although the possibility of vague incomparability has been previously recognized, Broome provides ingenious arguments in favor of that variant, as against the standard one, and to the effect that vague incomparability must have a particular structure — that the boundaries of the zone of vagueness must, in a certain way, be quite sharp.

But why think that incomparability can exist at all? Griffin argues that options can be incomparable with respect to moral values, given the absence of an overarching framework (such as utilitarianism) by which to order them. Chang provides a rigorous overview of the arguments for incomparability. She suggests that the apparent rationality of judging an option not better nor worse than an alternative, while at the same time judging that a small improvement to the option would still leave it neither better nor worse than the alternative, provides the strongest argument. Regan, by contrast, contends that given (1) the possibility of indefinitely fine-grained intra-value comparisons, and (2) the possibility of some inter-value comparisons, we should conclude that (3) indefinitely fine-grained inter-value comparisons are also possible. I confess not to have been persuaded by Regan, here plausibly, what individuates (or goes to individuating) values just is the platitude that options differing only with respect to a single value are universally comparable - nor by Regan's other two arguments for universal comparability, namely (a) that how options compare is revealed by the choice of an ideal agent, and (b) that choice between incomparables is unintelligible. It seems to me that these two latter arguments have no greater force against the possibility of incomparables than they do against the possibility of equally good options, which latter possibility everyone (including Regan) accepts. Nonetheless, Regan's contribution to IIP, together with a prior article therein cited, constitute the leading case for universal comparability, and are essential reading.

Finally, does incomparability preclude rational choice? Taylor suggests that 'a sense of how [options] fit together in a whole life' (179) enables choice between incomparables. Note, however, that, if one option is better than the other with respect to whole-life-fittingness, then they are not (at least in this respect) incomparable. Raz and Finnis argue that choice between incomparables that is guided by, respectively, 'desires' or 'feelings' is indeed rational. There are two objections here, one in effect advanced by Regan, the second by Millgram. First, the Raz/Finnis view of desires or feelings as choice-relevant considerations that are not full-blooded values is incoherent; either they are full-blooded values (in which case the options are not, after all, incomparable), or counter-preferential choice is not irrational. Second, even on the Raz/Finnis view, the problem of comparability simply recurs with respect to desires or feelings. One option can be more desired than a second, even though neither option is more or less desired than a third — since, as Millgram puts it, a desire 'will generally not contain within itself the resources needed to adjudicate conflicts between it and many other actual and possible desires' (154). And he continues: 'Choice on the basis of incommensurable desires undermines unified agency ... by either successively propelling the agent in different directions, or encouraging indecisiveness ... or where an agent is able to avoid [that] by dint of the sheer determination not to change his mind once it is made up, by committing him to a dogged and

unintelligent response to as-yet-unanticipated circumstances' (156). Stocker offers a more radical critique of the link between comparability and rationality than Raz and Finnis — to the effect that it can be rational to choose a worse option — but this is persuasively rebutted by Chang.

Surely some attention to the case of rational choice among equally-valued options would have helped illuminate the problem of rational choice among incomparables. I know of no one who thinks that the betterness of an option is a necessary condition for its being rationally chosen. Where options are of equal value (or at least of precisely equal value), the choice of either one is rational if not justified. Why, then, is it irrational to flip a coin between incomparables (at least where the agent monitors choices over time so as to avoid being value-pumped)? A clearer focus on the distinction between rational and justified choice, and on the case of equal value, would have made *IIP* even better than it already is. But that is just a small quibble with a truly fine volume.

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