

A Paradox of Practical Rationality

Suppose morality requires me to do one thing, but it would better serve my well-being to do something else. What ought I to do? Some theorists believe that morality requirements always outweigh non-moral considerations—that morality is overriding. But let's assume for the sake of argument that morality is not overriding. Then what?

There is a particular conception of practical rationality that was, as far as I know, introduced by W.D. Ross in *The Right and the Good*—the idea that what one ought to do is a function of what reasons one has to do the various things one might do. The most straightforward such function is the maximizing function: one ought to act on one's strongest reason. This version has been adopted by Thomas Scanlon.¹ While you will not find in the literature many explicit endorsements of the Rossian conception, it is clear from the ubiquitous claims about what we have “strongest reason” to do that many theorists are relying on it. If what we ought to do weren't determined by what reasons we have and how strong they are, what difference would it make what we have strongest reason to do?

Any theorist who endorses or relies upon the Rossian conception of practical rationality needs to know whether reasons can be compared strengthwise. What it means for two reasons, x and y , to be comparable in strength is for it to be true that either x is stronger than y or x is less strong than y or x is equally as strong as y .² Surprisingly, the

¹ Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 32.

² I am assuming that there are only these three comparative. Ruth Chang, James Griffin and Derek Parfit have disputed this; they believe that ‘parity’ (Chang) or ‘rough equality’ (Griffin and Parfit) constitutes a fourth comparative relation. The payoff of positing that parity or rough equality is a comparative relation is the ability to undermine the “small steps” argument for incomparability. However, I will not be using the

literature contains not a single discussion of whether reasons are comparable in this sense. True, there is a growing body of work on whether all values can be compared strengthwise.³ Perhaps there is a widespread belief that if we can answer the questions of values comparability, we will have the answers to the questions of reasons comparability.⁴ In any event, my intention here is to start a discussion on one of those latter questions. Specifically, I want to inquire whether moral reasons are comparable in strength to non-moral reasons. This strikes me as the most important of all the reasons comparability questions, yet one that is not easily answered.

I shall first argue for what I call the ‘widespread incomparability thesis’—the claim that moral and non-moral reasons are always incomparable in strength. I will present three strong objections to the thesis. My conclusion will be that we have extremely compelling reasons both to accept and to deny that moral reasons are comparable in strength to non-moral reasons. We cannot, of course, do both, which means that we are facing a paradox, the importance of which cannot easily be dismissed.

III. The Argument for the Widespread Incomparability Thesis

The argument for the widespread incomparability thesis proceeds as follows:

small steps argument in support of the idea of reasons incomparability, and so for our purposes we can simply assume that there are only three comparative relations.

³ The original contemporary writings on this were Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," 1977, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 128-41, and Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," 1979, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 71-82. Joseph Raz kept the issue alive by writing numerous papers and chapters on the issue beginning in the 1980s. See for instance his "Value Incommensurability," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 86 (1985-86): 117-34. The place to start for the current thinking on the issue is *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, Ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴ My view is that this belief is mistaken, for two reasons. First, some reasons are not grounded in a value. And second, even were it true that all reasons are grounded in a value, there are still good reasons to believe that the strength of a value-grounded reason is not necessarily the strength of the value that grounds it.

1. For a comparative relation to hold between the strengths of a moral and a non-moral reason, there would have to be a basis of comparison for the strengths of moral and non-moral reasons.
2. There is no basis of comparison for the strengths of moral and non-moral reasons.
3. Therefore, no comparative relations hold between the strengths of moral and non-moral reasons.

If we are looking for a basis of comparison for moral and non-moral reasons, we should begin by asking what sort of thing could serve as a basis of comparison. My view, the truth of which I shall assume for the purposes of argument, is that what we are looking for is a practical normative standard. I shall define a practical normative standard as an ideal that grounds reasons—reasons to pursue, achieve or live up to the ideal—and structures the normative relations they bear to one another. For instance, prudence is an ideal that we have reasons to live up to, hence prudence is a practical normative standard and the reasons it grounds are called prudential reasons.⁵ The normative relations reasons can bear toward each other include outweighing, undermining, cancelling out, enabling, etc.

Most of the rest of this paper will be taken up by a defense of premise 2. My argument for premise 1 is brief, and I respond to only one objection to it. In addition, I provide only a partial defense of premise 2: there are two kinds of practical normative

⁵ I am not going to delve into the issue of what distinguishes one ideal from another. Later in the paper I am going to need examples of moral reasons and of non-moral reasons, but all the examples I will use are paradigm cases. The difficulty of separating the various standards from each other well enough to be able to correctly categorize any given reason is not a concern for us here.

standard that might serve as the sort of basis of comparison required by premise 2, but I will argue against the existence of only one kind. With respect to the other kind of standard, I will simply assume, based on work I have done elsewhere, that it does not exist.

II.1.a The Argument for Premise 1, Part a: The Need for a Basis of Comparison

Premise 1 is the claim that for moral and non-moral reasons to be comparable strengthwise there needs to be a basis of comparison. This is just an instance of what I take to be the general truth that any strengthwise comparison of reasons requires a basis of comparison. By “basis of comparison,” I just mean something in virtue of which a comparative relation holds between two reasons. Given this definition, the denial of premise 1 is the claim that it is possible for two reasons to bear a comparative relation to each other in virtue of nothing. In other words, the comparative relation is a brute fact. I have no argument against this claim, but it is drastically counterintuitive—so much so that surely the burden of proof rests with whoever assents to it.

Ruth Chang has made this same point with respect to the comparability of values. She uses the jigsaw puzzle as a metaphor. The idea of values bearing certain comparative relations to each other as a matter of brute fact is like the idea of a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces fit together but do not form a picture. In this case, their fitting together is a brute fact. The contrast here is with jigsaw puzzles that form a picture when completed. With these puzzles, the pieces fit together a certain way for a reason: putting them together that way helps form a picture. Chang says that values can't simply fit together

like the pieces of a non-picture-forming jigsaw puzzle. There must be some unifying idea—some picture—in virtue of which they fit together.⁶ My view is that the same holds true for reasons. Whatever that picture is in virtue of which the comparative relation holds is what I am calling the basis of comparison.

III.1.b. The Argument for Premise 1, Part b: A Response to an Objection

Suppose someone were able to tell me what facts about reasons x and y make x stronger than y, and call these facts XYZ. I would then be in a position to demand to be told what grounds XYZ. And so on. One might complain that I am setting up a metaphysical regress problem for which no one has a satisfactory solution.

Regress arguments, as used in metaphysics, are skeptical arguments—attempts to cast doubt on the existence of certain realms of facts or properties. But the incomparabilist—the person who denies that certain values or reasons are comparable to each other—does not aim to raise such doubts about comparative relations. We need to distinguish claims of reasons non-comparability from claims of reasons incomparability. A claim of reasons non-comparability is a denial that there is any fact of the matter as to whether one reason is stronger than another, just as there is no fact of the matter as to whether North America is more honest than the year 2005. A claim of reasons incomparability, on the other hand, is a claim that two reasons bear no strengthwise comparative relationship to each other. Such a claim requires admitting the existence of certain facts. The incomparabilist admits that there is a fact of the matter as to whether

⁶ Ruth Chang, “Putting Together Morality and Well-Being,” in Peter Baumann and Monika Betzler, eds. *Practical Conflicts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 118-58 at 138-9.

Smith's moral reason to tell Jones the truth is stronger than Brown's well-being-based reason to have a tasty lunch. The fact, according to her, is that it is not. The question is why she is right or wrong about this, and with respect to that question, the comparabilist and the incomparabilist are symmetrically situated. The incomparabilist believes she can explain why it is false that x is stronger than y—i.e., because there is no basis for comparing the strengths of moral and well-being-based reasons. What the incomparabilist wants from those who think that some comparative relation does hold between such reasons is to point to what makes it the case that that relation holds. The incomparabilist's argument is not skeptical, and she makes no demands of the comparabilist that she does not make of herself.

II.2.i. The Argument for Premise 2, Part i: Two Kinds of Practical Normative Standard

Premise two is the claim that there is never a basis of comparison in the case of moral and non-moral reasons. This claim, of course, is quite general in that it ranges over non-moral reasons of every sort. But I will make my argument for it by way of a single test case: whether moral reasons are comparable in strength to well-being-based reasons. I will argue that they are not. I will argue later that the argument I am about to make is generalizable, *mutatis mutandis*, to all other moral/non-moral reason pairs. I have chosen well-being-based reasons for my test case because most of the literature on incomparability of values focuses on the case of moral- and well-being-based values.

What we are looking for is a practical normative standard that could unite moral- and well-being-based reasons under a single basis of comparison. Only two kinds of

standard would do the trick: a standard that provides a basis for comparing *all* reasons (what we might call a “substantive global standard”) or a standard that provides a basis for comparing just moral and well-being-based reasons (a “substantive local standard”).⁷ In the next section I address whether there could be a substantive global standard. Subsequently I argue against the existence of a substantive local standard.

II.2.ii. The Argument for Premise Two, Part ii: A Global Standard

Our question for now is whether there is a substantive global standard. I think that often it’s this sort of standard people have in mind when they use terms like ‘rationality,’ ‘reason,’ or ‘reason as such’ and when they speak of a normative standard that is ‘all things considered’ or ‘final.’ Since we need to have a way to refer to this standard, I will call it the final standard.

I have argued elsewhere that there is indeed a final standard, but it is not substantive—i.e. it doesn’t contain within it an account of what reasons we have and how they compare strengthwise. The final standard is purely formal; it requires is that one act on one’s strongest reason, where “strongest reason” is understood *de dicto*.⁸ This being the case, the final standard does not provide a basis for comparing reasons strengthwise but simply instructs us how to act given a comparison, and consequently is not the substantive global standard. Now in order for the final standard to fail to be the substantive global standard, my particular theory of the final standard need not be correct.

⁷ Technically, of course, there is the possibility of a standard that unites moral reasons, well-being-based reasons, and at least one other kind of reason while at the same time omitting other kinds of reasons. But I have never heard anyone propose that such a standard exists.

⁸ Reference omitted for the purpose of blind review.

It simply needs to be the case that the final standard, whatever it is, does not provide a basis for comparing reasons strengthwise. I will assume the truth of this weaker claim from here forward.⁹ I will also assume that if the final standard is not the substantive global standard, then there is no substantive global standard. By modus ponens we reach the conclusion that there is no substantive global standard.

With these assumptions in hand, we turn to the possibility of the existence of a substantive local standard.

III.2.iii. The Argument for Premise Two, Part iii: A Local Standard

To help us along, I am going to give a name to the substantive local standard whose existence we are trying to verify: the standard that would provide a basis for comparison moral and well-being-based reasons strengthwise. Borrowing from Chang, I will call it “prumorality.” My argument that we are not justified in believing that prumorality exists runs as follows: I said earlier that a practical normative standard is an ideal. For an individual to be justified in believing that an ideal exists, she should be able to entertain it or have evidence that other people can. Hence, to be justified in believing that prumorality exists, one should be able to entertain that ideal or have evidence that other people can.

⁹ I would be remiss if I did not point out that there is only one contemporary philosopher that I know of who has laid out a theory of the final standard on which that standard provides a basis for comparing reasons strengthwise: Joshua Gert in his *Brute Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In “Reasons and Rationality,” I offer some considerations against Gert’s theory. Of course, lots of other theorists *seem to think* that the final standard is substantive; their credence in this idea is indicated (though not proven) by their willingness to make comparisons between the strengths of moral and non-moral reasons. Besides Gert, however, I have found only one theorist who admits that the truth of such comparisons requires the existence of a substantive standard. That would be Owen McLeod, in his “Just Plain Ought,” *The Journal of Ethics* 5 (2001): 269-91.

In defense of my claim that we are not justified in believing that prumorality exists, consider the following case:

I have agreed to pick up my good friend at the airport. I am watching the news as I get ready to leave, and the previous day's winning lottery numbers are announced. It turns out that six of my seven numbers hit, and I am entitled to a \$1000 prize. Oddly (yet conveniently for this thought experiment), the lottery rules state that any winning ticket must be redeemed within 24 hours after the numbers are drawn. It turns out, then, that I can either pick up my friend at the airport or collect \$1000, but not both. Furthermore, I have no way of getting in touch with my friend nor any way of arranging alternative transportation for him.

The question is whether my moral reason to keep my promise is stronger or weaker than my well-being-based reason to become \$1000 richer. For my part, when I think about this case I find that there is no ideal to which I can appeal for a solution. By contrast, consider Philippa Foot's transplant case, which is an instance of a conflict between a non-maleficence-based reason (to not kill an innocent person) and a beneficence-based reason (to save five lives). When I consider this case, I find that there is indeed an available ideal that I can turn to a solution: morality. Similarly, when presented with Nozick's pleasure machine thought experiment, which presents a conflict between various reasons—some favoring and others opposing connecting oneself to the machine—I am able to bring to mind an ideal, well-being, which helps me think about which of the competing reasons is strongest. Now this is not to say that in the transplant and pleasure machine cases the relevant ideals provide clear solutions. The point, rather, is that they are there to be appealed to whether or not I have a firm enough grasp on them to reach a solution.

My guess is that I am not unique in my inability to call to mind an ideal that deserves the label “prumorality.” Furthermore, no philosopher that I am aware of has ever put forward an interpretation of that ideal. Given how important prumorality would be (think of all the situations we all face in our lives in which morality conflicts with one’s well-being), one would think that if it existed then someone by now would have produced a theory of it. In the case of well-being—a practical normative standard if there ever was one—we have countless efforts on the books: mental statism, informed-desire satisfaction, objective list theory and all the variations on these and other theories. In the case of morality, we have numerous versions of consequentialism, deontology, virtue theory, etc. But in the case of prumorality, there is not a single theory. There is not even a proto-theory, the existence of which would be evidence that there exists an ideal whose content we are struggling to elaborate.¹⁰

In summary, I am unable to entertain an ideal that deserves the name “prumorality” and I have no reason to believe that other people can. I trust that we are all similarly situated in this respect. Consequently we are not justified in believing in prumorality.

In her paper, “Putting Together Morality and Well-Being,”¹¹ Ruth Chang presents an argument that can be cast as an objection to what I have just said. While Chang is concerned to demonstrate the comparability of moral-and well-being-based values, her

¹⁰ Generosity is an example of an ideal for which we have a proto-theory. The way we talk about how generous people are demonstrates that most of us believe generosity has something to do with how much money and time one gives to the needy and how much one has to give. But no one ever claims to have any idea how to weigh these factors against one another and we are not certain that there aren’t other factors, such as whether one’s propensity for giving is influenced by the prospect of receiving recognition for doing so. In short, most of us have a proto-theory of generosity.

¹¹ All subsequent references to Chang are from this article.

argument for their comparability could be used, *mutatis mutandis*, as an argument for the comparability of moral-and well-being-based reasons.

As she makes clear in her jigsaw puzzle analogy, Chang believes that in order for moral-and well-being-based values to be comparable in strength, there would have to be a basis of comparison. She does not, however, claim that she can entertain the corresponding ideal or that anyone else can. She thinks that there is another way of being justified in believing in such an ideal.

Chang makes her case by way of three thought experiments, each one of which serves a unique purpose in her argument. The first runs as follows:

Suppose you are a member of a philosophy appointments committee whose task is to fill a vacant chair in your department. There are only two candidates for the post: Aye, who is quite original but a historical troglodyte, and Bea, who is singularly unoriginal but is a bit more historically sensitive than Aye...It is perfectly clear that one rationally ought to choose Aye. (125)

The puzzle Chang wants us to grapple with is why there is often a straightforward rational resolution when diverse values conflict. In the case of Aye and Bea, there is an intuitive answer: the choice can be made by appeal to a broader value—philosophical talent—which has originality and historical sensitivity as parts, each with a certain normative weight (126). Chang's point is that when diverse values conflict, we often appeal to a unifying value to determine how to balance them.

Another of Chang's thought experiments is about the same philosophy appointments committee. This time the choice is between Dee and Eee. Dee has enormous philosophical talent, but is a poor teacher. Eee has less talent but is a better

teacher. In all other respects, the two are equal. Presumably, the appointments committee would be able to reach a non-arbitrary decision between the two candidates. But to do this they would have to appeal to a value that unifies the values of philosophical talent and teaching ability. So there must be such a value. This broader value, however, does not have a name. Thus, we are justified in believing that there is a nameless value (129).

Chang's other thought experiment involves a conflict between moral and well-being-based values.

Suppose you are a keen athlete who has entered a major marathon race. The day of the race comes and you are running well. As you approach the last mile, you realize in a wave of excitement that you are in the lead position. Suddenly you spy a stranger who is flailing about in a nearby pond. If you stop to help him, you will lose the race; if you don't stop, he will drown. Stopping to help has the moral value of saving a human life; carrying on has the well-being-based value of winning the race. (126)

Again, the solution seems obvious: you ought to stop and save the stranger. From this fact, Chang reasons the following way: In the case of Aye and Bea, the availability of a clear solution led us to the conclusion that there was a more comprehensive value at play. However, if a more comprehensive value is at play in this situation, it doesn't have a name. But we have already agreed that there is at least one nameless value, so there doesn't seem to be any principled reason to deny the existence of another one. Hence, we are justified in believing that there is a value that comprehends the values of morality and well-being—a value Chang labels "prumorality" (126).

The parallel argument for the comparability of moral-and well-being-based reasons would run as follows. When diverse reasons conflict, we appeal to a unifying practical normative standard to resolve the dispute. So, for instance, if telling the truth would cause my dear friend some emotional pain, I have to weigh a fidelity-based reason against a non-maleficence-based reason. I would do this by appealing to a unifying standard—perhaps respect for autonomy. In some cases, the unifying standard appealed to does not have a name. Conflicts between moral-and well-being-based reasons appear to be such cases. We regularly weigh such reasons against each other—the moral reason to save the drowning stranger and the well-being-based reason to win a marathon, for instance—even though there is no named standard available for appeal. We should posit, therefore, that there is indeed a practical normative standard that unifies moral-and well-being-based reasons: prumorality.

This argument falls short of its goal. The evidence it presents for prumorality's existence is the fact that we make judgments about the relative strength of moral-and well-being-based reasons. Notice, however, that at this point in the argument we cannot assume that any such judgments are correct. That would simply beg the question, since the judgments could be correct only if there were a basis of comparison—i.e., only if prumorality existed. So our ability to make these comparative judgments doesn't entail prumorality's existence. The argument, therefore, has to be recast as an inference to the best explanation, the explanandum being that we make judgments about the relative strength of moral-and well-being-based reasons and the explanans being the existence of prumorality.

There are other explanans available. A good one, I think, is that when we make these judgments we are working backward from an overall judgment. To give an illustration of how this works, let's return to the marathon case. Upon hearing the details of the case, one would most likely conclude that the runner ought, in a final, all-things-considered sense, to stop and save the drowning stranger. If pushed to judge the relative strength of the relevant reasons, most people would probably take the easiest route to such a judgment by using their judgment about the overall ought to derive a judgment about the relative strengths of the relevant reasons. The most natural way to do this would be to assume that one ought, in a final sense, to act on one's strongest reason.¹² Therefore, this line of reasoning goes, if the runner ought to save the drowning stranger then the reason in favor of doing so is the strongest one he has.

I have no argument for the claim that this explanation of our habit of making judgments about the relative strength of moral-and well-being-based reasons is better than Chang's. But it is Chang who needs to establish that her explanation is better, and I do not see why it would be. Thus, Chang has not shown us how we are justified in believing in prumorality. For now, at least, my earlier skeptical argument holds.

II.2.iv. The Argument for Premise Two, Part iv: An Inductive Inference

My argument for the claim that there is no basis of comparison for the strengths of moral and well-being-based reasons went as follows. If there is a standard that comprehends

¹² As I said earlier, I believe this is true when understood de dicto. However, I am not asserting here that this interpretation of the claim is something that one would immediately seize upon. Rather, I think that one would naturally be drawn to accept the de re interpretation of the claim.

morality and well-being, then there must be a substantive global standard or a substantive local standard encompassing morality and well-being. There is no substantive standard, since the global standard simply requires that we act on our strongest reason. Nor is there a local standard, since there is no corresponding ideal (prumorality).

The argument against the existence of a local standard comprehending morality and well-being could be run, *mutatis mutandis*, against the existence of other local unifying standards. Take aesthetics, for instance. There is no local standard covering moral and aesthetic reasons, a fact that is made clear by the absence of any corresponding ideal (aesthetimorality).

Now there is no agreement on how many non-moral standards there are and which they are, so one cannot make this argument for every possible standard. It would always be possible to doubt whether some standard had been omitted. And so the final step must be an inductive inference: this general argumentative strategy would work for any non-moral standard. If this inference is strong, then we have a *prima facie* case for the claim that there are no substantive practical normative standards that comprehend morality and another practical normative standard. This concludes my argument for premise two of the argument for the widespread incomparability thesis. Since I already made my argument for premise one, the argument for the thesis itself is complete.

III. The Reasons to Doubt the Widespread Incomparability Thesis

There are at least three strong reasons to doubt the widespread incomparability thesis:

(1) First, and most obviously, the claim is, intuitively, overwhelmingly implausible. Suppose I could get rid of my cold by killing 10 innocent people. I would then have a well-being-based reason to kill them and a moral reason not to.¹³ It seems almost self-evident that the latter reason is stronger than the former. But the widespread incomparability thesis cannot allow for this.

(2) There is behavioral data the best explanation of which seems to require the falsity of the widespread incomparability thesis. Among these data is the fact that people constantly make comparative judgments about the strengths of moral and non-moral reasons. If the widespread incomparability thesis is true, there are no grounds for such judgments. This fact leads to the following two questions: First, how could one reach a judgment about an issue on which there are no grounds for judgment? Second, even if one could reach a judgment about whether some moral reason were comparable in strength to some non-moral reason despite there being no grounds on which to judge the matter, we would still need an error theory to explain why people make these misguided judgments.

Another relevant bit of behavioral data is that people are somewhat predictable in how they behave when morality conflicts with some other kind of consideration; this predictability can be explained by the immutability of the facts about the relative strengths of moral and non-moral reasons. Once this explanation is taken away, it is not clear that any others are available.

¹³ For more examples of this sort, see Derek Parfit's as-yet-unpublished manuscript, *Climbing the Mountain*, §6. http://individual.utoronto.ca/stafforini/parfit/parfit_-_climbing_the_mountain.pdf. Accessed 1 October 2007.

(3) The widespread incomparability thesis appears to leave us in the unsettling position of being unable to answer the question, “Why be moral?” If moral reasons are never stronger than non-moral reasons, why act on the former instead of the latter when they conflict?

IV. Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that we have very good reasons both to accept and to reject the widespread incomparability thesis. Resolving this paradox is an important task, as the widespread incomparability thesis calls into question our deliberative rationality. We tend to think that rational deliberation about what to do requires comparing the strengths of the reasons one has to do the various things one might do. The widespread incomparability thesis has the consequence that in a great number of cases—any involving both moral and non-moral reasons—this is simply impossible. And so its truth or falsity ultimately might determine whether we can retain our common-sense notion of deliberative rationality.