Meeting 5: Parity, and the Comparative Priority of the Evaluative Categories

I. Chang against the Three I’s

Chang denies the Trichotomy Thesis: If $x$ and $y$ are comparable with respect to some covering consideration $V$, it must be the case that either (i) $x$ is better than $y$ with respect to $V$, (ii) $x$ is worse than $y$ with respect to $V$, or (iii) $x$ is equally good as $y$ with respect to $V$.

She argues that there is a fourth option: (iv) $x$ is on a par with $y$. This is the option that obtains, she argues, when we face hard choices in life, and it is what explains why those hard choices are hard.

Three explanations of what makes hard choices hard that Chang rejects:

- **ignorance**: Maybe hard choices are hard because “we are ignorant or uncertain of the normative or nonnormative factors that are relevant to making the choice” (and, perhaps, ignorant or uncertain of how those factors play off each other to determine an all-things-considered verdict) (p. 3).

  Chang’s objection: Some hard choices are with regard to “covering considerations” such as tastiness-to-you-right-now “over which we have first-personal authority,” in that “your judgment, assuming you are functioning normally, determines the truth of the matter, give or take a margin for error” (p. 3).

  This is stronger than Chang needs, and anyway not very plausible when she extends her argument to pain. (My judgment that I am in pain doesn’t make it the case that I am in pain.) All she needs is that my judgments about tastiness-to-me-right-now entail (rather than determine) the truth of the matter, “give or take a margin for error” (whatever that means).

Suppose I am deciding between having lemon sorbet ($= LS$) or apple pie ($= AP$) for dessert. I taste each and judge P1 below to be true, so it is true. Then I taste the apple pie with an extra dollop of whipped cream ($= AP^*$) and judge both P2 and P3 below to be true, so they both are true. It follows, by the argument given below, that C2 is true (where $T =$ tastiness-to-me-right-now):

The Small Improvement Argument:

P1. AP is neither better nor worse that LS with respect to $T$. [premise]
P2. $AP^*$ is better than AP with respect to $T$. [premise]
P3. $AP^*$ is not better than LS with respect to $T$. [premise]
P4. If two items are equally good with respect to $T$, one can always be substituted for the other in comparisons with respect to $T$. [premise: the Substitutability of Equality]

C1. So, AP and LS are not equally good with respect to $T$. [from P2, P3, P4]

C2. So, AP is not better than, worse than, or equally as good as LS with respect to $T$. [from P1, C1]

But I wonder whether an ignorance theorist will grant that we judge both P1 and P3 to be true. Do I really acknowledge that there is this two-place relation, being better in overall tastiness (to me right now) than, which I judge AP and LS not to bear with respect to each other (in either direction)?

I can see myself either (a) being unsure whether this relation fails to obtain between AP and LS or (b) denying that there is such a thing as overall tastiness (to me right now) and being unsure how the respects in which AP is tasty and the respects in which LS is tasty play off each other to make it the case that one is or is not better overall than the other.
Chang writes, “The problem is not lack of information—you have all the information you need to judge tastiness to you” (p. 4).

But if I don’t know how the respects in which AP is tasty play off against the respects in which LS is tasty, then (depending on what we mean by “information”) either I do lack relevant information, or information is not all that matters to my judgments of overall betterness.

- **incommensurability**: Maybe hard choices are hard because the alternatives are “incommensurable”: “there is no common unit by which they can be measured with respect to [the covering consideration that matters in the choice]” (p. 6).

  When two items are incommensurable, their values cannot be represented cardinally, either by a ratio scale (like meters, which has a true zero point) or by an interval scale (like Celsius).

  *Chang’s objection*: Incommensurability is compatible with ordinal comparability. Even if there is no common unit by which we can measure the artistic talent of both sculptors and composers, Rodin (the great French sculptor) was a better artist than Salieri (the inferior Italian composer who was Mozart’s nemesis).

- **incomparability**: Maybe hard choices are hard because the alternatives are “incomparable”: “the alternatives cannot be compared with respect to what matters in the choice” (ibid.).

  (Note that, for Chang, parity is not the same as incomparability: being on a par with is a fourth basic comparative evaluative relation, whereas being incomparable with holds between two items when they fail to be evaluatively comparable in any of the basic ways.)

  *Chang’s objection*: Choice in hard choices can be made rationally, i.e. as an exercise of rational agency. But the incomparability theorist is forced to deny this.

When one is selecting among two **equally good** alternatives, Chang claims the appropriate response is to **pick one**: to arbitrarily select, qua rational agent, one of the two alternatives.

When one is selecting among two **incomparable** alternatives, Chang claims the appropriate response is to **plump for one**: to arbitrarily select, not qua rational agent, one of the two alternatives.

Chang says that both forms of selection are arbitrary “in the sense of not being guided by reasons” (p. 9), but we need to be careful here. If we are choosing among many alternatives, two of which are equally good and better than all the rest, then picking one of those two does involve being guided by reasons, namely the reasons that favor those two over the others.

Since plumping is an irrational response, the incomparability theorist must hold that we cannot rationally respond to hard choices.

*Raz’s reply*: My wanting one of two incomparable alternatives can rationalize (i.e. make rational) my choosing that alternative over the other.

*Chang’s counter-reply*: If your wanting the one alternative was part of what made it the case that the two alternatives are incomparable (as opposed to the first being better than the second), then to take the wanting to also rationalize your choice is to double count a consideration.

But if your wanting the first alternative does make it better than the second, then we have changed the choice situation and are no longer faced with a choice among incomparables.

*another objection against the incomparability theorist*: If the incomparability theorist is right, then so-called “hard” choices aren’t really hard at all. The choice is easy: just plump for one alternative. (Or if such choices are hard, they’re only hard because we don’t know the truth of the incomparability theorist’s proposal.)
II. Chang on Parity

Chang’s diagnosis of why parity might seem puzzling, even though it is not: we “simply assume that values have the same trichotomous structure as quantities like length, weight, and volume,” but once we realize that values have qualitative as well as quantitative aspects, we can see that this assumption is “absurd” (p. 11).

Chang’s model for understanding parity:

We take as foundational the idea of an evaluative differences between two items.

If A and B have no evaluative difference with respect to covering consideration V, they are incomparable, and if A and B have some evaluative difference w.r.t. V, they are comparable.

If A and B’s evaluative difference w.r.t. V has no magnitude, their comparative ranking is merely ordinal, and if A and B’s evaluative difference w.r.t. V has magnitude, their comparative ranking is cardinal, broadly construed. (Chang hereafter focuses on the latter case.)

We can then ask whether A and B’s evaluative difference w.r.t. V has nonzero magnitude, and whether it has bias toward either A or B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bias?</th>
<th>nonzero magnitude?</th>
<th>value relation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes (toward A)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>A is better than B w.r.t. V</td>
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<tr>
<td>yes (toward B)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>A is worse than B w.r.t. V</td>
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<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>A is equally good as B w.r.t. V</td>
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<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>A is on par with B w.r.t. V</td>
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(I must confess to finding talk of the evaluative difference between A and B with respect to V “having a nonzero magnitude” when they are on a par unhelpful, since at times it seems that all this means is that they aren’t equal in value with respect to V: see especially the second full paragraph on p. 12. It’s not clear what explanatory work is being done by the reification of magnitudes.)

It is easiest to see how two items can have an unbiased evaluative difference with a nonzero magnitude, says Chang, when the items are qualitatively very different with respect to V.

One way for A and B to be on a par w.r.t. V is for it to be the case that (1) A and B are qualitatively very different in V-ness while (2) A and B are in the same neighborhood of overall V-ness.

Parity has different logical properties than betterness and equality in value:

- Being better than is irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive.

- Being equally good as is reflexive, symmetric, and transitive.

- Being on a par with is irreflexive (nothing is on a par with itself), symmetric (if A is on par with B, then B is on a par with A), and nontransitive (it’s not the case that: if A is on a par with B, and B is on a par with C, then A is on a par with C).

III. How Does Parity Explain the Hardness of Hard Choices?

Two proposals about how parity might explain the hardness of hard choices that Chang does not accept:

the picking proposal: Hard choices between items A and B are ones in which A and B are on a par, and the appropriate practical response is to pick either A or B.

the plumping proposal: Hard choices between items A and B are ones in which A and B are on a par, and the appropriate practical response is to plump for either A or B.

Instead, Chang holds that when two actions are on a par (with respect to what matters in the choice situation), we have the power to commit to one of the good-making features of one of those actions, thereby making that action better than the other.
Three ways of stating this suggestion:

values only way: When agent X faces a choice between actions A and B that are on a par, X has the power to commit to a good-making feature of A, thereby making A better overall than B.

values and reasons way: When agent X faces a choice between actions A and B that are on a par (and hence the strength of the reasons in favor of A are on a par with the strength of the reasons in favor of B), X has the power to commit to one of the good-making features of A, thereby making there be a new will-based reason in favor of A, so that now X has more reason to choose A than to choose B.

reasons only way: When agent X faces a choice between actions A and B in which the strength of the reasons in favor of A are on a par with the strength of the reasons in favor of B, X has the power to commit to one of the considerations that is a reason in favor of A, thereby making there be a new will-based reason in favor of A, so that now X has more reason to choose A than to choose B.

Note that although committing involves an exercise of our rational agency, committing is not itself an action.

Note, also, that these new will-based reasons can never make it the case that whereas before there was more (or equal) reason to choose A rather than B, now (after one commits) that’s no longer the case.

Chang also thinks there is such a thing as drifting, which is choosing one of two actions that are on a par without committing to it.

Putting all of this together, it seems (though I am not entirely sure here) that Chang’s proposal is

the commit-or-drift proposal: Hard choices between actions A and B are ones in which A and B are on par, and the appropriate practical response is to either (i) commit to A and chose it, (ii) commit to B and choose it, (iii) drift toward A, or (iv) drift toward B.

Three things that puzzle me about this proposal:

• first worry: Why isn’t the “choice” of whether to drift toward A or to drift toward B a case of picking? (It can’t be plumping, because “drifting is a rational response,” says Chang [p. 19].)

Similarly, why isn’t the choice of whether to committedly choose A or to committedly choose B a case of picking, from one’s perspective before the decision? (Even if, after the decision, I will have had most reason to committedly choose A if that is what I in fact do, it seems that, before the decision, the strength of my reasons to committedly choose A and the strength of my reasons to committedly choose B are on a par.)

So this just seems to be a souped-up version of the picking proposal.

• second worry: Is committing something one can choose to do?

If so, then it seems that the choice situation has been misdescribed. Really it’s a choice between (1) committing to A and choosing A, (2) committing to A and choosing B, (3) committing to B and choosing A, (4) committing to B and choosing B, (5) committing to neither and choosing A (i.e. drifting to A), and (6) committing to neither and choosing B (i.e. drifting to B).

But if not, then “committedly choosing A” is not a response to the current choice situation; rather, it’s a response to a different choice situation that arises after one commits. (Compare Chang on Raz.)

• third worry: However we answer the above questions, it seems that this proposal is open to the same objection I levied against the incomparability theorist. If Chang’s proposal is correct, then so-called “hard” choices aren’t really hard at all. The choice is easy: either committedly choose or drift.

Such choices only seem hard to us because we don’t know the truth of Chang’s proposal. But that’s an explanation of the (apparent) hardness of hard choices that every theorist can offer! So she hasn’t really offered a distinctive explanation of why (apparently) hard choices are (taken to be) hard.
IV. Gustafsson against Defining Goodness in Terms of Betterness

Can goodness/badness be defined in terms of betterness?

Recall that Smith argued that goodness cannot be defined in terms of betterness, because “[t]here is more information on the scale than mere information about the ordering in terms of better and worse” (p. 12).

And Schroeder in “Value Theory” argued that ‘good’ just means ‘better than sufficiently many’ (in some contextually appropriate comparison class).

Gustafsson argues that there is no way of defining goodness in terms of betterness. Consider:

- **Brogan’s definition:** That p is good \( \equiv \) That p is better than not-p.

  Note that this is an account of the goodness of states of affairs. It is not clear how to extend this definition (or any of the others Gustafsson considers) to the goodness of non-propositional entities such as people or objects, to goodness for, or to attributive goodness.

  Gustafsson claims that this definition (and all subsequent ones) can be either a definition of intrinsic goodness in terms of intrinsic betterness or a definition of final goodness in terms of final betterness, but it seems to me that it works better as the latter type of definition. (Is A intrinsically better than B when A is better than B in virtue of their intrinsic properties, or is A intrinsically better than B when A’s degree of intrinsic goodness is greater than B’s degree of intrinsic goodness? Neither works well here.)

- **Chisholm & Sosa’s objection:** Assuming hedonism, then that there are no unhappy egrets is better than that there are unhappy egrets, but that there are no unhappy egrets is not good.

  a reply Gustafsson doesn’t consider: Replace ‘better’ with ‘more good’ in Brogan’s definition.

- **Chisholm & Sosa’s definition:** That p is good \( \equiv \) There is a state of affairs that q such that (i) that q is indifferent (i.e. that q is not better than that not-q, and that not-q is not better than that q), and (ii) that p is better than that q.

  Gustafsson’s objection: According to one plausible axiology in population ethics, it can be the case that:
  
  a. that Adam exists with well-being level 1 (for some small but positive level of well-being) is neither better nor worse than that it’s not the case that Adam exists with well-being level 1;
  b. that Adam exists with well-being level 2 (where this is slightly higher than level 1) is neither better nor worse than that it’s not the case that Adam exists with well-being level 2; and
  c. that Adam exists with well-being level 2 is better than that Adam exists with well-being level 1.

  But then that Adam exists with well-being level 2 is both indifferent and good, which is implausible.

- **Quinn’s definition (in simplified form):** That p is good \( \equiv \) There is a state of affairs that q such that (i) that q is indifferent (i.e. that q is equally good as that not-q), and (ii) that p is better than that q.

  Gustafsson’s objection: Given an axiology that allows interpersonal parity, it can be the case that:
  
  i*. that Smith exists with well-being level L_S is equally good as that it’s not the case that Smith exists with well-being level L_S;
  ii*. that Jones exists with well-being level L_J is equally good as that it’s not the case that Jones exists with well-being level L_J; and
  iii*. that Smith exists with well-being level L_S is on a par with that Jones exists with well-being level L_J, which is on a par with that Smith exists with well-being level L_S*, which is better than that Smith exists with well-being level L_S.
But then that Smith exists with well-being level $L_S^+$ is good and that Jones exists with well-being level $L_J$ is indifferent, but the former is not better than the latter, which (supposedly) is implausible.

(It is unclear to me why such an axiology would allow i* and ii* to be the case, nor why we should deem this axiology to be a plausible one.)

The underlying point behind Gustafsson’s criticisms is that it is difficult to find a proper indifference point on the basis of which to define goodness, especially once we allow for the possibility of parity.

V. Gustafsson against Defining Betterness in Terms of Goodness

What about the reverse direction: can we define betterness in terms of goodness? Consider:

• van Bentham’s definition: That $p$ is better than that $q =_{df}$ In the context set \{that $p$, that $q$\}, that $p$ is good while that $q$ is not.

  **Gustafsson’s objection:** Assume hedonism. Let A be a pleasurable experience. And let B be a pleasurable experience with the same duration but a lesser intensity. Then that A exists is better than that B exists, even though given the context set \{that A exists, that B exists\}, both that A exists and that B exists are good.

• another definition: That $p$ is better than that $q =_{df}$ That that-$p$ rather than that-$q$ obtains is good.

  **Gustafsson’s objection:** Assume hedonism. Let A be a very painful experience with a very long duration. And let B be a painful experience with the same duration but a slightly greater intensity. Presumably if that $A$ exists rather than that $B$ exists obtains, then that $A$ exists obtains. So that that-$A$ exists rather than that-$B$ exists obtains is not good, because that $A$ exists is so bad. But that $A$ exists is better than that $B$ exists.

  **a reply:** Let’s take the above to be a definition of more-goodness, not of betterness, and then define betterness in terms of more-goodness and less-badness, like so:

  - That $p$ is more good than that $q =_{df}$ That that-$p$ rather than that-$q$ obtains is good.
  - That $p$ is more bad than that $q =_{df}$ That that-$p$ rather than that-$q$ obtains is bad.
  - That $p$ is better than that $q =_{df}$ Either that $p$ is more good than that $q$, or that $q$ is more bad than that $p.$