Coping with Apparently Incomparable Alternatives—Pluralism, Parity, and Justified Choice

By

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Abstract

In several intriguing papers, Ruth Chang has argued that many objects that appear to be incomparable with one another are really comparable. Perhaps some object is neither better than, equal to, nor worse than another object, but this does not imply that they are incomparable. They can stand in the fourth evaluative relation, that is, being on a par. Chang argues that the phenomenology of some comparison favors calling compared objects “on a par” rather than “incomparable.” Moreover, while the choices involving incomparable objects cannot be justified, the choices including the objects that are on a par can be justified. Thus, the justifiability of choice is saved. This paper argues against Chang that it is not necessary to introduce the fourth relation, parity, to save the phenomenology of comparison and the justifiability of choice. The introduction of parity is not necessary and violates the transitivity of evaluative comparison, so we should not introduce parity to avoid incomparability.

Introduction

Cultural or individual diversity is often associated with the plurality of values, the view that there are values of different types. The plurality of values is usually thought to imply that some valuable things are incomparable with each other. That is, no comparative relation, no ranking, obtains between them. For example, it is hard to see how individual liberties can be weighed against political or distributive equality, and this difficulty is presumably explained by the incomparability between them: it is intuitively plausible that certain individual liberties are neither better than, equal to,
nor worse than political or distributive equality. It is thus declared that there is no correct answer in some of the cases where different cultures give priority to different and conflicting alternatives. If this common line of thought is right, it will have important consequences. It will become unclear what to do when different cultures or individuals need to cooperate but give preference to different and conflicting alternatives. People will become unable to assume that any of them is mistaken. Some might find this result to be welcome, but the other side of value incomparability is that people might have no rational way to settle or even cope with such a conflict of evaluative ordering.

In several papers, however, Ruth Chang has argued that many objects that appear to be incomparable with one another are really comparable. Perhaps some object is neither better than, equal to, nor worse than another object, but this does not imply that they are incomparable. They can stand in the fourth evaluative relation, that is, being on a par. Chang argues that the phenomenology of some comparison favors calling compared objects “on a par” rather than “incomparable.” Furthermore, while the choices involving incomparable objects cannot be justified, the choices including the objects that are on a par can be justified. So the justifiability of choice is saved.

Chang’s argument and position are so intellectually and practically stimulating that they merit serious examination. This paper argues against Chang that it is not necessary to introduce the fourth relation, parity, to save the phenomenology of comparison and the justifiability of choice. The introduction of parity is not necessary and violates the transitivity of evaluative comparison, so we should not introduce parity to avoid incomparability.

This paper first explains comparability, parity and other relevant concepts. This paper will then examine Chang’s argument and rationale for the introduction of parity.

**Comparability, Parity, and Transitivity**

One of the ways Chang characterizes comparability (of the bearers of value)

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1 Isaiah Berlin is famous for this sort of claims in the contexts of political philosophy (see, for example, Berlin 1969).
is as follows: “two items are evaluatively comparable if there is a positive value relation that holds between them and incomparable if there are only negative value relations that hold between them.” (Chang 2001, 663) Some people argue that incomparability is vagueness and that in the cases of incomparability even negative value relations do not hold definitely (Broome 1997). However, due to space limitation, I will ignore this possibility and stick to Chang’s understanding of incomparability.

Chang argues that all evaluative comparisons must proceed in some evaluative respect, which she calls a “covering consideration.” For instance, Mozart cannot be better than Michelangelo \textit{simpliciter} but can only be better in some respect. Put another way, all value relations are strictly three-place. This covering value assumption is controversial (Regan 1997 and Hsieh 2005), but I will take it for granted.

Given the covering value assumption, incomparability is distinguished from noncomparability. It makes sense to compare cheesecake with cheddar in terms of the covering value of gustatory pleasure, but it does not make sense to compare chalk with cheddar in terms of gustatory pleasure. In the former type of cases a value covers items at stake, but in the latter type of cases it does not: the value of gustatory pleasure fails to cover chalk. In the latter type of cases items at stake are noncomparable. Two items are noncomparable when the value in question does not cover items at stake—and hence it does not make sense to compare the items. In contrast, two items are incomparable when the value in question covers items at stake—and hence it makes sense to compare the items—but no positive evaluative

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\item The above way of characterizing comparability appeals to the distinction between positive and negative value relations, which Chang takes to be controversial (Chang 2002, 15). Chang thus apparently favors the following, second way of characterizing comparability: “If items are comparable, there is an evaluative difference between them; if they are incomparable, there is no evaluative difference between them. There is a sense in which there is no evaluative difference between items that are equally good, but the sense of “no evaluative difference” that obtains when items are incomparable excludes there being any difference whatever, even a zero difference.” (Chang 2001, 663-664) This characterization of comparability is, however, unhelpful unless “no evaluative difference” can be cashed out independently of the notion of incomparability.
\item I myself think that in some examples of alleged noncomparability, it might make sense to compare items at stake. For example, it might make sense to compare chalk with cheddar in terms of gustatory pleasure: isn’t cheddar definitely better than chalk in terms of that value? This issue is not crucial to Chang’s argument, so I will not pursue it further.
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relation obtains between the items (Chang 1997, 27-28).

Chang argues that there is no practical problem of choosing between items in a way that does not make sense to compare them. For example, it does not make sense to compare a lamp and a window in terms of the fitness for prime minister, and there is no practical problem of choosing between them in terms of that value. So in the cases of noncomparability, there is no problem of practical choice (ibid. 29). In contrast, agents can face a practical problem of choosing between items in terms of a value that covers both items. For example, as the value of good career covers both a career of lawyer and a career of a clarinetist, agents can face a practical problem of choosing between these careers in terms of the value of good career. Thus, if incomparable items existed, agents could face a problem of practical choice, which might be rationally irresolvable. Because we are interested in those failures of comparison that can affect the possibility of justified choice, we should clearly distinguish incomparability from noncomparability.

When it is argued that two items are so different that no comparison is possible between them, Chang’s reaction to this pluralist argument is twofold. First, in the cases where the value in question does not cover the items, these items are noncomparable, and not incomparable. Second, when the value in question covers both items, some positive evaluative relation might hold between them. In particular, they might be on a par with respect to the covering value.

The notion of parity is crucial to Chang’s position. Two items are on a par just in case neither is better than the other and their differences preclude their being equally good, and yet they are comparable. For example, Chang argues that Mozart and Michelangelo are on a par in terms of creativity (Chang 2001). Chang gives two different analyses of parity, but I will forgo them because the above intuitive understanding is sufficient for our discussion.

Now, as Nien-Hê Hsieh points out (Hsieh 2007, 70-71), parity violates the axiom of transitivity. The axiom of transitivity is the idea that for any three things A, B, and C and for any evaluative relation R, if A has R with B and B has R with C, then

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4 For some expressions of pluralist argument, see Nagal 1979; Raz 1991; de Sousa 1974, 547-548; and Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, 66-68.
A has R with C. Three traditional evaluative relations—being better than, being equal to, and being worse than—all satisfy this axiom. For example, if, in terms of fitness for president, Barak Obama is better than John McCain and John McCain is better than Sarah Palin, then Barak Obama is better than Sarah Palin. However, as Chang herself admits, parity is not transitive. Suppose that the career of a clarinetist is career-wise on a par with the career of a lawyer. Now consider another clarinetist who has the same career except earning a little more. Perhaps the career of the lawyer is still on a par with the career of this latter clarinetist, but this does not mean that the career of the former clarinetist is on a par with the career of the latter: the career of the former clarinetist, who earns less, is presumably worse than the career of the latter.

As all traditional evaluative relations satisfy the axiom of transitivity, many think that any evaluative relation must do so. Because parity is not transitive, we should not introduce it unless it is absolutely necessary. I will examine its necessity by reviewing Chang’s argument and practical rationale for the introduction of parity.

**Chang’s Argument for the Introduction of Parity**

Pluralist argument for incomparability has been radically challenged by Ruth Chang (Chang 1997, 14-16). Chang argues that the plurality of values has nothing to do with whether or not valuable things are comparable: that the plurality certainly fails to entail the incomparability of valuable things. Suppose, for example, we try to compare the sculptor Michelangelo with the composer Mozart with respect to creativity. You might think that these two are so different with respect to the features that contribute to their creativity—the sculptor’s creativity and the composer’s creativity respectively—that they are incomparable with each other. However, we can conceive a sculptor, say Talentlessi, whose talent is minimal. Apparently the composer Mozart is not incomparable with the sculptor creativity-wise: Mozart is better than Talentlessi. In general, as far as the value in question covers the items at stake, an exceptionally excellent example of one type is comparable with an exceptionally poor example of the other type even if they are very different with respect to the features that contribute to that value. Thus, in principle different types of items can be compared with each other in terms of the value that covers both.
Then, pluralism—the diversity of the features that contribute to a covering value—does not by itself entail that the items in question are incomparable with each other. However, Chang admits that it does seem that many instances of one type, say, Michelangelo, is incomparable with many instances of the other type, say, Mozart, in terms of a covering value, creativity in this case. Here Chang introduces the notion of parity to explain our intuitions about such a hard case.

Chang’s argument for parity takes two stages. The first stage of the argument is called “the Small-Improvement Argument” and the second stage “the Chaining Argument”. The Small-Improvement Argument tries to establish the claim that there are hard cases in which none of the three traditional evaluative relations—being better than, being equal to, and being worse than—holds (Chang 2001, 667). The Chaining Argument tries to establish the claim that in (at least some of) those hard cases, items at stake are still comparable. The conjunction of these two claims shows that parity (at least sometimes) holds between those items, for parity is defined to be the non-traditional evaluative relation.

The Small-Improvement Argument has the following general form: if (1) one item A is neither better nor worse than another item B with respect to a covering value V, (2) there can be the other item A+, which is better than A with respect to V, and (3) A+ is not better than B with respect to V, then (4) A and B are not related by any of the three traditional evaluative relations with respect to V (Chang 2001, 667-668). Suppose, for example, you are a member of a philosophy appointments committee whose task is to compare Eunice, a metaphysician, and Janice, a moral philosopher, in terms of philosophical talent. You and your colleagues have researched both candidates thoroughly, discussed and examined at great length their written work, canvassed considered opinions from across the country, evaluated letters of recommendation, and so forth. It is surely possible that after careful, coolheaded deliberation you and your colleagues rationally coincide in the conclusion (1)’ that Janice is neither better nor worse than Eunice in terms of the value of philosophical talent. In such a case, (2)’ there can be a candidate that is slightly better.

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5 According to Chang (Chang 2001, 667), the Small-Improvement argument is introduced by Ronald de Sousa and later employed by Joseph Raz and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (de Sousa 1974; Raz 1986, 325ff; and Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, 67ff). These philosophers used the argument to conclude that some items are incomparable. However, Chang, along with Derek Parfit and James Griffin, points out that the argument only entails that the three traditional evaluative relations do not hold between some items (Parfit 1984, 431; and Griffin 1986, 81).
than one of the candidates: for example, there can be Eunice+, who is a bit more technically proficient but otherwise equal to Eunice; and there can be Janice+, who is a bit more clear as a writer but otherwise equal to Janice. But it is plausible to think in such a case (3)’ that Eunice+ is not better than Janice, or that Janice+ is not better than Eunice. In general, it is plausible to hold that for some items of a certain type, certain small improvement—given by a dollar, a pleasurable tingle, and so on—cannot effect a switch from an item’s being not being better than another to its being better. Then, (4)’ Eunice and Janice are not related by any of the three traditional relations with respect to philosophical talent (Chang 1997, 24-25).

If successful, the Small-Improvement argument leaves two options. First, A is incomparable with B. Second, A is on a par with B, that is, comparable with but neither better than, equal to, nor worse than B. The following Chaining Argument is intended to eliminate the first possibility.

The Chaining Argument takes the following general form. There is some evaluatively very different pair of items (X, Y) not related by any of the three traditional evaluative relations. The apparent instance of the pair is Eunice the metaphysician and Janice the moral philosopher (in view of philosophical talent), or Michelangelo the sculptor and Mozart the composer (in view of creativity). For such a pair, there is a continuum of unidimensional differences connecting X with some Xn that is clearly comparable with Y. It is plausible to hold the Small Unidimensional Principle: a small unidimensional difference cannot trigger incomparability where before there was comparability. Thus by serial application of this principle, if Xn is comparable with Y, so is X because the difference between Xn and X can be given by a series of small unidimensional differences. Thus, X and Y are comparable (Chang 2001, 674-675). For example, we can conceive a continuum of increasingly improved versions of Talentless in a single respect of creativity, which leads through Michelangelo. Because it is implausible that a very small improvement in a single

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6 Chang 2002 admits that this principle might not be universally applicable. Perhaps some small improvement of a relevant aspect might not make the item in question better than its unimproved counterpart, because “you can have too much of a good thing” (Chang 2002, 132). Furthermore, the small improvement of a factor might create a new value or disvalue in the improved item that is lacking in its predecessors (ibid). Chang admits that to these cases the Small Unidimensional Principle might not apply. However, she seemingly thinks that these cases are uncommon, and contends that the examples she uses in her argument for parity are not among them.
factor of the sculptor Talentlessi introduces incomparability with Mozart, Mozart will be comparable creativity-wise with Talentlessi+—the slightly improved version in the single respect of Talentlessi but otherwise equal to Talentlessi—with Talentlessi++, with Talentlessi++++, and eventually with Michelangelo. Thus, it turns out that Mozart is comparable creativity-wise with Michelangelo (Chang 2001, 673-674).

The Small-Improvement is intended to show that for some pairs of items, no traditional evaluative relation holds (though they are not noncomparable). The Chaining Argument is intended to show that for at least some of these pairs, the items are comparable. Therefore, for such a pair, parity holds.

Several criticisms can be made against this series of arguments. For example, as Chang admits, the Chaining Argument has the form of a sorites argument, which is invalid if the predicate in the argument is vague (Chang 2001, 680). Furthermore, Martijn Boot (2009, 77-84) criticizes the crucial premise of the Chaining argument, the Small Unidimensional Principle (which Boot calls “Difference Principle”). That is, Boot argues that a small unidimensional difference can trigger incomparability where before there was comparability. This is the case, for example, if unidimensional difference (i.e., difference of value in one aspect) creates the situation where one option is better than the other in one aspect but not in another. Suppose that the goodness of career depends on only two factors: salary and the pleasantness of working environment. If career A is equal to B in the former factor but superior to career B in the latter, A is definitely comparable with B in value: it is better. However, imagine that B is slightly improved with respect to the former factor, salary. Now A is better than B in one respect (the pleasantness of working environment) but worse in the other (salary), and perhaps now A and B are incomparable. The small unidimensional change can render a pair incomparable. Boot also argues that a small unidimensional difference can trigger incomparability in two other cases: when it changes a insignificant contribution of a factor to a significant one, and when it renders a rationally determinable choice between the pair to an indeterminable one.

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7 Chang argues that the predicates in the Chaining argument, “comparable” and “incomparable”, are not vague (Chang 2001, 680ff).
8 See Chang’s apparently preemptive comment (Chang 2001, 676) and Boot’s response (Boot 2009, 80n5 and 82n11).
9 For other criticisms leveled against Chang’s arguments and position, see Gert 2004 and Hsieh 2005. Chang 2005 contains the responses to these criticisms.
However, one appeal of Chang’s arguments must be admitted: something appears to be roughly equal or on a par between the items in the cases Chang focuses on. Intuitively, something seems to be roughly equal or on a par between Michelangelo and Mozart. They somehow look similar, but not so exactly similar that the small improvement in either effects difference in judgment. Chang’s critic must not only refute Chang’s arguments but also provide an explanation of these intuitions without appeal to the fourth evaluative relation. Just claiming that some traditional evaluative relation holds between Michelangelo and Mozart in terms of creativity—one is more creative than, equally creative to, or less creative than the other—does not save these intuitions. Neither does just claiming that these two are incomparable. Critics need to add some alternative account of these appearances of rough equality.

When it appears that something is roughly equal between Michelangelo and Mozart, what we are getting at might be not that they are on a par with each other, but that we do not know which of the following four judgments is epistemically justified: that Michelangelo is better than Mozart; that Michelangelo is equal to Mozart; that Michelangelo is worse than Mozart; and that Michelangelo is incomparable with Mozart. That is, we might be expressing the sense of uncertainty between all the traditional evaluative relations and the absence of them. Small improvement in either will not effect the change of our judgment—we will still be uncertain, to a roughly equal degree, about the above four judgments—because we are uncertain about whether and how the contributing factors balance against one another. We are not sure about whether there is any way to weigh the sculptor’s creativity against the composer’s creativity in the case at hand, and, even if there is one, how one factor fares against the other in contributing to the value of creativity. Because we have a limited grasp on the weighing system to balance two factors contributing to creativity, a large change in either often recovers our confidence in one evaluative judgment: for example, we become confident that Talentlessi is worse than Mozart. However, this limited grasp prevents us from being sure about evaluative relation in a certain series of comparison.

The above analysis of phenomenology is supported by reflection on how, in the above hard cases, you react to the people who assert one of the three traditional
evaluative relations. Suppose, first, that in evaluating Eunice and Janice, one person insists that Eunice is better than Janice as a philosopher. According to Chang’s analysis of your phenomenology, you hold (1)’ that Eunice is not better or worse than Janice. Then, presumably you are disposed to deny and refute the person’s claim that Eunice is better than Janice. However, this does not seem to be the case. You might well express diffidence in the person’s view, but you are probably disposed to admit that the view might be correct. Suppose, next, that in evaluating Eunice and Janice, another person insists that Eunice is equal to Janice as a philosopher. According to Chang’s analysis of your phenomenology, you plausibly hold both (2)’ that there can be a candidate that is slightly better than one of the two candidates, Eunice and Janice, and (3)’ that Eunice+ is not better than Janice, and that Janice+ is not better than Eunice. Because the conjunction of (1)’, (2)’ and (3)’ implies that Eunice and Janice are not equal as a philosopher, presumably you are inclined to deny and refute the person’s claim that Eunice is equal to Janice as a philosopher. However, again this does not seem to be the case. You might well express diffidence in the person’s view, but you are probably disposed to concede that the view might be correct. These reactions underlie my analysis that, in the imagined hard cases, you are uncertain about which fundamental evaluative relation, if any, obtains between the items at stake.

Here I would like to avoid one possible misinterpretation. I am not claiming that in hard cases we make a mistaken evaluative judgment, the conjunction of (the instances of) (1), (2) and (3). I am rather claiming that we are hesitant about asserting any evaluative relation.

The above analysis of phenomenology actually enables us to resist the conjunction of the three premises in the Small Change Argument: (1) one item A is neither better nor worse than another item B with respect to a covering value V, (2) there can the other item A+, which is better than A with respect to V, and (3) A+ is not better than B with respect to V. To support these three premises, Chang appeals to the view that it is plausible to hold that for some items of a certain type, certain small improvement cannot effect a switch from an item’s not being better than

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10 Donald Regan and Christopher Gowans argue that this evaluative judgment is mistaken (Regan 1989; Gowans 1994, 54-55). See Chang’s rebuttal in Chang 2001, 668-672.
another to its being better. However, we do not have to accept this view, which leads us to the metaphysical claim that A and B are either on a par or incomparable. Perhaps for all items, small improvement can effect a switch from an item’s not being better than another to its being better. All we should accept is an epistemic claim, the view of uncertainty about a certain range of evaluative judgments. Because we are sometimes unsure about the weighing system of two types of items, without some large improvement we would not reach the position to say which of the following judgments is true: that one item A is better than the other item B in terms of some value V; that A is equal to B in terms of V; that A is worse than B in terms of V; and A is incomparable with B in term of V.

The conjunction of (1), (2) and (3) is needed to support the conclusion of the Small-Improvement Argument, some pairs of items are not related by any of the three traditional evaluative relations with respect to some value V. And this conclusion is in turn needed to support the ultimate conclusion that some pair of items is on a par. Because we do not have a reason to hold the conjunction of (1), (2) and (3), we need not accept that some pair of items is on a par.

Thus, Chang’s argument fails to establish that some pair of items is on a par. However, Chang also suggests that there is some practical need for the notion of parity. We will examine this practical rationale for parity in the next section.

**Chang’s Practical Rationale for the Introduction of Parity**

Chang claims that the possibility of parity has a significant implication.

Many philosophers have thought, rightly in my view, that the possibility of justified choice between two alternatives depends on their being comparable; if the alternatives cannot be compared, practical reason fails to determine at least one of the alternatives as justified. The possibility of parity suggests that many putative cases of incomparability may instead be cases of parity, and given that the common thought about the possibility of choice is correct, it follows that many choice situations in which justified choices seem precluded are within the reach of practical reason. (Chang 2001, 665-666)
According to Chang, while incomparability between two items makes any justified choice impossible, parity between them makes it possible. Of course, if, for any pair of items, one item is either better than, equal to, or worse than the other item, then there is no need for parity. For these traditional evaluative relations also make justified choice possible. However, I have not shown, and I do not have an argument to show, that one of these traditional evaluative relations hold of every pair of items. Therefore, if parity enables justified choice while incomparability does not, it is potentially a practical rationale for introducing parity.

However, it is unclear whether incomparability really precludes justified choice, and hence whether incomparability is less tractable than parity. Chang thinks that the possibility of justified choice depends on the comparability of items at stake, and hence it is impossible when the two alternatives are incomparable. However, this premise is dubious. As Amartya Sen points out (Sen 2000, 486-487), as far as a certain negative relation—being not worse than—obtains between alternatives, we can make a justified choice. For what justifies a choice is that the option maximizes the good: the option is not worse than any other option. We should distinguish maximization from optimization: the account according to which, for a justified choice to exist, an alternative must be better than any other alternative. Between incomparable items, no betterness relation obtains. But either of the incomparable items is surely not worse than the other. So maximization does not preclude justified choice when incomparable options are involved. For example, suppose Eunice is incomparable with Janice as a philosopher. If we are forced to choose between the two candidates, there is no best choice—no choice that is better than any other alternative. Thus, if optimization is the theory of justified choice, your choice of either Eunice or Janice is not justified. However, if maximization is the theory of justified choice, the choice of either Eunice or Janice can be justified because neither is worse than the other.

And, as Sen asserts (Sen 2000, 487), it makes sense to prefer maximization over optimization as the theory of justified choice. The role for the theory of justified choice is to recommend a choice. Optimization fails to recommend a choice when incomparable (and equally valuable) options are involved. Maximization does recommend a choice even when these options are involved. Therefore, maximization is superior to optimization in fulfilling the role for the theory of justified choice.
Chang argues against maximization (which she calls “maximalizing”) as a theory of justified choice. She argues as follows:

That the chosen alternative is not worse than the others cannot justify the choice, however, for x may be not worse than y with respect to V because x and y are incomparable with respect to V, and the incomparability of x and y cannot provide a ground for choosing x over y. (Chang 1998, 1584; Chang 2002, 52)

This argument misunderstands what the fact of incomparability must justify. It is plausible to hold that the incomparability of x and y cannot provide a ground for choosing x over y. However, there need not be a ground for choosing x over y for the choice of x to be justified. If that is necessary, the equality between two items cannot justify the choice of either. However, nobody denies that when two items are equal in value, it is justified to choose one of them. More plausibly, the justification of choosing one alternative only requires that the ground for the choice is not weaker than the ground for choosing any other alternative. And the fact that an alternative is not worse than any other alternatives satisfies this requirement.

Perhaps Chang’s point is rather that the incomparability of x and y can provide no ground for choosing either alternative, period. However, this just begs the question against the defenders of maximization, who takes it to justify choosing an alternative that the option is not worse than any other option perhaps because some of them are incomparable with each other. Or, perhaps Chang’s point is that the justification of choosing one alternative requires not only that the ground for the choice is not weaker than the ground for choosing any other alternative, but that the former ground is at least as strong as the latter ground; and that, when some alternatives are incomparable, this stricter requirement is not satisfied. However, it is not apparent that the justification of choosing one alternative requires that the ground for the choice is at least as strong as the ground for choosing any other alternative.

Thus, Chang’s argument specifically against maximization is not convincing. If maximization is the theory of justified choice, there is a justified choice even when incomparable alternatives are involved. We do not need parity to make justified choice

11 Her recent work suggests that this interpretation is correct (Chang 2009, 248n7 and 265n25).
possible.\textsuperscript{12}

However, Chang points out a problem for theories of justification that permit justified choice between incomparable items. Because maximization is one of such theories, we have to deal with the problem, which she calls “the value pump” problem. Given theories of justification that permit justified choice between incomparable items, through a series of putatively justified choices, one may end up with less value than one started with. Suppose A is incomparable with B, B is incomparable with A+, and A+ is better than A. If one is faced with a choice between A+ and B, it is justified to choose either because they are incomparable. Suppose he has chosen B. Now suppose that he is subsequently offered a choice between B and A. Because they are incomparable, again it is justified to choose either. Suppose he then chooses A. But now he is left with A where before he might have had A+, which is better than A (Chang 1997, 11).

We will presently consider how to deal with this value pump problem. However, note first that apparently this problem arises also for the theories which permit justified choice between the alternatives that are on a par (Boot (2009, 87) points this out, too). We can suppose A is on a par with B, B is on a par with A+, and A+ is better than A. This supposition is consistent and acceptable because parity is intransitive. If one is faced with a choice between A+ and B, it is justified to choose either since they are on a par. Suppose he has chosen B. Now suppose that he is subsequently offered a choice between B and A. Because they are on a par, again it is justified to choose either. Suppose he then chooses A. But now he is left with A where before he might have had A+, which is better than A.

Chang actually recognizes this problem for her position (Chang 2005, 346-347). She then claims as follows:

The rational permissibility of choosing either of two items on a par, then, must be constrained by one’s other choices. If one chose B when offered a choice between A+ and B, one is thereby rationally prohibited from choosing A when offered a choice between B and A. (Chang 2005, 347)

\textsuperscript{12} For another defense of maximization against Chang, see Hsieh 2007, 72-74.
Chang is here indicating the following condition of justified choice. If you have chosen between the alternatives that are on a par, thereafter you are not justified to abandon the chosen one for another option that is worse than some of the alternatives of that previous choice. Given such a historical condition, in the above example involving parity, since one has already chosen B over A+, which is on a par with B, she is not justified to abandon B for A, which is worse than the A+ that is one of the alternatives of the previous choice. The value pump problem is prevented.

However, it appears that the defenders of maximization can also adopt a similar additional condition.\footnote{Boot points this out, too (2009, 88). It appears that Chang herself concedes this point in Chang 2005, 346n18.} If you have chosen between the alternatives that are incomparable, thereafter you are not justified to abandon the chosen one for another option that is worse than some of the alternatives of that previous choice.\footnote{As it stands, this condition (as well as Chang’s original suggestion) might be problematic. As John Broome points out (Broome 1999, 33-34), even if you have chosen between the alternatives, you can be justified to abandon the chosen one for another option that is worse than some of the alternatives of that previous choice. You are not justified to abandon it only if you do not simultaneously repudiate the previous choice between incomparable alternatives. However, this potential modification will not affect my point in the text.} Given such a historical condition, in the above example involving incomparability, since one has already chosen B over A+, which is incomparable with B, she is not justified to abandon B for A, which is worse than the A+ that is one of the alternatives of the previous choice. The value pump problem is prevented once again.

To show that parity is more tractable than incomparability, Chang needs to show that, while the above parity-involved constraint of justified choice is acceptable, the similar incomparability-involved constraint is not. However, Chang has provided no argument of that sort. Until she provides one, the defenders of maximization (plus the above historical constraint) can claim that incomparability is as tractable as parity in view of justified choice. There is no practical need for the introduction of parity.

Conclusion

I have argued against Ruth Chang on two points. First, her argument fails to show that some items are on a par. We do not need parity to explain the
phenomenology of hard choices. Second, Chang’s alleged rationale for the introduction of parity really does not exist. Given a plausible account of justified choice, incomparability is as tractable as parity. So we have no theoretical or practical reason for introducing parity. Because parity is the non-traditional evaluative relation which is intransitive, we have a reason to avoid incurring it as far as possible. Thus, pace Chang, we should discard the possibility of parity.

I have not settled the issue, whether there are any incomparable items. However, as Chang has argued, pluralism _per se_ does not effect incomparability. As Chang points out, in certain contexts items of different types might not be incomparable but only noncomparable: it might not make sense to compare them in the given context. For instance, it might not make sense to choose between a lamp and a window in terms of the fitness for prime minister. In such a case, there is no problem of practical choice. Furthermore, even when comparison makes sense between items of different types, at least a very excellent item of one type is comparable with—better than—a very poor item of another type. For example, a very significant instance of (increase in) individual well-being is better (in terms of moral or political value) than a very insignificant instance of fairness. It is ridiculous to accept what Maynard Keynes is said to call “the Principle of Equal Unfairness”: if you can’t do a good turn to everybody in a certain situation, you shouldn’t do it to anybody (Williams 1973, 226). The cases of apparent incomparability are less abundant than might have been imagined.

Still, there are apparently incompatible alternatives, and Chang has not succeeded in showing that these are really on a par and thus comparable. So there might be incomparable items. However, a plausible theory of justified choice—maximization plus a constraint conditional on past choice—can perhaps cope with such cases of incomparability. Maximization permits that there is a justified choice when incomparable options are involved. In addition, the additional constraint restricts present choice by way of past choice and prevents the value pump problem. Without presupposing parity, we can perhaps cope with incomparability.

To illustrate these points, let me finish this paper by considering comparison involving individual liberty and distributive equality. On the one hand, respect for individual liberty apparently involves allowing individuals to make a certain range of
choices and to receive their consequences, whether they are good or bad for them. For example, if an individual chooses to found a company (through legal processes), then respect for individual liberty seems to require that she be allowed to do so and have its consequences: that is, she should be left to enjoy the resultant profit and fame if the company succeeds, and she should be left to suffer the loss of funds and confidence if it fails. On the other hand, respect for distributive equality apparently involves improving the economic conditions of the worse-off even at the expense of the better-off. Thus, it is often required to tax the rich to improve the conditions of the worse-off. However, taxing the rich will prevent them to have the full consequences of their choice, as far as they become rich as a result of their prior choice, for instance, to found a company. If, however, the rich are allowed to have the full consequences of their choices, distributive equality will not be achieved. In this way, it appears that sometimes we cannot respect individual liberty and distributive equality simultaneously. In such cases some have favored individual liberty over distributive equality while others have favored the latter over the former. The disagreement has persisted even between the most rational, like Robert Nozick and John Rawls, and it might feel that the instances of these values are frequently incomparable.

It makes sense to compare (in terms of, say, politico-moral value) taxing the rich for distributive equality and infringing individual liberty with avoiding the taxation of the rich for individual liberty and disrespecting distributive equality. Thus, the former and the latter are not noncomparable. So are they really incomparable? Apparently, even between items of different types—individual liberty and distributive equality—at least a very excellent item of one type is comparable with a very poor item of another type. For example, a very significant instance of individual liberty is better (in terms of politico-moral value) than a very insignificant instance of distributive equality, and vice versa. Thus, few people propose to tax the richer to level their wealth or well-being down so that it is made exactly equal to the wealth or well-being of the worse-off. And even libertarians seldom object to taxing all the people’s income at the same rate, and thereby collecting more tax from the rich. The focus of the debate is usually whether we should prefer progressive taxation to flat taxation, and if so, how steep the increase of tax rate for the richer should be. Presumably, a certain level of individual liberty can be traded off against a certain

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level of distributive equality, and *vice versa*.

Still, it might appear that individual liberty is incomparable with distributive equality in some situations. Chang has not successfully shown that seemingly incomparable alternatives are really on a par and thus comparable. So, perhaps individual liberty is incomparable with distributive equality in some circumstances. However, a plausible theory of justified choice—maximization plus the above constraint conditional on past choice—can perhaps cope with such cases. Suppose that the choice of a progressive taxation scheme, a significant approach to distributive equality, is incomparable with the alternative of flat taxation, more respect for individual liberty, and that these two options are better than other currently feasible alternatives. Then, because each of the two options is not worse than any other, the maximizing conception allows us to choose either, as far as our present choice is in a way consistent with our past one. For example, if we have once chosen that progressive taxation scheme over the previous tax system, and that past alternative (to which we cannot go back) is better on the whole than the current option of flat taxation, then we are not justified in choosing flat taxation (over the progressive taxation scheme) now. This constraint prevents us from ending up exchanging a better option with a worse one through a series of choices. In this way, even if there are incomparable items, we can perhaps live with the incomparability.

**Bibliography**


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