

Value Incomparability and Indeterminacy

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Abstract Two competing accounts of value incomparability have been put forward in the recent literature. According to the standard account, developed most famously by Joseph Raz, ‘incomparability’ means determinate failure of the three classic value relations (*better than*, *worse than*, and *equally good*): two value-bearers are incomparable with respect to a value V if and only if (i) it is false that x is better than y with respect to V , (ii) it is false that x is worse than y with respect to V and (iii) it is false that x and y are equally good with respect to V . Most philosophers have followed Raz in adopting this account of incomparability. Recently, however, John Broome has advocated an alternative view, on which value incomparability is explained in terms of *vagueness* or *indeterminacy*. In this paper I aim to further Broome’s view in two ways. Firstly, I want to supply independent reasons for thinking that the phenomenon of value incomparability is indeed a matter of the indeterminacy inherent in our comparative predicates. Secondly, I attempt to defend Broome’s account by warding off several objections that worry him, due mainly to Erik Carlson and Ruth Chang.

Keywords Value incomparability · Vagueness · Comparative predicates · Moral disagreement · Broome · Carlson · Chang

1 Incomparability: Determinate vs. Indeterminate

Moral disputes sometimes take the form of disagreement about which of two (or more) persons, objects, actions, or outcomes (‘value-bearers’, for short) is more valuable, where the consideration with respect to which the comparison is made can be any of a wide range of moral values (justice, fairness, rightness, sympathy, and so on). Some of the cases in which we are called upon to make such comparisons, though potentially very difficult, nevertheless admit of positive solutions in terms of some definite value relation: action a brings about more happiness than action b (i.e. a is better than b with respect to happiness

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maximisation), resources are distributed less fairly in outcome x than in outcome y (i.e. x is worse than y with respect to fairness of distribution), person A is as tolerant as person B (i.e. they are equal with respect to the value of tolerance). In many other cases, however, we seem less capable of reaching verdicts as straightforward as these and no matter how attentively we analyse the features involved, none of the standard ‘trichotomy’ of value relations (*better than*, *worse than*, *equally good*) appears to hold.¹ Is it better for Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter in order to appease Artemis and win the Trojan War, or to lose the war but save Iphigenia’s life? Is it better for Sartre’s student to join the French Liberation Army or to stay at home and look after his elderly mother? Or, on a slightly more trivial note, is a life devoted to charity better than one consecrated to philosophical research? When faced with questions like these, we typically feel as though the answer cannot be reached simply by invoking one of the three positive value relations. How, then, should we think of such ‘hard cases’ and what is their significance for the way we conceptualise value?

According to one standard line of argument, advanced most notably by Joseph Raz (1985–86, 1986) and followed by many other philosophers, these cases are instances of value incomparability, defined as follows:

I_1 : Two value-bearers x and y are *incomparable* (with respect to a value V) if and only if (i) it is false that x is better than y (with respect to V), (ii) it is false that x is worse than y (with respect to V), and (iii) it is false that x and y are equally good (with respect to V).

I shall dub this view ‘hard incomparabilism’. It claims that incomparability is a matter of determinate failure of the classic value relations. It also claims that there are many instances of such incomparability in our practical thought.

Some philosophers, whom I shall henceforth label ‘comparabilists’, have protested against this account of hard cases. In their view, hard incomparabilism unwarrantedly assumes that the classic trichotomy exhausts the logical space of positive value relations. Instead, Derek Parfit (1984) and James Griffin (1986) have suggested that many of the instances which people are typically tempted to classify as ‘incomparable’ would in fact be better described in terms of ‘rough equality’ (i.e., classic equality with transitivity deleted), while more recently Ruth Chang has argued that a fourth *sui generis* relation between value-bearers should be acknowledged, namely ‘parity’ (Chang 2002a, b).

But despite their disagreement concerning the number of value relations available in the conceptual space, and therefore the scope of incomparability, hard incomparabilists and comparabilists would in fact agree on one fundamental thing about the nature of hard cases. The crucial assumption behind both these views is that in such cases, the trichotomy of value relations fails *determinately*: it is determinately false that x is better than y , determinately false that y is better than x and determinately false that they are equally good. Of course, incomparabilists and comparabilists will want to draw different conclusions from this. Based on I_1 , the former will argue that x and y are incomparable. The latter, however, will claim that failure of trichotomy does not entail incomparability, since the items can be ‘roughly equal’ or ‘on a par’. But comparabilists will typically

¹ The term ‘trichotomy’ is used by analogy with the mathematical law of trichotomy, which states that for any real numbers x and y , exactly one of the following relations holds: $x < y$, $x = y$, $x > y$. Of course, like the numerical relations, the three value relations can be reduced to just one (e.g. *better than*), and the other two relations defined in terms of it (a is worse than b iff b is better than a ; a and b are equally good iff it is not the case that a is better than b and it is not the case that b is better than a).

admit that *if* incomparability *were* to ever occur, then it would be a matter of determinate failure of the value relations.

In contrast to this, an alternative account of incomparability is possible, which simply rejects this assumption. According to this third view, which I shall dub ‘soft incomparabilism’, value incomparability *does* occur, only not as a matter of determinate failure of the three classical value relations as traditional incomparabilists would have it, but rather as vagueness or failure of bivalence. This alternative notion of incomparability is best captured by the following definition:

I_2 : Two value-bearers x and y are *incomparable* (with respect to a value V) if and only if (i) it is neither true nor false that x is better than y (with respect to V), (ii) it is neither true nor false that x is worse than y (with respect to V), and (iii) it is neither true nor false that x and y are equally good (with respect to V).

The difference between I_1 and I_2 has not gone unnoticed in the philosophical debate concerning value incomparability. Raz, for instance, who is one of the pioneers of this debate, distinguishes sharply between ‘the case in which it is false that of a and b either one is better than the other or they are of equal value’ and ‘the case in which this statement is neither true nor false’ (Raz 1985–86: 119). He dismisses the latter as less significant, due to the fact that it arises merely as a result of ‘the vagueness and absence of sharp boundaries which infect language generally’. With one notable exception, the vast majority of subsequent contributors to the debate over incomparability have followed Raz in this assumption. The exception is John Broome, who in a series of recent writings (Broome 1997, 2001, 2004) has presented a very interesting argument against the standard conception of value incomparability encapsulated in I_1 . Broome’s view, however, has been met with considerable opposition by hard incomparabilists and comparabilists alike. My aim in this paper is to further soft incomparabilism in two ways. Firstly, I want to supply some independent reasons for thinking that the phenomenon of value incomparability is indeed a matter of the vagueness inherent in our comparative predicates and should therefore be treated in terms of indeterminate rather than determinate failure of the trichotomy. Secondly, I will attempt to defend Broome’s account by warding off several objections that worry him, due mainly to Ruth Chang and Erik Carlson.

2 Incomparability and Vagueness

What reasons have we for thinking that incomparability is grounded in vagueness?

My starting point is the observation that our comparative predicates almost always allow for certain margins for error. To employ the popular metaphor of weighing, we might say that the scales we use to weigh goods and rank them against one another are not sufficiently sensitive to register very slight differences or changes in value. Imagine, for instance, that someone were to add two mildly insightful lines to one of David Lodge’s novels. Would the resulting book be better than the original? The issue appears indeterminate: it would seem that there are always certain amounts of value that are too small to tip our scales.

In this sense, comparative predicates can be said to be *tolerant* with respect to values, where a predicate F is defined (following Wright) as tolerant with respect to a property ϕ ‘if there is ... some positive degree of change in respect of ϕ insufficient to ever affect the justice with which F applies to a particular case’ (Wright 1976: §2). The issue of *tolerance* concerns the proper application of predicates: it encapsulates the idea that if two objects a and a^+ , both falling under F , differ only marginally in the relevant respect (on which F is

tolerant), then if one competently judges a to be F , one cannot competently judge $a +$ in any other manner.

The serial application of this principle of tolerance famously leads to contradiction. Suppose F is a tolerant predicate. We can then construct a continuum of objects $a_1 \dots a_n$, starting from an a_1 that is determinately F , and gradually making small changes in respects on which F is tolerant until we finally reach a_n , which is determinately not F . By applying the principle of tolerance to each object in this continuum we conclude that a_n is determinately F , which contradicts our assumption. Thus, a predicate's being tolerant makes that predicate susceptible to sorites paradoxes.

It's easy to see that comparative predicates match this description very well. Let us suppose, for instance, that F is an evaluative predicate, out of which the comparative 'Fer than' is constructed. Then, we can imagine what Broome calls 'a *standard configuration*' for the given comparative, that is, 'a chain of things, fully ordered by their F ness and forming a continuum, and a fixed thing called the *standard* that is not itself in the chain. At the top of the chain are things Fer than the standard, and at the bottom things the standard is Fer than' (Broome 1997: 69). Now, as I noted above, there are reasons to believe that at least some comparatives in our ordinary language are tolerant with respect to certain values. We can illustrate this with the help of the following example. Suppose Thomas Talentless is a very bad novelist. He is clearly a worse novelist than David Lodge. Suppose, moreover, that we can construct a continuum of novelists by taking Talentless and gradually adding very small units of insightfulness until we finally reach a supremely insightful novelist, Manfred Masterson, who is clearly better than Lodge. Now, by applying the tolerance principle, which states that small additions cannot affect the application of a predicate like ' _ is a better novelist than _ ', we are forced to deny that Masterson is better than Lodge. The situation exhibits all the features of a sorites argument, thus motivating the intuition that some comparative predicates may be vague or indeterminate.

In addition to tolerance and sorites susceptibility, comparatives also display other traditional hallmarks of vagueness, such as *indefiniteness* and *borderlineness*. Indefiniteness refers to the lack of well-defined extensions. On our previous scale of novelists ranging from Talentless to Masterson, there appears to be no sharp boundary between novelists that are good and novelists that are not good, nor is there any exact point at which one of these increasingly insightful novelists can be said to be better than Lodge. A related phenomenon is borderlineness, which refers to cases where it is unclear whether or not a predicate applies. Just as some people are borderline tall, i.e. not clearly tall and not clearly not tall, some novelists can be borderline good, i.e. not clearly good novelists, but not clearly not good novelists either. This carries over to the comparative case: it seems quite likely that somewhere along our continuum of novelists, there will be some who are neither clearly better than Lodge, nor clearly not better. This might be, for instance, because they are more insightful in some respects, but less insightful in others. Or, as is more likely given the fact that 'good novelist' is a multidimensional term, with many other criteria apart from insightfulness (creativity, humorousness, storytelling, character-building, etc.), some novelists might be borderline better than Lodge because they are slightly more humorous but a little less insightful.

The final reason I have for thinking that comparatives are vague is perhaps more contentious, so in the course of expounding it I will also be considering a few arguments by Ruth Chang, which may seem to undermine my main point. Put crudely, the point I want to make is that there are great similarities in the *phenomenology* of incomparability and borderlineness, which in turn warrants the claim that vagueness is the underlying source of both these phenomena. When the phenomenology of borderline cases is examined, the

feelings of perplexity, ignorance, and arbitrariness that often attend such cases are standardly invoked. Typically, when dealing with a predicate that lacks well-defined extensions, we would prefer not to have to give a positive or negative judgment for every object that might fall under the predicate, and would rather leave some cases unexamined. The same applies in the case of comparatives. Is Ian McEwan a better novelist than Lodge? In many instances, it is conceivable that we would rather not have to give a determinate answer to a question like this. Moreover, if forced to make a judgment, we would only do so with a sense of artificiality and arbitrariness. In some cases, it may even seem to us as though no amount of information could ever help us decide whether someone is a good novelist, or a better novelist than Lodge, just as no amount of information could help us decide whether David Cameron is thin or not. The matter simply *feels* indeterminate to us.

But is this enough to establish that value-predicates and comparatives are vague? Does the idea of comparative vagueness really stand up to scrutiny? Ruth Chang thinks not. In her view, hard cases are not borderline instances of vague comparatives, because ‘the phenomenology of the cases is different’:

In borderline cases, insofar as we are willing to judge that the predicate applies, we are also willing to judge that it does not apply. Take for example Herbert, a genuine borderline case of baldness. Insofar as we are willing to call Herbert bald, we are also willing to call him not bald. In hard cases, things are different. The evidence we have inclines us to the judgment that the one item is *not* better than the other (and not worse and not equally good). So, for example, our research into the philosophical talents of Aye and Bea inclines us to the judgment that Aye is not more philosophically talented than Bea: it seems that this is the case without its also seeming that Aye is more philosophically talented. Thus, in a hard case, insofar as we are willing to judge that “better than (with respect to *V*)” does not apply, we are not also willing to judge that it does apply. In the absence of any explanation for why the phenomenology should be different, there is good reason to think that hard cases are not cases of vagueness in the given comparative. (Chang 2002a: 137)

As Chang herself admits, however, the force of this argument is not altogether clear. I am tempted, in fact, to think that she is simply wrong about the phenomenology of the cases she considers. Given the fact that most hard cases involve evaluatively diverse items (which instantiate the covering values in very different respects), it seems more plausible, and more in line with actual phenomenology, to suppose that we will be inclined to judge that the comparative predicate *both does and does not apply*—because it applies in some respects but not in others. Thus, replacing Aye and Bee in her example with actual philosophers (say, Quine and Wittgenstein), we might say that Quine is more rigorous, while Wittgenstein is more insightful. But which of these two philosophers is better *tout court*? Confronted with this question, perplexity is certainly licensed, and to the extent that one might feel inclined to answer ‘Quine’ on grounds of rigour, one may also feel disinclined to give that answer when insightfulness is the relevant comparative criterion.

Nevertheless, Chang has a second reason for rejecting the vagueness account: she thinks that even if we allow that a certain feeling of perplexity is sometimes justified in hard cases, the resolution of this perplexity is not of the same sort as resolution of the indeterminacy of borderline cases. More precisely, ‘in borderline cases, whether the given predicate applies can be a matter of *arbitrary* stipulation, but in hard cases, resolution of application cannot be an arbitrary matter’ (Chang 2002a: 137–138).

To illustrate her point, Chang compares two scenarios. In both of them, Jack and Jill (two ideal agents stipulated to be ‘in possession of all the relevant facts, sensibilities and

powers of reasoning' needed to evaluate things) are required to sort items into one of two piles for a given predicate, under the sole requirement that those items of which the predicate is true go into one pile, and those of which the predicate is false go into the other. In the first scenario, Jack and Jill must sort Herbert (a borderline case of baldness) with respect to the predicate 'bald'. It is assumed that they agree on all the relevant facts concerning Herbert's cranial hair, that they have the same understanding of the predicate, 'and that the sorting takes place in no particular context—it's not that Jack will win a prize if he sorts more items into the "true" category, or that the world will be a better place if they both sort certain items into the "false" category—rather, the sorting is context-free' (*ibid.*). Given these assumptions and our intuitions about indeterminacy it seems extremely plausible to assume that the decisions Jack and Jill make about Herbert are perfectly arbitrary—each could just as well flip a coin to determine how Herbert is to be sorted. Moreover, if Jack and Jill happen to disagree about how to sort Herbert (say Jack puts him into the 'bald' pile and Jill into the 'not bald' pile) their disagreement is not substantive but 'simply a clash of arbitrary decisions' (*ibid.*).

In the second scenario, Jack and Jill must sort pairs of value-bearers with respect to comparative predicates, based on the same requirement as before: those pairs of which the predicate is true go into one pile and those of which the predicate is false go into the other. Now consider a hard case involving comparison of a particular act of promise-keeping a , and a particular act of bringing about great happiness b . According to Chang the resolution of such a case 'clearly cannot be a matter of arbitrary stipulation, but is a substantive matter concerning which *is* better' (*ibid.*, 139). This is revealed, she thinks, by the fact that we would find it unacceptable for Jack and Jill to simply flip a coin in order to decide in which pile to put the pair $\langle a, b \rangle$. Moreover, '[i]f Jack puts the pair in the "morally better" pile and Jill puts it in the "morally worse" pile, there is a genuine substantive disagreement between them, not a mere clash of arbitrary decisions' (*ibid.*).²

Despite the force of Chang's example, I do not find her second argument against soft incomparabilism any more convincing than the first. Some of the differences she notes between the phenomenology of hard cases and that of borderline cases may indeed be real. In fact, it is quite obvious that not all comparisons have the same *feel* that instances of vagueness typically have. But does this really show that our comparatives are any less vague? Hardly. For note that the differences in phenomenology can be explained very easily by appeal to other factors, which have nothing to do with the vagueness or not of our comparative predicates. One such explanation, for instance, might invoke a notion of *practical significance*. The claim would be that in some contexts, the application of vague predicates can seem less arbitrary not because those predicates are any less vague, but simply because *it matters to us more* in those contexts how we apply the relevant predicates. For instance, the importance of some of our choices may sometimes help to dispel the air of arbitrariness surrounding them, without necessarily eliminating that arbitrariness itself. In other words, it might alter the phenomenology of borderline cases, without changing their semantics.

The notion of *practical significance* that I am invoking here may sound hopelessly obscure and imprecise, but it need not imply much more than the perfectly innocuous

² A slightly *ad hominem* remark might be in order here, to the effect that, if Chang's considerations were correct, they would seem to work not only against the claim that it is indeterminate whether a is better than b , but also against the claims that a and b are equal, roughly equal, or 'on a par', since all of these claims seem to entail that the choice between such items is, in an important sense, indifferent and therefore that Jack and Jill could flip a coin in order to settle their disagreement.

platitude that being able to make comparative judgments is more important to us in some contexts than it is in others. Obviously, the difference between situations in which comparisons are practically significant and situations in which they aren't is itself vague and highly contextual. The same comparison can be very important to us in one context, but completely insignificant in another. That fact, however, need not raise any problems, because after all our feelings of arbitrariness can also vary with context. To see this, consider a variation to Chang's first scenario. As before, Jack and Jill are required to sort people with respect to their baldness and Herbert is borderline bald. This time, however, it is added that Jack and Jill possess some weird conative states which allow them to make friends, or interact ethically, only with bald people. (Or worse, imagine that Jack and Jill's boss has ordered them to sort people into these two categories because he wants to subsequently kill all those who are bald.) Now, notice that when such variations are introduced, the phenomenology of the case immediately changes. Jack and Jill's decision concerning Herbert's baldness no longer *feels* arbitrary and in an important sense it no longer *is* arbitrary: they shouldn't (in the moral sense) toss a coin because Herbert's life may depend on that. Moreover, if they happen to disagree about whether or not Herbert is bald their disagreement is in a sense substantive.³

Here is another illustration of how the practical significance of choice could alter the phenomenology of vagueness.⁴ Jaffa Cakes are classified by their manufacturer as cakes. But they also possess many of the features of biscuits. Are they cakes, or are they biscuits? In everyday contexts, the issue seems patently indeterminate—a matter of arbitrary stipulation. In the UK, however, VAT is charged on chocolate-covered biscuits, but not on cakes. So in 1991, HM Customs and Excise decided to challenge the classification of Jaffa Cakes as cakes. Subsequently, the matter was argued in court. The resolution of the case was no longer felt to be arbitrary and disagreement seemed substantive. Despite this change in phenomenology, however, it would hardly seem plausible to claim that the issue of whether Jaffa cakes are cakes thereby lost any of its initial vagueness.

If I am right the differences that Chang notes between the phenomenology of *some* hard cases and that of *some* borderline cases do not point to any corresponding difference between the nature of incomparability and that of vagueness. As we have seen, they can be explained by appeal to contextual factors. On the other hand, we have seen that there are strong reasons to think that many instances of incomparability can be explained in terms of indeterminacy.

Still, the issue of whether incomparability should be construed as indeterminate or determinate failure of trichotomy might seem overly disjunctive. After all, why wouldn't the two conceptions be perfectly compatible? Why not embrace an alternative picture on which, for any predicate F and things a and b , there would be cases in which the trichotomy holds determinately (either a is F er than b , or b is F er than a , or they are equally F), cases in which it fails determinately (it is false that a is F er than b , false that b is F er than a , and false that they are equally F) and, in between, cases in which it is indeterminate whether the trichotomy holds or fails? Broome's argument, which I explore below, is meant to show that this view leads to contradictions and therefore that the two ways of construing incomparability are incompatible.

³ I say 'in a sense' because even in a situation like this, the answer to the question of whether Herbert *is* bald remains indeterminate, which means that their disagreement is in an important respect a mere clash of arbitrary stipulations. My point is only meant to show that the argument from *feelings* of non-arbitrariness is too weak, as these feelings can be explained by appeal to other considerations, like practical significance.

⁴ I owe this example to Tim Crane. See his website for a nice discussion of this and a few related examples (http://web.mac.com/cranetim/Tims_website/Jaffa_cakes.html).

3 Broome's Argument

According to hard incomparabilism, the continuum in a standard configuration is always divided in precisely three areas with sharp boundaries between each other: the top area, where *As* are *Fer* than *B* (the standard); the middle area, where it is false that *As* are *Fer* than *B*, false that *B* is *Fer* than *As*, and false that *As* and *B* are equally *F*; and the bottom area, where there are *As* than which *B* is *Fer*. But this runs afoul of our intuition that evaluative predicates have margins for error and therefore cannot have sharp boundaries.

To accommodate this intuition, the hard-line incomparabilist might change his picture by allowing the boundaries between the three zones on the continuum to be fuzzy. By doing so he would now be acknowledging not three but five zones on the continuum: the top area—as before; then, further down, a borderline area—in which it is neither true nor false that the *As* are *Fer* than *B*; then the middle area—as before; still further down another borderline area—in which it is neither true nor false that *B* is *Fer* than the *As*; and finally the bottom area—as before. At first, this proposal might seem cogent and attractive, inasmuch as it attempts to reconcile hard incomparabilism with the intuitions about indefiniteness and borderlineness that motivate soft incomparabilism.

According to Broome, however, it is precisely this combination of hard and soft incomparability that makes the picture incoherent and gives rise to contradiction. He reveals the contradiction by means of the following argument, which has the structure of a *reductio*.⁵

Suppose that the standard configuration contains the five zones described above. Now, take any point in the upper borderline zone (namely, that between betterness and hard incomparability). It is clearly false that *B* (the standard) is *Fer* than this point, since this is false for all the points in the zone of hard incomparability and above. Given that this is a point in the zone of vagueness, it is neither true nor false that it is *Fer* than *B* (if it were true, the point would be in the top zone, if it were false, it would be in the middle area of hard incomparability). So the following is true about any point in the upper vagueness area: it is false that *B* (the standard) is *Fer* than it, but not false that it is *Fer* than *B*. But now, the following principle seems true:

The collapsing principle, special version. For any *x* and *y*, if it is false that *y* is *Fer* than *x* and not false that *x* is *Fer* than *y*, then it is true that *x* is *Fer* than *y*.

Given this principle and what was said about the arbitrary point in the indeterminacy zone, it follows straightforwardly that the point is *Fer* than *B*. But this implies it is not in the zone of vagueness after all. So there can't be any such zone.

A parallel argument can be constructed against the possibility of the lower zone of indeterminacy (between worseness and hard incomparability). Thus, we assumed that zones of hard incomparability and soft incomparability can coexist and, based on this assumption, we derived a contradiction. The assumption must then be rejected: we can only have one or the other. But we have already seen above that the hard-line incomparabilist's three-zone model of the standard configuration is unsatisfactory, as it violates our intuition that there can be no sharp boundaries in the application of comparative predicates. Therefore, we must conclude that *incomparability is vagueness*.

⁵ The argument is set forth in Broome 1997: 73–75. Similar versions can be found in Broome 2001: 12–13, and Broome 2004: 173–175.

4 Broome's Argument Defended

As Broome himself realises, the most problematic step in his argument is the application of the collapsing principle. Broome vindicates this principle as follows:

If it is false that y is *Fer* than x , and not false that x is *Fer* than y , then x has a clear advantage over y in respect of its *Fness*. So it must be *Fer* than y . It takes only the slightest asymmetry to make it the case that one thing is *Fer* than another.⁶ One object is heavier than another if the scales tip ever so slightly toward it. Here there is a clear asymmetry between x and y in respect of their *Fness*. That is enough to determine that x is *Fer* than y . (Broome 1997: 74)

He also illustrates this point by means of a thought experiment:

Suppose you had to award a prize to either x or y for its *Fness*. Suburbs in Canberra are named after great Australians, and each new suburb has to go to the greatest Australian who does not yet have a suburb. Suppose there are two candidates for the next suburb, and you have to decide between them. Suppose that, on investigating their cases, you conclude it is false that Wye is a greater Australian than Exe, but that it is not false that Exe is a greater Australian than Wye. This is not at all like the case where you conclude that Wye and Exe are equally great Australians, because then it is not clear who should get the suburb. You should probably toss a coin. Nor is it like the case where you conclude that neither Wye nor Exe is greater than the other and they are not equally great either. This is a case squarely in the zone of [hard incomparability]. In this case, it is once again not clear who should get the suburb, just because neither candidate is better than the other. Perhaps you should toss a coin in this case too, or perhaps some other procedure would be right. But when it is false that Wye is greater than Exe, but not false that Exe is greater than Wye, you need not hesitate. It would be quite wrong to give the suburb to Wye. Since the prize was for being the greater Australian, it could not be so obvious who should win unless that person was the greater Australian.

When it is false that y is *Fer* than x but not false that x is *Fer* than y , then if you had to award a prize for *Fness*, it is plain you should give the prize to x . But it would not be plain unless x was *Fer* than y . Therefore, x is *Fer* than y . This must be so whether you actually have to give a prize or not, since whether or not you have to give a prize cannot affect whether or not x is *Fer* than y . (*ibid.*: 74–75)

This example is supposed to reveal the intuitive plausibility of the collapsing principle. According to Chang, however, the thought experiment goes awry:

Consider the initial judgments that it is neither true nor false that Exe is greater than Wye and that it is false that Wye is greater than Exe. If the collapsing principle is true, what must follow? We must infer that one of our judgments is not true. For the collapsing principle tells us that we have made a mistake; both claims cannot be true and we must reject at least one of our judgments. Now perhaps it is true that choosing Exe is the right thing to do in the given circumstances, but if that is so, it will not have anything to do with our initial judgments implying that Exe is greater. For we

⁶ To make room for the tolerance of the comparative '*Fer* than', this should be qualified to read: 'It takes only the slightest *discernible* asymmetry ...'. The point does not affect the argument negatively, however, since the asymmetry between x and y to which Broome draws our attention is certainly discernible in this sense.

know that at least one of those judgments is false, though we don't know which, and so those judgments, if they are to provide grounds for choice, cannot do so by implying something about comparative facts concerning Exe and Wye. Thus the thought experiment fails to bolster the collapsing principle. (Chang 2002a: 161)

The point Chang makes in this paragraph is not entirely clear to me, but I suspect it is meant to be running along somewhat the following lines. According to Broome, from:

- (1) It is false that Wye is greater than Exe
and
- (2) It is not false that Exe is greater than Wye,
we can derive
- (3) It is true that Exe is greater than Wye,
because the collapsing principle tells us that (1) and (2) imply (3). But then, it follows by contraposition that (1) and the negation of (3), namely
- (4) It is not true that Exe is greater than Wye,
(which is also true because 'It is neither true nor false that Exe is greater than Wye' is true), together imply the negation of (2), namely
- (5) It is false that Exe is greater than Wye.

So, strictly speaking, inasmuch as the collapsing principle helps us derive (3) (as Broome wants it to) it also yields something contrary to (3), namely (5). But then, the objection might go, it follows that whatever reasons we have for thinking that (3) is obvious in Broome's thought experiment, these reasons have nothing to do with the collapsing principle.

I am not sure whether this is precisely the point Chang had in mind,⁷ but it is a point that others have made (see Carlson 2004: 95) and, as such, is worth considering. What, if anything, does it prove? It certainly does *not* prove that Broome's argument is unsound. For even if the collapsing principle in fact allows us to derive either (3) or (5), it still entails, by doing so, the falsity of the proposition 'It is neither true nor false that Exe is greater than Wye'. And this is sufficient for Broome's purpose of deriving a contradiction from the assumption that this proposition is compatible with (1). However, the objection *does* seem to achieve something. By showing that the collapsing principle can actually collapse the asymmetric situations to which it applies not only to truth, but also to falsity, it seems to rob this principle of much of its intuitive appeal. After all, in cases like Broome's thought experiment, what we want to be entitled to conclude is that Exe is greater than Wye, not that this is false. We don't want a principle that remains indifferent between these two claims. If that were all we needed, we might have just as well flipped a coin.

But the collapsing principle does not have to remain indifferent between truth and falsity. In its special version stated above, the principle works not on its own, but in conjunction with the assumption that x is much closer to F ness than to not- F ness, in virtue of the place we gave it in the continuum (namely, in the *upper* and not the *lower* zone of vagueness). It is because of this that ' x has a clear advantage over y in respect of its F ness', as Broome puts it. And there is a general version of the collapsing principle which encapsulates the intuition arising from this almost graphic representation:

The collapsing principle, general version. For any x and y , if it is more true that x is F er than y than that y is F er than x , then x is F er than y .

⁷ It might very well be, given what she says a couple of pages later: '...strictly speaking, Broome does not need the collapsing principle to collapse to the truth of x 's being F er than y ; he could just as well say that the collapse is to the *falsity* of x 's being F er than y ' (Chang 2002a: 167).

This version, I believe, avoids the difficulties signalled by the above considerations in a satisfactory way. But other difficulties lie ahead.

Thus, in a recent paper (Carlson 2004), which Broome acknowledges as containing a strong objection to his view (see Broome 2004: 185–186, n. 6), Erik Carlson proposes one interesting type of counterexample to the collapsing principle. First, he notes that a consequence of the special version of the collapsing principle is that vague comparisons must be symmetrical with respect to truth-value, in the sense captured by the following claim:

Vagueness symmetry: It is neither true nor false that x is *Fer* than y if and only if it is neither true nor false that y is *Fer* than x .⁸

The proof for this is as follows. Suppose some x in the indeterminacy zone is *Fer* than y (the standard), and it is neither true nor false that y is better than x . Since x is *Fer* than y , the asymmetry of the relation ‘*Fer* than’ implies that y is not *Fer* than x . This contradicts our assumption. Second, suppose that x is not *Fer* than y , and it is neither true nor false that y is *Fer* than x . From this, by the special version of the collapsing principle we get that y is *Fer* than x . Again, we derive contradiction. The proof for the other sense of the equivalence relation is parallel. Therefore, if the special version of the collapsing principle is correct, vagueness is symmetrical (and vice versa—the collapsing principle and the thesis of vagueness symmetry are equivalent).

However, Carlson thinks that vagueness symmetry is open to counterexamples of an interesting kind:

Suppose that we are considering who of Alf and Beth is the better philosopher. Concerning every property that indubitably contributes to goodness as a philosopher, we find that they possess it to an equal degree. However, Alf has greater rhetorical skill than Beth. Does this make Alf a better philosopher than Beth? It seems that there may well be no definite answer to this question. Perhaps our concept of a good philosopher is such that it is indeterminate whether rhetorical skill contributes positively to this species of goodness. If so, it is neither true nor false that Alf is a better philosopher than Beth. It is clear, however, that rhetorical skill does not contribute *negatively* to goodness as a philosopher. Hence, it is definitely false that Beth is a better philosopher than Alf. But these two judgments, that it is neither true nor false that Alf is a better philosopher than Beth, and false that Beth is a better philosopher than Alf, together contradict vagueness symmetry. [...]

In general, there appear to be properties for which it is indeterminate whether they are positively relevant for an item’s goodness (in a certain respect), but definitely false that they are negatively relevant, or vice versa. Vagueness symmetry implausibly excludes the possibility of such indeterminately relevant properties. Since the collapsing principle is equivalent to vagueness symmetry, there is good reason to reject it. (Carlson 2004: 96–97)

Carlson’s example seems quite compelling, but I do not think its consequences for Broome’s view are damaging. As Carlson notes, Broome might attempt to respond by restricting the scope of his argument so as to exclude cases involving indeterminately relevant properties. But he thinks that this response would be *ad hoc* and ‘would make Broome’s argument much less interesting’ (*ibid.*: 97). It would be *ad hoc*, presumably,

⁸ See Carlson 2004: 96. Broome explicitly endorses this thesis as a consequence of his collapsing principle in Broome 1997: 76.

because there is no principled distinction between cases of indeterminate relevant properties and other instances of vagueness in our comparatives. It would be less interesting because ‘the phenomenon of indeterminately relevant properties appears to be rather common, [and thus] there will be plenty of standard configurations for which the contentious assumption [that there is no pair of items which are alike in all their determinately relevant properties, but differ concerning the possession of some indeterminately relevant property—not even when the standard is included among the items of comparison] is false’ (*ibid.*).

I want to argue in what follows that Carlson’s assumptions are unwarranted, because (a) there *is* a principled distinction to be drawn between cases that involve indeterminately relevant properties and the instances of vagueness I have been focusing on so far, and (b) this distinction gives us good reasons to believe that, even though Carlson’s phenomenon of indeterminate relevance is pervasive, it poses no particular problems for Broome’s conception of indeterminacy defended here.

I shall start with (a). To introduce the distinction I have in mind, I want to emphasise an important difference concerning the source of the two types of comparative vagueness I will be distinguishing here. An interesting characteristic of all the hard comparisons discussed so far is that their respective sets of contributory values are stipulated to be determinately defined: that is, we suppose (often just for the sake of simplicity) that we know exactly what the contributory values relevant for our deliberations are, and then we ask how these values are to be ranked against each other. A consequence of this is that we are able to specify in each case the exact meaning of the evaluative term ‘good *F*’, having previously stipulated the relevant criteria for what counts as falling under *F*. In this sense, whatever indeterminacy we then find lurking in our comparisons, that indeterminacy will clearly be *non-derivative*: in other words, the truth-value of ‘*x* is *F*er than *y*’ will be indeterminate not because of any indeterminacy regarding ‘*x* is a good *F*’ or ‘*y* is a good *F*’, but because it is not determinate how the contributory values of *x* and *y* should be ranked. In an important sense, then, this type of vagueness belongs entirely in the realm of comparisons—it characterises the application of our comparative predicates and is therefore ‘extensional’. I will call it *genuine comparative vagueness*. Its symptoms are, as we have seen above, *tolerance* and *lack of sharp boundaries*.

On the other hand, it’s easy to notice that the ‘indeterminately relevant properties’ on which Carlson relies in his counterexample give rise to a distinct type of vagueness. The crucial difference is that this new kind of comparative indeterminacy is essentially *derivative*: the truth-value of ‘Alf is a better philosopher than Beth’ is indeterminate *because* the criteria of being a good philosopher are not definite—should we count rhetorical skill or not? It’s easy to see that vagueness of this sort is not peculiar to comparative predicates and does not have its sources in them. Rather, it stems from the fact that certain non-comparative concepts do not have precise criteria, which is to say that this type of vagueness characterises not merely the application of those concepts, but also the semantic conditions for their application, and is therefore ‘intensional’. I will call it *derivative comparative vagueness*. Its main symptom is semantic *open-texture*.

With this distinction in place, my proposal is that we amend Broome’s collapsing principle as follows:

The collapsing principle, general version (amended). For any *intensionally determinate* predicate *F* and any things *x* and *y*, if it is more true that *x* is *F*er than *y* than that *y* is *F*er than *x*, then *x* is *F*er than *y*.

Hopefully, given what I have just said about the two kinds of vagueness, this restriction will not seem *ad hoc*. The collapsing principle is explicitly restricted to comparative

language anyway (see Broome 1997: 77), and we have seen that only one type of indeterminacy deserves to be called *genuinely comparative*. There is no reason why the principle should apply to other kinds of vagueness phenomena as well.

I have argued that the type of vagueness identified by Carlson is a specific manifestation of a more general feature, which arguably infects a great deal of our ordinary language. The concepts that possess this feature are *open-textured*—their semantic criteria are vague. If Carlson is right (and he probably is), such concepts are pervasive. But this should pose no specific problem for the conception of incomparability defended here. When items are incomparable in virtue of their having what Carlson calls ‘indeterminately relevant properties’, what this means is that there are multiple *sharpenings*, or *precisifications*, of the concepts in terms of which the comparisons are made. Thus, for instance, in Carlson’s example of Alf and Beth, there are two possible sharpenings of ‘goodness as a philosopher’. On one of them rhetorical skill matters and therefore Alf is better than Beth. On the other it doesn’t and so Alf and Beth are equal. This suggests the following idea: unlike the usual comparatives, concepts that are intensionally indeterminate (in the sense exploited by Carlson’s argument) admit of multiple standard configurations, according to the particular sharpening they are given. But these standard configurations are in every respect identical to the normal standard configuration we have used in our examples so far. The phenomenon might be pervasive, but this is not a threat for the view that incomparability is vagueness. In fact, the more pervasive it is, the more incomparability there actually *is* out there.

5 Conclusions

If the arguments I have put forth in this paper are correct, they license the conclusion that some of our comparative predicates are vague or indeterminate, in much the same way in which predicates like ‘red’ or ‘bald’ are said to be vague. This, I believe, provides a good explanation of the phenomenon of value-incomparability along the lines of Broome’s account, an explanation which, as I have tried to show, can avoid some of the objections raised against Broome in recent literature.

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