

Population Ethics and Conflict of Value Imprecision

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Parfit (2016) has suggested a new way of avoiding the paradoxes and impossibility theorems in population ethics by revising our beliefs about fundamental axiological concepts such as “equally good” and “better than”. More specifically, Parfit suggests that ““We might claim that ... given the conflict between ... values, [w]orlds are only imprecisely comparable, and would be imprecisely equally good.” From this follows that many of the comparisons of different future populations will involve imprecise comparisons and hence that transitivity of “better than” might fail. Parfit suggests that this move in combination with an appeal to (lexically) superior values will open up a way of avoiding the Repugnant Conclusion without implying other counterintuitive conclusion, and thus solve one of the major challenges in ethics. In my paper, I shall try to clarify Parfit’s proposal and evaluate whether it, or a possible development of it, will help us with the impossibility theorems in population ethics.

Parity without Imprecise Equality

Chrisoula Andreou

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I begin by laying out the details of a conception of imprecise equality according to which options that are that are imprecisely equally good are not rankable in relation to each other but are close in value. I then consider the question of whether all cases of parity are cases of imprecise equality. Given that options that are on a par, though not rankable in relation to each another, are "in the same neighborhood" in terms of their overall value relative to what matters in the case at hand, it might seem like options that are on a par must be close in value and so must be imprecisely equally good. But, according to the position I defend in this paper, there is room for cases of parity that are not cases of imprecise equality. How could two options that are not rankable in relation to one another be in the same neighborhood (in terms of their overall value relative to what matters) without being imprecisely equally good? This question has received little attention, even by Ruth Chang, who provides the most prominent way of understanding parity that does not appeal to the sort of closeness associated with imprecise equality. In responding to the question, I develop the idea that the 'grading system' used to evaluate certain sets of options may have to employ broadly applicable evaluative terms. As I explain, the result is broad classes (or leagues or neighborhoods) for which it is *not* safe to assume that all of the options that are in the same class (or league or neighborhood) are close in value; indeed, for some pairs of options in the same class, it can be clear that one of the options is more than a little better than the other. Still, because, in accordance with the set up of the scenario provided, no more refined grading system is applicable, the options in each class (or league or neighborhood) are plausibly described as on a par.

Incommensurability is vagueness

John Broome

University of Oxford

It is commonly said there can be three things, A, A+ and B, such that A+ is not better than B and B is not better than A, but A+ is better than A. This is said to be the identifying characteristic of incommensurateness. I doubt it is true.

Instead, I think incommensurateness is a sort of vagueness. I once argued for this conclusion on the basis of an intuitively attractive claim I called ‘the collapsing principle’. Since the collapsing principle has not been universally acclaimed, I shall now argue on different grounds for the conclusion that incommensurateness is vagueness.

The common view does not give adequate credit to our intuitions about incommensurateness and its normative implications. For example, if A+ is better than A, then A+ is more better than B than A is. If it is permissible to choose A in a choice between A and B, it is more permissible to choose A+ in a choice between A+ and B. Something goes wrong if you swap B for A+ and then swap A for B. And so on. Recognizing that incommensurateness is vagueness gives a better account of these matters. It also better explains the worrisome nature of incommensurateness in practice.

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Defusing Continua Arguments

Ruth Chang

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Continua arguments pose an enduring challenge to our understanding of value. Indeed, Derek Parfit thought that his own continua argument in population ethics leading to the Repugnant Conclusion raised a puzzle to be solved before we could arrive at the correct theory of morality, what he called 'Theory X'. Since Parfit, others have offered continua arguments that similarly challenge our understanding of value -- and of normativity more broadly. In this talk, I critically examine possible 'structural' solutions to continua arguments and offer one of my own. I believe that we can defuse such arguments by embracing a fundamentally different, but very attractive, way of thinking about value.

Indeterminacy and Agency

Luke Elson

University of Reading

In his classic 1997 ‘incommensurability and agency’ Joseph Raz argued that incommensurability supports a classical view of human agency, where reasons make actions eligible, and in ‘paradigmatic human action’ we choose from one of the eligible actions.

In this paper, I defend the opposing rationalist view, where paradigmatic human action involves choosing the option supported by the strongest reasons

Rationalism faces a puzzle. As I write this, I am drinking a cup of tea. But I could have had coffee instead. Would either of those really have been contrary to reason? Whilst the classical conception of agency can easily account for this situation, the rationalist needs to explain the obvious plausibility of Raz’s ‘basic belief’: that most of the time, we are in situations like this, where we have a variety of options that we could take in accord with reason.

I defend ‘indeterministic rationalism’, which is rationalism combined with the thought that our reasons are shot through with indeterminacy. I claim that when it’s indeterminate what we have most reason to do, it’s (often) permissible to take any of the indeterminately-best options. So, for example, I may simply not have perfectly determinate preferences which would render either tea or coffee rationally ineligible.

The main advantage of indeterminist rationalism is that it allows broadly maximising conceptions of reasons (such as, for example, that we have most reason to do what will best promote our desires) with the basic belief. It thus allows maximising views to avoid the claim that throughout the day we probably do many slightly irrational things.

Though my focus is Raz, I also make some critical remarks about other ways of supporting the basic belief, such as Jonathan Dancy’s ‘enticing reasons’.

Nondeterminacy and reasonable choice

Anders Herlitz

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Many have argued that some reasons admit of what be generally called nondeterminacy; they sometimes fail to fully determine that one of two options is at least as good as all alternatives (either due to indeterminacy (e.g. John Broome, Luke Elson) or because some non-conventional comparative relations such as parity obtains between two alternatives (e.g. Ruth Chang, Wlodek Rabinowicz)). This paper outlines some of the implications of nondeterminacy for reasonable choice, puts forward the hypothesis that clues to the questions of *which* reasons admit of nondeterminacy and *how* they do this can be found by studying the challenges that nondeterminacy poses for choice theory, and argues that when it would justify decision strategies that violates basic requirements of rationality, reasons cannot admit of nondeterminacy.

Decision criteria that admit of nondeterminacy can actualize serious challenges for practical reasoning. If one adopts the view that all maximal options (options that are not worse than any alternative) are permissible (defended by Amartya Sen) one adopts the view that it can be permissible to form sequences of choices that are not maximal, and a decision maker who follows the strategy is exposed to a weak kind of money pump. Furthermore, it is not obvious that the justification of a choice that is grounded in how alternatives relate to each other is sufficiently strong to meet requirements of reasonableness when an option is maximal as opposed to optimal (at least as good as all alternatives). If one by contrast adopts the view that some choice criterion that is external to the situation should be introduced to guide the choice between two alternatives that are nondeterminate in their ranking (defended by Ruth Chang) one's approach might violate basic requirements of rationality such as Basic Contraction Consistency, and it is possible that one's approaches generates cyclical rankings of some alternatives in the choice set.

There is a view of how to make reasonable choices with decision criteria that fail to fully determine a best alternative which avoids these problems. This view says that one must introduce external criteria but put constraints on what external criteria one might introduce to guide the choice, similarly to how supervaluationist approaches to vagueness puts constraints on what permissible presicifications of vague terms are. Since one can avoid choice-theoretical challenges in this way, the hypothesis that one can learn something about when and how nondeterminacy occurs by studying decision strategies is put forward. If this is

correct, it is plausibly true that reasons cannot admit of nondeterminacy in such a way so that doing what is permissible according to the reasons can mean that one violates basic requirements of rationality.

Incommensurability, 'Rough Comparability' and Vagueness: On Value Relations and
Population Ethics.

Mozaffar Qizilbash

University of York

There are significant differences between various proposals which involve the relations of 'rough comparability', 'rough' or 'imprecise equality' and 'parity' in the contexts of practical rationality and population ethics. Derek Parfit originally proposed the relation of 'rough comparability' in the context of the mere addition paradox, and the range of levels of well-being at which merely adding people to the world is neither better nor worse. In his later work, he also invoked this relation in the context of avoiding the 'repugnant conclusion'. Ruth Chang has invoked 'parity' in addressing this conclusion. On other views the relation of 'parity' understood as a form of 'incommensurateness' is used to develop variations of Parfit's view. These views make the primitive 'at least as good as' relation incomplete but retain transitivity. Vagueness enters these views of mere addition to the degree that a zone of 'incommensurateness' (which renders the primitive relation incomplete) has rough borderlines. It has also been argued that there may be 'discontinuity' in evaluative comparisons of a series of worlds in which various populations live at specific levels of welfare and that this might address the 'repugnant conclusion', but that this view is plausible only if one allows for vagueness about the point where there is 'discontinuity'. This paper compares, contrasts and considers the relative merits of these positions – all of which avoid making the primitive relation non-transitive – with a view to clarifying the various claims made in this literature.

Incommensurability Meets Risk

Wlodek Rabinowicz

Lund University

The problem I discuss in this paper concerns interaction between incommensurability of value and risk. More specifically, the paper focuses on value comparisons between risky actions whose outcomes are guaranteed to be mutually incommensurable in value: the actions will lead to incommensurable outcomes whatever state the world is in. It might seem that, in such circumstances, the actions themselves would have to be mutually incommensurable. But this intuition, as we shall see, might well be challenged; indeed, it should be challenged.

The problem in its main outline is originally due to Hare (2010) (see also Hare 2009, 2013). Later it was taken up by Temkin (2012), Schoenfield (2014) and Bales, Cohen & Handfield (2014). While Hare views it as a problem concerning rational preferences and rational choice between risky actions, I here discuss it as primarily a challenge for formal axiology, and more specifically for a formal account of value relations. The general question is how axiology should deal with situations in which value incommensurability interacts with risk. This is also Temkin's perspective on the problem. Both Schoenfield and Bales *et al.* combine these two perspectives, the perspective of axiology and that of rational choice. As they present it, the problem arises for rational choice insofar as the latter is guided by value comparisons.

In this paper, I only mention but don't discuss these authors' ways of dealing with the problem. Instead I focus on the problem as I view it – as a challenge to formal axiology. Setting off from the fitting-attitudes analysis of value relations I have proposed in Rabinowicz (2008) I suggest how I think the problem should be solved. I argue that one action can be better than another even though their outcomes are bound to be incommensurable. But then I identify a residual issue that I don't know how to resolve.

Contracting and Dilating with Imprecise Probabilities

Miriam Schoenfield (joint work with David Builes and Sophie Horowitz)

MIT

It's thought that agents are sometimes best represented by imprecise probabilities (sets of probability functions) rather than precise ones. In this paper we explore the following question: if you're in an imprecise state, is there a reason to stay there? Or is it permissible to *contract* (arbitrarily) to a more precise state. Similarly, if you are precise, is it permissible to *dilate* (arbitrarily) to an imprecise state.? We argue that the standard epistemic utility theory framework permits both contracting and dilating without receiving any new evidence, and that this is problematic. We then show that an alternative framework – Horowitz's "educated guess framework" - motivates a picture on which there is nothing rationally problematic about arbitrarily contracting to a *more* precise state, but that arbitrarily dilating to a *less* precise state is irrational. While this seems initially unintuitive, we argue that this, in fact, is the correct result by pointing to an important asymmetry between dilating and contracting. This asymmetry has important consequences for a number of issues in epistemology.