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EASY CASES AND VALUE INCOMMENSURABILITY

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Abstract

Several critics have denied value incommensurability—or the claim, roughly, that there is no common measure in terms of which values can be weighed—on the basis of what we might call *the argument from easy cases*. Although the argument from easy cases is quite popular, what is much less often discussed is what exactly the argument entails—in other words, what sort of further commitments the argument generates. Suppose we grant that easy cases point to the existence of a common measure. How then should we think about this common measure? What is its scope? How widely does it range? I attempt to clarify these questions and in the process evaluate the force of the argument from easy cases.

Several critics¹ have denied value incommensurability—or the claim, roughly, that there is no common measure in terms of which values can be weighed—on the basis of what we might call *the argument from easy cases*. According to the argument, although it may sometimes seem as if certain values are in such fundamental conflict that they cannot be put on the same scales with one another,² it is always possible to concoct easy

¹ For example, Griffin (1986, p. 80-83), Sinnott-Armstrong (1988, pp. 58-62), Regan (1997, pp. 134-36), and Chang (1997, pp. 14-15; cf. 2004a, 2004b). Regan's employment of the argument is typical: 'Imagine that what we are comparing is a deep and passionately committed knowledge of beetles, such as might result from a life's study, and a modestly rewarding but not especially intimate friendship, such as any fortunate person can expect to have a goodly number of. Whatever our worries about how comparisons of value are possible between such different things, do we really doubt that the knowledge of beetles is more valuable?' (1997, p. 134). Regan goes on to survey how this form of argument—what I am calling an 'easy cases' argument—is widely used in the literature, concluding: 'It seems to be widely acknowledged, then, that we can often compare great values of one type against relatively slight values of another type' (1997, p. 135).

² As, for instance, Isaiah Berlin (1997a) and John Gray (1995) seem to think. According to Berlin: 'The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not

cases—especially, cases involving a massive sacrifice of one value for the sake of a small gain in the other—that show that the values are in fact commensurable after all.

Suppose, for example, that the values at stake in a particular choice situation were environmental preservation and industrial development. Although in some cases it will be very difficult to decide which of the two values is weightier, in other cases it seems downright easy. When the choice is between some minor environmental loss (say, uprooting a few daisies) as against a significant industrial advance (say, a much-needed factory), the rational choice to make in such situations just seems obvious.

Although the argument from easy cases is frequently offered by critics of incommensurability, what is much less often discussed is what exactly accepting the argument brings with it—in other words, what sort of further commitments the argument generates. Suppose, for example, we grant that easy cases point to the existence of a common measure. How then should we think about this common measure? What is its scope? How widely does it range?

If the argument from easy cases apparently shows (among other things) that we need to postulate a common measure in order to account for our ability to weigh certain values, then this plainly leaves the nature of the common measure quite open. In this paper I will consider which type of common measure makes best sense of the appeal of the argument from easy cases.

1. Values and Measures

To begin, it will help to have a more precise sense of what it might mean for values to be incommensurable. According to Joseph Raz's (1999) straightforward description, two values are incommensurable if there is an 'absence of a common measure' between them, such that neither of the values is better than the other nor are they of equal value

merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind. Some among the great goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss' (p. 11). And according to Gray: value incommensurability 'marks a limit to rational choice, and an occasion for radical choice—for the kind of choice that is not, and cannot be, reason-based, but consists in making a decision or a commitment that is groundless' (p. 70).

(p. 46).³ This way of characterizing value incommensurability is helpful, but it quickly leads to a new set of questions. For one thing, what does it mean for something to be evaluable with respect to a common measure? For another, what *kind* of common measure, exactly, is at issue here?

Beginning with the second question, we can distinguish between two standard kinds of measures, those based on *ratio* scales and those based on *ordinal* scales.⁴ Measures based on ratio scales are characterized by a fixed zero point and units of equal distance. Thus mass and length are standardly measured on ratio scales, and as a result we can meaningfully say that the mass of one object is (say) 2.4 times the mass of another. Ordinal scales, however, measure differently. On an ordinal scale, we can say that some candidate for measurement X is better than another candidate for measurement Y, but not that it is better by some fixed quantitative amount.⁵

With respect to the comparison of values, the real question therefore seems to be not whether values can be weighed on a ratio scale but rather whether they can be weighed on an ordinal scale. Suppose that the values at issue in a particular choice situation are a concern for national security on the one hand a concern for personal privacy on the other. Even if we agreed that the two values could be compared, and that (say) the concern for personal privacy was clearly weightier, it would seem absurd to say that the concern for privacy was weightier by some fixed amount: for instance, that privacy was 5.327 times weightier than a concern for national security.

But if the issue is whether deep values can be weighed on an ordinal scale, then how is this supposed to work? How do ordinal scales actually weigh or compare various candidates? One natural idea is that we weigh candidates on an ordinal scale by considering how well they contribute to or promote the common measure. Put a little

³ Broome (2000) offers essentially the same account: 'If values are incommensurable, that means they cannot be measured on the same scale. So a degree of one cannot be compared, as greater or less, than a degree of the other' (p. 22).

⁴ For more on this distinction, and for further differences between kinds of measures, see Bartz (1988).

⁵ In what follows I shorten 'candidates for measurement' to the simpler 'candidates.' Moreover, I intend the language of candidates to be flexible enough to accommodate comparisons involving both values *per se* (value types, as it were) as well as instances of value (value tokens). In this I again agree with Griffin (2000): since we clearly speak of comparing both tokens and types of value, we would like our account to accommodate both if possible.

differently, we weigh them by asking how well they have done *with respect to this common measure*. Some examples should help to illustrate the general idea.

Imagine we are on a panel responsible for choosing the recipient of our town's annual Good Citizen Award. Presumably the common measure that will guide our choice will be something like 'excellence as a citizen.' But clearly the 'excellence as a citizen' measure has a number of different parts or components, in each aspect of which someone might excel—e.g., in helping one's neighbors, or in standing up to corruption, or (more trivially) in keeping one's yard tidy. Or again, suppose that we are part of a committee in charge of awarding a prize in painting. The common measure that will guide our choice will be something like 'artistic ability,' but here as well there will be a number of different, more specific values that contribute to our assessment of the more fundamental value—for example, mastery of perspective and expressiveness.

These examples suggest that we might call a value a *general value* if it provides a common measure in terms of which we can compare two or more other values.⁶ Thus 'excellence as a citizen' can be thought of as a general value because it allows us to compare certain more specific values in terms of the contributions they make to the general value. The examples also suggest, at least as a working hypothesis, that we can think of the sort of common measure that is relevant to our question in the following terms: When we say that two values can be compared in light of a common measure, what we mean is that the two values can be weighed *with respect to* the contributions they make to the more general value.

2. Local and Global Commensurability

With this model of a common measure in mind, we can now say a bit more about what the value incommensurability claim amounts to. Specifically, to hold that two values are incommensurable is to hold that there is *no* general value that encompasses the two values, and hence no way in which we can compare these values in light the contribution they make to the general value.

Notice that in denying the existence of a common measure the incommensurabilist is in effect denying a number of different claims, including at least the following: (a) that there is a general value that encompasses just *this* pair of deep values, and (b) that there is a general value that encompasses *all* deep values, with this

⁶ Here I slightly adapt Chang's helpful notion of a 'covering value'; see, e.g., Chang (1997, p. 5).

pair being a special case.⁷ In other words, the value incommensurabilist is in effect denying at least:

- **Local Commensurability:** For *each* pair of values, there is a general value in terms of which that pair (and only that pair) can be measured; and
- **Global Commensurability:** For *all* pairs of values, there is the same general value in terms of which they can be measured.

Consider a comparison. Suppose we are wondering whether it is possible for a certain couple to marry, and we think that in order for the couple to marry there must be a judge with the power to marry them. If we deny that there exists a judge with the power to marry the couple—if we think there is simply no one with that power to be found—then we are in effect denying a number of different possibilities. For one thing, we are denying the possibility that there exists a judge with the power to marry *all* couples, of which this couple is but a particular case. But we are also denying that there exists a judge with the special power to marry this (and no other) couple.⁸

It is not clear that incommensurabilists have generally borne this distinction between Global and Local Commensurability in mind.⁹ Indeed, I suspect that insofar as they have taken themselves to be denying the existence of a common measure, they have generally had in mind the kind of common measure suggested by Global Commensurability; that is, a common measure that in some sense encompasses *all* values.¹⁰ But of course even if Global Commensurability is false, Local could still be

⁷ For a related distinction, see Richardson (1994, ch. 6).

⁸ Again, these possibilities aren't exhaustive—e.g., it could be possible for this couple to marry because there exists a judge with the power to marry some subset of all couples of which this couple is a part—but for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the cases at either end of the spectrum.

⁹ An important exception is Williams (1981, p. 77), though his distinction between types of commensurability is somewhat different from my own.

¹⁰ On the most straightforward reading of Berlin, for example, the target clearly seems to be Global Commensurability: thus his arguments typically draw attention to the politically dangerous effects of what he refers to as the 'Monistic' idea (e.g., 1997b, p. 312). I will return to the topic of monism later, suggesting that there is something importantly correct about Berlin's worry about value monism, though not in quite the way he claims.

true. After all, just because there isn't a super judge with the power to marry every couple, it doesn't follow that there are no local judges with that power.

Crucially, however, what remains to be seen is whether the force of the argument from easy cases—if it has any force at all—is best explained by the truth of Global Incommensurability or instead by the truth of Local Incommensurability (or perhaps by some other thesis in between). I will take up this question again in Sections 5 and 6; in the following section, however, I will consider in more detail why the argument from easy cases has been thought to be worth reckoning with.

3. Easy Cases

Consider the dynamics of particular value conflicts: for instance, conflicts pitting liberty vs. equality, or national security vs. personal privacy, or medical progress vs. the rights of experimental subjects, or industrial development vs. environmental preservation. Any of these conflicts could serve as a case study, but for simplicity we can focus our attention on the last pair on the list: industrial development vs. environmental preservation.

How should we think about these conflicts on the incommensurabilist picture? In broad terms, the idea seems to be that when faced with a decision between building a new factory and destroying wetlands, for example, industrialists advocating the former and environmentalists advocating the latter will simply appeal to fundamental values that are incommensurably at odds with the values of the other group. For industrialists, the valuable thing will presumably be something like 'development'; for environmentalists, the valuable thing something like 'preservation.' In the absence of a common measure that seems to govern the choice situation, however, the conflict will quickly reach an impasse.

Although part of this picture might seem to ring true—for instance, there is little doubt that some people (especially, we can imagine, committed environmentalists) build their lives around such values and treat them as if they were, for most practical purposes, inviolable—the important thing to see for our purposes is how quickly this way of understanding value conflict descends to the level of caricature. To imagine an industrialist who values development so single-mindedly that he cannot even place the value on the same scales as the value of preservation, for instance, is to call to mind a movie villain gleefully twisting his moustaches as he bulldozes forest after forest. Or

again, to imagine an environmentalist who values preservation so single-mindedly that he cannot even place this value on the same scales as industrial development it is to appeal to a stock character from an editorial cartoon, the sort of figure who on one day ropes himself to an ancient redwood to save it from the chainsaw and on the next to a simple dandelion standing on the ground of a much-needed power plant.

Moreover, it should be clear that the same considerations apply to *intrapersonal* conflicts as well. Thus imagine someone deciding whether to accept a promotion at work that will require her to spend more time apart from her family: in other words, someone facing a choice that pits the value of career advancement against the value of (roughly) family time.¹¹ Even though many cases of this sort will be extremely difficult, even wrenching, in other cases the comparison will be almost effortless: when the choice is between a very modest advancement at work as against a massive disruption to the family, for example, the rational choice to make here again just seems obvious.

Let us call such cases ‘easy cases.’ The crucial thing to notice now is that if the incommensurabilist picture were correct—that is, if it were really the case that there were no common measure with respect to which the two values could be weighed—then the result should hold quite generally: the values at stake with respect to easy cases of value conflict should be just as incommensurable, just as ‘unweighable,’ as they are with respect to what we might think of as hard cases. In Isaiah Berlin’s terms (cf. footnote 2), the values in conflict should be incommensurable conceptually or in principle, whenever the two values are at issue. But easy cases help to show why this way of looking at things is such a poor way of characterizing value conflict. Thus an industrialist who as a matter of principle supported *any* development, no matter how trivial and no matter what the cost to the environment, would presumably be considered unhinged and perhaps dangerous even by his fellow industrialists (and not, we can suppose, merely for prudential reasons). He would generally be regarded as suffering from some dereliction of judgment, some lack of sensitivity to what matters. Again, it is difficult even to imagine what such a person might be like without descending to the level of caricature; real people are simply such that they quite unavoidably feel the tug of the other value.

¹¹ Monica Betzler (2004) offers a nice version of such a case.

Imagining cases pitting large sacrifices of one value as against a small gain in another simply helps to make this tug more pronounced.

And naturally there is nothing special about interpersonal conflicts between industrial and environmental values, or about intrapersonal conflicts between career advancement and family time. The same type of case can be generated again and again: a massive sacrifice in personal privacy for the sake of some small gain in national security, for example, or a slight improvement in the quality of health care at the expense of a huge loss in the quality of public education. In case after case we are tempted to say that the rational choice to make in such circumstance just seems obvious.

But if the rational choice is obvious, and if we continue to think that the ability to weigh values in this way presupposes the existence of a common measure, then we have arrived at a pivotal result. Put in terms of the distinctions offered in Section 2, easy cases of this sort suggest that the values at issue can be viewed as contributing to an as yet unspecified general value which in some sense encompasses them. Just as the common measure ‘excellence as a citizen’ allows us to compare the specific values of ‘willingness to help others’ and ‘courage in standing up to corruption’ in terms of the contributions they make to being a good citizen, so too there is reason to think that some as yet unspecified general value allows us to compare development and preservation in terms of the contributions that they respectively make to *it*.

Two objections might be offered at this point. First, according to absolutists such as G. E. M. Anscombe (1958) the very willingness to weigh certain values—specifically, the value of taking of an innocent life as against some other benefit—betrays (in Anscombe’s memorable phrase) ‘a corrupt mind.’ But what this suggests is that, for better or worse and at least for some people, even a small sacrifice of some values is so unthinkable that it is never possible to generate an ‘easy case’ with respect to these values—in other words, a case where making a small sacrifice of one value will begin to seem just obvious provided that the potential sacrifice of another value is significant enough.

The crucial question we need to ask with respect to such absolutism, however, is whether judgments such as Anscombe’s (a) stem from the fact that the one value is regarded as *emphatically* more valuable than the other, or whether instead (b) the two values at issue are regarded as so different in kind that they cannot be placed on the

same scales at all.¹² Given this choice, it would seem that (a) has the advantage. After all, if (b) is right, then giving preference to one of the values would appear to be brute or unguided. But that doesn't seem to be the way absolutists such as Anscombe view the choice: in her case, for instance, it seems to be a principled conviction that it is always more valuable to avoid intentional harm to innocents. But in that case it is hard to make sense of the 'more valuable' language without presupposing a common measure. Thus although it might be difficult to run the easy case argument with respect to some values (and with respect to some people), this by itself does not tell against the view that it is possible to weight the two values—to judge them as more or less valuable than one another—with respect to the contribution they make to some common measure.¹³

Second, it might be objected that even if we allow that easy cases show that it is possible to compare even the deepest values on occasion, this does nothing to rule out the worry that as cases get harder—as more detail is added, perhaps, or as wider interests become involved—the values at some point cease to be commensurable. Indeed, what other explanation could there be for the apparently intractable stand-offs among values that we sometimes (perhaps, altogether too often) see?

But once we have acknowledged the possibility of weighing in easy cases, the burden seems to be on the objector to show that there is a principled difference between the easy cases and the hard cases.¹⁴ In the absence of such an account, however, we seem entitled to suppose that the easy cases point to a general truth about the fundamental values we are considering: namely, that they are not irreducibly distinct, and indeed that it is possible to weigh them in terms of the contribution they make to a more general value.

4. What to make of this?

As noted at the outset, although easy cases are often thought to point to the existence of a common measure, for the most part critics have been content to remain silent about how we should think about this common measure. Michael Stocker (1990), for one,

¹² For more on such 'emphatic' value comparisons, see (among others) Griffin (1986, esp. pp. 85-89) and Anderson (1993, 1997). I am indebted to both of these discussions here.

¹³ Alternatively, we might say that for absolutists such as Anscombe, these cases too count as 'easy cases,' given the emphatic strength of one of the values.

¹⁴ Chang nicely highlights this point; see Chang (1997).

simply leaves the matter open; on his view, when it is possible to weigh values against one another this means that ‘they may fall under common higher-level synthesizing categories. And if there is an all-encompassing and highest category of values as such, they all fall under that’ (p. 177).

Among the many other virtues of her work, Ruth Chang’s (1997, 2004a, 2004b) recent discussions of value incommensurability are therefore exceptional because they offer an extended analysis of *how* exactly—or, better, in virtue of *what* exactly—easy cases earn their purchase. Although Chang herself does not appeal to the distinction between Local and Global Commensurability developed in Section 2, in effect she argues that easy cases are best explained by the truth of Local Commensurability. That is, she claims that for every pair of values that can sensibly come into conflict,¹⁵ there is a general value which encompasses that pair (and only that pair) as component parts.¹⁶

In the remainder of this paper I will argue, first, that it is a mistake to think that general values of the sort proposed by Chang best explain our ability to compare deep values. The basic problem is that the common measure that we bring to bear in weighing pairs of values does not seem to be limited to *that very pair* in the way that Chang suggests. Moreover, once we think that the measure is not limited or restricted to that very pair of values, then the pressure to think of the measure in more unrestricted terms seems almost irresistible, with any ‘clustered’ stopping point along the way seeming arbitrary and unmotivated. In other words, what the argument from easy cases seems to show, if it works at all, is that *Global* Commensurability is true—a result which, for many advocates of the argument from easy cases, will presumably be quite eye-opening.

5. Chang’s Proposal

¹⁵ Again, as we saw in Section 1, it seems that not every value can sensibly come into conflict: e.g., the neatness with which someone can drink a glass of milk and the elegance with which she turns the pages of a book.

¹⁶ Chang explicitly considers, and rejects, the claim that there might be a more expansive general value that encompasses all other values, though she does not provide a rationale. Referring to such a value as a ‘supervalue,’ she writes: ‘I believe that there is no such supervalue, but a careful consideration of the question would take us too far astray’ (2004a, p. 147).

Perhaps the best way to introduce Chang's account is by means of one of her central examples. Thus suppose that, moments before crossing the finish line of a marathon (something that has considerable prudential value for you), you notice someone on the verge of drowning in a nearby pond. According to Chang, 'Both the moral and prudential values are at stake in the choice. Yet it seems clear that the reason to save the stranger is weightier than the reason to carry on in the race. You rationally ought to stop and save the stranger' (2004a, p. 126). Moreover, the reason why it is possible to weigh these two values rationally, she argues, is that we are able to draw on a more comprehensive value—a hitherto 'nameless' (Chang's word) general value which for convenience she calls *prumorality*—to carry out the comparison (2004a, p. 125).

According to Chang, this way of accounting for our ability to weigh values holds quite generally. When trying to evaluate the relative merits of some environment value as against some industrial value, for instance, we likewise appeal to a nameless general value: for convenience call it 'enviroindustry'; when deciding between medical progress and the rights of experimental subjects we appeal to a different general value: call it 'medicrights'; and so on. As she writes:

'Prumorality,' and nameless values generally, also help to block the worry about the scope of practical reason. For if morality and prudence (or beauty and truth, or rights and utility, and so on) can be put together by more comprehensive nameless values, then conflicts between such different values can, like humdrum conflicts within morality or within prudence (or within beauty, truth, rights, and utility), be in principle rationally resolved. What looked like a possible gap in practical reason turns out not to be a gap after all; nameless values rush in to show how there may be a justified choice in every case of value conflict. (2004a, pp. 148-49)

For each situation in which values can sensibly be compared, there is thus a general value—often nameless—that includes the values as component parts.¹⁷ As she puts it,

¹⁷ According to Chang, moreover, when we say that 'all things considered' one value is weightier than another, the expression 'all things considered' is simply a stand in for the nameless value that governs the choice situation. She writes, 'My suggestion is that 'all things considered' is, in effect, a placeholder for a

such values ‘rush in’ to provide a common measure for practical reason whenever they are needed.

An obvious worry one might have at this point is that the general values Chang postulates are suspiciously obscure. If (as she suggests) these values are so pervasive, and if the function they serve is so essential, then why don’t we have any *names* for these values? Indeed, how ethically significant can a nameless value be? As Chang argues, however, this concern seems to be a red herring because many of the concepts that are central to ethical evaluation lack official ‘named’ status. She writes:

The idea that some values are nameless has its roots in Aristotle who thought that there were many nameless virtues and vices. In identifying the virtue and vice concerned with the pursuit of small honors, for example, Aristotle held that the mean between the extremes of ambitiousness and unambitiousness is nameless. Similarly, he thought that the regulation of feelings of anger involved a nameless virtue and vice; at one extreme is an excess of anger, ‘irascibility,’ and at the other extreme is a deficiency in anger, which is nameless, and the mean between the two extremes is also nameless. Aristotle was right in pointing out that many perfectly ordinary virtues and vices have no names. We take Aristotle’s insight and extend it to values generally. (2004a, p. 145; cf. 2004b, p. 18)

With Aristotle, then, Chang insists that the difficulty in referring to her restricted general values is in itself no strike against them. That a morally significant category lacks a ready name does not necessarily limit our ability to call it to mind or draw on it in moral evaluation.

6. Nameless Values?

What should we make of Chang’s appeal to nameless values? On one significant point I think we should simply agree with her: the mere fact that the values she posits lack names should not particularly concern us. It seems clear, however, that the worry about the namelessness of these values is merely a symptom of a deeper, more substantial

more comprehensive *value* that includes the things considered as parts, and that this more comprehensive value determines how the things considered normatively relate to one another’ (2004b, p. 2).

worry. Specifically, the real problem with the values she posits does not seem to be their namelessness but rather the fact that they are, from both a deliberative and a motivational point of view, *invisible*. In other words, they are not the kinds of values that we draw upon when we deliberate about and try to justify our decisions. Moreover, the general values that *are* deliberatively and motivationally visible—in other words, the values that we *do* draw upon—seem to be much wider in scope than her nameless values (which, recall, are restricted to the pair of values in conflict). When we look at our actual practice of weighing values what we find is that the common measures we appeal to are far more general than the restricted general values invoked by Chang.

Consider the marathon example again. The question we need to ask is this: How plausible is it to think that when weighing the relative importance of prudential and moral values in this situation, the runner makes his decision by appealing to a more comprehensive value along the lines of Chang’s ‘prumorality’? Suppose that you’re the runner. Along with the person in Chang’s example, after weighing the pros and cons for a moment, you quickly decide to leave the race to help the person on the verge of drowning. We can agree with Chang that under normal circumstances your judgment will be perfectly rational; there is no special reason to think that there is anything brute or arbitrary about it. But now we need to ask: Which common measure guided your comparison of the alternatives? Put a little differently: With respect to which measure did leaving the race seem more important, more pressing than completing the race?

No doubt one’s answers to these questions will vary a bit from individual to individual, but if asked to justify your decision I suspect there are a number of things you will be tempted to say: perhaps you will appeal to the idea that, if you were in the same situation, you would want someone to do the same for you; or perhaps you might say that helping the man was for the best because it did more to promote the common good; or again, that leaving the race to help the stranger was better than finishing it because it did more to enhance the overall happiness of the world.¹⁸ Admittedly, these

¹⁸ As H. L. A. Hart (1961) notes, ‘When a choice has been made between such competing alternatives it may be defended as proper on the ground that it was for the ‘public good’ or the ‘common good’ (p. 255). From the context it is clear that when Hart uses the language of ‘may be,’ he means this in a descriptive sense rather than a normative sense. It is the descriptive sense—the sense that reports how people typically go about their deliberations—that I am primarily interested in here.

suggestions sound a bit artificial. For our purposes however the details of how such a justification might proceed—whether by invoking the common good, or by appealing to overall happiness, or what have you—are secondary. What *does* matter is that there is good reason to think that your sense of what counts as contributing to a general value of this more expansive sort is, although by no means infallible or transparently clear, at least relatively robust. It would be hard to deny that we all have at least a *basic* sense of what counts as contributing to the common good and what does not, or of what counts as contributing to the overall happiness of the world and what does not. By comparison what counts as contributing to prumorality is anybody's guess.

Again, this is not a point about our unfamiliarity with any value that goes by the name 'prumorality'; whether or not Chang needs to invent a name or not is beside the point, as her appeal to Aristotle aptly shows. The point is rather that we seem to have no sense *at all* of any restricted general value, named or not named, that encompasses prudential concerns and moral concerns as proper parts, or of why such a value matters, or of how we might appeal to it in normatively weighing prudential concerns and moral concerns.

If it is right to think that Chang's restricted general values are deliberatively and motivationally idle, however, then it seems that we are driven to the following conclusion. Namely, when we weigh values by appealing—implicitly or otherwise—to some more comprehensive value (as when we judge that it is wrong to allow massive sacrifices of one value for the sake of small gains in another), the best explanation of what we are doing here is that we are appealing to our sense of one of the more expansive general values suggested above. In other words, and *contra* Chang, the best explanation is *not* that we are appealing to our sense of what benefits or contributes to prumorality, or enviroindustry, or whatever nameless value it is that on her view allegedly rushes in to guide us.

One way to make this objection sharper is by considering what we might think of as *the additive problem*. Thus take our familiar conflict between industrial and environmental values and then add another value to the mix: say, a concern for national security. In particular, suppose that the conflict calls for us to weigh a large sacrifice to the environment as against only a small gain for industry *and* a small gain for national security. In keeping with the rationale of the previous arguments, this too should

qualify as an easy case. The correct decision to make here, we're again tempted to say, just seems obvious.

Since according to Chang our ability to weigh values in this way presupposes the existence of a more comprehensive value, on her view it follows that we need to posit a new nameless value that encompasses *just* these three values as component parts. But now how credible is it to think that once we add a concern for national security into the mix the choice situation is suddenly governed by a new nameless value: 'enviroindustrysecurity'? The answer seems to be: not very credible at all. There seems to be no value that answers to the name 'enviroindustrysecurity.' And again, the essential problem is not that the name is so peculiar but rather that it is difficult to imagine what the contours of such a value might look like, or what it would be like to care about such a value, or what it would be like to try to promote something of that sort. But the harder it is for us to make sense of such a value, the more implausible it is to suppose that something so obscure might in fact be guiding our decisions.

And naturally the situation only threatens to deteriorate. Suppose we add a fourth value to the mix—say, a concern for personal privacy. Or a fifth. Or a sixth. Since on Chang's view whenever we add a new value of this sort the common measure that guides our decisions suddenly shifts, presumably when we now weigh these alternatives against one another it is by considering how they contribute to a *new* value that is strictly constituted only by the values at issue. Yet not only, from a first-person point of view, does there not seem to *be* such a conspicuous shift in standards, more importantly the reasons we appeal to in weighing the various values remain remarkably stable. Large sacrifices in one value for the sake of small gains in others—however many values we choose to add—seem unjustified for the very same sorts of considerations: because such sacrifices would be detrimental to overall happiness, or to the common good, or something of that sort. To suppose instead that we judge the sacrifices unjustified because of our sense that they contribute negatively to nameless values X or Y is hard to swallow.

If all this is right, however, then it would appear that the proper explanation for the force of easy cases is not that *Local* Commensurability is true. Rather, if easy cases have any power at all it seems to be because *Global* Commensurability is true; in other words, the *kind* of common measure that seems required to make sense of the way in

which we compare and deliberate about the value conflicts that are characteristic of easy cases turns out to be more expansive than we might originally have supposed. Indeed, the measure seems to be so expansive that any stopping point short of maximal expansiveness—i.e., a measure that encompasses *all* values—would seem to be arbitrary and unmotivated.

While it seems that this is where the momentum of the argument is headed, there are a number of concerns which would need to be addressed before we could feel confident in accepting Global Commensurability as the best explanation for the force of easy cases. Here I will mention only one that seems particularly important.

The argument suggests that we characteristically resolve value conflicts by appeal to our sense of what is more conducive to the common good, or the greatest overall happiness, etc. But when it is *intrapersonal* (as opposed to *interpersonal*) value conflicts that are at issue—especially when I am deliberating about the goals and projects I wish to pursue—it hardly seems right to say that we resolve these conflicts by appealing to our sense of the common good or the like. Instead (speaking autobiographically) what I seem to consider as I weigh alternatives is what it is that will best enhance *my* well being—my flourishing, my happiness. At the very least, there seem to be two basic sorts of measures: one governing interpersonal value conflicts and the other governing personal value conflicts.

In closing I offer two brief points in response. First, it might just be that this objection is correct: that there are simply two basic standards. But I take it that this would still be an important result, and one significantly opposed to the model Chang proposes. That point aside, however, I think there is still more that can be said on behalf of Global Commensurability. For while it is true that in trying to resolve personal conflicts I generally am guided by concerns about my own well-being, the fact that my well-being can conflict with yours, and yet nevertheless allow for rational resolution (for surely there will be easy cases here too, where a slight inconvenience on my part would result in great benefit for you), suggests that considerations favoring my well-being are never truly ultimate. Even when my concerns are not explicitly being weighed against the concerns of others, they are at least normally *receptive to* the concerns of others. And what this plausibly suggests is that when we deliberate in this way there is a sense

in which we are being guided—if only weakly or, as it were, as a side constraint—by a our sense of a common measure that encompasses the two concerns.¹⁹

7. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have essentially argued for the following conditional: If the argument from easy cases works, then the best explanation for the force of the argument is the truth of Global Commensurability (or, at least, some suitably hedged version of Global Commensurability). Many might find the consequent of this conditional intolerable, and so (by *modus tollens*) reject the antecedent: in other words, the argument from easy cases. Although to my mind that rejection would (on balance) be unmotivated, it would be an improvement over appeals to the argument from easy cases that fail to take into account the substantial commitments that the argument seems to bring with it.²⁰

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¹⁹ It might help to consider an analogy familiar from the epistemology literature. Suppose that I am in a factory watching red widgets roll across the assembly line, and that on the basis of my perceptual experience I form the belief ‘There go some red widgets.’ I am then told that in this stage of the assembly process the widgets are illuminated by red light in order to reveal possible structural defects, effectively undercutting my belief that the widgets are red. Now even though it is ridiculous to suppose that in forming my beliefs about the world I am constantly asking myself whether my perceptual experience is the product of trick lighting (or the like), my evidence is nevertheless clearly sensitive to counterevidence of this sort. In other words, although in forming my beliefs about the world I am generally guided only by my perceptual experience (I generally give my perceptual evidence default credence), this evidence is nevertheless inherently sensitive to defeat. When it conflicts with other evidence I possess (e.g., someone’s testimony that there are red lights in the area), I have to decide which evidence to trust; I have to place the various bits of evidence on the scales and determine which is weightier. In the same way, I think, the value that I place in promoting my own well-being is normally receptive to or sensitive to the value I place in the well-being of others. But this is not to say I typically entertain thoughts along the lines of: ‘Am I sure that in promoting my well-being I am not doing so at the expense of someone else’s well-being?’ Nevertheless judgments about what is in my self-interest are normally open to such considerations, and this (again) seems to suggest the presence of an implicit common measure that encompasses concern for my own well-being along with a concern for the well-being of others.

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