Broome's Argument against Value Incomparability

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John Broome has argued that alleged cases of value incomparability are really examples of vagueness in the betterness relation. The main premiss of his argument is 'the collapsing principle'. I argue that this principle is dubious, and that Broome's argument is therefore unconvincing.

Sometimes, we are inclined to judge that neither of two value-bearers is better than the other, and that a small improvement in either would not be enough to make it the better one. This means that the items cannot be equally good, either. If they were, a small improvement would make one of them better than the other. Such cases are hence putative examples of value incomparability, as standardly defined:

Two value-bearers x and y are *incomparable*, with respect to value, if and only if (i) x is not better than y, (ii) y is not better than x, and (iii) x and y are not equally good.

Perhaps the items to be compared are of such different categories that we tend to find every item of the one type incomparable with every item of the other type. Suppose that you are asked to judge whether Cantor's diagonal proof is more or less impressive than the Karnak temple. Your answer may be that proofs and temples in general are so different that they cannot be compared, in terms of impressiveness.[1] The term 'total incomparability' can be used to refer to this kind of case.

Not all putative cases of incomparability are total. Considering possible career opportunities, you may judge a very successful career as a physician to be definitely better than a very poor career as a philosopher, and vice versa. If so, the two kinds of career are not too different to exclude all comparisons. Nevertheless, comparing an average career as a physician to an average career in philosophy, you might conclude that neither career is better than the other, nor are they

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[1] Cf. John Broome, 'Is Incommensurability Vagueness?', *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. R. Chang (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1997), pp. 68–9.

exactly equally good. Cases of this kind are examples of what we may call 'partial incomparability'.

I

According to John Broome, partial incomparability does not exist. All alleged cases of partial incomparability are, he maintains, really examples of *vagueness*. In such cases, propositions (i) to (iii) in the standard definition of incomparability are neither definitely true nor definitely false. Vagueness, he points out, implies a sort of comparability. For one thing, it is not false that one item is better than the other. Indeed, if we understand vagueness in terms of degrees of truth, it may even be true to some degree.[2]

There are two steps in Broome's argument. First, he tries to show that incomparability is incompatible with vagueness.[3] Second, he argues that betterness is vague. I shall try to show that his argument founders already at the first step.

Broome puts his argument in terms of a 'standard configuration', which

consists of a chain of [real or imagined] things, fully ordered by their [goodness] 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 [better] than the standard, and at the bottom things the standard is [better] than.[4]

Between the members of the chain that are better than the standard and those that are worse there may (but need not) be a 'zone of indeterminacy', containing more than one item that is neither definitely better nor definitely worse than the standard. If there are two or more such items, Broome argues, none of them can be equally good as the standard. There is 'hard indeterminacy' if there are items in the indeterminate zone that are definitely not better and definitely not worse than the standard.[5] We may to this definition add the requirement that it must be definitely false, of such an item, that it is equally good as the standard. Hard indeterminacy then amounts to incomparability, as standardly defined.[6]

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[2] Ibid., p. 89. Broome seems inclined to accept the possibility of total incomparability (ibid., p. 69).

[3] From now on, I shall let 'incomparability' refer to partial incomparability.

[4] Broome, 'Incommensurability', p. 69. Actually, Broome's notion of a standard configuration, as well as his argument against incomparability, applies not only to betterness, but to any comparative, '*F*er than'.

[5] Ibid., p. 73.

[6] A slightly weaker notion of hard indeterminacy is obtained if we require only that it is not definitely true, of any relevant item, that it is equally good as the standard. I suspect that Broome would claim that there cannot be instances of the weaker notion,

Let us say that a standard configuration involves vagueness if there is at least one item in the zone of indeterminacy, such that it is neither true nor false that it is better than the standard, or neither true nor false that the standard is better than it, or both.[7] It would seem that the borders of the indeterminate zone might, in cases of hard indeterminacy, be infected with this sort of vagueness. Consider the upper border of the indeterminate zone. Between those items in the chain that are better than the standard, and those that are incomparable to it, might there not be items for which it is neither true nor false that they are better than the standard?

Broome argues that this is, contrary to appearances, impossible. His argument is as follows:

Take any point somewhere around the top boundary of the zone of indeterminacy. Clearly it is false that the standard is [better] than this point, since this is false for all points in the zone of indeterminacy and above. If it is also false that this point is [better] than the standard, then the point is squarely within the zone of indeterminacy. If, on the other hand, it is true that this point is [better] than the standard, then it is squarely within the top zone. So if there is really a zone of vagueness, for points in this zone it must be neither true nor false that they are [better] than the standard. But now we can apply something I call the *collapsing principle:*

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

...I have just said that for a point in the zone of vagueness, if there is such a zone, it is false that the standard is [better] than it, but not false that it is [better] than the standard. Then according to the collapsing principle, it is true that it is [better] than the standard. This implies it is not in a zone of vagueness after all. So there is no such zone.[8]

If this argument is sound, the possibility of a zone of vagueness around the lower border of the indeterminate zone can be excluded by an exactly parallel argument. The conclusion is thus that incomparability is incompatible with vagueness.

The crucial premiss in this argument is the collapsing principle. Broome vindicates this principle as follows: 'If it is false that *y* is [better] than *x*, and not false that *x* is [better] than *y*, then *x* has a clear advantage over *y* in respect of its [goodness]. So it must be [better]

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which are not also instances of the stronger one. Anyway, the difference between the two notions does not matter in what follows.

  [7] Unless otherwise indicated, I shall by 'true' and 'false', respectively, mean definitely true (true to degree one) and definitely false (true to degree zero).

  [8] Broome, 'Incommensurability', pp. 73–4.

than y.'[9] Although this may sound convincing, there are, I shall argue, good reasons to reject the collapsing principle.

II

Under the uncontroversial assumption that betterness is an asymmetric relation, the collapsing principle is logically equivalent to the following thesis:

> *Vagueness symmetry*: If it is neither true nor false that x is better than y, then it is neither true nor false that y is better than x.

Broome acknowledges that the collapsing principle implies vagueness symmetry, and provides a proof of this implication.[10] To see that the converse implication also holds, suppose that there is a counterexample to the collapsing principle, i.e. a case in which it is false that y is better than x, not false that x is better than y, and not true that x is better than y. The last two assumptions imply that it is neither true nor false that x is better than y. If it is false that y is better than x, and neither true nor false that x is better than y, then vagueness symmetry does not hold. Hence, any counterexample to the collapsing principle implies the falsity of vagueness symmetry. By contraposition, if vagueness symmetry is true, so is the collapsing principle.

However, vagueness symmetry is open to counterexamples. 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 judgements, 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.

Or suppose the question is whether Cecil is a morally better person than Deirdre. Their characters are very much alike, except that Deirdre

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[9] Ibid., p. 74.
[10] Ibid., p. 76.

is more cheerful than Cecil. Does that make Deirdre a better person than Cecil? Again, it may be indeterminate whether or not cheerfulness contributes positively to moral goodness, although it is clear that it does not contribute negatively. If so, it might be neither true nor false that Deirdre is a better person than Cecil, and false that Cecil is better than Deirdre.

For a final example, suppose that *A* and *B* are two identical alarm clocks, except that *A* is waterproof, and *B* is not. Is *A* a better alarm clock than *B*? There may be no definite answer, since it may be indeterminate whether water resistance is a good-making characteristic of artefacts that are not very likely to come into contact with water. It is clear, however, that *B* is not better than *A*, since *A*'s being waterproof definitely does not detract from its goodness as an alarm clock.

In general terms, 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 hence good reason to reject it.[11] By relying on this principle, Broome's argument against incomparability is unconvincing.[12]

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[11] Broome takes the collapsing principle to be valid for any comparative, '*F*er than'. For some putative comparatives, however, vagueness symmetry is obviously false. Consider, for example, the comparative 'much taller than'. Presumably, our ordinary understanding of this comparative is such that, for some difference in length *d* (say three inches), if Cecil is taller than Diana by *d*, it is neither true nor false that Cecil is much taller than Diana. But it is definitely false that Diana is much taller than Cecil. (Cf. Ruth Chang, *Making Comparisons Count* (New York, 2002), p. 166.) Broome denies, however, that 'much *F*er than'-comparatives are genuine comparatives in their own right. According to him, they are only fragments of the corresponding '*F*er than'-comparatives (Broome, 'Incommensurability', p. 84).

[12] I wish to thank John Broome, Johan Brännmark, Ruth Chang and Wlodek Rabinowicz for helpful comments on earlier versions of this note.