The Implications of Incommensurability

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Bill, Ben, and what was in their flower-pots

Like me except in point of competence, Bill and Ben are gardeners. As gardeners, they have aims. Indeed both Bill and Ben, to go by what they tell us, have the *same* aim. Both say that their aim is not merely to grow *lots of flowers* in their two gardens, but also to grow *lots of flowers of different kinds* in their gardens. Each gardener expresses his own aim, not merely as *that there should be lots of flowers in my garden*, but rather as *that there should be lots of lupins and tulips and eschscholtzias in my garden*. (For brevity, I pretend that Bill and Ben are only interested in these three species.)

But now Bill says to Ben that Bill is prepared to regard quadrupling his lupin count, at the cost of digging up every tulip and eschscholtzia he has, as a way (*he* says) of furthering his overall gardening aim.

Ben makes the obvious retort to Bill:

> You can't be serious. Your aim, you said, wasn't just that there should be lots of lupins, or lots of flowers, in your garden. Your aim was *that there should be lots of lupins and tulips and eschscholtzias in your garden*. But what you're proposing just isn't a way of achieving that aim. If your aim really is growing *all* three species, then your strategy for achieving that aim has to include (*some*where) growing *each* of those three species.
>
> Of course, you might legitimately concentrate on lupins not tulips *now*, on tulips not lupins *at some other time*, etc. Indeed, since the aim of growing lupins and the aim of growing tulips are different aims which prescribe different actions, you will have to make such divisions of your attention all the time.
>
> But it's one thing to divide your attention like that, so that *at the moment* you are doing nothing at all to pursue your aim of growing tulips because *at the moment* you are busy pursuing your aim of growing eschscholtzias. It's another thing altogether to *abandon* an aim. Some things that you can do say loud and clear that you *have* abandoned an aim. And digging up every tulip and eschscholtzia you have so as to quadruple your lupin count seems to be one of them.

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> Of course, maybe (1) there's something you haven't told us about your means-ends beliefs (perhaps e.g. you think that growing nothing but lupins this year will enrich the soil for all three species next year). Or maybe (2) you're irrational. But if not, we may infer from your actions that (whatever you may *say*) you have really changed your aim. Your real aim, now, may be *lupins*, or simply *flowers*. But (modulo conditions (1) and (2)) it can't still be *lupins and tulips and eschscholtzias*.

Informally, this paper is a defence of Ben's retort to Bill, and an application of the argument to wider issues in the theory of practical reason.

The thesis

More formally, the paper's thesis is this:

1. Any agent can have, as her overriding practical objective, a *simple* or a *complex* aim.
2. If an agent has a simple aim, she can rationally pursue that aim by *a promote-only strategy*.
3. If an agent has a complex aim, she cannot rationally pursue that aim by *a promote-only strategy*: she is obliged, on pain of irrationality, to adopt a *promote-or-respect* strategy.
4. Consequentialism enjoins a promote-only strategy for rational agents.
5. If rational agents have simple aims, consequentialism might not be wrong. But if rational agents have complex aims, consequentialism must be wrong. (3, 4)
6. If the goods are incommensurable, rational agents have complex aims.

7 If the goods are incommensurable, consequentialism must be wrong. (5, 6)

I will now spell this argument out.

Premise 1: Any agent can have, as her overriding practical objective, a simple or a complex aim

An aim is *simple* if and only if there is just one state of affairs that the agent who has that aim is ultimately aiming at. An aim is *complex* if and only if there is more than one state of affairs that the agent who has that aim is ultimately aiming at. Simple aims, by definition, have no other simple aims as their components. Complex aims, by definition, do have simple aims as their components.

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This contrast apparently needs to be underwritten by a theory of how to count states of affairs. Fortunately we can deal with that *ambulando*, simply by giving examples. A gardener whose practical aim is only the state of affairs 'lots of flowers in my garden' counts, for my purposes, as having a simple aim. A gardener whose practical aim is the state of affairs 'lots of lupins in my garden' *and* the state of affairs 'lots of tulips in my garden' *and* the state of affairs 'lots of eschscholtzias in my garden' counts as having a complex practical aim. On a reasonably natural way of counting states of affairs, there is more than one state of affairs she is aiming at.

(If someone wants to take the state of affairs 'lots of lupins *and* tulips *and* eschscholtzias in my garden' as a *single* state of affairs, my withers are entirely unwrung. I will only respond that some single states of affairs are complex, while others are simple, and rewrite my definitions of complex and simple aims accordingly.)

Premise 2: If an agent has a simple aim, she can rationally pursue that aim by a ***promote-only strategy***

'A promote-only strategy' for pursuing an aim is simply a practical strategy which instructs the agent consistently and in all her actions to seek the best outcome relative to that aim, and nothing else. Premise 2 says that this is or can be the rational agent's strategy when the rational agent has a simple aim. If I am a gardener with the simple aim *lots of flowers in my garden*, then I act rationally in so far as everything I do is directed to the promotion of that one end, and nothing else. Planting or tending any sort of flower will then count as rational action. Tarmacking over flower beds will not count as rational action, unless there is some further (possibly long-term) reason why such an action promotes my aim rather than, as it seems to, thwarting it.

Premise 3: If an agent has a complex aim, she cannot rationally pursue that aim by a promote-only strategy: she is obliged, on pain of irrationality, to adopt a promote-or-respect strategy.

A rational agent with a complex aim must 'divide her attention' (as Bill put it above) between the component parts of her complex aim. Of course she does not have to divide her attention between her complex aim and anything else; but she does have to divide her attention between the different simple aims that constitute her complex aim. She cannot spend her whole time and energy on any *one* of her simple aims. For if she does, and does not seem to be irrational, we have reason to deny that she *has* a complex aim, and say

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that her real aim is only the one simple aim that she actually pursues. (Compare Ben, who when he saw Bill spending his whole time and energy on just one species of flower could reasonably deny that Bill was really pursuing a complex aim involving three different species of flower.) Likewise, if the rational agent's complex aim really includes some simple aim S as a component, she must spend at least *some* of her time and energy on S. For if she does not, yet does not seem to be irrational, we have reason to deny that she *has* S as a component of her complex aim. (When we see Ben spending his whole time and energy on just three species of flower, we have reason to deny that Ben is pursuing a complex aim involving any *other* species of flower except those three.)

A rational agent with a complex aim cannot adopt a promote-only strategy relative to any of the simple aims that are the components of that complex aim. But she must adopt a promote-*sometimes* strategy, as we could call it, relative to all of her simple aims, on pain of counting either as irrational, or else as not really having those simple aims that she never promotes.

Notice, further, that there can be agents with complex aims if and only if there is a distinction between the agent who is not now promoting some aim *because it is not one of her aims*, and the agent who is not now promoting some aim *because although it is* (*still*) *one of her aims, it is not the one that she is concentrating on right now*.

As Ben observes, there plainly is such a distinction. Not every switch in an agent's *practical attention* is a change in that agent's *schedule of aims*. Ben's preparedness to ignore his eschscholtzias for the next half hour while he inspects his tulips is not the same sort of practical policy decision as Bill's preparedness not merely to ignore his eschscholtzias for the next half hour, but to rip them out for good. It can be reasonable to interpret a rational agent as still having S as part of her complex aim even when she is not actively promoting that aim, *provided* the agent's behaviour, intentions, and dispositions are distinguishable from those of an agent who does not recognize S as an aim at all.

So: *how* should the rational agent with a complex aim treat those component aims that she is not currently promoting? Well, she should 'keep them in play'.[1] She should refuse to regard her com-

[1] 'But couldn't an agent's aims change? Couldn't I decide that the price of retaining B or C as aims while pursuing A is too high, and drop B or C from my schedule of aims?' Of course you could. Obviously your profile of goods could be 'streamlined', narrowed down, in this way. Equally obviously, it could also be broadened out by the opposite sort of decision—perhaps by a realization that a moral price, high though it may be, simply has to be paid.

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plex aim as completely fulfilled by any possible state of affairs that does not include at least some satisfaction of those currently-unpromoted aims. In particular, she should refuse to promote any one part of her complex aim at the price of abandoning any other part of her complex aim. As we could also put it, she should refuse to *promote* any part of her complex aim at the price of failing to *respect* any other part of her complex aim.

If my argument works, this shows that practical rationality requires the agent with a complex aim to adopt what I shall call a promote-sometimes-and-respect-always strategy to each of his simple aims. This conclusion establishes Premise 3, and has two important corollaries.

The first corollary arises from the *promote-sometimes* half of the strategy. This is that a rational agent with a complex aim can have discretion *when* to promote any particular component of his complex aim. (To put it another way, a rational agent with a complex aim can have discretion, at a given time, *whether* to promote any particular component of his complex aim.) Transposed into the ethical key, this comes out as the claim that there is such a thing as the supererogatory, and moreover that the supererogatory is not merely licensed by the rational agent's *tactics*, but actually by her *strategy*. This is a hard claim for the consequentialist to make sense of.

The second corollary arises from the *respect-always* half of the strategy. The claim is that an agent with a complex aim is rationally required never to take any course of action that does not count at least as respecting any of the simple aims that are components of his complex aim. Transposed into the ethical key, this comes out as the claim that there are such things as moral constraints, and moreover that these moral constraints are not merely licensed by the rational agent's *tactics*, but actually by her *strategy*. This is an even harder claim for the consequentialist to make sense of.

Premise 3 is the crux of the argument laid out on p. 2. The remaining four steps of the argument go through relatively easily.

Whether any decision in either direction would be rational is another question, which this paper will not attempt to answer. There is practical rationality *relative to ends*, which I have if I have the end(s) that a practically rational agent has. There is also practical rationality *relative to means* (or *instrumental* practical rationality), which I have if I pursue whatever end(s) I may have by a strategy that a practically rational agent could endorse. The two are obviously different, since anyone could have the one sort of practical rationality while lacking the other. This paper is mostly about *instrumental* practical rationality.

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Premise 4: Consequentialism enjoins a promote-only strategy for rational agents

A promote-only *strategy*, I said. I didn't say that consequentialists can't allow a practically rational agent to deploy non-promoting *tactics*. Everyone knows that they can allow that; or at least, that they can make a plausible case for allowing it.

That distraction aside, what would be the argument for denying that consequentialism enjoins a promote-only strategy for rational agents? A diehard rule consequentialist might deny this, I suppose; but I suspect the diehard's rule 'consequentialism' would then turn out to be a rubber duck. *Most* consequentialists are eager to tell us that their moral theory gives us just one way of responding to any aim that we recognize: to promote it. Philip Pettit, for instance (Philip Pettit, in Singer, (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. xii, 232–3):

> '[A] consequentialist theory ... tells us that we ought to do whatever has the best consequences ... [More formally,] the consequentialist holds that ... the proper way for an agent to respond to any values recognized is ... in every choice to select the option with prognoses that mean it is the best [i.e. the most probably successful (highest scoring] gamble with those values.'

Interestingly, indeed ironically, Pettit regards the simplicity of consequentialism in this respect as one of its defining *advantages* over non-consequentialism. More about this below.

Premise 5: If rational agents have simple aims, consequentialism might not be wrong. But if rational agents have complex aims, consequentialism must be wrong

Premise 5 follows from Premises 3 and 4. (I am taking it as read that consequentialism is a theory of practical rationality, and that any theory of practical rationality that enjoins a strategy that cannot rationally be implemented is wrong.)

Notice that the point made by Premise 5 is *not* that, in practice, all consequentialists enjoin a single aim for rational agents. Some do: 'There is one ultimate moral aim: that outcomes be as good as possible' (Parfit's statement of consequentialism, *Reasons and Persons* p. 24). Others perhaps don't: Pettit seems not to in the last quotation, where he speaks non-commitally of responding to *any* 'values recognized'. The point is rather that *if* rational agents have complex aims, then consequentialism's promote-only strategy cannot be deployed.

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Do rational agents have complex aims? I say they do if the goods are incommensurable. (I also say they do, since I think the goods *are* incommensurable: but that isn't my main thesis here.) That brings us on to my argument's Conclusion, 7 (after considering which we will go back to look at Premise 6):

Conclusion (7): If the goods are incommensurable, consequentialism must be wrong

7 follows from Premises 5 and 6 by the transitivity of entailment.

Premise 6: If the goods are incommensurable, then rational agents have complex aims

Premise 6 claims that the incommensurability of the goods entails the complexity of rational agents' aims. How does this entailment work?

Many things can be (and have been) meant by 'incommensurability'. My use of the term does not strike me as bizarre or extraordinarily out of line with standard uses. But I don't mind if people think it *is* bizarre or deviant, provided only they understand what I mean by it. I offer this definition:

(DEF IG) Goods G1 and G2 are incommensurable goods if and only if *the rational agent* (a) regards both G1 and G2 as of basic and non-negotiable importance, and (b) does not regard himself as rationally obliged to recognize any permanent and completely determinate order of priority between G1 and its instances and G2 and its instances.

What, however, is a good? The answer is that a good is a *rationally sanctioned aim:* a good (or a value) is a generic aspect of possible options or states of affairs which in itself suffices to give a rational agent *pro tanto* reason (possibly both justifying and motivating) to promote or pursue or otherwise choose for those possible options or states of affairs. For some examples see Griffin's profile of values in *Well-Being* pp. 67–68. Griffin lists 'Accomplishment, [autonomy, health, freedom from pain and anxiety, minimal material well-being], understanding, enjoyment, and deep personal relations'.

Now recall our gardeners Bill and Ben. As we know, they have aims, and Ben at least has a complex aim. As we know from my discussion of Premise 3, for a rational agent to have a complex aim is (a) for her to regard *more than one* state of affairs as worth aiming at, and (b) for her not to regard any one of the different parts of that complex aim as eliminable in favour of some other part or parts.

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But parts (a) and (b) of what it is to have a complex aim come to the same thing as parts (a) and (b) of (DEF IG). To think that more that one state of affairs is worth aiming at—in itself—*is* to regard both of two separate things as goods, and both as of basic and non-negotiable importance. To deny that any one of the different parts of my complex aim can rationally be eliminated in favour of some other part or parts *is* to deny that there is a rational sanction for any permanent and completely determinate order of priority between all those goods I recognize.

It follows that Ben has a complex aim if and only if the simple aims that are components of Ben's complex aim *are incommensurable goods for Ben*. It also follows that Ben has a complex aim *all the parts of which are rationally sanctioned* if and only if the simple aims that are components of Ben's complex aim are all incommensurable goods *without relativisation*. More generally, the goods are incommensurable *if and only if* rational agents have complex aims.[2] Since a biconditional establishes both of the one-way conditionals that compose it, this argument suffices to establish Premise 6. And this completes my main argument for my thesis.

Some applications

To close, I shall note three applications of my argument. These applications give us answers to three important questions that are raised by Robert Nozick, Philip Pettit, and John Harris.

First Application: an answer to Nozick's question. Nozick's question is: 'Can we supply an argument for Kant's and Nozick's preference about how to state the second formulation of the categorical imperative?'. Nozick discusses this at *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 30–32; where he asks:

> Isn't it *irrational* to accept a side constraint C, rather than a view that directs minimising the violations of C? If non-violation of C is so important, shouldn't that be the goal? How can a concern for the non-violation of C lead to the refusal to violate C even when this would prevent other more extensive violations of C?

Nozick answers:

> ... Side constraints upon action reflect the underlying Kantian

[2] Strictly, I should say 'complex aims not all the parts of which can be lexically ordered', since someone could have a complex aim consisting of aims A and B and yet be prepared always to sacrifice A for B. (My thanks for David Evans and Brad Hooker for pointing this out.)

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> principle that individuals are ends and not merely means. ... Individuals are inviolable... Had Kant held [an end-state ethical view] he would have given the second formula of the categorical imperative as, 'So act as to minimize the use of humanity simply as a means', rather than the one he actually used: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.' ... There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more ... talk of an overall social good covers this up. ... To use a person in this way does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person, that his is the only life he has.

In my terms, Nozick's thesis is simply that a rational agent will take the well being of each human individual as a separate simple aim—a separate component part of the rational agent's complex aim. The rational agent will therefore be committed to a promote-sometimes-and-respect-always strategy towards the well being of each and every human individual. This will mean that practical rationality itself will require the agent with this complex aim not to promote any one human's well being if he cannot do so without failing to respect any other human's well being. Practical rationality will require that, because to fail to respect any aim is to abandon it, and it is irrational relative to the complex aim for the agent to abandon any part of it: see above under discussion of Premise 3. Thus practical rationality itself will require an agent with a complex aim to regard the requirement on him always to respect each of his component aims as setting limits for him on his obedience to the other requirement on him sometimes to promote each of his component aims. And this explains why the deontologist can rationally hold, like Nozick above, that individual humans may not be used 'for the greater good'.

Consequentialists often do no more against deontologists than object to the mysteriousness of their intuitions about justice and the separateness of persons. (See, for instance, Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, pp. 27ff.) But there is no unclarity or mystery or paradox in the statement that I have just made of the deontological position about constraints. If the consequentialist complaint about the deontological position about constraints was only that it was mysterious, then that objection is answered.

This statement also shows how the theory of practical reason might not only *permit* us, but actually *oblige* us to take the deonto-

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logical line on constraints (and to take that line so to speak at the highest level, as a part of the practically rational *strategy* for achieving a complex aim, not merely as part of our *tactics* as in many forms of consequentialism). If the consequentialist complaint about the deontologist's position on constraints was only that his position had no basis in the theory of practical reason, then that objection is answered too.

Second application: an answer to Pettit's question. Philip Pettit's question is: 'Can the non consequentialist explain why he is right to recognize two ways of responding to values, and why the consequentialist is wrong to recognize only one?'. Pettit puts this question in his classic article on 'Consequentialism', pp. 230–240 in Peter Singer, (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, at p. 238. Pettit regards the non-consequentialist view about how to respond to values as implausibly complicated, and the consequentialist view as pleasingly simple:

> Non-consequentialists all commit themselves to the view that certain values should be honoured ... But they all agree ... that certain other values should be promoted. ... Thus where consequentialists introduce a single axiom on how values justify choices, non-consequentialists must introduce two.
>
> But not only is non-consequentialism less simple for losing the numbers game. It is also less simple for playing the game in an *ad hoc* way. Non-consequentialists all identify certain values as suitable for honouring rather than promoting. But they do not generally explain what it is about the values identified which means that justification comes from their being honoured rather than promoted... Not only do [non-consequentialists] have a duality then where consequentialists have a unity: they also have an unexplained duality.

My argument 1–7 answers Pettit's complaint. For it establishes that if rational agents have complex aims then they are rationally required *not* to adopt the promote-only strategy that Pettit advocates. If Pettit's objection to non-consequentialism is that it is not simple enough, then the non-consequentialist can reply that unless rational agents have simple aims, Pettit's sort of consequentialism is not complicated enough.

Third Application: an answer to Harris's question . Harris's question (*The Value of Life*, p. 60) is: 'Can we reconcile the claim that values are incommensurable with the claim that choices between them can be rational and not random?':

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> Those who hold that values are incommensurable will have to choose to do one thing rather than another while maintaining that this does not commit them to any judgment about the greater value or moral importance of what they have chosen, as compared with rejected alternatives ... Unless such choices are deliberately made at random, a pattern of preference is likely to emerge. It would be difficult not to think of such preferences as moral preferences.

Harris finds it 'difficult not to' assume that every rational choice between goods necessarily expresses some sort of preference between them. I have the opposite difficulty. To see why, consider the gardeners again. Ben may be doing nothing *at the moment* to promote his aim of growing tulips, because *at the moment* he is busy promoting his aim of growing eschscholtzias. But suppose we know that Ben has a complex aim which includes the growing of eschscholtzias *and* the growing of tulips as component simple aims. On that assumption, we cannot explain his action in any such case as rational if we assume that what he is doing now necessarily expresses a *preference* between his two aims. For to say this in every such case is to say that Ben only has *a simple* aim. But that is precisely what I am denying: that there are only simple aims and not also complex ones.

Harris may object that, on my model, Ben's choices between his different aims are *random*. If 'random' means 'not uniquely rationally vindicated as the single correct solution to his choice-problem', then the charge is true, but harmless. But if 'random' means 'irrational', the charge is false. Ben's choice to attend to his tulips now is fully (instrumentally) rational. Its rationality derives (where else?) from the fact that growing tulips is one of Ben's aims, together with the point that the choice to attend to his tulips now does not fail to respect any of his other aims.

Closing remarks

I am likely to face the accusation that I have not done this, that or the other in this paper. So, to end, I shall point out four things that I was not trying to do.

First, to reiterate, I have not tried to argue that the goods *are* incommensurable, or that rational agents *do* have complex ends. I have only talked about what follows for the theory of practical rationality on these conditions.

Second: I have not tried here to specify what the goods are, or how to identify or individuate them, or to answer such questions as 'How finely do we slice goods before we decide that they count as

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separate goods?' This is not because I find these questions uninteresting; it is because I find them *too* interesting to be able to deal with them briefly.

Third, I have not said *what counts* as respecting or promoting any good for rational agents who have complex ends.

('So for all you have said we could count absolutely any course of action as rationally consistent with the recognition of a complex aim, or for that matter of a simple aim … so your paper's argument excludes nothing: it is vacuous.' *Non sequitur*: conclusions for the interpretation of action are not *supposed* to follow until we add information about what goods an agent with a complex aim actually recognizes, and what actions the agent counts as promoting, respecting or violating those goods.)

Fourth, therefore, my argument (if it works) establishes that if rational agents have complex ends, then there are moral *constraints*: but not that these constraints take the form of specific and material moral *rules*, e.g. 'Do not murder'. For all I have said here, it is open to the particularist to argue that what respects or promotes, respects or violates any good is context-dependent to such an extent that there are no such moral rules. If I disagree with particularism (and I do), that has not been the issue here.

If the argument of this paper is correct, then the implications of incommensurability for consequentialism are dire. I have argued that if the goods are incommensurable, then consequentialism is a wrong theory of practical reason. Perhaps, then, it is time to write another paper establishing incommensurability.[3]

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