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Rhetoric and the Incommensurability of Values

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Title: Rhetoric and the Incommensurability of Values
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The brunt of my claim in this paper is that the notion expressed in the slogan, “incommensurability of values” is misleading at best, pernicious at worst, and that its implications for practical rhetoric—which is to say, arguments when they go to work—are especially unfortunate.

The case is straightforward. There is nothing in the original mathematical metaphor or in the developments in philosophy of science that warrants the use of *incommensurability* as a technical term in ethics. Values are bigger, lumpier things than the term *incommensurability* prototypically references, and the deployment of the word in philosophy of science also references markedly different issues than it does in the domain of values. Moreover, that domain flat-footedly misappropriates the term for duties it doesn't serve elsewhere, comparison. Worst of all, the implications of the use of *incommensurability* as a technical term are to draw attention away from the value-holders, who might well reconcile discrepant values if given the chance, and to direct that attention generally towards reified values, and specifically towards some putative relationship between reified values that precludes reconciliation.

Mathematical roots

Incommensurability of values is, at the root, a mathematical metaphor that compares moral and aesthetic ideas to numbers. Incommensurable numbers are paired numbers without a common divisor—in the 6th century BCE Pythagorean milieu in which the notion was invented, such numbers are “without common measure” [Gk. *asummetra* which morphed to L. *incommensurable* in the Latin Middle Ages]. Moral ideas include such things as liberty and equality; aesthetic ideas, beauty and grandeur.

Philosophy of science roots

Incommensurability, however—the nominalization—came into widespread modern usage via philosophy of science in the early 1960s.¹ Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn jointly, though not collaboratively, developed a sense that scientific theories (frameworks, paradigms, ...) can be encapsulated isolates. Feyerabend's and Kuhn's arguments draw on a constellation of notions inherited from logical empiricism (chiefly the concepts of frameworks, meaning variance, and theory-ladenness) and apply

them to instances of theory succession in the history of science. The reasoning runs something like this:

- Theoretical terms get their meaning from the frameworks they participate in.
- Meanings change as the framework changes.
- There are discontinuous jumps in frameworks applying to the same domains.
- Not everybody in the field makes those jumps.
- Therefore—subtotal—we sometimes get situations in which two variant frameworks in a domain have different meanings for key terms (like *planet*, in the classic Ptolemaic/Copernican example, which included the sun for Ptolemy but not Copernicus, included the earth for Copernicus but not Ptolemy).
- Those variant frameworks cannot be objectively adjudicated because
 - the meanings of the terms are given by different contexts, and
 - there is no external third (fourth, fifth, ...) context into which both sets of meanings can be rendered
- Therefore—big conclusion—we get incommensurability between such frameworks.

In addition to this logical-empiricist technical machinery, Kuhn (especially) brought in themes from gestalt psychology, social psychology, and linguistics—all of which were seen to compromise notions of rationality. He talked about the discontinuous jumps between frameworks in terms of the belief structure of the adherents to the new variant. It was like perceiving one of the potentialities in a gestalt image, then leaping to the next. It was like religious conversion. It happened suddenly and totally, and was independent of reason. He talked further of the frameworks being like different, non-intertranslatable languages. Drawing on the thesis of linguistic relativity, he suggested the adherents 'lived in different worlds.' Needless to say, whatever implications of relativism were latent in the lack of neutral contexts for adjudicating between variant frameworks, they were made highly salient by Kuhn's use of these analogies.

Thus began a cottage industry in philosophy of science, and not just there. Sociology of scientific knowledge effectively owes its existence to adumbrations of scientific incommensurability. So does rhetoric of science. So does a widespread interest in suasive argumentation in the history of science. —All three of these movements realize what Richard Rorty has called "The rhetorical turn" (Simons 1990, vii). The extremely influential scholarly idiom known as postmodernism, also draws significantly on incommensurability; Feyerabend is virtually a founding father of that dialect.

In short: there is a collection of semantic and thematic pressures beyond the straightforward mathematical metaphor bearing on the slogan, "incommensurability of values."

Discourse of values roots

The non-mathematical use of the word *incommensurability* before Feyerabend and Kuhn was restricted and arcane; they brought fresh attention to the concept, creating a problem field, and popularizing the nominalization. But the non-mathematical use of

incommensurable dates at least to the seventeenth century.² Long before the 1960s, that is, there was an adjective, a quality that might hold of some pairs of phenomena, but there was not yet a noun, a locus of attention.

What is most interesting about the adjective is that it very often implicates values. The second edition of Oxford English Dictionary (OED2) defines what it calls the 'general' use of *incommensurable*, as "having no common standard of measurement; not comparable in respect of magnitude or value," exemplifying that definition with this collection of paradigmatic sentences:

1660 R. Coke Justice Vind. 12 Whether such things so apprehended by the Senses, be pleasant, profitable, just or unjust...commensurable, or incommensurable. 1664 H. More Myst. Iniq. Apol. 539 Will not this Position prove as incommensurable to humane affairs and be laden with as great inconveniences? 1796 Burke Let. Noble Ld. Wks. 1842 II. 260 Between money and such services...there is no common principle of comparison: they are quantities incommensurable. 1845 De Quincey Nat. Temperance Movem. Wks. XII. 167 The two states are incommensurable on any plan of direct comparison. 1881 Westcott & Hort Grk. N.T. II. 46 The rival probabilities represented by relative number of attesting documents must be treated as incommensurable.

Some of the uses of *incommensurable* catalogued here have technical connotations to them, and some are fairly indeterminate from what we can see in these brief snatches. But overall these five sentences, sampling from three centuries of use, illustrate a lengthy, if not dense or widespread, deployment of *incommensurable* in the realm of values. The usage clearly penetrated moral philosophy, perhaps even originating with it. Roger Coke's (1660) treatise, the earliest OED2 citation, falls into that genre—the full title is *Justice Vindicated from the False Fucus put upon it by Thos. White Gent., Mr. Thomas Hobbs, and Hugo Grotius*—though there is no sense from the snippet here (and I haven't examined the original very fully) how systematic or characteristic the connection of *incommensurable* is with values. But by at least the turn of the last century the theme of value-(in)commensurability had noteworthy currency in ethics.

Hastings Rashdall, for instance, in his two-volume *Theory of Good and Evil*, argues that any

two kinds of value are not absolutely incommensurable. However much superior the value of a good act may be to that of a transitory pleasure, we still use the term 'value' of both, and we use it in the same sense: the two kinds of value differ as being at the top and the bottom of the same scale, not as representing two totally incommensurable scales. There can be only one ultimate scale of values, however heterogeneous the objects which we appraise by that scale (Rashdall 1907.1 174).

Rashdall implicitly treats incommensurability as a graduated notion (as the inverse of the graduated notion that he elevates, commensurability); what he repudiates is the far end of the scale, absolute incommensurability. A cornerstone chapter in the second volume, "The commensurability of all values," epitomizes his "scientific treatment" of ethics. Every pleasurable experience for Rashdall (1907.2, 15) is "a sum of other pleasures"

(with *pleasure* construed in a utilitarian or even Socratic sense—knowledge, virtue, and so on, are pleasures) which can be calculated via a “hedonistic calculus.” Commensurability is not always a concern; it becomes an issue only if we have to choose between differently ranked goods, perhaps in differing quantities, “*when we cannot have both.*” In that case, the calculus can be brought in: “we can compare them, and pronounce that one possesses more value than the other” (Rashdall 1907.2, 39).

Rashdall addresses a variety of opponents, hostile to the measurement and/or calculation of pleasures (values, goods), but it is not clear there was a distinct position that might be connected with the phrase “incommensurability of values”³ until work by Sterling Lamprecht on ethical pluralism and prudential values in the early 1920s, which flatly contradicts Rashdall:

Many times men are faced with situations in which the potential goods are woefully incompatible, in which the choice of one good involves the abandonment of another; and sometimes men are faced with still more trying situations in which the potential goods are unknown and can not be brought to light except on the basis of a daring decision, a decision which is frankly a hazard and will not be proved true or false until the outcome has made investigation of other expedients forever impossible. The goods of life are utterly incommensurable. Health, beauty, courtesy, knowledge, friendship, all these cannot be measured by a common scale and tabulated in a common calculus (Lamprecht 1920, 564).

The prolonged clash of rival codes and standards of right is so grave an evil that at all costs we must seek to limit and prevent its occurrence. But in so doing, we are more likely to meet success if we remember that we are not always judging between a right and a wrong, but often between two irreconcilable rights, two irreconcilable choices of incommensurable goods (Lamprecht 1920, 570).

Lamprecht was writing of course, in the wake of the War to End all Wars, and at the very outset of—in the title of a prescient book on the middle east—the *Peace to End all Peace* (Fromkin 1989). So, his use of phrases like “prolonged clash of rival codes” and “so grave an evil” is not the traffic of abstraction.

Lamprecht is especially concerned with using value incommensurability to counter ethical monism, not just of Rashdall’s utilitarian sort, but any universal-solvent project to ethical issues, and to promote its converse, pluralism. Arguing that there are no available “eternal principles” by which to measure potential actions that we find valuable, Lamprecht endorses an approach in which we make largely personal choices and do not require others to act according to our constellation of values.

I have not explored Lamprecht’s milieu very far at all, but he begins his essay with “The general tendency in American philosophy during the last two decades has been towards pluralism” (Lamprecht 1920, 561; see also Lamprecht 1921), evoking such philosophers such as William James and John Dewey, though the theme of value incommensurability does not appear to be prevalent in their work. But some years later we find Henry W. Stuart, a student of Dewey’s, putting an overlay of incommensurability terminology on Dewey’s views. Summing up the moral he draws from a series of

situations that lead to choice among values, a process Dewey explored under the term *valuation*,⁴ Stuart writes:

The ends in an ethical situation are, then, variously described in [Dewey's work] as incompatible, discrepant, heterogeneous, opposed. They get in each other's way; they cannot readily be measured and chosen, one as against the others, because no common denominator can be found in terms of which to express their relative worth. In ethical situations, that is to say, the rival ends toward which the individual finds himself attracted are found to be incommensurable (Stuart 1939, 298).

Where Lamprecht clearly uses a general sense of *incommensurable*, Stuart makes the mathematical linkage explicit, and he not only uses the nominalised variant, he uses it in a way that suggests he is circumscribing a problem field—"ethical incommensurability" (Stuart 1939, 301, 311). For him, *incommensurable* and *incommensurability* are technical terms.

It is not clear what contact, if any, Lamprecht and Stuart had with each other. They surely knew each other on some level; both were active professional philosophers in an overlapping period, at established U.S. schools, at a time when the philosophical community was not large.⁵ Nor is it clear how common was talk about value incommensurability among the American pluralists; there are no adequate corpora available for electronic searches, and I do not know this literature well. Nor can I say what direct influence pragmatists generally, Lamprecht or Stuart specifically, and/or such talk might have had on subsequent ethical philosophy. There is no citation presence of this work to speak of in the literature of contemporary value incommensurabilists, and, in particular, the most substantial figure associated with this line of thought later in the century, Sir Isaiah Berlin, does not cite earlier pluralists, aside from occasional notice of William James; indeed, in the article "My intellectual path" Berlin says rather disarmingly, of the incommensurability of values, "I do not know who else may have thought this" (1998, 60).⁶ Finally, it is not clear what influence, if any, Feyerabend and/or Kuhn may have had on Berlin (whose earliest major statement of pluralism, *sans incommensurability*, comes in 1958, with "Two concepts of liberty").

That's a good deal of murk; my apologies. But two things *are* clear: the fortunes of discourse on incommensurability of values were improved substantially by Berlin's work, especially his *Four essays on liberty* (1969), from which some commentators date the movement;⁷ and the charisma of the word *incommensurability* was raised immeasurably by the work of Feyerabend, and especially Kuhn.⁸ Berlin's *Four essays*, the very widely sold second edition of Kuhn's *Structure*, and a highly influential group of essays on Kuhn's work, *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970), all came out very close to one another, and all made a great many philosophy reading lists in the 1970s.

Incommensurability of values

The incommensurability-of-values literature over the last quarter of the last century, that is, and on into this one, manifests the convergence of two currents of philosophical usage, the one Berlin represents, and the Feyerabend-and-Kuhn incommensurability-of-scientific-programmes usage, though the latter is distinctly less important for the topics and instruments of values literature. Value incommensurabilists almost never mention Feyerabend, and mention Kuhn largely to exorcize his massive ghost. Ruth Chang's collection of essays, for instance, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* introduces Kuhn on the very first page solely to banish (a confused-but-popular version of) him:

We can reject one notion straight off as inapplicable for [incommensurability of values discourse]. This is the idea, spawned by the writings of Thomas Kuhn, that evaluation across different conceptual schemata, ways of life, or cultures is impossible (Chang 1997, 1).

The authors in Chang's book observe her banishment, with the lone exception of James Griffin, who invokes Kuhn in kind—as responsible for an “extreme position,” one that is “implausibly strong” (Griffin 1997, 39).⁹

What value incommensurabilists mean by the term is, like science-studies incommensurabilists, various, but it trucks much more explicitly with comparison—moral, political, and aesthetic. In the science-studies literature, the relation between comparison and incommensurability is controversial. Feyerabend, Kuhn, and their more sympathetic expositors deny that incommensurability forecloses theory comparison;¹⁰ many of their opponents insist that it *does* foreclose comparison (and, further, that since it does, it must be wrong, because theories are compared all the time). Often comparability is either absent altogether from science studies discussions, or simmers quietly on the back burner, present only through allusion. For value incommensurabilists, there is almost no controversy (but, like all bodies of scholarly discourse, the *almost* is necessary for every adjective): “What nearly all of us ... mean by the ‘incommensurability’ of values,” James Griffin volunteers for this discourse community, “is their ‘incomparability’—that there are values that cannot be got on any scale, that they cannot even be compared as to ‘greater’, ‘less’, or ‘equal’” (Griffin 1997, 35). This incomparability is sometimes linked to value systems of a sort that correspond to frameworks in science studies, as in Berlin's juxtaposition of Classical and Christian values:

[The Greek and Roman heroic system was based on the virtues] of courage, vigor, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice, above all assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction [which contrasts with the Christian virtues of] charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value -- higher than, indeed, wholly

incommensurable with, any social or political or other terrestrial goal (Berlin, 1979, 45).

This wholesale way-of-living contrast looks very much like the framework incommensurability that occupies much of *Structure*, and it clearly echoes Sterling Lamprecht's concern for the "rival codes and standards of right." It is not, however, a subject much treated in the value-incommensurabilist literature (though it will no doubt escalate as religious and economic frameworks clash politically in the wake of the terrorism and warfare that has defined the early years of the twenty-first century).

Far more often value incommensurabilists concern themselves with intramural clashes, when incommensurability makes choosing among system-internal values recalcitrant.¹¹ The claim is not that all values are incommensurable. The choice between a cheeseburger, even a really good cheeseburger, and world peace, is not one that many people would have trouble making. Further, there are some values that may well be incommensurable but are not worth worrying about—choosing between a cheeseburger and a re-run of *F-Troop* on TV—the sorts of things we have whims for. But there are some values—"ultimate values," Berlin calls them, "sacred values" in another theorist's terms (Lukes 1997)—values that are very much worth worrying about, and some of them (runs the defining claim of this viewpoint) cannot be commensurated in any rational, clear-cut way.

These sacred values are the familiar, compellingly large abstract notions that have preoccupied moral and political philosophy from the days when it was all anima and gods. Berlin argues that some of them are, in consummate form, antithetical:

Liberty ... is an eternal human ideal, whether individual or social. So is equality. But perfect liberty (as it must be in the perfect world) is not compatible with perfect equality. If man is free to do anything he chooses, then the strong will crush the weak, the wolves will eat the sheep, and this puts an end to equality. If perfect equality is to be attained, then men must be prevented from outdistancing each other, whether in material or intellectual or spiritual achievement, otherwise inequalities will result. ... Similarly, a world of perfect justice—and who can deny that this is one of the noblest of human values?—is not compatible with perfect mercy. I need not labor the point: either the law takes its toll, or men forgive, but the two values cannot both be realized (Berlin 1998, 60).

While the notions of comparability and ranking drive much of the value-incommensurability literature (especially a concern for the two relations, better-than and equal-to, which are said not to hold in cases of incommensurability), they are not compelling interests of that movement's most immediate sponsor, Berlin. There is no overt concern for the lack of a common measure in Berlin, no express worry about comparing liberty and equality, justice and mercy.

What concerns Berlin is not measurement but cancellation. The values push in opposite directions, and since they are inverse, more of one means less of the other. Berlin customarily plays ultimate values to the full. So the issue is not really that 'the two values cannot be both realized' (even though Berlin puts it that baldly in excerpt above)—one might easily have a half-measure of justice and a half-measure of mercy, for instance—but that they cannot both be *fully* realized at the same moment. Consummate

liberty, on Berlin's story, can only be got by eliminating equality as a value, which by its very nature reduces liberty; consummate equality, by eliminating liberty.¹² Moreover, life will sometimes throw us—personally, but especially politically—into situations where there is no option but to choose between conflicting ultimate values, which means inevitable tragic loss. We are required by circumstances to choose between sacred and mutually exclusive values: one of them has to give. There's no way out. What to do?

Pluralism + incommensurability

The solution for Berlin, and for many value-incommensurabilists (though, like all scholarly literatures, this one is far from homogeneous), is liberalism, which can only be got via value-pluralism + incommensurability. What is relevant is not "the mere plurality of values," James Griffin argues. One might have values galore, with varying allegiances to all of them (as Rashdall's lexical essentialism implies, we wouldn't call them 'values' if they didn't have value to us) and still be content (as Rashdall is) with a one-size-fits-all calculus; if the values are incommensurable, however, there can be no such calculus. The situation calls not for a method, Griffin says, but an attitude, an attitude that brings together multiple worth and incommensurability:

a certain important picture of how [values] are related—that they clash, that they all matter, that they all have their day, that there are no permanent orderings or rankings among them, that life depressingly often ties gain in one value to terrible loss in another, that persons may go in very different directions and still lead equally valuable lives—call this picture 'liberalism' (Griffin 1986, 91).

All of these factors—the clashing, the distributed significance, the unavailability of absolute rankings, the negation, the inverse relationship of gain and loss, the susceptibility to tragedy, and, somewhat perversely, the notion of 'equally valuable life'—follow from the incommensurability fly in the pluralistic ointment, and collectively they constitute the ground for liberalism. The enemy of Berlin's liberalism—as it is with William James, Sterling Lamprecht, John Dewey, Henry W. Stuart, and the whole plurality of American pluralists—is monism.¹³ For James, monism is a philosophical disease, pluralism the cure. For value-incommensurabilists, monism is a political disease, liberalism the cure. The cure cannot be a methodological one, which would be another monism. It must be a stance towards values, and especially towards other value-holders, that counsels tolerance and respect. The catch, of course, is the same with all ethical solutions to moral and political dilemmas—the stance must be shared, indeed, universal (which, of course, begins to sound monistic). *Everyone* needs to realize that values are incommensurable so that they don't attack or coerce other value-holders, or follow some other hegemonic programme for their own slate of values.

Rhetoric and pluralism

Value pluralism has tremendous appeal for rhetoricians, of course, especially rhetoricians of a sophistic stripe. The history of rhetorical theory, aside from brief exceptions—the sophists, the Italian humanists, Giambattista Vico—is a handmaid's tale. Truth and value are obtained elsewhere, through other resources, and then rhetoric is brought in to market that truth or distribute (or enforce) those values. We can thank Plato for the earliest articulation of this position, in the one dialogue in which he lets his foot off the throat of rhetoric long enough to allow it a mildly wholesome role in the life of men. Having secured the truth, Socrates tells little Phaedrus, "The dialectician selects a soul of the right type, and in it he plants and sows his words founded on knowledge" (*Phaedrus* 277^a). If truth and value, however, are not universal, immutable Forms, if they are contingent products arising from the exchange of argument, if they emerge from reciprocal suasion, then rhetoric has a constitutive role, not an auxiliary role, in human affairs. And if, as Aristotle argued, rhetoric is allied inextricably with ethics (*Rhetoric* 1356^a, 1359^b), there is also duty associated with this constitutive role.

The dangers of pluralism (alienation, tribalism, persecution) are at least as great as the dangers of monism (zealotry, totalitarianism, persecution), and a constitutive rhetoric is the strongest weapon to combat them. Carolyn R. Miller, for instance, has argued for "a rhetoric of pluralism" that (in keeping with Aristotle) addresses itself to community values over an exaggerated sense of the individual, since hypertrophied individualism encourages "anomie and disaffection and ultimately the conviction that reasoned argument is not possible because each individual is entitled to his or her conception of the good incommensurable by definition with everybody else's" (Miller 1993, 87). She advocates a rhetoric addressed "not only to the diversity within any community but also to the diversity of communities that co-exist and overlap each other" (Miller 1993, 91).

Incommensurability failures

I'm with Miller all the way, and with Berlin and the pluralists most of the way. But there are failures and confusions that confound the use of incommensurability in value talk, and my argument is, simply, that it shouldn't be used—not just because it's misguided and erroneous (it is), but because, as Miller alludes, it has potentially vile implications.

The failures are the failures of analogy. The root metaphor in particular goes beyond worthless to malignant. But the explanatory failure of incommensurability in philosophy of science is also a parable for value incommensurabilists.

The numbers 4 and 6 are commensurable because there is a number that divides into them both, 2, and can be used to measure them with respect to each other (letting us know, for instance, that 4 is 2/3s of 6); π and 6 are not commensurable, they are incommensurable, because no sum of π s, nor any proportion of π , can go cleanly into 6, and vice versa. Now, we need to ask, what values are commensurable—mercy and forgiveness, perhaps? Let's assume a scheme in which they are both ultimate values.¹⁴ They're certainly compatible. Mercy (as a rough but I hope sufficient approximation) expresses itself as an act that averts some otherwise legitimate but injurious act, usually

one that is in some sense 'deserved.' Forgiveness is an expression of an internal state that relieves or bypasses a state of deserved animosity. One might show mercy without forgiveness, and forgive when mercy is not at issue—they aren't in any entailment relation—but they both apply in similar circumstances and might well apply in identical circumstances, and they don't get in each other's way. Compatibility, sure. But commensurability? How? In what conceivable way might they have a 'common divisor'? And if values can't be commensurable, how can they (or other values) be *incommensurable*?

Taking it from the other side, justice and mercy—especially retributive justice and mercy—conflict. They are called for in similar circumstances, they might be called for in identical circumstances, but they don't go especially well together in the sense that Berlin articulates—they pull in opposite directions. They both can't be completely realized at the same time: total mercy might well mean zero justice; total justice, zero mercy. Conflicting, sure. But incommensurable? No.

It's not so much that there is no common divisor in cases of value-(in)commensurability. We're working with a metaphor after all. It's that there is nothing conceivable which corresponds to that element in the metaphor, nothing to fill the common-divisor slot of the vehicle. Another value? If justice and mercy are incommensurable because there is no common value they can be aligned in terms of (and surely there isn't), then what is the common value that aligns *commensurable* values, like mercy and forgiveness? With justice and mercy, I'm not even convinced that the weaker relation, 'incompatible,' holds. Most people would want a legal system to try and accommodate both, for instance, treating them as balancing agents, one tempering the other, not as hopelessly mismatched concepts.

In short, values are bigger, messier, things than numbers—and, more crucially, stand in bigger, messier relationships to each other than do numbers—so much bigger and messier that the differences vitiate the mathematical metaphor, which depends on precision to function.

Looking to the example of philosophy of science offers no comfort to value incommensurabilists either, which may be why, they *don't* look to philosophy of science much at all, except to condemn its version of the concept for extremism.

Philosophy of science, in fact, doesn't have one sense of incommensurability. It has at least two by most counts, and upwards of five if the pie is cut finely. I'll use two here for simplicity, semantic incommensurability and material incommensurability.¹⁵ Semantic incommensurability concerns misalignments in lexical reference between rival theories. It is the prototypical sense of incommensurability that developed directly out of the resources of earlier philosophy of science—*planet* refers to different phenomenal objects in the Ptolemaic scheme than in the Copernican scheme; *phlogiston* in Priestly's chemistry refers to some of the same phenomena that *oxygen* does in Lavoisier's, though each refers to different phenomena as well, such that there is no isomorphism; and so on. Material incommensurability concerns misalignments mostly of standards and practices (including argument-adjudicating values, like simplicity and scope), and developed mostly out of Kuhn's attempt to account for the levels of animosity and incomprehension that attend many cases of theory succession—differences in reference don't seem sufficient.

But the lessons from philosophy of science for incommensurability of values are not encouraging. Firstly, the mathematical metaphor doesn't fare well in that domain either, so that I'm not sure *incommensurability* is a sensible term in philosophy of science (which might do better with the simple *incompatibility*). But, secondly, ignoring that gap and going directly to semantic incommensurability, the relevant claim is that reference misalignments compromise the comparison of the frameworks that house the referring terms. It is not that the *concepts* are incommensurable. Even in the most restricted version of semantic incommensurability, what Kuhn calls *local incommensurability*, it is a cluster of interdependent concepts (and sometimes practices) that drive the incommensurability, not individual concepts. So, there is nothing in the philosophy of science use of incommensurability that corresponds to concepts like mercy and justice.

On the other hand (the third hand, if you're counting), neither is there anything in the notion of material incommensurability to warrant application to the realm of values. The misalignment of standards and practices again concerns framework incommensurability. The closest we can come might be when the relevant standards are themselves values. For instance, the migration from a Ptolemaic universe to a Copernican one was retarded by a constellation of shared values, the migration effectively only coming more than eighty years later, with a reconfiguration of those values. Both Ptolemaists and early Copernicans venerated perfection in celestial mechanics, and held circular motion to be the most perfect form of motion. Objects in both of their respective heavens inscribed perfect circles. Both programmes also valued predictive accuracy very highly, but neither had a notable edge on that score. Copernicus offered a few savings in elegance, a reduction of the number of epicycles, and a more natural account of retrograde motion (one that derived from other features of the model and did not have to be simply stipulated). But neither elegance nor derivable accounts were enough to tip the geo- to helio-centric balance.

The predictive-accuracy balance, however, shifted markedly with Kepler. His elliptical orbits brought significantly greater mathematical elegance (no more epicycles), and, most importantly, his Rudolphine tables demonstrated very impressive gains in predictive accuracy. The acceptance of geo-centricity could not be accomplished without restructuring the value system: circles, and by implication, perfect motion, could no longer be maintained; indeed, celestial perfection overall was seriously compromised (if earth was a planet, then all the wandering bodies in the heavens might be made of the same mutable, corruptible materials). For astronomers who could not shake their allegiance to circular orbits and/or superlunary perfection in favour of greater predictive accuracy and/or mathematical elegance, there could be no adoption of Copernicanism.

What does this tell us about the incommensurability of values? At the immediate level of values like justice and mercy, nothing very much. It is the networks of adjudicating values that generate this species of incommensurability in philosophy of science, not a putative misalignment of individual values. Take, say, perfection and accuracy, or circular motion (a type of geometrical simplicity) and mathematical elegance (a variety of algebraic simplicity)—none of them is even remotely incompatible with each other, and indeed the restructuring could not be accomplished without the ability to rank (and re-rank) the relevant values. What is at issue are not the values, but the value schemes. But the story for incommensurability of values isn't much better at the level of value schemes. The incommensurability in philosophy of science, remember, is not

between the value schemes themselves, but between the frameworks that the value schemes support. Moreover, (1) the frameworks in our example *were* adequately adjudicated (one framework was chosen historically over the other), and (2) values were instrumental in that adjudication.

'Well, but,' you might object, 'the value theorists who deploy the word don't mean *incommensurability* in that way at all. They mean incomparability. You quoted James Griffin on that point yourself.' True, all true, but in fact that is the final, most significant reason we should abandon the slogan "incommensurability of values" altogether. It just means 'really-really-incomparable.' These folks mean 'incomparable,' but they want to say it in a tougher way. That's why *incommensurable* comes so often with a rush of other adjectives and totalizing modifiers. Rashdall denies values are "absolutely incommensurable." Lamprecht claims that values are "woefully incompatible" before moving up a notch to "utterly incommensurable." Stuart collects a small clutch of terms from Dewey's work before bringing out (in a scientific passive phrase) the more precise-sounding and definitive term: "incompatible, discrepant, heterogeneous, opposed ... that is to say, the rival ends toward which the individual finds himself attracted are found to be incommensurable" (Stuart 1939, 298). Berlin situates his concern, when first introducing the term in the introduction to *Four essays*, in those circumstances "where ultimate values are irreconcilable, ... incompatible ... absolute and incommensurable" (Berlin 1969, 1 [the lower-case letter e], not the number one]).

Incommensurable, in short, is just a tough and technical sounding word to make a fairly clear, not particularly astonishing claim sound portentous. And, frankly, it's wrong. *Incommensurability* is not a synonym for *incomparable* in mathematics. As Kuhn reminded some of his critics, "on the contrary, incommensurable magnitudes can be compared to any required degree of approximation" (Kuhn, 2000, 35). Neither is it a synonym for *incomparable* in science studies. It's true that many of Feyerabend's and Kuhn's critics take it pretty much that way, but both of them are on record, repeatedly, as saying that incommensurability compromises comparison, but hardly precludes it.¹⁶ They would be crazy to maintain otherwise, since the theories and frameworks they label *incommensurable* have all been compared, one of them has been chosen by the majority of scientists in the relevant field, and the other has been abandoned to historians and philosophers.

Rhetoric and incommensurability

And there's one final problem with using the word technically in the realm of values, a problem that is endemic to many strains of ethical discourse, and may even be responsible for spawning the whole incommensurability-of-values theme, reification. One of the truly relentless problems we have in dealing with qualities (in Western languages, at any rate), is the ease with which our nominalizing proclivities can turn them into objects. We are alright, I think, so long as we can maintain an awareness of convenient fiction about treating, say, the tendency to act in just ways, or to behave mercifully, as a thing, so long as we generalize over just or merciful acts to arrive at useful, fictive abstractions. But if we start to believe those abstractions are real, independent things, as Plato believed them to be, we start a process that takes us away from human action into

metaphysics. And if there is any philosophical discipline that needs to be rooted in human action, it is ethics.

Incommensurability, coming originally from geometry and evoking measurement, exacerbates this tendency to reify, focusing inevitably on things. The real issues (in science as well as in ethics) associated with incommensurability are misunderstandings and disagreements, which concern not things directly, but people's attitudes to things (and to each other), and the arguments they build around those attitudes. Berlinian liberalism, in particular, wants to drive people's attitudes away from abstractions. It is a philosophy of the particular—of individual, context-embedded decision making. Much of his case about the incommensurability of ultimate values is conducted as a prosecution against the possibility of utopias. "The very notion of the ideal society," Berlin says, "presupposes the conception of a perfect world in which all the great values in the light of which men have lived for so long can be realized together, at least in principle" (Berlin 1998). Such a world is not only unrealistic, it is logically impossible:

X is ultimate.

Y is ultimate.

Not X and Y.

Therefore, there is no possible world in which all ultimate values (X and Y as a subset) are fully realized.

But the fall-out of this argument from abstract values for Berlin is a required attitude to bring to the particular case, an attitude chiefly of tolerance.

The problem is that incommensurability doesn't get you there. Berlin's argument, of course, is built on a conflict between values, not on incommensurability in any relevant way (unless treating *incommensurable* as a synonym for *conflicting* is relevant). Where incommensurability does get you, if it is taken seriously, is in some arhetorical place where discussion is foreclosed. If there is no conceivable common ground (the best I can do with 'common measure' in this context), there is nothing on which to base agreement.

Take justice and mercy again. Viewing them as incommensurable is a foreclosure. Viewing them as conflicting is an invitation. They do conflict, but that fact is unrelated to incommensurability; if anything, the conflict makes them commensurable. If they are truly opposite in the way Berlin depicts them, then whatever scale we measure one on we could equally measure the other on. Antithetical qualities are frequently measured on the same metric (heat and cold, light and dark, strong and weak—pick your antonyms, and you will find them at either end of the same scale). I certainly don't want to try and develop a Rashdall-style calculus for measuring them. But branding them as 'incommensurable' obscures the possibilities that recognizing them as 'in conflict' opens up, the possibilities of compromise and negotiation, of value adjudication, of rhetoric.

Ultimate values do not need to be realized ultimately; that is Descartes's ontological argument all over again. Just because we define God as perfect does not require Him to exist, any more than defining a unicorn as a horse with a horn requires it to exist. Calling values *ultimate* does not commit us to wanting them in ultimate proportions. In any case, Berlin's argument shows they can't be fully realized

simultaneously, even if that was our wish. So, what do we do? We try to first commensurate them in some rough fashion, to mutually quantify them somehow so that we can end up with the right proportions of each in a general methodological way, and then try to realize the right proportions of each in particular cases. All this is messy and imprecise and subject to complications or breakdowns at all levels. But the other side of the coin is worse yet. If the values were truly incommensurable, the only message for rhetoric would be 'why bother?'

Incommensurability, too, is no friend of pluralism (and I, for the record, am no friend of monism). It is true that we don't get anywhere with Griffin's 'mere plurality of values,' but the blockage here is not the absence of *incommensurability*, but the presence of *mere*. A plurality of values needs to be augmented conceptually, but it is with processes of adjudication and reconciliation, not with principles of foreclosure. I think this means that the notion of incomparability with respect to values (at least to values which share a domain) is compromised as well, but that is an argument for another day.

Conclusion

To sum, incommensurability as a technical characterization of value relations fails: it fails as a mathematical metaphor; it fails as an extrapolation from philosophy of science, working from either semantic or material conceptions of incommensurability; the slogan "incommensurability of values" is misleading, perniciously so. If the word "incommensurable" is used in its rough, general sense, there's no harm. But it cannot bear the freight that is required of it as a technical term in ethics.

Further, deploying it as a technical term suggests an abandonment of ameliorating discourse that is noxious. If values come into conflict, as they often do, the task must always be to make the choice that best satisfies them—or rather, the people holding them—not to abandon choice altogether. Even more troublesome situations arise when different rhetors espouse values in conflict with each other. They may not get along, and they may refuse to explore their options rhetorically any further, to the point where they fall to hostility, violence, terrorism. But, if so, the blame belongs to the rhetors—or, since they have abnegated rhetoric, it may be more proper to call them anti-rhetors—it does not belong to their values, or to some irremediable, brick-wall relation between their values. Calling the values *incommensurable* absolves them of negotiation. That's a bad place to start from, if your goal is peaceful coexistence.

Notes

¹ The initial publications are Kuhn, *Structure of scientific revolutions* (1962, better known in the 1970 second edition) and Feyerabend "Explanation" (1962, 1981.1). Both scholars continued to investigate the notion for the remainder of their careers. Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975) is perhaps his best known book, and it develops incommensurability very thoroughly.

² As does the use of its antonym, *commensurable*, and the related terms, *commensurate* and *incommensurate*. I am just relying on the Oxford English Dictionary here (OED2), not on any philology of my own—which even records *incommensuration* as a synonym with *incommensurable*, but there is only one (17th century) citation for that; and much more widely *commensuration*, which has a small range of senses all related to measurement and proportion (Finnis 1997 deploys this term in the incommensurability of values literature). On this kind of data, too, I confess, one can't rule out the pre-Kuhn-n-Feyerabend non-mathematical use of *incommensurability*, even from some of the citations given (a few of which might be easily take a non-mathematical reading), but I'll just bow to the OED2 editors and compilers, who list all the citations under a single definition.

³ Actually dating this slogan, however, is another matter. The earliest use I have found of it suggests it was in at least moderate currency sometime before. C. K. Grant, in the 1950s, gives passing mention to "a problem which used to be called 'the incommensurability of values'" (Grant 1956, 407). Lamprecht does not use the phrase.

⁴ See Dewey (1932, 124): "belief ... always involves valuation, preferential attachment to special types of objects and courses of action. . . . The chief rôle of philosophy is to bring to consciousness, in an intellectualized form, or in the form of problems, the most important shocks and inherent troubles of complex and changing societies, since these have to do with conflicts of value."

⁵ Henry Waldgrave Stuart (1870–1951; Ph.D. Chicago 1900; Stanford University), was a president of the American philosophical association, and there is a chair in philosophy at Stanford named after him. Sterling Power Lamprecht (1890–; Ph.D. Columbia; Amherst, 1928–1956); there is a graduate fellowship in his honor at Amherst. Both Stuart and Lamprecht gave Howison lectures at Berkeley, two years apart (Stuart in '36, Lamprecht in '38).

⁶ Someone who does try to figure out who else might have thought of the value-incommensurability/pluralism blend that Berlin advocates is his literary executor, Henry Hardy, who catalogues a wide number of scholars he identifies as sources of "pluralism before/independently of Isaiah Berlin," including Lamprecht, Stuart, Dewey, and James. Most entries in the list are without comment, and there is no general discussion of American pluralism, but Hardy phrases the relations between Lamprecht's and Berlin's

positions in these terms: "[Lamprecht's formulation] is a remarkably precise anticipation of Berlin's ideas, unless of course Berlin drew on it (unawares?) himself" (Hardy 2001).

⁷ The essays themselves were written in the period 1948-1959, but the extensive and influential introduction, which centralizes the relationship between incommensurable values and ethical pluralism, was written for the 1969 collection.

⁸ Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1978) went through three editions, achieving substantial notoriety. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) also went through three editions, making it onto the list of the one hundred most influential books since the Second World War by *The Times Literary Supplement* [1995]. It has sold well over a million copies. Feyerabend's book and Kuhn's book have been, respectively, translated into nineteen and twenty-five languages. It is in any case noteworthy, I think, that this strain of discourse is not known, for instance, under the slogan "the irreconcilability of values," or "the incomparability of values," or "the incompatibility of values."

⁹ Indeed, despite the title of her book, Chang attempts to dispose entirely of the word, *incommensurability*, early on, in favour of *incomparability*, this time far less successfully. All of the authors feature the word very prominently in their articles, often in their titles. Chang's move, though, is not a simple substitution. She defines *incommensurability* as a somewhat more precise variant of *incomparability*. Here is what she says: "Let us henceforth reserve the term 'incommensurable' for items that cannot be precisely measured by some common scale of units of value and the term 'incomparable' for items that cannot be compared ... I am going to set aside the first idea—incommensurability—and focus on the second—incomparability" (1997, 2). In fact, she then spends most of the introduction trying to dispose of incomparability as well. Her introduction is a fine essay on the importance of practical reason for making choices that might seem unmakeable, but it is peculiar as an introduction. The use of *incommensurability* in the title looks a bit like a typical bait-and-switch, since she has so little interest in it, but all the other essays in the book retain *incommensurability*. Moreover, most of them use that word pretty much the way Chang uses *incomparability*, and many of them use those terms synonymously.

¹⁰ What Feyerabend and Kuhn explicitly say on the topic of comparison is (1) that the empirical consequences of rival theories cannot be compared, so that the criterion of 'factual adequacy' can't adjudicate between theories, but (2) that the lack of consequence comparison does not mean the theories themselves cannot be compared on any number of metrics (particularly values such as simplicity and scope). Kuhn especially devotes much ink to showing how they can be compared, and indeed, the sorts of comparative predicates that concern value incommensurabilists are exactly the sort that Kuhn says new programmes are marketed with: "the new theory is said to be 'neater,' 'more suitable,' or 'simpler' than the old" (Kuhn, 1970, 155).

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, though, finds the source of intramural value clash in the divergent genealogy of values, back to incompatible moral traditions. "It is not surprising that there

is no rational way of deciding which type of claim is to be given priority," among (for instance) rights, utility, and justice, he says, "or how one is to be weighed against another, [because m]oral incommensurability is ... the product of a particular historical conjunction' (MacIntyre 1981, 68).

¹² The most full-blooded case of an eliminative incommensurability is Joseph Raz's "constitutive incommensurability," which describes certain non-fungible value relationships, where even to contemplate a comparison (or, under a slightly softer interpretation, to contemplate acting on such a comparison) negates the superior value. "It is impoverishing to compare the value of a marriage with an increase in salary," for instance, says Raz, or "it diminishes one's potentiality as a human being to put a value on one's friendship in terms of improved living conditions" (Raz 1986). The key feature is that the act of comparing constitutes the incommensurability. "We run into 'constitutive incommensurability' of values whenever treating values as commensurable subverts one or both of the values to be entered into the trade-off calculus," Tetlock et al. observe, "To compare is to destroy" (Tetlock et al. 1996, 37).

¹³ Griffin is an exception here, saying "the monism-pluralism issue is not especially central to the issue of incommensurability" (Griffin 1986, 90).

¹⁴ In the passage quoted above, Berlin treats these two as synonyms. I think it is possible to maintain a distinction between them, as I do below, but nothing much hangs on whether they are the same or not; I'm just looking for two value-labels corresponding to highly compatible concepts.

¹⁵ This two-category scheme is a reconfigured subset of a four-category taxonomy in my introduction to the forthcoming *Rhetoric and incommensurability* (Harris 2004). I won't plot out the taxonomy here, but the variables implicated in Feyerabend's and Kuhn's incommensurability include misalignments of lexical meaning, evaluative standards, experimental methods, analytical methods, and/or perceptions, between and among proponents of rival theories.

¹⁶ A forthcoming paper by Paul Hoyningen-Huene outlines the positions of both of them with respect to incommensurability and theory comparison (Hoyningen-Huene 2004).

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