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Commentary on Julder Gómez’ “The Incommensurability of Values Problem”

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1. Introduction

I am delighted to be a commentator for Gómez’s paper “*The incommensurability of values problem*”. In this paper, Gómez puts forward a new proposal to shed light into the problem of how practical decisions are made in the presence of incommensurable values in a pluralistic community. Values and factual beliefs are two components of practical reasoning underpinning these decisions, but when the argumentation reaches the point of a choice which is motivated by incommensurable values, or as Gómez poses this, “*two incommensurable values are used as premises to favour of a proposal and one against the very same proposal*”, identifying a reasonable proposal is problematic. This difficulty, continues Gómez, is manifested in particular when values pertain to different dimensions that are themselves incommensurable. This is an interesting area of research, and Gómez’s new proposal is certainly welcome in an area of many debated solutions. While the paper could perhaps focus further on the importance of this problem, we can draw from Kock’s analysis that in these situations “*We lack the common measure that will enable us to do this [weigh incommensurate warrants] with ‘certainty, necessity, and rationality’*” (Kock, 2017, p. 89). Kock also reminds us, “*we humans do weigh such options and make choices anyway.*” What strategy is then to be used to compare choices that are based on incommensurable values in practical reasoning remains an open question.

Gómez paper takes us through a characterisation of when instances of this problem arise, through the manifestation of such cases in conductive arguments in practical reasoning. Gómez analyses many proposals and concludes that values incommensurability can be solved only if a new value hierarchy can be established and justified during the practical reasoning process itself. Revising value hierarchies, however, would be against the principles of a pluralistic community where those incommensurable values are the highest level.

Gómez enters the conversation on how to solve the problem inviting further reflection on the role values play in the selection of a choice, or alternative choices. Gómez’s proposal suggests looking for values that open the possibility to attain other values, in a similar form of how an action is instrumental for achieving a goal in the basic instrumental practical reasoning scheme (Macagno & Walton, 2018). This leads to new ways of assessing values on the basis of conditions of possibility, establishing relationships between values in the current circumstances. The new proposal comes with the useful properties that “*a value is presented as outweighing another value without detriment of compromising it, without introducing a third value and without going against the pluralistic assumption.*”

The proposal is particularly interesting as it gives insights for resolution and identification of choices where such situations might have been previously overlooked in particular where

practical reasoning is studied in computational settings. This commentary will continue with a discussion on interesting features of this proposal and the comparison between values. I will then offer some questions for discussion about Gómez's proposal and its properties.

2. Comparing values and states of affairs.

Gómez approach provides an interesting presentation of values, with the following two important statements:

Values are criteria to guide actions, they serve to select the kind of situations that should be pursued.

Values may or may not be executed. But, then, in order to far a value to be executed some things have to be obtained. Values have conditions of possibility.

As widely acknowledged in practical reasoning, Gómez introduces values as means to select actions. This starting point is manifested in the practical reasoning schemes as proposed by Macagno and Walton (2018) in their first level of the practical reasoning model. Among others, Macagno and Walton introduce the scheme for value-based practical reasoning as proposed by Atkinson and Bench-Capon (2007), which introduces values in the instrumental practical reasoning scheme. This latter approach has also been highly influential in computational models of practical reasoning. The scheme suggests that in a given set of circumstances C, an artificial agent should perform action A which will realise a goal G as a future state of affairs and promotes a value V, and therefore the agent ought to perform action A. Practical reasoning in frameworks adopting this scheme focus on deriving conclusions on the basis of the order of preference given to values according to an audience (Atkinson & Bench-Capon, 2007). This order is generally a total order for a specific audience, and hence would only allow a single highest value, which is also not applicable in a pluralistic community. In my opinion, this suggests that computational theories as well as those proposed in Gómez's paper, could benefit from this new proposal permitting the study of further features that might have been overlooked.

The second part of the above description of values gives an interesting perspective to the problem. I find that executing a value could benefit from further clarifications with respect on how it compares to achieving a goal that promotes a value. My interpretation of Gómez's proposal is that a reasonable new ordering can be established by considering that a value in order to be promoted might need other circumstances or states of affairs to be achieved. This is an alternative to for example the layered system of Macagno and Walton (2018) where states of affairs and their values are evaluated or classified individually. I wonder whether Gómez's new proposal is presenting us a new argument pattern that draws together two or more values, and provides a justification for one value to be subordinate to another value.

The new argument could be considered a combination of premises from two practical reasoning schemes where to refer to the previous value-based scheme, where bringing about a goal G1, which promotes V1, is compared to bringing about a goal G2, which promotes V2. The comparison seems to be at the level of a future state of affairs hence in given set of circumstances, and according to some general principle of ordering, it might the case that G1 enables G2, hence V2 should be subordinated to V1. Alternatively, it might be the case that G1 compromises G2,

hence V2 should be subordinated to V1. One of the critical questions of the value-based argument for practical reasoning seems to be in alignment with the identification of alternative goals, as states of affairs that have positive or negative relationships with the other one, however, this new perspective allows the justification of a new ordering.

Gómez's new proposal provides interesting insights in how values and practical reasoning are interlinked, stepping out of the individual evaluation of each action to the evaluation of paired actions. In my perspective, Gómez provides useful insights in reasoning about value orderings. In addition, for an artificial agent, this seems particularly appealing, as it can provide additional justification and reasons to the practical reasoning process.

3. Revisiting value hierarchies.

In this part I would like to offer a few suggestions and questions regarding the revision of the value hierarchy in practical reasoning.

Conclusions of the new example arguments. The proposal for establishing a new hierarchy of values during the reasoning process is an interesting approach, but I have a question on the example arguments proposed, in particular regarding their conclusions. Another way of looking at the premises of the example arguments is that they could provide justifications for the claim that a state of the world in which a value is promoted should be subordinate to a state of the world in which another value is promoted due to some principle of ordering rather than a justification for the subordination of the values. My question follows from some unclarity on the use of executable values, which seems to skip some of the inference steps of having an action that contributes to some new state of affair which promotes a value. What is possible or impossible, greater or smaller seems to be the state of affairs. Can this be generalised to the subordination of values? In the value-based argument scheme we can challenge the inference from goal to value with a question “*Does the goal realize the value stated?*” (Atkinson & Bench-Capon, 2007; Macagno and Walton, 2018). Does this assumption require further attention in Gómez's proposal?

Properties of the approach. Gómez holds that in this new proposal, there is no introduction of a third value to make proposals commensurate, however, I wonder whether by using a principle of ordering, this property is fulfilled. One might suggest that the conditions of possibility introduce new values, for example pursuing achievable objectives. In the examples, would these potentially commensurable values be considered differently than a third value used to commensurate peace and justice? It seems that the concept of a value and hierarchies of values could be clarified further. This property of the new proposal might then result in a clearer discussion.

Necessary condition and examples of the approach. Gómez argues that it is necessary to review the set of values to solve the problem of incommensurability, and I would suggest that this might require some further clarifications. Given that specific criteria to establish a new hierarchy between values are not provided in this paper, one could foresee many new hierarchies, some of which could be in conflict with others, leading once again to alternative choices that are preferable to others only in respect to a certain audience. Or this might lead to additional incommensurability conditions. This new approach brings indeed additional insights into the problem, and it seems clear that some criteria of preference even in equally good alternative actions is used to draw a final decision by decision makers. Whether the revision of value hierarchy is, however, a necessary condition to solve the problem could be a controversial statement. It would seem that this explanation does not strictly identify an action that must be done, when another action might still be justifiable if evaluated under different criteria. For this reason, it would be good to further

qualify the proposal. Additional analysis and real examples of application of this new proposal that are further situated in context may also provide additional clarity. For example within the context of a deliberation dialogue, the closing and the decision drawn upon the choices might be dependent on many additional factors, such as an early closing of the practical reasoning (Walton, 2015, pp. 183-187).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I find the proposal of introducing a revision of value hierarchy guided by the condition of possibility an interesting approach that I see bringing an interesting perspective in the study of practical reasoning. As a side consideration the approach seems to bring potential for computational practical reasoning. There are, however, some perspectives in the paper that could be further clarified with respect to the arguments and conclusions, motivation and properties of the approach.

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