Incommensurability, incomparability, and practical reason, Ruth Chang, ed. Harvard University Press, 1998, 303 pages.

One focus of dissatisfaction with standard models of decision making has been the assumption that a rational agent must have a complete linear ranking of the outcomes open to her. Such agents seem very different from human beings, or, to put the point more carefully, they seem to represent a state that humans can only approximate to as the result of a good deal of work on their preferences, a process that intuitively seems to be susceptible to rational criticism. You can do it more or less well. So at the very least standard models leave out something important and interesting. Current interest in philosophy in these questions is largely a product of dissatisfaction with the 'Humean' dogma that there can be no rational deliberation about ends. In economics, the interest largely stems from a general suspicion that too heavy idealisation in micro-economics may close off interesting ideas about the behavior of consumers and investors. The philosophers' and economists' paths crossed at a chateau in Normandy, for an interdisciplinary conference. This book consists of descendants of some of the conference papers, largely those by philosophers, many of them taking account of points made by others of the collection, plus some commissioned pieces. Ruth Chang has added a very helpful and clarifying introduction.

Each paper makes a point. There is a fair amount of overlap between the papers. The points argued for fall into four rough categories.

The nature of incomparability: There is considerable divergence among the authors about the nature of the phenomenon. The simplest interpretation of incomparability is to take it as a failure of trichotomy, the principle that A is preferred to B or B to A, or they are indifferent in preference. Even then there are choices to make. Are we dealing with the merely partial ordering of specific outcomes as ranked by a particular agent, or with some feature of preferences between general desirable and undesirable features of the world, such as liberty and well-being? But trichotomy, indeed the structure of preference orderings, may not be the issue at all. Something more subtle about rationality or the process of thinking through a choice may be crucial. To some extent these differences are just claims for ownership of the word "incomparable". They also involve competing claims about which phenomena are more basic and most worth trying to understand. David Wiggins seems to be working towards a conception of incomparability in which the focus is on the difficulty and seriousness of making comparisons, and their elusiveness, rather than on failure of trichotomy. It would make sense to call this "incommensurability" as there is an intelligible metaphor with Pythagorean commensurability of rational and irrational numbers within the complete ordering of the real line. Elizabeth Anderson uses a simple characterization of incomparability as failure-of-trichotomy and argues that to do justice to it we need a radically different model of practical reason. Ruth Chang points out the variety of possible preference structures and begins the task of relating these to characteristic difficulties of comparison and decision.

Does it exist? To some it is just obvious that the standard idealizations do violence to the shape of our preferences. Thus David Wiggins, Elizabeth Anderson, Joseph Raz, Elijah Millgram, Charles Taylor, Michael Stocker, and Cass Sunnstein, simply work from the assumption that their construal of incomparability represents something real. Donald Regan plays the role of, as he puts it, "the 'designated eccentric', appointed to take a position no one else would touch with a barge pole." He defends - with clarity, sense, and good humor - the suggestion that there really is no such thing as incomparability of desires, values, or outcomes. His arguments come down in the end to the observation that often when we are unable to compare two values or outcomes more reflection will produce the missing comparison. He points out that it is often morally required that we try to do the thinking that may result in a comparison. While this is undeniably true, it misses two basic points. First, sometimes when we think about two at first sight comparable outcomes or values we become *less* certain that we can rank either of them above the other, while remaining torn between them. Second, as Chang, Anderson, and Sunnstein point out, sometimes we are morally obliged to try to avoid thinking through a problem by finding a trade-off between the competing factors.

John Broome argues for a position that at first sight seems much like Regan's. The effects of real incomparability between the values of outcomes may be the result of ignorance-induced vagueness. In fact, though, what Broome argues, convincingly, is that even if the values of outcomes - their objective degrees

of goodness - are thoroughly comparable, decision makers will still have to deal with the fact that they are often unable to determine these degrees of goodness precisely enough to treat those outcomes as totally ordered. Regan could use this conclusion to explain the appearance of incomparability. But his opponents could also use it, to explain the need for taking incomparability as a serious issue for decision-makers, whatever the ultimate and perhaps unknowable structure of good.

Non-maximizing patterns of reasoning   If incomparability is inescapable then we need decision-making procedures which do it justice. Elizabeth Anderson suggests that what we need is an "expressive theory of rational choice" in which the fact and manner of choice is constitutive of the ends that choice aims at and balances. The general flavor seems to be anti-maximizing, though with a much more pluralistic quality than many deontological accounts. As she points out, Kant's ethics are expressivist in that the only ultimate value is reason itself, but one can make the rational manner of a decision part of the value of an outcome without either seeing reason as homogeneous or making it into the sole desideratum. She does not consider cases analogous to the 'murder to prevent more murder' cases that separate hard core anti-maximizers from the rest. She argues nicely for an extreme variety of patterns of value and of valuation.

Joseph Raz argues that the required reasoning does not operate with desires at all. He points out that when someone approaches a hard decision they ask themselves what they

should prefer, rather than what their inclinations or whims are. As a result, many of our wants are based on our conclusions about what is valuable, rather than the other way round. A complex structure of values is, for Raz, at the heart of practical reasoning, and must be grasped both when making non-trivial decisions and when understanding the choices of others. Raz's arguments and examples do not actually make much essential use of incomparability. Much of what he says would hold true of other circumstances in which choice is difficult. One of Raz's conclusions is endorsed by several other authors in this volume: in making sense of non-trivial decisions we need something richer that 'desire' and 'preference'. Raz distinguishes between goals, desires, reasons, and urges. Regan and Stocker make similar points explicitly, and others hint at them.

Elijah Millgram discusses the process of making preferences comparable. Or more generally, since this is not an argument for general comparability, the process of fitting one outcome into a preference-structure alongside others, or of reorganising an existing structure. According to Millgram some aspects of this process will inevitably occur during the act of decision rather than in preceding reflection. Millgram's main aim is to dissuade us from making such comparisons in our heads, by apriori or imaginative means. It is essential, he thinks, to form our preferences by reflection on our experiences. And when we see how we can do this we become more optimistic about the possibilities for rational preference dynamics.

Links with moral philosophy When we stop thinking that rational decision aims to maximize the satisfaction of whatever desires

the agent happens to have, we begin to erode the distinction between decision-theory and moral philosophy. The best choice is the one that gives you most of what it would make most sense to want. Or what it would be rational to want, or even what you should want. It is not surprising then that several authors argue that reasoning with incomparables, even when it does not involve balancing of one person's interest against another's, has characteristics sometimes attributed to morality. An aversion to maximization is found in several papers, sometimes not clearly distinguished from an aversion to the arbitrariness of desires. Charles Taylor argues that the resources we bring to problems of incomparability are those of thinking through the larger structures of our lives. He says that we have resources that are not acknowledged in philosophy for making sense of our lives, and which are essential when we are faced with deep incomparabilities. He doesn't say very helpfully what these resources are. Stephen Lukes, Ruth Chang, and Elizabeth Anderson, stress the moral importance of not making easy comparisons of the value of e.g. friendship and money. And James Griffin and Cass Sunnstein stress the social and legal dimension of the point: we can acknowledge publicly that something has a certain kind of value by building obstacles to simple trade-offs between it and other things into our shared practices.

There are remarkably few outright disagreements among these papers. Even Regan accepts that most people most of the time cannot rank many alternatives open to them, and may have to make decisions before they can find or impose a suitable better-and-worse ordering. I believe that this appearance of

harmony is in part based on a mistake. The mistake is to think that if you accept the existence of incomparabilities in preference orderings you are driven away from maximization. This is simply not so. Outcomes can be assigned values over a partially ordered set, and the formal machinery of utility maximization can be formulated more or less unchanged. Of course, very often incomparability in outcomes will then generate incomparability in acts. There is nothing awful about this, though it does invite us to formulate supplementary principles to say what an agent should do when two available options are incomparable and not dominated by any others. (The simplest principle is: do either.) Once we realise this, that incomparability is not by itself a weapon for attacking Humeans and consequentialists, it becomes easier to separate out the issues that do have a bearing on questions about maximization. They are - I claim, with the support of several papers in this book - issues about the formation and evolution of preferences, and issues about limited rationality. In particular they concern decision-making when the decision is needed soon but thinking out a solid ordering of the outcomes will take longer. The crucial fact, I think, is that faced with the task of making sense of our preferences all human rationality appears very limited. Discovering what to want is a very hard job, and takes as much time and intellect as we have to give to it, so that most decisions have to be made on the basis of a very inadequately thought out set of preferences. Incomparable desires invite us to enter a difficult long-term process of preference revision. (They are not the only invitation, of course.) They thus reveal the need for two distinct kinds of principle. One kind concerns the evolution of preferences: the long-term thinking out of what

we should want. The other kind concerns decision-making with inadequate materials: the materials are always inadequate. Most of the papers in this book contain suggestions about principles of both kinds, usually without separating them very clearly. The suggestions are not easy to turn into definite principles, or even into useful guidance for people faced with hard choices. There is a lot of work to do.

Adam Morton

University of Bristol