What does Incomparability Tell us about Agency?*

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Abstract. Ruth Chang and Joseph Raz have both drawn far-reaching consequences for agency from the phenomenon of incomparability. After criticising their arguments, I outline an alternative view: if incomparability is vagueness, then there are no substantial implications for agency, except perhaps a limited form of naturalistic voluntarism if our reasons are provided by desires.

Terminology is a minefield here: one must choose between 'incommensurate' and 'incomparable,' and each has advantages and disadvantages. But I choose the latter. Let's say that two items or options A and B are *apparently V-incomparable* when with respect to some value V, it seems that A is not better than B, B is not better than A, and A and B are not equally good. Apparent V-incomparability is the apparent failure of any one of the three *trichotomous* comparisons (better, worse, and equally good) to hold with respect to V.

Examples of apparent incomparability almost always involve two options or items that each do better along different dimensions of the relevant standard or value. Cooking at home is healthier and cheaper, but ordering delivery is tastier and more convenient. In some classic cases—Mozart versus Michaelangelo in creative terms, or Stonehenge versus St Peter's in terms of impressiveness—it's not even clear how to specify the relevant dimensions in an informative way.[1]

'Small-improvement arguments' seem decisive to me in showing that at least *apparent* incomparability exists. I won't retread the ground here, but the thought is that if you made the best delivery option 1p cheaper, but left it otherwise unchanged, then that would make it clearly (albeit slightly) better than the original option. But such a 'small improvement' difference doesn't seem like it would make the new (improved) delivery option better than cooking at home—which it would if cooking at home and the original delivery option had been precisely equally good.

Why talk of 'apparent' incomparability? Because we could be epistemicists: Apparent incomparability is compatible with one of the trichotomous comparisons obtaining, without us knowing it. In what follows, I'll assume that there are cases of genuine trichotomous incomparability, where none of the three trichotomous comparisons determinately applies:

*I am indebted to John Broome and Ruth Chang for incisive and helpful comments. I also owe participants in the 2019 'Incommensurability: Vagueness, Parity and other Non-Conventional Comparative Relations' conference in Stockholm, and an audience at Oakland University.

[1]These examples are due to… qz

Trichotomous Incomparability. A and B are trichotomously incomparable when none of the following 'trichotomous' comparisons determinately applies: A is better than B; A is worse than B; A and B are equally good.

My topic is the implications of incomparability for agency and choice. We don't simply investigate which option is better with respect to some value; we make choices between options. And when acting, it's very rare that we have no choice at all, especially when we recognise that our options can include stalling for time, doing nothing, or doing something completely outrageous. Much of the time, though, the best option is so obvious that we don't even waste any time consciously deliberating, or thinking it over.[2]

In what follows, I will assume that we are making a choice with respect to some value, but I will suppress mention of the value—which value it is doesn't matter for my purposes. The crucial point is the connection between the value and our reasons: we ought to choose the best option, and if A is better than B, then we have stronger reason to choose A than B.

It is fairly clear how we ought to act in the absence of apparent incomparability. If A seems to us better than every other option—if A is *strongly dominant*—then we ought to A, and doing anything else would be a clear mistake. But sometimes, one option merely *weakly dominates* every option, or is 'weakly dominant': it is at least as good as every option. This can be because every option is equally good, or because there are two or more options which are equally as good as each other, but better than all others. When we are choosing cans of beans of the same brand at the supermarket, there are likely to be many cans tied for best, and perhaps some which are worse (the dented ones).

But under apparent incomparability, there may be no option that appears weakly dominant. If the set of options is not infinite, and the betterness relation is not cyclic, then we know that there will be at least one option which is not strongly dominated. But under apparent incomparability, there may be at least two such options: A and B, not strongly dominated, but apparently incomparable with each other. Neither appears weakly dominant, because A is not determinately at least as good as B, and B is not determinately at least as good as A.

It may be, for example, that cooking for yourself and ordering takeaway are each better than the other options—going hungry, foraging—but are apparently incomparable with each other. Or if you are engaging in a spot of post-pandemic travel, the ranking of your options may have a fast express train and a cheaper slow train apparently incomparable with each other, but strongly dominating all other options (walking, a fast express train in the wrong direction, … most of our options are so silly that we don't even bother to think about them).

In such cases, there are two pieces of phenomenology that seem to pull in opposite directions. First, either option seems permissible—certainly, neither is criticisable. If you have thought it over and you really think that there are things to be said for either option, but neither cooking for yourself nor ordering takeaway is better than the other, then what else is there to do but pick one of them? And when quizzed about your choice by a nosy neighbour, "well cooking would have been healthier, but delivery was more convenient so I went for that" is a perfectly reasonable justification in many instances. (He might be

[2] Nomy Arpaly?

getting at the claim that you should value your health more than convenience—but that's a different question, and even more nosy.)

The other piece of phenomenology is that except perhaps in the most trivial choices, we don't stop worrying. When we reach the conclusion that two options are incomparable, we typically continue to agonise and deliberate about a choice between them, at least in major choices. Even if we have to choose *right now*, and do pick arbitrarily, we might retrospectively think the choice over. If you are like most people, when househunting there are several options open to you which are incomparable but dominate all others: the smaller place closer to work, the bigger place further away, the fixer-upper, and so on. But with such a major purchase (or rental agreement), coming to think that your remaining options are incomparable does not simply stop your deliberation. We do not at that point simply roll a die. Instead we think it over. (We might roll a die in the food case, but not all of us would in the train case. How much you agonise about your travel options has a lot of individual variation, and I would probably enjoy travel more were I to simply relax about such choices.)

These two pieces of phenomenology are not contradictory. The former is about the permissibility of actions, whereas the latter is about the decision procedure—and not even about which decision procedures are permissible or appropriate, but about which ones we in fact employ. But the two are certainly in tension: if both are permissible, then why worry and deliberate about the choice?

Joseph Raz and Ruth Chang have each drawn quite far-reaching conclusions about the nature of human agency from incomparability, and in particular from something like these two pieces of phenomenology. After criticising their arguments, I'll argue that if we see incomparability as vagueness (a view I have defended elsewhere, which has also been famously defended by John Broome[3]) then its implications for agency are minimal. I don't pretend to offer a rigorous defence of my alternative, but simply to explore how I think about choice under incomparability, and to sketch a reasonably plausible picture.

1 Raz's Classical Conception

Joseph Raz distinguishes two views of human agency. The first is what he calls *rationalism*: "Paradigmatic human action is taken because, of all the options open to the agent, it was, in the agent's view, supported by the strongest reason."[4]

Rationalism doesn't say that in paradigmatic human action, we do the action that is *actually* supported by the strongest reason. Instead, it is about what the agent believes to be her strongest reason. What does 'paradigmatic' mean, here? I take it to refer to the central, standard case, when things are working as they should. There may be exceptions, but they are either relatively isolated oddities, or involve some kind of error:

Rationalism. Typically, rational actions are those where the agent chooses what she believes to be the strongly-dominant option, because she believes it to be strongly dominant.

The rationalist picture is that there are many reasons for and against various actions,

[3] See Broome (1997) and Elson (2017). qz also robbie and cristian?

[4] Raz (2002), p. 47.

and the action one ought to do is that which is supported by the strongest collection of reasons, after all the weights are in. A huge part of the metaethics of the past 25 years or so consists of arguments about what these reasons are: are they just desires (or grounded in desires), or facts about impartial welfare, or particularist facts, or …? Rationalism says that there is little distinctive role for the will, other than acting in compliance with the reasons we have.

The 'typically' in Rationalism is crucial: there can be some exceptions, but the model is increasingly threatened insofar as there are more choices without strongly-dominant options. This can arise in two ways, because of ignorance and because of incomparability.

The main threat is incomparability, of a certain form:

Hard Incomparability. A and B are hard-incomparable when each of the three trichotomous comparisons determinately fails to apply: A is determinately not better than B, B is determinately not better than A, and A and B are determinately not equally good.

Hard Incomparability is a species of Trichotomous Incomparability: the latter says only that the three trichotomous comparisons fails to determinately apply; the former specifies that they determinately fail to apply. It is the difference between 'she is not determinately tall' (which leaves room for it to be indeterminate whether she is tall) and 'she is determinately not tall' (which doesn't).

If hard-incomparability is commonplace, then Rationalism starts to look untenable because there will be no option which appears even weakly dominant, and the picture of paradigmatic action as involving reason narrowing down the options to a few weakly dominant ones looks increasingly strained, as the phenomenon of incomparability becomes more widespread. Some incomparabilities can be accepted—qz Raz 'relatively rare anomalies' quote—but Rationalism is a distortion if there not being any weakly dominant option is the *more* common situation.

Raz argues that incomparability is hard-incomparability.[5] The more we move in this direction, the more support is lent to Raz's second picture of agency, which he calls the *classical conception*: "paradigmatic human action is one taken because, of all the options the agent considers rationally eligible, he chooses to perform it."[6] Here is my gloss:

Classical Conception. Typically, rational actions are those where the agent chooses from amongst actions she believes to be rationally eligible.

On this conception, even after the strongly-dominated options have been eliminated as ineligible, there remain quite a wide range of options in many cases. If there are five incomparable takeaway food options in my town, but each of these five is better than all other restaurants, then reason will eliminate all but those five options.

Whereas under Rationalism the will must choose either the strongly-dominant option, or from among several weakly-dominant options, under the Classical Conception the will must often choose between several incomparable options which are not weakly dominant, but also not strongly dominated by anything else. Instead of simply executing

[5] qz 1986 cite

[6] Raz (2002), p. 47.

the verdict of reason or—in some rare cases—picking between options that reason has deemed equally good, the will has to make a choice from amongst the (perhaps large) set of options which are rationally-eligible.

Depending on how we understand the notion of making a 'choice' between rationally eligible options, the presence or absence of incomparability doesn't so much falsify one of Rationalism and the Classical Conception, as make one of them a distortion of the truth. If there are no widespread incomparabilities, then almost always there is just one or perhaps a few rationally eligible options, all of which are supported by (joint-)strongest reasons, so to talk of the agent as choosing between eligible options is misleading: it exaggerates the post-reason role of the agent.

But if there are widespread incomparabilities, then Rationalism is the distortion, implying as it does that in paradigmatic cases the reason will have determined the correct (set of) choices.

Raz argues that incomparability supports the Classical Conception: when we have to choose between more than one incomparable option, the will must come into play in the manner just sketched. And he argues that desires are the only feasible candidate for a source of reasons that could remove all—or nearly all—remaining incomparabilities, but desires don't provide reasons:

(1) Desires don't provide reasons.
(2) But desires are the only plausible candidate for commensurating values.
(3) So reasons normally leave a number of hard-incomparable options.
(4) Which supports the Classical Conception.

I have been arguing that the inference from (3) to (4) is plausible, but I've not engaged with the rest of the argument. Below, I'll argue that if incomparability is vagueness—in particular, if there is soft-incomparability, so it's typically *indeterminate* which option is better—then the widespread presence of incomparability can be reconciled with something close to Rationalism, because (3) is false.

2 Chang's Hierarchical Voluntarism

We saw that Raz draws from incomparability the thought that the will can choose without (and after) reason. Ruth Chang draws a different lesson: agency may involve creating reasons where there were none.[7]

Her main argument for this rests on the angstiness and continued deliberation characteristic of some choices under incomparability. As I argued above, coming to think that our best options are incomparable with each other doesn't usually simply stop deliberation in its tracks, the way that coming to think that they are precisely equally good does. And importantly for Chang, we don't always think this continued deliberation *irrational*, as for example a waste of mental resources would be.

To explain the rationality of continued deliberation under incomparability, Chang argues that deliberation has more functions than we thought: we can all agree that 'deliberation

[7] I will here discuss her view as defended across a series of papers, but especially Chang (2009), Chang (2013), and Chang (2017).

is a matter of discovering, recognizing, investigating, appreciating, and engaging with the reasons there are,' but she adds to this list the voluntarist *creation* of new reasons.[8]

This creation happens under Hard Incomparability, when the 'given' reasons for action have run out. Chang also defends Hard Incomparability, but of a different sort to that discussed above; she thinks that the trichotomy doesn't exhaust the available comparisons.

Parity. Sometimes, options are hard-trichotomously-incomparable but nevertheless comparable, because a fourth comparative relation called 'parity' holds between them.

According to Parity, at least sometimes, apparently incomparable options are *on a par*. Though central to Chang's overall view, the parity claim is not crucial to the deliberation argument that I will soon discuss.

The voluntarism is hierarchical: the voluntarist reasons can only rationalise or justify actions which are not strongly dominated (taking account solely of given reasons). The given reasons mark out the fences of the playground within which we must act, but they don't tell us what to do within that playground. Whereas for Raz the will must now choose what to do without reliance on reasons, for Chang the faculty of reason can—through its capacity to deliberate—*create* reasons to do one thing rather than another in the playground. So the view is rationalist in a certain sense: paradigmatic action involves acting for what we taken to be the strongest reasons, but it's (within these limits) up to us which reasons are strongest.

Voluntarist creation is not required—instead, one may simply drift, and perhaps go to law school.[9] There are two questions: how plausible is Hierarchical Voluntarism considered on its own terms, and how effective is the argument from deliberation? My concern here is almost entirely with the latter, but I will mention one instability with the voluntarist view.

Hierarchical Voluntarism includes both given reasons, and voluntarist reasons. This risks being an unstable compromise that will satisfy neither side, at least if the given reasons are external, as Chang claims.[10] Two mains line of objection to external reasons rest on their supposed metaphysical extravagance and queerness, and on questions about how they could get a normative grip on us.[11] Because Chang's Hierarchical Voluntarism retains external reasons, these worries are likely to persist.

But the view will also not appeal to those suspicious about any supposed ability to create reasons. Chang points to a broadly extensional advantage of the view: because one can only create voluntarist reasons within the area marked out by the given reasons, there is no way to create voluntaristic reasons to commit murder or do other heinous things. (If they are forbidden by the given reasons, anyway.) Some anti-voluntarists object to the claim that we have genuine normative powers, to create reasons. If this is the *extensional* point that such powers threaten to allow us to make all sorts of unfortunate reasons—such as to commit murder—then Hierarchical Voluntarism avoids that objection, because murder is outside the playground. But if the worry is instead an expression of discomfort with the thought that we have the ability to create reasons, then the hierarchical view

[8] 259

[9] qz Cite for Chang 'law schools are full of drifters.

[10] qz quote

[11] Korsgaard?

doesn't mitigate the worry. Murder is just an extreme case: the real problem is that we can create any reasons whatsoever.

So Hierarchical Voluntarism has a somewhat narrow support base: those comfortable with external reasons, but also comfortable with voluntarist creation. But my main focus is not Hierarchical Voluntarism on its own terms, but whether deliberation under incomparability will get us the view.

2.1 The Deliberation Argument

Let's consider again Chang's argument from deliberation, as found in Chang (2009):

(1) Sometimes our reasons run out.
(2) When they do, we often keep deliberating.
(3) Unlike with continued deliberation under betterness or equal goodness, we (often) consider this continued deliberation under incomparability to be rational.
(4) The best explanation for (3) is that unlike under betterness or equal goodness, deliberation under incomparability is not a waste of time.
(5) The best explanation for (4) is that deliberation under incomparability involves the voluntaristic creation of reasons.

This presentation perhaps overstates the strength Chang attributes to the argument, which she intends to be more suggestive than abductive.[12] But it captures the core logical structure of the argument.

My objection will be to premise (3): I'll argue that we sometimes rationally continue deliberating under trichotomy, and the explanation for this fact is similar to why we rationally continue deliberating under incomparability. Deliberation is an activity with its own costs—typically, the opportunity cost of spending time on it, but also other psychological downsides—but also its own benefits, which go beyond simply a greater chance of choosing the best option.

First, let's focus on cases where one of the trichotomous comparisons seemingly applies. If the stakes are high enough, then deliberation can continue to be rational even when one option seems best. When I presented this paper at the conference in Stockholm, I was also planning a trip to Texas to visit family, and could only find extraordinarily expensive travel insurance. After a reasonable amount of time, I found what seemed to be the best insurance policy ('Policy X')—the cheapest one that met some quality thresholds. But I continued to deliberate: rather than simply buying that apparently-best policy, I held off and continued to search price-comparison websites and so on, thinking about which policy would really be best. Finally, I bought Policy X.

Was my continued deliberation irrational? I'm not sure. Certainly there was an opportunity cost to it (perhaps disguised by the fact that philosophers are not generally paid by the hour). But the deliberation process served several functions. I *looked* for a cheaper policy, spent time wondering how comprehensive my insurance really needed to be (what my quality thresholds should be), and so on. Assuming that my continued hemming and hawing didn't simply distort my preferences or lead me into irrationality (a non-trivial assumption), the continued deliberation and searching increased the likelihood that I

[12] qz quote

would find the best policy. I believed that Policy X was the best policy, but I was not certain, and the deliberation raised my credence in that proposition.

Deliberation also served a psychological purpose: I became surer that I was not wasting money, and that the policy I settled on was in fact the best option. This reassurance is not worth nothing, and may rationlise some continued deliberation. So perhaps I would add 'confirming' to Chang's list of the functions of deliberation. (discovering, recognizing, investigating, appreciating, and engaging with the reasons there are, and creation).

This example illustrates that sometimes in large choices the costs of choosing wrong are so high, that the cost of continued deliberation is swamped by them. And the costs need not be limited to the financial: some of us find comparing insurance policies oddly fascinating, whilst also deploring its necessity as a feature of gotcha capitalism. All told, sometimes it can make sense to stay and re-check one's calculation.

That case was one where continued deliberation brings net benefits, either by making it more likely that we choose the correct option (by helping us to choose correctly, or changing our reasons), or because deliberation itself beings non-causal benefits.

Sometimes, however, even when it's clear that sometimes even when we know that continued deliberation *would* produce a better outcome in a narrow respect, that deliberation is not worth it and thus not rational. Continuing on the theme of not wishing to be overly spendy, I buy my fruit and vegetables from the local Aldi. Aldi is a discounter, so—inevitably—there are some bruised or otherwise damaged bananas in the large tub that one must reach down into. So I *could* achieve a better banana-outcome by deliberating for longer about which banana to take. But Aldi has decent quality controls, so I know that the truly undesirable bananas are rare, and such deliberation takes time. So it would be (even given my frugal preferences) irrational for me to deliberate about each banana, not to mention about each item in my weekly shop. The food outcome would be better, but the opportunity cost and mental strain of the deliberation would be large. A quick survey to eliminate any obviously-inferior bananas is the best strategy. Applied to nearly every item, this strategy will get me out of the store in a decent amount of time, with several bags of acceptable produce.

But only *nearly* every item. There are some goods in the shop that repay careful examination. The most obvious one is the avocado: a bruised or damaged avocado is nearly unrecoverable, and so avocados need careful inspection. I'm labouring this point because it illustrates one thing: the difference between avocados and bananas is *not* that the stakes are higher in the former case (they are, but only a little, because avocados are a little more expensive). The difference is that things are more likely to go wrong with avocados, so even given roughly equal stakes, the *expected payoff* of deliberating about them is higher. Even under undoubted cases of trichotomy, sometimes deliberation is rational and sometimes not, and the stakes are not the only things which vary.

What about continued deliberation under equal goodness? It must be conceded that if we are certain that two objects are precisely equally good, then it would be perverse to continue to deliberate between them. But when it comes to complex choices, we almost never encounter cases of equal goodness. That is one of the main arguments in favour of widespread incomparability: whereas the cans of beans at the supermarket might be precisely equally good, basically any complex choice with multiple dimensions will engender some degree of susceptibility to a small-improvement argument. I challenge you

to think of a multidimensional comparison where two different options—no tricks, no implausible stipulations—are precisely equally good, despite being better along different dimensions. (And even in the can of beans case, if we look closely at the shelf, we might notice they vary slightly in appearance… and would moving one can 1cm closer to your hand always make it the clearly better choice?) All this is by way of arguing that if two options are precisely equally good then continued deliberation would nearly always be irrational, but that this is likely only to happen in cases where the options are qualitatively identical.

My argument has been basically epistemic: the main benefits of deliberation are more knowledge (or certainty) about our situation, and the consequent ability to act better, and sometimes when the stakes are high, for example, these can justify continued deliberation even when the facts are apparently all in.

Chang, of course, is not blind to the epistemic possibility. She argues that we can be *practically certain* that we are facing a hard choice, and that the deliberation argument can be run from this point: if it is rational to continue to deliberate beyond practical certainty, then there must be something else going on:

> Although we may never be in a position to know, in some strong sense of "know," that our reasons have run out in any particular case, we can, however, be *practically certain* that they have. If you are practically certain that p, it is irrational for you to act on the assumption that not p.[13]

Let's accept this definition of practical certainty. My quibble with the argument is twofold. First, Chang then argues that in cases where you are practically certain that p, "It would be irrational, for instance, to revisit your deliberation about whether p. If, for example, you are practically certain that you turned off the lights, it is irrational for you to check to see whether you did." But it's not obvious that *deliberating whether p* really is acting on the assumption that not-p. Even if I'm absolutely certain that p, it need not make deliberating about p irrational. As I've tried to argue, whether it does depends on the costs of continued deliberation. Consider an extreme case:

> **Prison Escape.** I'm locked in a cell and must wait an hour to make my escape attempt. I'm certain that it'll be better to bash one guard over the head with a flowerpot rather than lock him in the bathroom, and these are my only two options, but the opportunity to do either will not arise for an hour.

Is it really so irrational for me to continue to deliberate? I don't think so. Of course there is the opportunity cost of not composing a sonnet or a proof in my head, but surely rationality is not *that* demanding about my mental activities? And there are the benefits I identified above from continued deliberation, such as confirmation that I am taking the right course, as well as the planning for various contingencies. (Some of this might stretch the boundaries of 'deliberation,' but I think they fall within the broad scope of *deciding and planning how to act*.)

In Chang's case, checking whether you turned off the lights has negligible mental cost—at least if you just do it once or maybe twice. Prison Escape is more extreme, but the point is general: granting Chang's definition of practical certainty, and absent an overly-

[13] Chang (2009), pp. 250–251.

demanding account of rationality, practical certainty *need not* rule out deliberation as irrational. So even if we are practically certain that we are dealing with incomparability, the apparent rationality of continued deliberation doesn't show that deliberation is engaged in more than fact-finding. As I've discussed, such fact-finding deliberation seems rational even under trichotomy.

This is half of my response to the deliberation argument for Hierarchical Voluntarism. The other half is much shorter: if the stakes are small enough—or the expected payoff of deliberation small enough, more generally—then even under incomparability, continued deliberation is not rational. I could point to the bananas again here. Suppose that you are going to buy one bunch of bananas, and they each cost £1. One bunch looks in just slightly better condition: a little riper, a little less bruised; the other bunch is bigger. Both bunches are perfectly usable, but they are each better along different dimensions. Assuming that this is just one item on a regular weekly shop, should you continue to deliberate amongst these incomparable bunches of bananas? Of course not: getting a notebook and food scale and estimating some kind of quality-adjusted weight (akin to quality-adjusted life years in healthcare) for each banana would clearly be an irrational waste of your time.

That example was silly, and in some ways just a more fleshed-out version of Chang's point about the lightswitch. But the overall argument is that there is no general connection between the presence of incomparability and the rationality of continued deliberation beyond the point of well-founded belief about how your options compare.

There are several ways Chang could go here, such as restating the argument with a tweaked definition of practical certainty that p, as implying explicitly that continued deliberation about whether p is irrational (and dropping the claim that such deliberation requires the assumption that not-p). But I think this is not a plausible route, because—as the Prison Escape case shows—this kind of practical certainty is far rarer, and one of the assumptions of the current dialectic is that it does *not* hold during hard cases, because practical certainty rules out continued deliberation as irrational, and the apparent rationality of continued deliberation under incomparability is the puzzle to be explained.

3 Indeterminist Rationalism

I have argued elsewhere that incomparability is vagueness.[14] In this discussion, I'll assume that vagueness is indeterminacy: in the standard case, it's neither true nor false that (ie, indeterminate whether) A is better than B or that B is better than A. (It may be either false or neither true nor false that that A and B are equally good.) Call this *Soft Incomparability*.

But what upshots does this view have for agency? What I'll call *Indeterminist Rationalism* says that Rationalism is true, but it's often indeterminate what we have most reason to do:

Indeterminist Rationalism (IR). An action X is rational *iff* the agent in question judges X to weakly dominate all options open to her—but it is often indeterminate which options weakly dominate others.

[14] Elson (2017).

IR is somewhere between the rationalist and classical views. For Raz (and for Hard Incomparability in general) there is often determinately *no* best option, because the ranking is incomplete. Under the indeterminacy view, it will be determinate that there is a complete ranking of options (this is a supertruth, because true on every sharpening), but indeterminate *which* option is best.

In what follows, I'll argue that IR can neatly explain the two pieces of phenomenology identified above—permissibility and rational continued deliberation—without making the kind of radical departures from Rationalism that Raz and Chang make. I will defend the simplicity of Rationalism.

First, the permissibility intuition. Any sensible account of rational action under indeterminacy will say that when it's indeterminate whether A or B is best (and determinate that no other option is best), either Aing or Bing is *acceptable*. Why the new terminology? Because there is some dispute about whether in such cases, Aing and Bing are each permissible, or merely borderline-permissible. The most liberal kinds of rules say that both are permissible, because E-admissible (that is to say, best on one sharpening); Susanna Rinard has defended a view where in such cases, Aing and Bing are each indeterminately-permissible. But even on her view, all *other* options are impermissible.[15]

But moving beyond an appeal to authority, I will say a few words about why I find a liberal account of action under indeterminacy plausible. Firstly, looking at the structure of the case, if it's indeterminate whether A or B is best, but determinate that every other option is strongly dominated, then if you A or B, then it's indeterminate whether you've done the best thing. If you do anything else, it's determinate that you did not do the best thing. Since there is no option which is determinately best, if you A or B, there is no option to which a critic can point and say 'you ought to have done that instead,' and say something determinately true. Whether you A or you B, you have done the best you can in your situation, because the best you can do is what is indeterminately-best.

Second, these permissive judgements about actions seem clearly right in everyday cases of indeterminacy. Consider a sorites forced march: you are walked along a row of men, starting with the very shortest, and each taller than the next by 1mm. Eventually you are walking past some very tall men indeed. You are asked to comment accurately on whether each man is tall or not. Let's assume that you do comment correctly on the clearly not-tall and the clearly tall men. If that is not the case, then you have determinately failed to complete your task correctly.

Beyond that assumption, our issue concerns the penumbra, of borderline-tall men: your answer to 'is this man tall?' should turn from No to Yes at some point in that penumbra. I think it intuitively obvious that you are not criticisable if your verdict changes somewhere in the penumbra.

Our second piece of phenomenology is the connection between incomparability and continued deliberation. As I argued above, there is no *necessary* connection: sometimes deliberation is rational under trichotomy, and sometimes it's irrational under incomparability. IR simply appeals to the thought that deliberation is an activity with its own costs, and sometimes the expected payoff is irrational.

But it would be churlish to deny that there does seem to be *some* connection between

[15] Rinard (2015).

incomparability and something like deliberation. Indeterminist Rationalism can explain this by appeal to some peculiar features of indeterminacy.

Deliberation costs. Deliberation is rational when the expected payoff of deliberation is more than the cost. But under indeterminacy, it's often non-obvious or even indeterminate whether this is so: the net expected payoff of each choice will itself be indeterminate, and thanks to the phenomenon of second-order vagueness it may not even be clear *whether* we are facing an instance of incomparability. It may also often be indeterminate how much deliberation costs (how much do you value your time, as against one of the goods at stake in the choice you face?) and so often indeterminate whether continued deliberation will bring some expected benefit.

Second, what looks like continued deliberation may simply be puzzlement. Indeterminacy is a puzzling, paradoxical phenomenon and it shouldn't be surprising that we might linger when confronted with a practical manifestation of it. We can see this by confronting avowed cases of choice under vagueness: suppose, for example, that I ask you to choose the shortest tall man in this crowded room. Assuming that there is some indeterminacy about who is that man, it may seem obvious that you should simply pick a borderline-tall man. And yet I think in normal circumstances, you will 'deliberate' for some time, perhaps leading yourself on some sorites forced marches (to make this vivid, suppose that each extra mm of height costs you £1). Eventually you will likely settle on an arbitrary man in the penumbra of 'tall man.' This choice is no better than the choice you could have made when initially confronted with the problem, and yet we would not judge you irrational for spending some time on it. The slogan view of Indeterminist Rationalism is that it makes us stop and think, for much the same reason as indeterminacy everywhere can make us stop and think, and puzzle.

It might be objected that I'm simply assuming that questions of action under indeterminacy don't themselves create any puzzling questions about agency. There is some truth to this, but perhaps not when it comes to Rationalism: if the indeterminacy *in our reasons* requires some theorising about agency, it will nevertheless not take us away from the core rationalist claim that rational action is acting for what we take to be the strongest set of reasons.

4 Indeterminist Humeanism and Naturalistic Voluntarism

To finish, I will explore the upshot of Indeterminist Rationalism when paired with the view that desires provide reasons:

Indeterminist Humeanism (IH). Indeterminist Rationalism is true, and all reasons are provided by desires.

There are many versions of 'Humean' or 'internalist' accounts of reasons, but they centre on the idea that somehow, an agent has a reason to do A *iff* Aing would promote the satisfaction of one of that agent's desires.[16]

I won't engage in detail with Raz's arguments against desires as reasons, except to concede that they need an answer. But I will mention one. A common objection to

[16]The classic of the genre is Williams (1981), but there are many internalists of different kinds.

Humeanism—and one made by Raz(?)—is that it would mean that deliberation about what to do is at base consideration of what we desire most, insofar as we deliberate about our reasons. This is often felt to be implausible, and in response some versions of Humeanism try to avoid this conclusion by saying that though desires in some sense *provide* reasons, it is not true that the desires *are* the reasons.[17]

My response is somewhat less sophisticated: I do not find it implausible that all deliberation is at least partly about what we desire. For example, when I travelled from Reading to Stockholm for the workshop this paper was written for, I was unsure whether to travel by train or by plane. I dislike flying, both for its hassle and its environmental damage, but this rail journey would take approximately two full days, and with a child at home I decided in the end to fly. I deliberated about this for some time, and I have no difficulty construing this deliberation in terms of desires: 'do I really want to be stuck on a train for two days, burning money on food out of boredom?' seems to me a wholly accurate description of my deliberative activity. I'm not arguing here that all deliberation is about what we desire most, but that's not *obviously* false that we sometimes deliberate about what we desire most.

But enough about the Humeanism. What about the indeterminacy? Indeterminist Humeanism will then locate the source of—at least some—incomparability in indeterminacy in our beliefs and desires. If my desires are imprecise, then they may be sharpened in various ways, and on some sharpenings of my desires I prefer one house and have most reason to buy that one, and on other sharpenings I prefer the other and have most reason to buy *that* one. I want both a comfortable place to read and a short commute to work, but precisely how do these desires weigh against each other? How many commuting minutes am I willing to give up for an extra square metre of writing space? And so on. IH says that the answers to these questions are indeterminate, and so choices which depend on those answers will also manifest indeterminacy, in a version of Indeterminist Rationalism.

Indeterministic Humeanism engenders a *naturalistic quasi-voluntarism*, because what I desire is at least partly within my control. If I can give myself a desire that some car is red, then I can give myself a reason to get out the spray paint. Or to give myself a reason to eat the vegan food, I may undergo hypnosis, or choose to reflect deeply and vividly on the methods of industrial farming, believing that this will weaken my desire to avoid many kinds of meat. (The naturalistic nature of the view means that the process may not be totally predictable: perhaps I will simply be inured to the brutal realities?)

For this reason, the view is only *quasi-voluntarist*, because I have limited voluntary control over how my reasons evolve. Our desires may evolve in unpredictable ways—though ones which can seem to be retrospectively inevitable—for example we may move to the countryside in search of more space, and then either develop more of a taste for rural life, or come by grim experience to hate commuting. These developments are not only unpredictable but also chaotic and random: it may be that you hate commuting this year because of the pandemic, and because your next-door neighbour—who takes the same train as you—is obnoxious. But had you moved to the countryside next year, after the vaccine and after said neighbour moved away, you'd grow to appreciate the peace of a commute.

[17] See eg Schroeder (2007) for a particularly sophisticated Humean response to this worry.

The point is that I can at least partly affect what I desire, and thus what I have reason to do. Some internalist accounts speak of a process of purification or therapy in determining what we have most reason to do—but different therapists may have different results, and we may even have some idea in advance what the likely upshot of choosing one therapist or another is likely to be. Or to put things in Williamsian terms, starting down one deliberative route over another can affect the content of one's subjective motivational set. That actions can do this is not new to Williams—it is part of his account of proleptic blame—but we should note that through deliberation, we can do it to ourselves. Deliberation can be a transformative experience.[18]

Such strategic deliberation may be impermissible. Suppose that I have most reason to do action A, which strongly dominates all my other actions. Then engaging in a path of deliberation which I can foresee will make me less likely to A seems rationally forbidden, because engaging that path goes against my reason to A—even if it makes it that in the future I will have most reason to *not-A*.

Indeterminacy may permit strategic deliberation. But if it is indeterminate whether I have most reason to A or to B, then assuming a permissive decision rule, not only is it permissible for me to A or to B, it's also permissible for me to go to a therapist who will strengthen my desire to A, or to her colleague who strengthens B-desires. The difference here with Chang's voluntarism is that creating or endorsing a reason in this manner purely optional: the indeterminist equivalent of 'drifting' is wholly respectable. And fixing my reasons is not not always permissible, for example if the cost of therapy exceeds the benefit of having determinate reasons.

In the case I have just described, the voluntarism is hierarchical in a sense: if it's indeterminate whether I have most reason to A or to B, I may only try to give myself most reason to A or most reason to B. This is for the same kind of reason as why in the case lacking indeterminacy, I may not engage in therapy which will foreseeably give me most reason to B.

But the deliberation need not be hierarchical. If either (and only) A or B is permissible, but deliberation changes desires so that C best promotes the agent's desires, then C is now a (and perhaps the only) permissible option. If all reasons are grounded in desires, then there is no hard line which makes the naturalistic voluntarism *hierarchical*. If the deliberation unforeseeably had this effect, then there need have been no irrationality at any point; if this was impermissible strategic deliberation, then there is an oddity: deliberating to create these reasons was impermissible, but we are where we are, and so acting up on them is not.

Of course, not only deliberation can change our desires. The actions I take now may well determine my reasons. But since the process is naturalistic and often unpredictable, we may reject the following argument due to Raz:

> there is no reason for incommensurabilities among the options open to the agents, for when push comes to shove, the need to choose will concentrate the minds of the choosers, who will realize (or think that they do) that they want one of the options more than the others.[19]

[18] Williams and Paul.

[19] (49) It's not *totally* obvious to me that Raz endorses this conditional claim, as a writing matter, but I think it most likely.

As a claim about the phenomenology of deliberation it seems false to me. Perhaps there are biases that reconstruct desires, but I often seem to plump without forming desires.

The more general point of this section has been that once we admit that desires can provide reasons—and especially if *only* desires can provide reasons—and that there can be indeterminacy therein, a kind of unpredictable naturalistic non-hierarchical voluntarism becomes an option.

5 Conclusion

Both of the authors I've considered draw conclusions about agency from incomparability. Raz argues that agents can't create normativity, but the will can choose between incomparable options, meaning a somewhat beefed-up role for the will, which does more than simply execute the verdicts of reason. Chang, by contrast, argues that agents can create normativity, but only within the space of rational freedom marked out by the given reasons. Here the faculty of reason and deliberation is beefed-up to cope with cases where that space is non-trivial.

I have argued, *pace* Raz and Chang, that incomparability and related phenomena need not inspire radical views about agency. According to the two indeterminist views I've considered, incomparability brings many quirks and oddities, but does not fundamentally affect the nature of deliberation.

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