

PARITY: AN INTUITIVE CASE

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Abstract

In other work I have argued that items can be *on a par*, where being on a par is a fourth, basic, sui generis value relation beyond the usual trichotomy of ‘better than’, ‘worse than’, and ‘equally good’. In this paper, I aim to marshal non-technical, intuitive arguments for this view. First, I try to cast doubt on the leading source of intuitive resistance to parity, the conviction that if two items are comparable, one must be better than the other, worse than it, or they must be equally good. Second, I explain how parity can arise by appealing to an uncontroversial distinction between quantity and quality of value. I propose both sufficient conditions for parity and a nontechnical model of the notion. My overall aim is to bring into view a simple and intuitive picture of value – and more generally of normativity – in which parity plays a significant role.

What are the basic ways in which two items can be evaluatively compared?

The answer seems perfectly clear. Comparable goods must stand in one of three basic relations: ‘better than’, ‘worse than’, and ‘equally good’. This is *The Trichotomy Thesis*, or ‘Trichotomy’ for short.

The Trichotomy Thesis holds that if two items can be evaluatively compared in some respect – what I have called a ‘covering’ consideration – one must be better than the other or worse than it, or they must be equally good in that respect.¹ If each of these relations fails to hold, then the items are incomparable in the given respect. Thus if Mozart and Michelangelo are comparable with respect to creativity, one must be better, worse, or just as good as the other with respect to creativity, and the two are incomparable with respect to creativity if neither is better than the other and nor are they equally creative. The same goes for comparisons of actions, events, people, and the like, and with respect to moral goodness, fulfillment of duties, well-being, justice, and the like.

I have argued that Trichotomy is false.² There is a fourth, sui generis, basic value relation beyond the standard trichotomy that can hold between comparable items. Although Mozart is neither better nor worse than Michelangelo in creativity and nor are they equally creative, it does not follow that they are incomparable. They could be *on a par*. Parity is a fourth basic way in which items can be comparable with respect to a covering consideration. If items can be on a par, then Trichotomy is false. The structure of values, like creativity, is not trichotomous but, at least, *tetrachotomous*; values may relate their bearers in one of four, not three, basic ways. What goes for the structure of value might naturally go for normativity more generally. But since values are the most natural home for parity, I’ll be focusing on values here.

That items can be evaluatively on a par is a large and controversial claim. We analytic philosophers are a conservative lot,

¹ See my ‘Introduction’ in Chang, ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

² See my ‘The Possibility of Parity’, *Ethics* 112 (2002), pp. 659-688, and *Making Comparisons Count*, (New York: Routledge, Studies in Ethics, series ed. Robert Nozick, 2002).

and so it is no surprise that parity has been met with what David Lewis once called “the incredulous stare”. Some have argued that parity rests on a confusion. The bulk of their arguments aim to show that what I have called ‘parity’ is really just ‘indeterminacy’ of some kind, usually semantic. Mozart and Michelangelo are not on a par in creativity; rather, it is just indeterminate which or whether any of the standard trichotomy of relations holds. I examine those worries elsewhere.⁴ Others have wanted a model of parity before they are willing to entertain the notion. Still others have insisted upon a simple, intuitive rendering of the idea that leads to an ‘ah-ha!’ moment of understanding of what parity is and how it might be possible. It is these concerns that I try to address here.³

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In this paper, I offer an explicitly *intuitive* case for parity. Instead of appealing to detailed, quasi-technical arguments of the kind I have given elsewhere – which tend to be inert against ground-level doubts about a phenomenon – I aim to address intuitive doubts with intuitive arguments. First, I try to cast doubt on the leading source of intuitive resistance to parity, the conviction that Trichotomy must be true. Second, I explain how parity might arise by appealing to the distinction between quantity and quality of value. I give sufficient conditions for parity and suggest a simple way in which the notion can be modeled. Some of the arguments I appeal to are drawn from previous work, but I extend or re-frame them here. My hope is that, when taken together, they might lead to an ‘ah-ha’ moment for at least some of my readers.

I. The Trichotomy Thesis

Most serious doubts about parity have their home in the conviction that Trichotomy is true.

It might be thought that Trichotomy is a conceptual truth. Indeed, many contemporary thinkers *define* comparability in terms of the standard trichotomy of

³ See my ‘The Possibility of Parity’ and my ‘Parity and Indeterminacy’ (ms.).

⁴ I have tried to give the intuitive underpinning and the beginnings of a model my *Making Comparisons Count*.

relations. But insofar as we are attempting to define the ordinary notion of comparability, this is a mistake. It is no part of our concept of comparability that one comparable item must be better, worse, or equal to the other.

To see this, consider the following story.

Two communities live on opposite sides of a town. In one community, there are ‘dichotomists’, who believe that if two items are evaluatively comparable, one of only two relations must hold between them: ‘better than’, or ‘worse than’. In the other, there are ‘trichotomists’, who believe that if two items are evaluatively comparable, one of only three relations must hold between them: ‘better than’, ‘worse than’, or ‘equally good’.

One evening, a trichotomist and dichotomist enter the town bar. The trichotomist sidles over and says to the dichotomist, ‘You are equally as handsome as George Clooney’.

The dichotomist is perplexed. What is this relation of ‘equally as’? It doesn’t sound like a compliment. He gamely replies, ‘What are you saying? If I’m neither better nor worse than George Clooney in handsomeness, we are incomparably handsome.’

Now the trichotomist is flummoxed: ‘No, don’t you see, there’s a third way you and Clooney can compare in handsomeness – one thing can be better than another thing, worse than it, *or* they can be equally good.’

The dichotomist, eyeing the exit, exclaims, ‘What? You mean you think there is a third way things can be compared beyond being ‘better than’ or ‘worse than’? That’s just nuts’.

What is important about this story is that we can hear it in two different ways. One is as a tale of two stipulative definitions of ‘comparable’ passing in the night. There is no genuine substantive disagreement about comparative handsomeness but only strangers talking past one another. However, we can also hear it as a substantive disagreement about *which* relations exhaust the conceptual space of comparability – are there two or three (or more)? *We* see that the dichotomist has made a substantive error in overlooking a third basic way in which items can be compared. Thus our ordinary concept of comparability does not have Trichotomy built into it; it is an open, substantive question which relations exhaust the conceptual space of comparability between two items. Indeed, we might define our ordinary notion of comparability neutrally as follows: two items are comparable with respect to some covering value just in case there is some basic value relation that holds between them with respect to that covering value. They are incomparable with respect to a covering value just in case no such relation holds. *Which* relations are basic is a matter for substantive debate.

Trichotomy, then, is not a conceptual claim but a substantive one open to argument and debate. To my knowledge, the thesis has never been explicitly defended as such. So we should look for arguments in its favor.

One is this. Trichotomy *works*, and therein lies the evidence for its truth. Every leading formal system of comparison, from expected utility theory and cost benefit analysis to QALYS (used in healthcare rationing) and the like, is built on the assumption that the thesis is correct, and those systems have provided frameworks not only for interesting formal results but also for what looks to be a plausible analysis of rational decision-making. Moreover, ordinary folk seem to get by just fine when, it seems, they implicitly take Trichotomy for granted. In short, Trichotomy seems to provide an adequate representation of the normative facts. And so why not accept its truth?

But does Trichotomy ‘work’? Consider dichotomists. Dichotomists, too, would be able to create formal systems of comparison according to which items are either better or worse or else incomparable. Those systems could also generate interesting formal results, many of which would be isomorphic with those of the trichotomists’. Moreover, ordinary dichotomists would seem to get along just fine when they appear implicitly to assume Dichotomy. From the dichotomists’ point of view, Dichotomy would seem to provide a perfectly adequate representation of the normative facts.

Of course, Dichotomy is false. The problem is that a system of evaluation, which makes certain assumptions about which basic relations exhaust the conceptual space of comparability between two items, will always *appear* to be a satisfactory representation of the normative facts. This is because anything that fails to be related by the basic relations will be lumped together as ‘incomparable’, and it is easy unreflectively to treat everything that falls within the gap of a partial order as a single phenomenon.

So one way we can determine whether Trichotomy is correct is by suspending belief that it is and investigating, in an open-minded fashion, the phenomena that would count as incomparability if Trichotomy were true. If, for instance, it turns out that there are two distinctive phenomena that the trichotomist would treat as cases of incomparability, one of which is more plausibly a case of comparability, not incomparability, Trichotomy would be mistaken.

The trichotomist herself can employ this strategy to show that Dichotomy is mistaken. Note, the trichotomist might say, that the way an apple and its duplicate compare in tastiness, call it R, is importantly different from the way an apple and an orange compare in tastiness, call it T. Indeed, the logical properties of R differ from the logical properties of T. Given that R holds between the apple and its duplicate, it is possible to substitute the duplicate for the apple in all comparisons of tastiness in which the apple figures without altering the comparative facts. Not so for the orange. And since it is implausible to think that you can always substitute one incomparable item for another in any comparison in which it figures while preserving the comparative facts, there is good reason to think that the way that the apple relates to its duplicate, that is R, is a relation of comparability, not incomparability. By leveraging shared notions, such as neutral notions of comparability and incomparability and the idea of substitutability, the trichotomist can show that the dichotomist overlooks a third basic way in which items can be compared.

In the same way, the proponent of parity might leverage shared notions to argue that trichotomists have overlooked a fourth basic way in which items can be compared. What the trichotomist calls ‘incomparability’ includes two distinct phenomena, one of which is better understood as a relation of comparability. We undertake such an argument in what follows. For now, we can simply conclude that the thought that Trichotomy ‘works’ does not support Trichotomy in the absence of further investigation of what phenomena hold when the trichotomy of relations fails to hold.

What other arguments might there be in favor of the thesis? I suspect that the strongest intuitive argument for Trichotomy is what I’ll call the ‘argument by analogy’. In the nonevaluative domain, comparisons of items with respect to nonevaluative criteria like weight or length must proceed by a trichotomy of relations: if two items are comparable with respect to weight, one must be greater than the other, lesser than it, or the two must be equal in weight. Just as one item can only be greater, lesser or equal in

weight, so too, in the evaluative domain, one item can only be better, worse, or equal in creativity or beauty or moral goodness.⁵ Trichotomy is taken to be true on the grounds that its analogue for nonevaluative comparisons is true. Why suppose we have trichotomy in the one case and not in the other?

The trouble with this argument, however, is that we need some independent reason to think that all values – including human life, dignity, justice, beauty, love, moral goodness, and so on – have the same structure as nonevaluative considerations like weight and length. Weights and lengths are quantities representable by real numbers. Anything representable by a real number must be trichotomously related because real numbers are themselves trichotomously related; one real number can be only greater, lesser, or equal to another. Are bearers of value trichotomous in this way?

Some values will have a trichotomous structure because they are mere quantities. ‘Goodness of number of lives saved’ is a value whose measurement is given by how many lives are saved – saving three lives is better than saving two, and better by one life. Comparisons of items with respect to values that are mere quantities will be trichotomous. But most values are not mere quantities. It has been widely accepted – at least since the Confucians – that most values have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. A pleasure can be languid or sharp, justice can be merciful or retributive, and beauty can be striking and awe-inspiring or pretty and cheering. Why should we think that values, which can have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, should have the same structure as mere quantities like weight and length?

Indeed, the argument by analogy can be turned on its head. Rather than supporting Trichotomy, it undermines it. The analogy with nonevaluative considerations like length and weight plausibly explains why Trichotomy has been generally assumed to be true: many have unreflectively assimilated values to mere quantities like weight and length – for example, assimilating value to utility or degree of pleasure. But we have yet to see any justification for this assimilation. So we have an explanation of the widespread assumption that Trichotomy is true that does not appeal to its truth. While not exactly debunking, this explanation casts some doubt on the unreflective assumption that the thesis is true.

In sum, Trichotomy, while generally assumed, is open to challenge. We argued that the thesis is not a conceptual truth but a substantive matter. We then examined two arguments for its truth, including perhaps the strongest such argument, and concluded that neither gives us any reason to believe that the thesis is true. Finally, we gave an explanation of why the thesis has been uncritically taken for granted: it has been assumed that values behave in the same manner as mere quantities. Given that values have qualitative dimensions, this assimilation is very much open to doubt. The possibility of parity then looms into view.

II. Qualities and Trichotomy

A trichotomist might argue that comparisons of qualities of value must nevertheless be trichotomous because quality is a contributory dimension of quantity. Although an item bears a quality of value, the value it bears overall can be represented as a quantity of that value. And if the value of items, however qualitatively complex, can always be

⁵ The seductiveness of the analogy is compounded by the fact that being better with respect to V can also be expressed as being ‘more’ V, where ‘more’ misleadingly suggests a greater quantity of V.

represented as a quantity of value, Trichotomy would follow. This is what the utility model of value supposes.

Can the value of an item always be represented as a quantity of value? The Aristotelian idea of an organic unity, a whole whose value is greater than a numerical function of its parts, suggests it cannot.⁶

Suppose you enjoy riding roller coasters. There are various qualitative aspects of the pleasure you typically get from riding one, including what we might describe as optimistic pleasure, enthusiastic pleasure, exhilaratory pleasure, frightful pleasure, euphoric pleasure, hopeful pleasure, relief pleasure, and so on. A well-designed roller coaster manipulates the qualities and quantities of pleasure you receive in an overall package of pleasure that unfolds over the course of the ride. Now consider the Formula Rossa at Ferrari Park in Abu Dhabi, the world's fastest roller coaster. The Formula Rossa is 171 feet tall and goes from 0 - 149 miles per hour in under four seconds. There is a hydraulic lift system that allows riders to experience 4.8 G force – thrilling without being painful. Riders enthuse: 'I almost left my head [behind] due to the speed' and 'u won't feel ur body 4 some time' after the ride.⁷ The entire ride lasts about 90 seconds. It is a package of different qualities of pleasure. Suppose we focus on the first four seconds of the ride, during which one feels the 4.8 G force while accelerating from a resting position to 149 miles per hour. Those first four seconds provide a certain quality and quantity of pleasure that makes a particular contribution to the overall pleasure of the 90-second ride. If we doubled these four seconds, we do not double the pleasure; indeed, going from 0 to 149 mph twice in quick succession is likely an *unpleasant* experience and would, we can suppose, make the ride less pleasurable overall.

Or, to take another example. Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, has certain quantities and qualities of literary merit. Suppose that Austen, with the prescience to know that her readers would want the story to continue, had added an epilogue that turned out to be word-for-word identical to P.D. James' *Death Comes to Pemberley*. The epilogue – and James' novel – has definite literary merit on its own. But adding the literary merit of the P.D. James murder mystery to the literary merits of *Pride and Prejudice* would have made the novel worse overall. The same goes, I believe, for comparisons with respect to justice, moral goodness, well-being, creativity, goodness as a career, beauty, humor, and most of the values at play in ordinary human life.

What these cases show is that there is no numerical formula or rate of tradeoff that codifies the contribution of quantities and qualities to the overall value of some items.⁸ If this is right, then it is reasonable to suppose that the value of items bearing such

⁶ Aristotle's notion of an organic unity is the narrower notion of the value of a whole consisting in something more than the mere *sum* of its valuable parts. But the extension to cover any numerical functions of parts is very much in keeping with the spirit of Aristotle's idea.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEy6QIM388U>.

⁸ These thoughts about value are a specific version of Frances Kamm's 'Principle of Contextual Interaction' according to which "a property's role and...its effect may differ with its context". See Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 51-57, see also her 'Killing and Letting Die: Methodology and Substance,' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (1983): 297-312 and 'Harming, Not Aiding, and Positive Rights,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 15 (1986): 3-32. See also Jonathan Dancy's holism about reasons in *Ethics without Principles*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) and Shelly Kagan's rejection of an additive function of factors relevant to the moral good in Shelly Kagan, 'The Additive Fallacy', *Ethics* 99 (1988), pp. 5-31.

values can be represented as quantities. For a quantity, whatever else it might be, plausibly has components whose contributions to the whole can be numerically represented. If its components are homogenous, their contribution can be given by a sum; if nonhomogeneous, their contribution can be given by a numerical formula or rate of tradeoff. How else could the whole be represented as a quantity? But organic unities appear to have neither feature.

If the value of items cannot always be represented as a quantity, then it is hard to see how the evaluative difference between them can be represented as a quantity. Thus we cannot defend Trichotomy by supposing that better items have a greater quantity of value, worse items a lesser, and equally good items the same quantity. If this is right, then standard approaches to evaluation, such as expected utility theory, cost benefit analysis, QALYs approaches, and so on, which presuppose that the value of items and the differences between them can be represented as quantities, are, at best, limited and, at worst, fundamentally misguided.

Even if the value of items and their differences cannot be represented as quantities, perhaps Trichotomy holds nonetheless. Being a quantity is sufficient for trichotomous comparison, but it need not be necessary. To my knowledge, there has never been an explicit argument that this is so. But, of course, the lack of an argument is not decisive.

I believe that the best way to cast doubt on the thought that even nonquantities must be trichotomously related is by presenting a picture of value in which this is not the case. Taking as given the idea that items bear qualities of value, I propose some sufficient conditions for parity and then outline a nontechnical ‘model’ of basic value relations in which parity figures.

III. Parity

A. Sufficient conditions for parity. When items bear qualitative dimensions of value, they might be very different in quality.⁹ Mozart is qualitatively very different in creativity from Talentlessi, a poor sculptor, but Mozart is better. So being qualitatively very different is not sufficient for parity; some items that are qualitatively different are trichotomously related. But others, I believe, are on a par. I suggest that qualitatively very different items are on a par if they are also ‘in the same neighborhood’ of value overall. Mozart and Michelangelo are both ‘in the same neighborhood’ of creativity – they are both creative geniuses – and yet qualitatively very different in creativity. I suggest that parity holds when two items are (i) qualitatively very different with respect to the covering value, and yet (ii) in the same neighborhood overall with respect to the covering value. These two features – being qualitatively very different and in the same neighborhood of value with respect to the covering value – together provide sufficient

⁹ The distinction between quantity and quality cuts across the distinction between values and non-values. Some non-values are not mere quantities but also have qualitative dimensions. Consider bulkiness. Must a standard sheet of 4' x 8' plywood be more, less, or equally as bulky as a standard 35" tall, 24" diameter barrel? Perhaps the qualitative dimension of bulkiness – unwieldiness – makes the plywood and barrel on a par in bulkiness; this might be because an object's unwieldiness is not a numerical function of its quantitative dimensions but depends on qualitative features like how difficult it is to carry and manipulate. Parity may be a feature of the nonnormative as well as the normative realm. But I won't pursue the point here.

conditions for parity.¹⁰ Of course, these features are not precise, and there can be reasonable disagreement about just how qualitatively different two items must be in order to be ‘very different’ and about whether two items are ‘in the same neighborhood’ of value. Such disagreement can be regarded as disagreement about whether two items are on a par.

Although the conditions are imprecise, we have a tolerably clear grasp of them. Consider being ‘qualitatively very different’ in value. Part of what it is to grasp a value is to understand very different qualities of that value; if you do not understand that a soothing pleasure is qualitatively very different from an exhilarating one, you don’t fully grasp what it is for something to be pleasurable. One way items can be qualitatively very different is if they bear very *different* contributory components of the covering value. Mozart and Michelangelo are qualitatively very different with respect to creativity in this way – one bears the qualities of creativity associated with being a great composer while the other bears the qualities of creativity associated with being a great painter, draughtsperson, and sculptor. Similarly, a 9-5 life in a corporate corner office is qualitatively very different with respect to well-being from life as an itinerant Buddhist monk – one bears qualities of a good life associated with material well-being while the other bears the qualities associated with spiritual well-being. Another way items can be qualitatively very different is if they bear very different qualities of the *same* contributory components of the covering value. Bach and Beethoven are qualitatively very different with respect to creativity even though they bear the very same components of creativity – those having to do with musical composition and performance. Similarly, a boring life with financial security is qualitatively very different in well-being from an exciting one that involves a hand-to-mouth existence.

We also have a tolerably clear understanding of what it is for two items to be ‘in the same neighborhood’ of value overall. Two B+ papers are in the same neighborhood of ‘goodness as a paper’ overall. A paper that deserves a C is not in the same neighborhood as a paper that deserves a B+. Whether B papers and B+ papers are in the same neighborhood may be open to debate, but how to draw the boundaries of neighborhoods is not something we need to settle here.¹¹ Similarly, Mozart and Michelangelo are in the same neighborhood of creativity overall, but Mozart and Vasari are not; we might say that Mozart gets an A+ in creativity and Vasari only a B. Being ‘in the same neighborhood’ of a value is being in the same ‘rank’, ‘league’, ‘division’, ‘category’, or ‘level’. I use the more prosaic ‘neighborhood’ in order to avoid any hint of hierarchy that other terms might imply.

Chrisoula Andreou has interestingly suggested an understanding of parity that appeals to something akin to our ‘neighborhoods’.¹² She suggests that items are on a par

¹⁰ Sufficient but not necessary. Parity can also hold between qualitatively similar items in the same neighborhood of value and, if we understand neighborhoods of value in a non-hierarchical way, parity can hold across neighborhoods. But I don’t discuss those cases here.

¹¹ What counts as an appropriate neighborhood of value is a matter of substantive theorizing about that value and the context in which it occurs. ‘Goodness as a paper’ has different appropriate neighborhoods of value when applied to seventh graders than when applied to professional academics.

¹² Chrisoula Andreou, ‘Parity, Comparability, and Choice,’ *Journal of Philosophy* 112 (1): pp. 5-22. The main way Andreou’s ‘categories’ appear to differ from my ‘neighborhoods’ is that categories are hierarchical groupings located along an underlying scale of increasing value (p. 14, fn. 14), while I understand neighborhoods as not presupposing an underlying scale of increasing value. This difference

when they belong to the same ‘category’ of value and there is no pairwise, ‘relational’ judgment that holds of them.¹³ Crucially, she understands the pairwise relations that could hold between items as trichotomous. So when she says that items on a par are not trichotomously related, her notion of parity is, as she says, strictly compatible with the idea that parity is a fourth, *sui generis* basic relation that holds between two items.

As far as her arguments go, however, her understanding of parity is one that trichotomists could accept. She says that the main reason to accept parity is that it allows us to say something ‘positive’ about how two items that are not related by the standard trichotomy. The positive thing we can say is that they belong to the same category of value.¹⁴ But this is something trichotomists can also say. Indeed, some trichotomist incomparabilists understand incomparability in the way Andreou understands parity. Mozart is neither more or less creative than Michelangelo, and nor are they equally creative: they are incomparable. But this judgment does not preclude the further claim that they are in the same category, league, or neighborhood of creativity – they are both creative geniuses.¹⁵ Whether we call cases of this sort ‘parity’ or ‘trichotomous incomparability’ is not what matters. The crucial question is whether it is correct to assume that there is no ‘positive’ *pairwise* judgment about how two such items relate. Why should we think that Mozart and Michelangelo cannot be pairwise compared, whichever pairwise relations could hold between them?¹⁶

Andreou helps us to see that there is an open question as to whether items belonging to the same category of value but not trichotomously comparable are nevertheless pairwise comparable. If two items belong to the same category of value, we need to determine whether there is a pairwise comparative truth about them. According to our proposed conditions, there is a comparative truth if the items are also qualitatively very different. They are on a par.

underwrites another. Andreou’s categories are the ‘most refined’ divisions there can ‘meaningfully’ be. In categorizing tastiness of beverages, it is arguably meaningful to talk about the very high-end of being terrific as opposed to being run-of-the-mill in terrificness, and so it would follow that each represents a different category of tastiness. Neighborhoods need not be the ‘most refined’ in Andreou’s sense; while they admit of further evaluative distinctions, those distinctions are not hierarchical, suggesting further divisions along a trichotomous hierarchy.

¹³ Andreou writes, “[parity] amounts to the [items] being in the same category...and there being no relational response that grounds a [pairwise] ranking of the [items]...” (p. 15). This is what she calls the ‘narrow’ sense of parity, which is the only sense of interest here. According to her ‘broad’ sense, items on a par may be trichotomously related.

¹⁴ Andreou, p. 7.

¹⁵ See e.g. Joseph Raz, ‘Mixing Values’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 65 (suppl.) (1991), pp. 83-100, and James Griffin, ‘Mixing Values’, in the same volume, pp. 101-118. Cf. Thomas Nagel, ‘The Fragmentation of Value’, in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128-141. Andreou starts off understanding parity as holding when the trichotomy of relations is ‘unavailable’ because her focus is primarily on our responses to the value of items rather than on the truth of how items relate. Later in her paper, however, she shifts between items being *non*-trichotomously comparable (non-WEB-comparable) to their being *not* trichotomously comparable (not-WEB-comparable) and treats the central case of comparing coffee and tea as one in which the trichotomy of relations *fails* to hold. This would make parity an instance of trichotomous incomparability. Andreou, pp. 7, 20-21.

¹⁶ Indeed, if as Andreou suggests, every category is the ‘most refined’ hierarchical division of value that is meaningful, it might be wondered whether it would follow that items belonging to the same category of value are equally good.

Note that the conditions for parity are very common. When comparing two desserts or careers or life paths or places to vacation or medical treatments or business plans or government policies, it will often be the case that the options are qualitatively very different with respect to the values that matter in their comparison. And yet they will also be in the same neighborhood of value overall. Parity is rife.

B. *Modelling parity*. Some philosophers do not feel secure in their understanding of a notion unless it can be modeled. So I want to end this paper by describing a simple model of value relations that includes parity.

There are a couple of models offered by others that are helpful. Wlodek Rabinowicz, in particular, has proposed an appealing model of value relations that makes room for parity. According to Rabinowicz, A and B are on a par if it is permissible to prefer B to A and permissible to prefer A to B. Preference – and other attitudes such as indifference and the lack of an attitude – are generated by permissible assignments of ‘degrees’ of favoring – where ‘favoring’ is a monadic attitude and degrees are partially but trichotomously ordered.¹⁷ Joshua Gert has proposed a related interval model of value relations that, like Rabinowicz’s, analyses value in terms of appropriate attitudes – in Gert’s case, attitudes of ‘goal puzzlement’, rather than preference and indifference.¹⁸ Both models may help some readers grasp the notion of parity. However, since both make substantive assumptions about value that I hope to avoid, namely, that value is to be analysed in terms of fitting attitudes, I put their models aside.

Erik Carlson has suggested an intriguing *definition* of parity in trichotomous terms, which, if successful, would show that parity is not a fourth, sui generis, relation of comparability.¹⁹ Carlson’s definition is quite elaborate, and it requires first grasping the stipulative relation, ‘almost better than’. According to Carlson, A is ‘almost better than’ B just in case (i) for every item, C, if A is better than C, then C isn’t better than B, and (ii) for every item D, if D is better than A, then D is better than B, or for every item E, if B is better than E, then A is better than E.²⁰ ‘Almost worse than’ is the converse. Roughly, the idea seems to be that A is ‘almost better than’ B just in case there is no intervening element between them – that is, nothing better than B and worse than A – and anything better than A is better than B *or* anything worse than B is also worse than A. A, as it were, ‘beats’ B either from above or below. Carlson then defines parity, “in its simplest terms”, as follows: two items are on a par “just in case neither is at least as good as the other, but there is a third item that is either better than one of them and almost better than the other, or worse than one of them and almost worse than the other”.²¹

As Carlson disarmingly notes, his definition of parity is “not very perspicuous or intuitively appealing”.²² But my main reason for rejecting it is that his argument for its vindication relies on an assumption that I reject. The argument depends on supposing that

¹⁷ See Wlodek Rabinowicz, ‘Value Relations’, *Theoria* 74 (2008), pp. 18-49, and ‘Value Relations Revisited’, *Economics and Philosophy* 28 (2012), pp. 133-164. He goes on to describe four ways in which this condition might be met.

¹⁸ Joshua Gert, ‘Value and Parity’, *Ethics* 114 (2004), pp. 492-510 and ‘Parity, Preference and Puzzlement’, *Theoria* 81 (2015), pp. 249-271.

¹⁹ Erik Carlson, ‘Parity Demystified’, *Theoria* 76 (2010), pp. 119-128.

²⁰ Carlson, p. 122. In order to simplify I ignore the case of ‘almost worse than’.

²¹ Carlson, p. 123.

²² Carlson, p. 123.

what I have elsewhere called the ‘Chaining Argument’ commits me to holding that whenever one item, C+, is better than another item, C, along a single dimension of the covering value, and does not differ from it along any other dimension, it follows that C+ is better than C. However, that claim should be rejected; sometimes one thing can be better than another along a single dimension, without differing from it in along any other dimension, but still be not better overall.²³ Put another way, Pareto superiority need not hold across contributory dimensions of a covering value.

I end with my own proposed model of value relations that includes parity. I do not attempt to provide a model in the technical sense, so my ‘model’ will be less of a mathematical structure and more of a philosophical picture. However, my model has two virtues: it is sufficiently abstract to accommodate any reasonable view about the nature of value; and it is very simple and, I hope, intuitive.²⁴

I suggest that we understand value relations in terms of *evaluative differences*. According to this account, all basic value relations can be defined in terms of dimensions of evaluative differences between items. There are at least two central dimensions according to which evaluative differences can be analysed and distinguished; first, whether they are biased in favor of one item and, second, whether the difference has magnitude or extent. ‘Bias’ obtains when the difference between the items ‘favors’ or ‘disfavors’ one item over the other, and ‘magnitude’ obtains when the difference between them has extent. Some evaluative differences – merely ordinal ones – lack magnitude not because they have zero extent but because the idea of magnitude does not apply. Since merely ordinal value relations are not of interest here, we can leave them aside.²⁵ The comparisons of interest – and the associated evaluative differences they describe – are cardinal in this broad sense: the evaluative differences between the items have a magnitude.

With these tools in hand, we can analyse four basic value relations. If A is *better than* B with respect to some covering value, V, then the evaluative difference between them with respect to V is biased ‘in favor’ of A, and the difference between them has some magnitude. If A is *worse than* B, then the evaluative difference is biased against A,

²³ In *Making Comparisons Count*, p. 132, I note that a small uni-dimensional improvement along a single dimension can make the uni-dimensionally improved item overall worse because of organic unities. I call this the ‘Aristotelian proviso’ on the Chaining Argument. I also note that a uni-dimensional improvement might trigger a new value (or disvalue) borne by the uni-dimensionally improved item but not by its unimproved counterpart, thereby blocking the condition that any ‘chains’ consist of items bearing all and only the same components of the covering value. I call this the ‘Hegelian proviso’ (p. 132) also discussed in ‘The Possibility of Parity’, p. 678. Indeed, Carlson taking note of the Hegelian proviso writes: ‘Chang restricts the applicability of the chaining argument to cases in which ‘there is a continuum of small uni-dimensional differences connecting A with some C that is both clearly comparable with A and clearly comparable with B’ Assuming the relevant domain to be all possible value bearers of a given kind, it seems plausible to assume that this condition is always satisfied.’ (p. 126, fn. 14). This is where we disagree. For Carlson’s definition of parity to be successful, he needs it to be true that between any two items that there is always a continuum of small uni-dimensional differences connecting those items such that something on that continuum will be clearly trichotomously comparable with one of the items and without running afoul of either the Aristotelian or Hegelian provisos. I do not believe that this can be achieved and so think we should not accept the definition.

²⁴ I introduced this model in my *Making Comparisons Count*.

²⁵ This is not to say that parity is not an ordinal relation. It is a basic relation that allows both ordinal and cardinal rankings, where ‘cardinal’ is understood broadly to indicate some magnitude of difference not necessarily measurable by the reals.

disfavoring it, and the difference has magnitude. If A and B are *equally good*, then the difference has no bias and no magnitude in that its magnitude is zero. And if A and B are *on a par*, then the difference between them has no bias but it has a nonzero magnitude. If A and B are incomparable with respect to V, there is no basic relation that holds between them with respect to V and so no evaluative difference between them to be analysed. We can summarize the account of basic relations by the following chart.²⁶

Value relation	Bias	Magnitude
A is better than B	✓	✓
A is worse than B	✓	✓
A and B are equally good	✗	✗
A and B are on a par	✗	✓
[A and B are incomparable	n/a	n/a]

Parity holds when the evaluative difference between two items is unbiased but has magnitude. These features, then, will naturally give rise to certain logical properties of parity: it is irreflexive – nothing is on a par with itself – symmetric – if A is on a par with B then B is on a par with A – and nontransitive – if A is on a par with B, and B is on a par with C, it doesn't follow that A is on a par with C. (Intuitively: something is always equally good as itself; if an evaluative difference is unbiased then its associated relation will be symmetric; and nontransitivity can be shown by counter-example). Since parity has different logical features from betterness, worseness and equality, we cannot treat it as a species of any of the usual trichotomy of relations.

How could unbiased differences with magnitude arise? Notice that such differences can be explained by the sufficiency conditions of parity given above. If items are in the same neighborhood of value overall, their evaluative difference might naturally be thought to be unbiased. Being in the same neighborhood of value overall gives us *prima facie* reason to think that the evaluative difference does not favor one item over the other. And if items are qualitatively very different, that gives us *prima facie* reason to think that there is some non-zero magnitude of difference between them. Taken together, these conditions are suggestive of unbiased differences with magnitude.

Thus we have a simple way to model value relations that makes room for parity, naturally gives rise to parity's logical features, and can be explained in turn by the

²⁶ It is worth distinguishing three ways in which the evaluative difference between two items can have no magnitude. There may be no magnitude of difference because there is no evaluative difference to begin with. That is the case of incomparability. There can also be no magnitude of difference between two items because, although there is an evaluative difference, the idea of that difference have magnitude simply does not apply. That is the case of mere ordinality and should not be thought to rule out parity as an ordinal relation. And finally, there is the case in which there is an evaluative difference between items, but there is no magnitude of difference between them because the magnitude is zero. That is the case of equality. See also my 'Parity, Imprecise Comparability, and the Repugnant Conclusion', *Theoria* 82 (2016), pp. 183-215, from which I take this chart.

sufficiency conditions we gave above. When two qualitatively very different items belong to the same neighborhood of value overall, one is not better than the other and nor are they equally good. Their evaluative differences are neither biased nor zero in magnitude. Instead, their difference is unbiased but has magnitude.

What this model shows is that there are two importantly different phenomena that trichotomists lump together as ‘incomparability’: items between which there are no evaluative differences because the idea of an evaluative difference does not apply, and items whose evaluative differences are unbiased but have magnitude. Indeed, as we saw, just as the trichotomist might leverage shared notions to show the dichotomist that there is a third basic value relation that can hold between items, we have leveraged shared notions, such as being qualitatively very different, being in the same neighborhood of value, having an evaluative difference, and so on, to argue that that the trichotomist has overlooked a fourth basic value relation that can hold between items. And just as the trichotomist can show that this third relation, equality, has logical features distinct from the standard dichotomist relations, so too we have shown that parity has logical features distinct from those of the standard trichotomy. If these arguments are successful, Trichotomy has been shown to be false. Two items can be comparable and yet neither better than the other nor equally good. They may be on a par.²⁷

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