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In defense of value incomparability: A reply to Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl

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Abstract

Cian Dorr, Jacob Nebel, and Jake Zuehl have argued that no objects are incomparable in value. One set of arguments they offer depart from a principle they call 'Strong Monotonicity', which states that if x is good and y is not good, then x is better than y. In this article, we respond to those arguments, thereby defending the possibility of value incomparability.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many philosophers believe that things can be incomparable in value. On one common definition of incomparability, which we shall adopt, two value bearers x and y are incomparable iff it is neither the case that x is at least as good as y, nor that y is at least as good as x.[1] For instance, Michelangelo and Mozart might be incomparable in artistic excellence, a great career as a lawyer might be incomparable in value (*qua* career) to a great career as a clarinetist, and the intrinsic value of pleasure might be incomparable to that of knowledge.[2] Indeed, some incomparability proponents (henceforth 'incomparabilists') see this concept as the key to solving many important

[1] Like Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl (2023) seem implicitly to do, we make the common and simplifying (but not entirely uncontroversial) assumption that the relation *at least as good as* is extensionally equivalent to *better than or equally good as*. Moreover, we shall set aside value comparisons involving objects that are not even bearers of the relevant value (such as the comparison in moral goodness between the number 2 and the color green), and the principles we formulate below should not be taken to apply to such cases.

[2] Some philosophers (notably, Chang, 2002) claim that the value bearers in such cases may be 'comparable', in a sense relevant to practical rationality and decision-making, even if they are incomparable according to our definition. We are not denying this possibility.

axiological problems, such as the 'mere addition paradox' in population ethics (see, e.g., Parfit, 2016, Gustafsson 2020, Hájek and Rabinowicz, 2021).

In a recent article in this journal, however, Cian Dorr, Jacob Nebel, and Jake Zuehl (henceforth 'DNZ') argue that value incomparability is impossible (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023). They do so by arguing for an even stronger claim: that *all* comparative expressions—i.e., those of the form '*F*-er than', 'more *F* than', 'equally *F* as', and so on—obey, as a matter of their logic, a principle they call 'Comparability'. Simplifying somewhat (in ways that will not matter for our purposes), this principle can be formulated as follows (cf. Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 417):

> *Comparability:* For any two *F*-bearers, x and y: either x is at least as *F* as y or y is at least as *F* as x.

DNZ argue that Comparability is a valid schema in the sense that all its instances express necessary truths. This view rules out the possibility of value incomparability, as it entails that either Mozart's artistic excellence is at least as great as Michelangelo's or vice versa, that either a great lawyering career is at least as good as a great clarinetist career or vice versa, and so on.

DNZ offer several related groups of arguments for Comparability. The purpose of this paper is to respond to one of them—one which we think is particularly intriguing and pressing for incomparabilists. The central idea underlying these arguments, which we shall label 'the Strong Monotonicity arguments', is that if x is good and y is not good, it intuitively follows that x is better than y (2023: 438).[3] On the basis of this principle, and variants of it, DNZ argue that incomparabilists have to accept a 'strange picture' of the evaluative domain (2023: 441).

We shall argue that the Strong Monotonicity arguments do not succeed. After presenting and elaborating on these arguments in section 2, we shall in sections 3 and 4 argue that they are, for several reasons, much less forceful than DNZ claim, even assuming the truth of the central principle. In section 5, we shall question the truth of this principle.

A comment about the dialectical situation is called for before proceeding. As we shall see, DNZ's reasoning sometimes raises issues about what it is for a philosophical argument, or a response to such an argument, to illegitimately 'beg the question'. To manage such issues, we shall adopt the view that the strength of a philosophical argument depends at least in part on whether and to what extent a rational party who is antecedently neutral with respect to the argument's conclusion would become more inclined to accept it upon being exposed to the argument (cf., e.g., van Inwagen, 2006; Fischer and Tognazzini (2007). Given this standard, which we take to be reasonable, the Strong Monotonicity arguments are not very strong—or so, at least, we shall argue.

2 | THE STRONG MONOTONICITY ARGUMENTS

Let x and y be two rather different careers that incomparabilists are likely to consider incomparable in value. For example, x may be a career as a clarinetist, while y is a career as a lawyer (cf. Chang, 1997: 23–24). Let x^+ be another clarinet career which differs from x only in that x^+ offers \$10 more in annual salary, and hence is very slightly better than x. If y is incomparable to x, it seems plausible that it is incomparable to x^+ as well. DNZ argue that if y is incomparable to both

[3] Another group of arguments that DNZ present is based on the idea that if x is not as good as y, it intuitively follows that y is better than x (2023: 427–432). We will not engage with those arguments here, in part because we do not share DNZ's linguistic intuitions about all their examples.

x and x^+, then we should expect that for *any* pair of clarinet careers that only differ with respect to $10 in salary, there is a possible law career that is incomparable to both:

> For any two [...] clarinet-careers x' and x'^+ [which only differ by at most $10 in annual salary], we will be able [to] find a law-career y' whose pros and cons as against either of x' and x'^+ are hard to weigh in the same way as the pros and cons of y as against x and x^+, so that the considerations that opponents of Comparability take to support the judgment that y is neither better nor worse than either x or x^+ will also support the claim that y' is neither better nor worse than either x' or x'^+. (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 436–437)

DNZ go on to argue that this picture is incompatible with the following principle, which they find intuitively compelling (cf. Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 438):

> *Strong Monotonicity:* If x is good and y is not good, then x is better than y.[4]

Their argument relies on the assumption that there is a pair of clarinet careers, x and x^+, which differ only with respect to $10 in annual salary, and are such that x^+ is just barely good while x is not good. Let us grant this assumption for now (we shall question it in section 3), and let y be any law career. By the Law of Excluded Middle, which DNZ assume (2023: 423), y is either good or not good. If y is good, Strong Monotonicity implies that it is better than x. If y is not good, Strong Monotonicity implies that it is worse than x^+. Hence, y cannot be incomparable to both x and x^+. This means that there is an implausible 'bottleneck' between x^+ and x in the betterness order of clarinet careers, implying that no law career is incomparable to both.

Assuming a domain that contains incomparable objects, DNZ define a bottleneck as an object x such that no object in the domain is incomparable both to something better than x and to something worse than x (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 438). On this definition, Strong Monotonicity does not imply the existence of a bottleneck if the domain is such that for every good object there is a worse object that is still good, and for every object that is not good there is a better object that is still not good.[5] Since DNZ's argument is more powerful if it is applicable also to such domains, we shall adopt a slightly different definition of a bottleneck, in terms of *ordered pairs* of objects:

An ordered pair of objects $<x^+, x>$ is a *bottleneck* in a domain containing incomparable objects iff:

(i) x^+ is better than x,
(ii) the value difference between x^+ and x is very small, and
(iii) no object in the domain is incomparable to both x^+ and x.

[4] DNZ formulate Strong Monotonicity, as well as Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity (see below), as argument schemata rather than as principles. However, they express similar claims, such as 'Monotonicity' and variants thereof (2023: 416), as principles, without commenting on this difference in formulation. This indicates that they do not regard it as important.

[5] Dense betterness orders may obviously have this property, but some infinite discrete orders have it as well. Consider, for example, a betterness order that is isomorphic to the following order of real numbers, with positive (negative) numbers representing good (non-good) objects: 1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, ..., followed by ... -1/4 -1/3, -1/2, -1.

DNZ do not specify exactly under what conditions they take bottlenecks to be implausible, and some bottlenecks seem unproblematic. (For example, suppose that the domain consists of many good objects, with some being incomparable to others, and only two bad objects, x^+ and x, such that x^+ is very slightly better than x. $<x^+, x>$ is then an unmysterious bottleneck.) In what follows, we shall assume that the relevant domains have the properties, whatever these are exactly, that make bottlenecks implausible according to DNZ.

While DNZ find the existence of bottlenecks very implausible, they grant that accepting one bottleneck may seem a price worth paying in order to save the possibility of incomparability (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 440). They go on to argue, however, that incomparabilists have to accept a great number of bottlenecks.[6] This is because there are variants of Strong Monotonicity which they take to be equally compelling. Letting V be any 'positive degree modifier', such as 'extremely', 'very', 'pretty', or 'somewhat', DNZ find the following principle highly plausible (cf. Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 442):

> *Strong Modified Monotonicity:* If x is V good and y is not V good, then x is better than y.

If x^+ is V good and x is not, Strong Modified Monotonicity implies that no y is incomparable to both x^+ and x. If the value difference between x^+ and x is very small, $<x^+, x>$ is thus a bottleneck. The upshot is that incomparabilists must acknowledge at least one bottleneck corresponding to every positive degree modifier V.

Another variant of Strong Monotonicity that DNZ find compelling is this (cf. Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 441):

> *Strong Superlative Monotonicity:* If x is one of the best objects and y is not, then x is better than y.

This principle arguably implies yet another bottleneck, since it excludes that a law career y can be incomparable to both x^+ and x, if x^+ is barely one of the best possible clarinet careers and x is barely not.

The situation is further aggravated, according to DNZ, by the fact that both degree modifiers and expressions such as 'one of the best' are highly context-sensitive and flexible:

> [I]t is rather tempting to think that whenever 'x is [better] than y' has a true interpretation, we can find some candidate interpretation of 'V [good]' for some positive degree modifier V (e.g., 'very') that makes 'x is V [good] and y is not V [good]' true, and is compatible with the given interpretation of '[better]'. Similarly, whenever 'x is [better than y]' is true, we can find some candidate denotation for 'the [best objects]' that includes x but not y. (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 441–442)

[6] Some domains might contain several bottlenecks which are, so to speak, fully or partially co-located. For example, suppose that x^+ and x^{+*} are equally good and that x and x^* are also equally good. If $<x^+, x>$ is a bottleneck, then $<x^+, x^*>$, $<x^{+*}, x>$, and $<x^{+*}, x^*>$ are also bottlenecks, given that *equally good as* is an equivalence relation. Similarly, if the domain contains three objects x^+, x, and x^- such that $x^+ \succ x \succ x^-$ and $<x^+, x^->$ is a bottleneck, it is unsurprising if $<x^+, x>$ and $<x, x^->$ are also bottlenecks. Hence, we take it that what DNZ find especially implausible is to posit many bottlenecks which are not even partially co-located in this way. (Co-located bottlenecks are possible also on DNZ's definition—if *equally good as* is an equivalence relation, their definition implies that every object that is equally good as a bottleneck is itself a bottleneck.)

DNZ here seem sympathetic to the view that if x^+ is better than x, there is a possible reading of some positive degree modifier V such that 'x^+ is V good and x is not V good' is true, and also a possible reading of 'the best objects' such that 'x^+ is one of the best objects and x is not' is true. We find that view questionable. For example, in a domain with 100,000 objects such that x is worst, x^+ is slightly better than x, and all the other 99,998 objects are much better than both x^+ and x, 'x^+ is one of the best objects' does not seem to have a true reading. At any rate, we shall not consider this part of their argument in what follows.

3 | STRONG MONOTONICITY AND VAGUENESS

It is usually assumed that every value bearer is either good, bad, or neutral. We shall call this view 'Monadic Trichotomy'. Thus:

> *Monadic Trichotomy:* Every value bearer is either good, bad, or neutral.

In this section and the next, we shall consider how incomparabilists who accept Monadic Trichotomy may respond to the Strong Monotonicity arguments. Given Monadic Trichotomy, any value bearer that is not good is either bad or neutral. And the following principle is arguably a conceptual truth, given the standard assumption that all neutral value bearers are equal in value:

> *Weak Monotonicity:* If x is good and y is neutral or bad, then x is better than y.[7]

Strong Monotonicity thus seems unassailable if Monadic Trichotomy is true.

In the present section we shall argue, however, that the Strong Monotonicity arguments become much less forceful once the possibility of evaluative *vagueness* is taken into account. In section 4, we shall argue against Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity.

A plausible view, which DNZ seem to share (2023: 436, 444–448), is that both monadic value predicates such as 'good' and dyadic value predicates such as 'better than' are vague.[8] If 'good' is vague, an object may be either definitely good, definitely not good, or *borderline good*—that is, neither definitely good nor definitely not good. Similarly, an object may be either definitely better, definitely not better, or borderline better than another. This allows us to distinguish between three principles along the lines of Strong Monotonicity:

> *SM1:* If x is definitely good and y is definitely not good, then x is definitely better than y.

[7] Wlodek Rabinowicz (2022b: 130) distinguishes between 'strict' and 'weak' neutrality, and rejects the standard assumption just mentioned concerning weak neutrality. On his view, a good object need not be better than a weakly neutral one (2022b: 135). As John Broome (2004: 170) and Johan Gustafsson (2020: 88, fn. 12) point out, however, weak neutrality is not neutrality in the intuitive sense. Rabinowicz's weakly neutral objects are better understood as what we in section 5 call 'tetric' objects. Thus understood, his view is incompatible with Monadic Trichotomy.

[8] Broome (1997, 2004) argues that if 'better than' is vague, then value incomparability is impossible. However, the 'collapsing principle' that Broome's argument relies on has been criticized by several authors, and DNZ (2023: 426–427) add to this criticism by providing a counterexample. Given that Broome's argument fails, we think incomparabilists should accept that value predicates, like the vast majority of predicates, are vague (but see Dos Santos 2020 for an interesting critical discussion).

SM2: If x is definitely good and y is not definitely good, then x is definitely better than y.

SM3: If x is not definitely not good and y is definitely not good, then x is definitely better than y.

While SM1 is undisputable given Monadic Trichotomy, SM2 and SM3 are highly dubious.[9] We shall underpin this verdict by invoking the supervaluation theory of vagueness. According to supervaluationism, a sentence 'p' involving vague terms is true if it is true under all 'admissible sharpenings' of the vague terms (in which case it is *definitely true* that p). If 'p' is false under all admissible sharpenings, it is false (in which case it is *definitely true* that *not-p*). If 'p' is true under some admissible sharpenings and false under others, then 'p' is neither true nor false, and it is *borderline* that p. Thus, it is borderline that p iff it is neither definitely true that p nor definitely true that *not-p*.[10]

On supervaluationism, then, an object is definitely good if it is good under all admissible sharpenings of 'good', and definitely not good if it is not good under any admissible sharpening. If it is good under some but not all admissible sharpenings, it is borderline good. Similarly, x is definitely better than y if it is better under all admissible sharpenings of 'better than', definitely not better than y if it is not better under any admissible sharpening, and borderline better than y if it is better under some but not all admissible sharpenings.

Suppose that x is definitely good and that y is borderline good. Since there are then admissible sharpenings of 'good' under which y is not good, there must, assuming Monadic Trichotomy, be admissible sharpenings of 'better than' under which x is better than y.[11] But since there are also admissible sharpenings of 'good' under which y is good, there may be other admissible sharpenings of 'better than' under which x is not better than y. If so, x is only borderline better than y, which conflicts with SM2. A similar argument shows that x may be only borderline better than y if x is borderline good and y is definitely not good. This conflicts with SM3.

The falsity of SM2 and SM3 has noteworthy implications for the Strong Monotonicity arguments. Suppose that x^+ is definitely good, that x is definitely not good, and that y is borderline good. Since SM2 is open to counterexamples, these suppositions are compatible with x^+ being only borderline better than y. If so, x^+ and y may be only *borderline comparable* (in which case they are also borderline incomparable). This is because they may be incomparable under some of the admissible sharpenings of 'better than' and 'at least as good as' that do not count x^+ as better than y. (Since incomparability cannot on the incomparabilist's view be reduced to vagueness, an

[9] While Broome's collapsing principle could be used to argue for SM2 and SM3, DNZ (2023: 426–427) explicitly distance themselves from this principle (cf. note 8).

[10] For an overview of the supervaluation theory, see Keefe (2008). While supervaluationism can be questioned, it is the most widely accepted account of semantic vagueness, and some authors also defend related theories of metaphysical vagueness (e.g., Barnes and Williams, 2011). Supervaluationism is also congenial to DNZ's position in at least one respect. As we noted in section 2, their argument for Comparability relies on the Law of Excluded Middle (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 423), which supervaluationism validates. As DNZ observe, philosophers who think that vagueness indicates that we should not accept that Law (such as some intuitionists) should also be suspicious of Comparability (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 422–423).

[11] Let S be an admissible sharpening of 'good' under which y is not good, and, hence, by Monadic Trichotomy, is either neutral or bad. Since x is definitely good, it is good under all admissible sharpenings of 'good', and hence under S. By Weak Monotonicity, every good object is better than every neutral or bad object under every admissible sharpening of 'better than'. Therefore, x is better than y under S.

admissible sharpening S of 'at least as good as' can be such that x is not at least as good as y, and y is not at least as good as x under S.) For similar reasons, the falsity of SM3 implies that x and y may be only borderline comparable in this case.

Let us say that $<x^+, x>$ is a *definite bottleneck* iff it is definitely true that $<x^+, x>$ is a bottleneck. In contrast, $<x^+, x>$ is a *borderline bottleneck* iff it is borderline that $<x^+, x>$ is a bottleneck. The borderline bottlenecks that are relevant to our discussion are ones which are borderline because it is borderline whether clause (iii) in our definition of a bottleneck is satisfied.[12] That is, the relevant borderline bottlenecks are such that it is borderline that some object in the domain is incomparable to both x^+ and x. We take it that DNZ understand Strong Monotonicity as SM1, and that they intend their argument to show that there must be at least one definite bottleneck in the order of clarinet careers. In order to prove the existence of a definite bottleneck, however, one would have to rely on SM2 or SM3. SM1 at most implies that there is at least one *borderline* bottleneck. As far as we can tell, this upshot is not clearly implausible to any degree at all—at least, it is significantly less implausible than the claim that there are definite bottlenecks.

Moreover, if 'good' is vague, the difference in value between an object that is definitely good and one that is definitely not good may have to be fairly large. As we saw in section 2, DNZ assume that subtracting $10 in annual salary from a career can take us from a good career to one that is not good. Such a reduction in salary, however, might be much too small to turn a *definitely* good career into one that is *definitely* not good. If the difference has to be considerably greater, SM1 does not even entail that there are borderline bottlenecks.

One might think that the value difference between a definitely good object and one that is *borderline* good can nevertheless be very small, and that we should therefore expect that there are some borderline bottlenecks $<x^+, x>$ where x^+ is definitely good and x is borderline good. However, even this view is questionable, as it depends on the highly controversial and counterintuitive view that there is no higher-order vagueness with respect to the application of 'good'. An alternative, more natural view is that a very small value difference is never enough to take us from a career that is definitely good to one that is borderline good.[13] On this picture, whenever x^+ is definitely good and x is only very slightly less good than x^+, the claim that x is good is either *borderline* borderline, or *borderline borderline* borderline, or borderline on some even higher order, if it is not definitely true. If x is in this way 'higher-order' borderline good, there may be some y in the domain such that it is not definitely borderline, but only higher-order borderline that y is incomparable to both x^+ and x. This would merely imply that $<x^+, x>$ is a higher-order borderline bottleneck. And, intuitively, the higher the order of a borderline bottleneck is, the closer to being definitely true is the claim that some object in the domain is incomparable to both x^+ and x. Accepting one or a few higher-order bottlenecks in order to make room for incomparability may hence be a price well worth paying.[14]

[12] We shall thus ignore borderline bottlenecks which are borderline due to clause (i) or (ii) being borderline.

[13] The existence of higher-order vagueness is acknowledged by most philosophers working on vagueness, including not just supervaluationists but also for example epistemicists. An attractive supervaluationist account of higher-order vagueness, defended by Rosanna Keefe (2000: chapter 8), invokes the vagueness of the notion of an admissible sharpening. For an argument against the existence of higher-order vagueness, see Wright (2010).

[14] While we have assumed supervaluationism, there are theories of vagueness whose truth would force incomparabilists to posit definite bottlenecks. An obvious example is the very controversial epistemicist view that vague predicates have sharp boundaries that we cannot possibly discover, since vagueness on this view does not generate truth-value gaps. (Like supervaluationism, epistemicism validates the Law of Excluded Middle, which DNZ assume; cf. section 2 and note 10.) However, independently of issues concerning incomparability, epistemicism is known to have many counter-intuitive and

4 | PROBLEMS FOR STRONG MODIFIED MONOTONICITY AND STRONG SUPERLATIVE MONOTONICITY

As we saw in section 2, however, DNZ take Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity to show that incomparabilists must in fact accept the existence of a great many bottlenecks. A first thing to note about those arguments is that if '*V* good' is vague, for a degree modifier *V*, the bottlenecks need not be definite even if Strong Modified Monotonicity is true. Likewise, if 'one of the best' is vague, Strong Superlative Monotonicity does not entail that there are definite bottlenecks. The bottlenecks may be borderline, or higher-order borderline, and hence intuitively less implausible.[15]

More importantly, however, Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity are both highly questionable. As regards the former principle, it seems doubtful whether there is always a fact of the matter about whether a value bearer is *V* good (even apart from the vagueness of '*V* good').[16] If *V* is a modifier like 'extremely', 'very', 'pretty', or 'somewhat', it may to a considerable degree be arbitrary whether an object should be classified as *V* good. A natural way to resolve this arbitrariness is by reference to a 'standard'. We may choose a particular object *x* in the domain, and classify an object as *V* good iff it is at least as good as *x*. (Of course, we cannot choose just any object as the standard, but there may be a number of permissible candidates.)

If whether an object is *V* good is determined in this way, Strong Modified Monotonicity seems dubious. Unless Comparability is presupposed, it may be the case that for any *x* which can reasonably be chosen as the standard, there are objects which are incomparable to *x*. Suppose that *y* is at least as good as the standard, and hence *V* good, while *z* is incomparable to the standard, and hence not *V* good. In this case, we cannot plausibly exclude the possibility that *y* is incomparable to *z*, and hence not better than *z*. In particular, that *y* is incomparable to *z* directly follows if *y* is equally good as the standard, and it will often be plausible if *y* is only slightly better than the standard. Thus, if an object's being *V* good is to be understood as its being at least as good as some chosen standard, Strong Modified Monotonicity seems very doubtful.

On an alternative definition of '*V* good', an object is *V* good just in case it is *not worse* than the standard. This leads to essentially the same problem. Suppose that *y* is incomparable to the standard, and hence *V* good, whereas *z* is slightly worse than the standard, and hence not *V*

surprising upshots; for example, that if x^+ is one microsecond older than *x*, the sentences 'x^+ is old' and '*x* is not old' may both be true. And the incomparabilist may reasonably hold that the existence of definite bottlenecks where there do not seem to be any is no more surprising than the existence of sharp boundaries where there do not seem to be any. They both illustrate the ways in which small differences have big consequences if epistemicism is true.

[15] We understand Strong Modified Monotonicity in analogy with SM1. Thus: 'If *x* is definitely *V* good and *y* is definitely not *V* good, then *x* is definitely better than *y*'. Similarly, we interpret Strong Superlative Monotonicity as follows: 'If *x* is definitely one of the best objects and *y* is definitely not, then *x* is definitely better than *y*'.

[16] An attractive view, we think, is that part of the arbitrariness in the application of '*V* good' stems from some form(s) of linguistic indeterminacy or underspecification that can be distinguished from vagueness. John MacFarlane (2020: 611), drawing on King (2018), provides the following example: if one is watching a group of surfers on the beach, one might assert 'those guys are good' without having a clear idea about exactly which plurality of surfers one is talking about. As MacFarlane notes, this kind of imprecision concerning the exact referent of 'those guys' lacks many features which are characteristic of vagueness; for instance, unlike vague predicates like 'is tall', 'those guys' is not intuitively insensitive to tiny changes in some underlying dimension, and hence is not susceptible to soritical reasoning. That said, if it turns out that the arbitrariness in the application of '*V* good' is only due to vagueness, this would not significantly impact our arguments below.

good. This leaves open the possibility that y and z are incomparable, contrary to Strong Modified Monotonicity.

DNZ might deny that 'V good' can be understood in terms of a standard. But there is no obvious reason to think that it cannot.[17] Moreover, if 'V good' cannot be understood in this (or some closely related) way, then it seems quite unclear what exactly it means. And this would in turn raise the question of why we should expect it to obey Strong Modified Monotonicity.

Strong Superlative Monotonicity is also problematic. First, if the relevant domain is the set of all possible value bearers of a certain kind, as DNZ seem to assume (2023: 437, 439), it may be the case that for every object there is a better one. For example, it seems plausible that for any career, there is a possible career that is better. There appears to be no limit in principle to how stimulating, exciting, or well paid a career could be. This implies that the set of the n best careers is empty, for any finite n. We take it that an object is one of the best only if it is one of the n best, for some finite n. (Compare: it seems clear that no natural number is 'one of the largest' natural numbers, since for every natural number there are infinitely many larger ones.) Given this assumption, Strong Superlative Monotonicity is vacuous, since its antecedent is false for every object x.

At the cost of making DNZ's argument less generally applicable and hence less powerful (cf. section 2), this problem of vacuity can be avoided by assuming that the domain always contains only finitely many objects of the relevant kind, and hence not all possible such objects. Given this assumption, however, an even more serious problem appears. There are two obvious options concerning how to understand 'one of the best'. The first option is to declare an object as one of the best iff it is at least as good as all except at most k objects in the domain, for some number k.[18] On the second option, an object is one of the best just in case there are at most k objects better than it. Both options imply, in conjunction with Strong Superlative Monotonicity, that the value relation between two objects can be domain dependent in an implausible way.

To see this, suppose first that x and y are incomparable, and that both are at least as good as all except exactly k objects in the domain. Thus, given the first option, x and y are both among the best objects. Now assume that we expand the domain, by adding an object that is equally good as x (and hence incomparable to y). As a result, y is no longer one of the best objects, since there are now $k+1$ objects that y is not at least as good as. On the other hand, x is still one of the best objects. According to Strong Superlative Monotonicity, then, x is now better than y. This is unacceptable. What value relation holds between x and y cannot plausibly depend on what other objects there are in the domain.

A variant of the first option claims that an object is one of the best just in case it is *better* than all except at most k objects. This leads to the same implausible conclusion if we, instead of adding an object that is equally good as x, add one that is worse than x but incomparable to y.

Now consider the second option regarding how to understand 'one of the best'. Suppose that x and y are incomparable, and that there are, for each of them, exactly k objects that are better. Now we add to the domain an object that is better than y but incomparable to x. As a result, y is no longer one of the best objects, since $k+1$ objects are better, while x is still one of the best. According to Strong Superlative Monotonicity, therefore, x is now better than y. Again, we get the implausible result that what value relation holds between x and y depends on what other objects there are in the domain.

[17] In a footnote (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 441, fn. 32), they express sympathy for a view that seems at least similar to the view that 'V good' can indeed be understood in terms of a standard.

[18] DNZ assume 'a lot of flexibility' about how many objects to include among the best ones (Dorr, Nebel, and Zuehl, 2023: 441).

This shows, we take it, that Strong Superlative Monotonicity is acceptable only if we assume Comparability. DNZ's argument is hence dialectically impotent; it would not be compelling to someone who is antecedently undecided about the truth of Comparability (cf. section 1).

5 | AGAINST MONADIC TRICHOTOMY

In this final section, we shall discuss how incomparabilists can respond to DNZ's arguments by denying Monadic Trichotomy.

In some cases, it seems to be arbitrary (and not just vague) whether a particular career counts as good, in much the same way as it seems arbitrary whether a career counts as, say, very good. As in the case of '*V* good', this arbitrariness in the application of 'good' can potentially be resolved by reference to a standard. We may choose an object in the domain as the 'zero point', and stipulate that the monadic value properties relate to the zero point as follows: an object in the domain counts as good iff it is better than the zero point, as neutral iff it is equally good as the zero point, and as bad iff it is worse than the zero point. This leaves open that some objects in the domain are incomparable to the zero point, in which case those objects count as neither good, nor bad nor neutral. If there are such objects, Monadic Trichotomy is false.

The idea that incomparabilists should recognize a fourth monadic value property in addition to goodness, badness, and neutrality has received some attention in the literature (see, e.g., Carlson, 1997, Espinoza, 2009, Gustafsson, 2020, Rabinowicz, 2022a). In what follows, we shall say that value bearers which are incomparable to the zero point (and thus are not good, bad or neutral) are 'tetric'. If there are tetric objects, Strong Monotonicity likely fails. Suppose that x is chosen as the zero point and that y is incomparable to x (and hence tetric). If x^+ is only slightly better than x, then x^+ is good, but may well be incomparable to y. In this case, x^+ is good and y is not good, but contrary to Strong Monotonicity, x^+ is not better than y.[19]

A similar argument can be used to question Monadic Trichotomy for values whose zero point is non-arbitrary. One possible example of such a value is well-being.[20] Suppose that the zero point for well-being is a life in coma. Consider now a form of well-being pluralism on which pleasure and knowledge are both good-making while pain and false beliefs are both bad-making. What should this pluralist say about the value of a life that contains a variety of good- and bad-making features, such as one that contains some pleasure and some false beliefs, or one that contains some knowledge and some pain? It seems open to her to hold that some such lives are incomparable to a life in coma. Such lives then count as tetric, contrary to Monadic Trichotomy. Moreover, it seems reasonable for this pluralist to hold that some lives which are incomparable to the zero point are incomparable also to some lives that are only slightly better than the zero point (e.g., a

[19] That the possibility of tetric (or 'weakly neutral') objects threatens Strong Monotonicity is noted by Rabinowicz (2022a: 83, fn. 27; 2022b: 135, 139–140, n. 35).

[20] The existence of a non-arbitrary zero point is standardly taken to be a necessary condition for ratio scale measurement of the relevant quantity. And ratio scale measurement of well-being is often assumed (at least implicitly), for example in discussions of utilitarianism.

life that contains one hedon and is otherwise exactly like a life in coma).[21] On this view, Strong Monotonicity is false.

DNZ might respond that if the existence of tetric objects conflicts with Strong Monotonicity, then the intuitive plausibility of Strong Monotonicity should lead us to deny that there are tetric objects. This response, however, is not compelling. Since the view that value incomparability is possible leads naturally to the view that there are tetric objects, it seems that someone who is antecedently undecided about the possibility of incomparability should also be undecided about the existence of tetric objects, and thus about Strong Monotonicity. If so, DNZ's arguments would, again, not be convincing to a party who does not already accept Comparability (cf. section 1).

Moreover, the incomparabilist may at this point suggest that the apparent plausibility of Strong Monotonicity can be explained away. The picture we have suggested vindicates Weak Monotonicity, stating that if x is good and y is neutral or bad, then x is better than y (see section 3). And the incomparabilist may propose that the intuitions that appear to favor Strong Monotonicity are accommodated just as well by Weak Monotonicity. After all, the only possible cases in which Strong Monotonicity but not Weak Monotonicity applies are ones in which y is neither good, nor bad nor neutral. And as we have emphasized, if there are such value bearers, it seems possible that some of them are incomparable to some good objects. Thus, once we accept Weak Monotonicity, it is unclear what reason there is to go further and also accept Strong Monotonicity.

We have already indicated how Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity can be questioned if there is arbitrariness concerning whether to count a particular object as *V* good (for some positive degree modifier *V*), or as one of the best objects. Might there be values for which the distinction between objects that are *V* good and those that are not, or the distinction between the best objects and those that are not among the best, is non-arbitrary as well? As far as we can see, the best candidates are values where some value bearers are 'superior to' or 'lexically higher than' others. For example, on a view associated with John Stuart Mill (1998), higher pleasures (such as intellectual ones) are superior in value to lower pleasures (such as gustatory ones) in the sense than an episode of higher pleasure is better than any number of episodes of lower pleasures, no matter their intensity and duration. On such an axiology, perhaps it might non-arbitrarily be held that an object is very good, or that it is one of the best objects, iff it is at least as good as some higher pleasure.

Even if some value bearers are superior to others in this way, this does not entail the truth of either Strong Modified Monotonicity or Strong Superlative Monotonicity. It could be that higher pleasures are superior to lower ones while instances of knowledge, for example, are incomparable to all pleasures of both types. Given the suggested definitions of what it takes for an object to be very good and to be one of the best, this would entail that both Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity are false.

More importantly, however, the incomparabilist can accept both Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity but deny that this implies that there are bottlenecks. If the line between objects that are very good and those that are not very good, or that between the best objects and the others, can be non-arbitrarily drawn in the way just indicated, then even if there are pairs of pleasures $<x^+, x>$ such that no object in the domain is incomparable to both x^+ and x, these pairs may all be such that x^+ and x differ *very much* in value, in which case $<x^+, x>$ is not

[21] A number of philosophers have defended the stronger view that general definitions of 'good', 'bad' and 'neutral' can be given in terms of 'better than' and a non-arbitrary zero point, at least as concerns intrinsic or final value (see, e.g., Chisholm and Sosa, 1966, Carlson, 2016). The suggested zero points generally leave open the possibility that an object is incomparable to the zero point. Again, this would imply that that Monadic Trichotomy fails.

a bottleneck. After all, on the suggested axiology, higher pleasures are in a sense 'infinitely better' than lower ones, since each higher pleasure is better than any finite number of lower pleasures. Hence, merely accepting that there are such pairs is not in tension with the incomparabilist's other commitments; for instance, she can still maintain, if she wishes, that pieces of knowledge are generally incomparable either to lower pleasures or to higher pleasures. All she has to do, if she wants to affirm Strong Modified Monotonicity and Strong Superlative Monotonicity, is to deny that pieces of knowledge are incomparable to *both* higher and lower pleasures.[22]

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