

Comparing in categories:

The possibility of a broad parity relation

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ABSTRACT:

Which tastes better, an apple or an orange? Which career should I choose, NGO advisor or travel writer? And who is more creative, Mozart or Michelangelo? Such hard comparisons cause perplexity in philosophy, and frustration and indecision in every-day life.

In these comparisons, none of the three standard value relations seem to fit; the options on choice are neither equal to, better than, nor worse than one another. But if none of the standard value relations hold, what relation, if any, is there then between the options in these cases?

Ruth Chang has suggested the possibility that there is a fourth comparative value relation called “Parity”, which holds in cases where options are neither equal, better, nor worse, but still comparable. I explore a different definition of the parity-relation suggested by Chrisoula Andreou, namely parity as “belonging to the same category”. This gives a “broad parity” relation which also encompasses options which are equal or slightly better or worse, but still fall in the same category.

I argue first that “broad parity”, or “being in the same category”, provides us with a definition of parity which is easier to make sense of than Chang’s original account of the concept. Then I go on to explore how comparing “in the same category” can be useful in some types of hard comparisons beyond the typical hard cases we started with, such as “self-torturer cases” and satisficing. Finally, I offer some reflections as to how categories are to be understood, and whether “belonging in the same category” has what it takes to be a candidate for a fourth comparative value relation; whether it really is of “the stuff value relations are made of”. I argue for the usefulness of comparing in broad categories, whatever our answer is to the last question.