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Abstract
This paper discusses whether, as a matter of logic, better-than relations require value-bearing relata. Must an x that is better than y be in any sense good (or, where x is less disvaluable than y, bad?) Examples I provide suggest the contrary—that it is possible for something to be better than something else without having any sort of value (other than betterness). Several reasons for being suspicious of this notion of better-than are considered and questioned.

1. Some assumptions

Logically, it seems we should agree that from

(i) x is better than y

it follows that

(ii) x is more valuable, or less disvaluable, than y

(ii) seems to follow from (i), but only, it seems, assuming that it is correct to say that x is more valuable than y if x is valuable and y is not, or that x is less disvaluable than y if y is disvaluable and x is not.

It also seems that from (i) it follows that

(iii) x is more good or less bad than y

This entailment also depends on an assumption. We must assume that it is correct to say that x is more good than y if x is good and y is not, and that x is less bad than y if y is bad and x is not.

However, even given this assumption, it is not obvious that (iii) is entailed by (i). Although 'better' is a value term, and hence is about the valuable, the valuable need not involve goodness or badness. Depending on what is better, (iii) may or may not be entailed by (i). For instance, if x is better than y in its taste or admirability, (i) entails that x is tastier than y, or that x is more admirable than y. In itself, this does not show that (i) does not entail (iii),

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since the analysis of 'tastier' or 'admirable' could eventually involve the notion of goodness. I am inclined to think it does (though the relevant kind of goodness would then need to be non-moral), but this is not an issue into which we need enter here. However, one thing is worth pointing out. The fact that 'better' ranges over more than goodness presents a challenge to those in the literature who attempt either to understand 'good' in terms of 'better' or to understand 'better' in terms of 'good'.[1] Unless they can show that thick concepts like 'tastier' and 'admirable' require for their analysis a reference to good (or bad) they are not going to fully convince.

Some philosophers also believe there is more than one meaning of 'better-than'—that the expression carries different senses and may therefore follow different logical patterns.[2] This may well be the case.[3] However, I shall proceed as if my inquiry concerns the basic logical pattern of the word 'better' as I believe this word is commonly used.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by noting some possible uses of 'better' that allegedly exemplify a kind of evaluation that a competent speaker might make. It is then asked to what extent we (who use 'better' in the ways illustrated in the examples) are logically committed to believing that the better-than relata are, in some sense, good/valuable or bad/disvaluable.

2. Introducing a hypothesis

There are examples, as we shall see, seeming to suggest that from

(i) x is better than y

it follows neither that x is valuable (or contains value) nor that y is disvaluable (or contains disvalue). If it is true that these things do not follow, we can reasonably insist that neither (ii) nor (iii) below follows from (i).

[1] For an example of the first analysis, see Carlsson (2016). For an example of the second, see Temkin (2012), p. 369. See also Äqvist (1968) for a discussion of this second possibility. More examples of the first sort of analysis are given by Johan E. Gustafsson, who in his 'Neither "Good" in terms of "Better" nor "Better" in terms of "Good"' (2014) challenges both directions of analysis. See also Carlson (2016) and the reply in Gustafsson's (2016).

[2] We should not confuse this with another issue, namely whether we should consider the expressions 'better' and 'better for' to be about one or two kinds of value. In Rønnow-Rasmussen (2021) I argue that these expressions are not understandable in terms of each other. Just as there are two positive general value notions, good and good-for, there is 'better' and better-for. Here I will focus exclusively on 'better', though.

[3] See von Wright (1963, p. 10), who maintains that 'better', in one sense, has 'worse' as its converse. However, when 'better' means 'good to a higher degree', the converse is not 'worse' but rather 'less good'. The discussion to follow in this paper is not in any interesting way dependent on whether we have only one of these senses in mind. In what follows, I shall therefore not pay any particular attention to the difference.

(ii) x is more valuable or less disvaluable than y

(iii) x is more good or less bad than y

Moreover, we also have reason to deny that any of these entails

(iv) x is either good/valuable or y is bad/disvaluable

Assuming there is something to these counterintuitive denials, should we perhaps endorse the following hypothesis?

(H): x can be better than y (or y worse than x) despite neither x nor y being valuable or containing any value at all.

(H) is a somewhat radical idea. Therefore, one should expect at least two general objections:

C1: The examples purporting to support (H) are not, after all, examples of x being better than y. Hence, they do not support (H).
C2: The examples are plausible enough, but when we carefully examine them, it becomes clear that the better-than relata in them contain some value or some disvalue. Hence, (H) is not, in the end, supported by the examples.

I shall refer to C1 and C2 as the cornerstones of a *conservative* approach that discards (H). Opposing this, *radicals* affirm (H). [4] According to radicals, it makes sense to use 'better' as it is used in these examples, so they reject C1. Optimally, the radicals will provide an explanation of some kind of why 'x is better than y' does not entail 'x is valuable (contains value) or is disvaluable (contains disvalue)'. Otherwise, it will be hard to resist C2. The explanation is not easy to provide, though. Later I will indicate (rather than show) two explanations with which a radical might work. However, whether or not these are ultimately viable, some, at least, of the responses that the radical might pursue in order to show that the conservative reply can be meaningfully rebuffed are worth considering.

Before moving on, I should stress that just how radical a thesis (H) is depends on how we interpret the idea that something is without value.[5] On a

[4] Neither 'conservative' nor 'radical' is intended as a pejorative or commendatory term.

[5] As we shall see in Section 8, where I briefly discuss the nature of instrumental or contributive value, (H) is open to another interpretative issue. It should therefore be stressed that I am interested in a particular reading of (H). Read in this sense, (H) implies that someone who thinks that x is better than y, and who believes that neither x nor y is or contains any value at all, necessarily only makes one (or is at least only logically committed to endorse only one) fully evaluative judgement, namely that 'x is better than y'. Sometimes 'instrumental value' and 'contributive value' (and other value terms) are used in a non-evaluative, or purely descriptive,

literal reading of (H), it implies that the x and y that stand in a better-than relation to each other need not bear any value at all other than their respective betterness and worseness. To put it differently: in some cases, you can make the claim that x is better than y on the basis merely of judgments whose content does not require you, when expressing them, to deploy any evaluative or normative terms. However, there may yet be an interesting way of looking at these relata.

Over a series of papers, Wlodek Rabinowicz has developed a view of value relations which he thinks (personal communication) suggests a different interpretation of what it is for something to lack value.[6] First, a bit of background. Rabinowicz understands value in terms of a fitting-attitude (FA) analysis. As we shall see later on, this kind of analysis explains value in terms of a normative notion together with an attitudinal element. Rabinowicz also distinguishes between cases of value comparability and value incomparability. Expressing that something is better than something else is an instance of the former, so we can set aside cases of value incomparability.

What Rabinowicz suggests is that something can be better or worse than something else even if it has neither goodness nor badness. In fact, there seem to be at least two possibilities here. For x and y could be either *strictly neutral* or *weakly neutral* (to use his notions). Strict neutrality is understood by Rabinowicz in terms of a requirement to be indifferent both to x and to y. Indifference is a genuine attitude, independent of an individual's preferences, not merely the absence of an attitude. Of course, there are questions about the exact nature of it. However, I will set these questions aside.[7] Here I am particularly interested in Rabinowicz's second possibility, which seems to come closer to what we mean by 'x has no value'. This is the idea of an object that is neither good, nor bad, nor strictly neutral. Rabinowicz refers to this as *weak neutrality*. Something x is weakly neutral if it is the case neither that you ought to favour x, nor that you ought to disfavour x, nor that you ought to be indifferent to x. In other words, you are permitted to favour, disfavour or be indifferent to x. There are other possibilities as well. For instance, something might be weakly neutral if we should not have any attitude at all to x.

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way. Better-than examples, involving these 'non-evaluative' uses would not disprove (H). More about this in Section 7.

[6] E.g., see Rabinowicz (2008), (2012).

[7] I am inclined to view indifference to the choice of favouring or disfavouring x as a state in which we have a second-order attitude vis-á-vis favouring x or disfavouring x. The nature of this second-order favouring is bound to vary, but essentially as a result of it the person will neither favor nor disfavor x. Andrés Garcia is presently working on a paper on indifference, and I expect I will have reason to modify this crude perspective once he is finished with his work.

Is being weakly neutral, then, being without value? It depends. If we take the analysans to be a normative claim (about what we may favour, disfavour or be indifferent about), then according to the FA analysis weak neutrality comes out as a kind of value. However, the analysans is a negative claim, and as such, it might be questioned whether we are dealing here with something displaying genuine normativity. If the analysans does not express something normative, weak neutrality would not, on the FA analysis, be a kind of value. Of course, this would mean that Rabinowicz would be using one kind of analysis (a normative one) for strict neutrality but a different kind for what is weakly neutral. In itself, this is not a problem. However, it does raise the question: What exactly are we analysing? Why is it that we need an FA-style analysis in the first place of something that is not valuable?

I am inclined to regard the analysans as a normative claim, and not only because it transforms into a claim about permissibility, or what we may do.[8] Just as I would say that the claims 'x is good' and 'it is not the case that x is good' are both evaluative claims, I think, analogously, that we should say that the following are normative claims: 'x ought to be done' and 'it is not the case that x ought to be done'. If we assume that (weak and strong) neutrality is a kind of value, then all objects come out as valuable in some sense. In the end, for logical reasons everything turns out to be valuable (or to formulate it in terms of FA analysis, everything turns out to be normative).

Against this, stands the idea that reality is not essentially evaluative or normative. Many—perhaps even most—things are valuable, but some are not, even in a weak neutral sense. Thus, the 'you ought to not dis/favour x' issue will not arise when x lacks value. Not everything is normative. The question 'Is reality evaluative (or normative)?' seems at least to be an open question whose answer logic alone does not determine. My guess is that the affirmation or negation of the idea that only parts of what exists are valuable expresses a deep-rooted conviction traceable back to the idea that there is a fact-value gap. Of course, this idea is certainly open to interpretation. However, one way to read it is as implying that there are at least some facts that literally are not valuable. Admittedly, for someone who lacks this kind of conviction, it will be equally hard to give up on the idea that things are either good, or bad, or strongly or weakly neutral.

This is not the place to settle this issue. In what follows, I shall continue to read (H) in the strict sense. However, I suspect that not only (H) but also the following variant of it will run into opposition.

[8] Cf. J. Gert (2004).

(H+): x can be better than y (or y worse than x) even when the only kind of value possessed by x, or by y, is weak neutral value.

(H+) is slightly less radical than (H). But I suspect that people who find (H) implausible will also find (H+) so. Be that as it may, I am inclined to think that what I argue below will be valid whether or not we have (H) or (H+) in mind. However, though we shall have occasion later on to return to (H+), my focus for the time being will be principally on (H).

A caveat is required, however: I will not provide a conclusive answer to the question whether we should accept or reject (H) or (H+). My aim is considerably more modest. I want to problematise both some more or less intuitive responses to (H) and the examples I discuss. Strong intuitions tell in favour of the conservative approach. It is therefore of interest to display, as I propose to do, the weakness of conservative interpretations of the examples. If, in addition, there is something that also tells in favour of (H) and the radical interpretation, this will be an even more noteworthy result. I will get to the radical response in the final section of the paper. Meanwhile, I will make some preliminary remarks and present the examples suggesting that (H) is correct.

3. 'Better-than'

It is clear that from (i) 'x is better than y' it does not follow that x is good. For one thing, x could merely be less bad than y, but still bad, and thus be better without being good. It is better that I burn my thumb rather than my whole hand, but burning one's thumb is not good; it is bad, albeit less bad than the alternative. Of course, we might want to evaluate what is less bad as being good. However, I venture to say that this further evaluation is not a logical consequence of 'x is less bad than y'. Similarly, we can safely conclude that 'x is less bad' does not follow from (i), since x might be good. However, it does seem hard to deny that (i) entails (ii) or (iii), i.e., that x is more valuable/good or less bad/disvaluable that y.

Hence, we might endorse what I will refer to as the *Quantity* thesis:

(Q): x is better than y only if x has or contains more goodness/value or less badness/disvalue than y.

However, (Q) is in fact questionable. Suppose x has no value at all or some neutral value, and y is bad. In that case, it seems x is better than y. As we shall see in Section 5, just what we should logically conclude in such a case is not obvious, though. Anyway, the interesting question concerns the validity of (H). That challenges both (Q) and the qualified version of it (Q+) which

adds to (Q) that x is better than y when x is of no or neutral value in the case in which y is bad or disvaluable.

Admittedly, the challenge might seem odd. If x contains more goodness or less badness, surely it contains either goodness or badness to some extent. However, sometimes an odd question might be worth pursuing, and I shall at least assume that this is the case here. In doing so, I shall in due course see what speaks in favour of (H). Meanwhile, let us next consider the first example.

4. The status quo case

Suppose some status quo is without value. As we shall see shortly, the nature of this status quo is open to interpretation. At the moment, the thing that is important to keep in mind is that its precise nature is neither good nor bad, nor has some other kind of value (with the possible exception of weak neutral value). Arguably, we might next think that anything is better than the status quo unless, of course, the change results in something bad. The question is, must we believe that the outcome of the change is good? If not, do we then have to think that it is at least less bad than the status quo? Or could we still consider the outcome differing from the status quo to be better despite being neither good nor less bad?

The conservative tells us that in such a case the outcome of the change must contain something good or something bad. (Conservatives might also think it is the change rather than its outcome that is good. I will turn to this response in Section 7). To begin with, let us keep an open mind as to what we have in mind here with ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In fact, we might also think there is some other kind of value involved—other, that is, than goodness and badness (and neutral value). I will soon consider this possibility.

The radical view denies the conservative contention. I am inclined to agree with radicals on this matter. For sure, changing the status quo might result in something good or valuable, but it does not seem that it has to do so. The example only imposes one condition, namely that the change is not one leading to anything bad/worse. So, whatever results in something other, and not worse, than the status quo is better. However, from this it does not necessarily follow that a competent user of ‘better’ must regard the outcome as in some sense good or valuable. Replacing the status quo with a state that does not contain any monadic values at all is better given the premise of the example that retaining the status quo is worse; replacing the status quo with something is better, at least as long as this something is not bad. Or, if you prefer, because keeping the status quo is worse than any change unless it is a change to something bad. If these are real possibilities, we seem to have

support for (H), i.e., for the idea that x can be better than y (or y worse than x) despite neither x nor y being or containing any monadic value at all.

It might be objected that the example above has been misconstrued. If you think anything is better than the status quo as long as it is not bad, you are in effect not comparing outcomes of the change; you are rather comparing events. On the one hand, you have something that is occurring without change being involved, and you evaluate this as worse than an event involving a change. Perhaps this is a better way of expressing why, in a given situation, we might prefer to end the status quo. Does the 'event' interpretation of our status quo example settle whether we should, logically, recognise that the examples do involve goodness or badness? I doubt it (and not merely because the word 'outcome' might well refer to a series of events). However, I will return to this interpretation in Section 7, where I will argue that it does not really matter whether we understand the example to be about outcomes or about events.

5. The Gricean Implicature Argument

Let us next consider what might initially seem as a possible conservative reply to our example. In the case in which the resulting state is not good, the conservative will want to insist that x or y must at least carry some value, since otherwise changing the status quo cannot be better. Why cannot it be better? Here the conservative might argue as follows: 'less bad' and 'more good' (or 'less disvaluable' and 'more valuable') are comparative expressions whose subject-matter is badness and goodness. Therefore, it will be confusing to insist that a change is less bad if we acknowledge, as we have in connection with the example, that the status quo was not bad. We can then draw the analogous conclusion about 'more good'. It is confusing to say that something is more good (or, put more idiomatically, has more goodness) than something else if the latter is not good at all.

Compare what we can conclude from 'x is less blue than y is'. Here we are logically entitled to conclude that x contains some blue—just not as much as y. But if we initially agreed that x does not contain any blue at all, it would be misleading to cause our listener to believe that x is blueish by saying 'x is less blue than y'. Rather we should say, in order not to break a Gricean conversational implicature, 'while x is not blue, y is', or something to that effect. From the perspective of the conservative, we should reason in a similar way about 'more good'. If we recognise that y is without value it is misleading to say that x is more good by a Gricean implicature. So, in light of what we might refer to as the *Gricean implicature argument* (GIA), it

remains for the conservative to argue that in the status quo case the outcome cannot be more good or less bad, and hence it cannot be better than y.

Is this a compelling argument? I think it is not. The radical is, at least, in a position to challenge it by claiming that GIA has counterintuitive results in other cases. Recall the example from the outset: while x is not good or valuable at all, y is bad. Or, to take yet another example: suppose y is without value and x is good. In both of these cases it would seem innocuous to acknowledge that x is better than y. For the sake of consistency, the advocate of the GIA would have to say that in cases of this kind we should say that x is good and y has no value, period. It is misleading to say that x is better than y. Radicals, in support of their interpretation, could stress the ample evidence, in the value theoretical literature, of philosophers who recognise that something that is good or less bad is better, and therefore logically more valuable, or less disvaluable, than something that is without value. Therefore, against GIA (and the idea that we cannot, for example, compare goodness with something that is not of value) stands a more or less common usage of 'better' according to which x might be better than y even in cases like the one we just described. If Gricean implicatures prevent us from making these comparative evaluations about x being good and y being valueless, then all the worse for the implicatures. Therefore, the radical should not be too worried about GIA.[9] Here we simply seem to face a clash of intuitions. We should also not forget that Gricean implicatures are revocable—which means, in our case, that we can always afterwards specify that what we meant is that y is either less good or not good at all. Therefore, Gricean implicatures should not be a watershed between radicals and conservatives.

6. The Canvas case

Before we examine other possible conservative arguments, let us consider yet a variant of our earlier example—one that is suggestive as to why we should accept (H). Consider an empty canvas. I might think adding a yellow spot to the canvas makes it better. Of course, far from everyone would agree with this judgement. Just what it takes to make a canvas better is an evaluative issue. Still, in my view it is a possible evaluative position to take. Someone might think the spot in itself lacks value. However, its presence on the canvas makes the canvas better than it was. There are then various potential explanations of why this is the case. For instance, it might be explained that the canvas acquires a kind of dyadic value, namely betterness, which can be

[9] I owe thanks to Wlodek Rabinowicz for making me see this 'radical' response to the implicature argument.

regarded as a kind of final extrinsic value[10] once the yellow spot is added.[11] It would be odd if someone insisted that in acknowledging this we are logically forced to agree that the spotted canvas is good or even valuable.[12] Nor should this acknowledgment force us to withdraw our better-than judgement in case we reject that the spotted canvas is valuable. According to radicals, we can still make sense of the claim 'the canvas x with the yellow spot is better than the empty canvas y is' without alluding to the former being good or valuable in some other sense. The radical view tells us that, though x might not contain any goodness or value, it can still be better than what y is—even in the case where y is not bad or in any other sense disvaluable.

In support of their view, radicals could, for instance, not only allude to the phenomenon of extrinsic final betterness value, or a particular kind of valuable organic unity (see footnote 10). They might also point to metaethical suggestions in the literature that support their case. For example, several metaethical views have preferences, as a core element, in their analysis of 'better'—be they naturalistic theories (roughly, 'x is better than y' means 'x is preferred to y by speaker or society S') or expressivist theories (in uttering or endorsing 'x is better than y' the speaker performs a speech act, the sincerity condition of which is having a particular preference). There is also, of course, the FA analysis, on which betterness is understood in terms of there being reasons to prefer x to y.[13] This kind of view is best understood as not requiring preferences to have, as their intentional object, any value, and

[10] For an account of final extrinsic monadic value, see Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2000.

[11] Another, more speculative, possibility would be to understand the yellow-spotted painting as displaying betterness as a peculiar kind of organic unity. This would then be a relevant explanation only in cases involving a whole and its parts. A whole might be better (or worse) than its parts. For instance, a clean canvas and a yellow spot, neither of which are valuable, might constitute the valuable painting. Of course, this raises questions about so-called organic unities that Franz Brentano and, in particular, G. E. Moore introduced to value theory. Not everyone agrees with Moore that two valueless objects might together form a valuable unit. As far as I am aware, Moore did not recognise the possibility of two or more valueless objects resulting in something displaying the property 'betterness' (albeit one and the same object but at different times). There might therefore be good reasons why we should give up on such an idea. However, whether or not there are such reasons, they are not obviously logical ones. So, a way of conceiving of x being better-than y is to understand the example along the lines of organic unities. The canvas with the yellow spot is not valuable in a monadic sense. However, the fact that it has two parts (properties) that are not alone, or together, enough to make the painting, say, good, makes the property-bearer nonetheless better than its parts.

[12] In due course, I shall specify what we might have in mind by 'good'. However, for the time being we can keep things simple.

[13] E.g., see Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000). Cf. Rabinowicz (2008), (2012) and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2011).

not requiring reasons for preferences to be or contain any value whatsoever. Just as I can prefer having my thumb burned rather than my whole hand burned without necessarily believing that a burned finger is good, or of value in some other sense, I can prefer a yellow-stained canvas to an empty canvas without thinking that the former is good or valuable in any sense.

For radicals, the problem with this kind of reply is that none of the metaethical views is uncontroversial. Hence, they cannot fully rely on any of these views. However, the fact that there are these metaethical views implies at least one thing: in the eyes of some value theorists there is nothing necessarily peculiar about better-than judgements about objects without monadic value.[14]

The idea that better-than status does not necessarily require value-bearing relata is open to another kind of response. It might be argued that if we cannot invoke any value of x or y, we are in effect treating better-than as a kind of primitive. There is simply no explanation of why x is better than y other than x's betterness or y's worseness. Of course, there is something to this contention. The question is whether we can consistently acknowledge this *and* at the same time accept the logic of 'better-than'. I think we can, and I am willing to do so, I suppose, for the very same reason that I think it is consistent with the logic of final goodness that it too can depend on value-makers that are not themselves valuable. This is part and parcel of what it is to finally value something.

7. Value bearer response

Let us next consider some additional conservative responses to our examples. Let us begin with the status quo case. A conservative 'Gordian knot' strategy would be to dismiss the case. At first sight, that dismissal does not appear ridiculous. However, the dismissal I have in mind, at least, is not a sensible option, for reasons I will come to in due course.

The dismissal response to the status quo case insists that it is the very change that is valuable (good) rather than the result of the change. The relata in the example are events. The radical interpretation of the example can therefore be discarded as the result of a value-bearer confusion. Advocates of this response might acknowledge either that outcome x does not carry any monadic goodness or that x is not less bad than y. However, in itself this does not show that we must accept (H). The reason is that it is not x but the event of change that is good. Since the change is good and the ongoing status quo

[14] Of course, some of these metaethicists may endorse the 'Guise of the Good' thesis, in which case attitudes like desires and preferences would always have a value as its intentional object. This thesis is controversial, though (e.g., Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021).

(event) is without value, the case turns out to be consistent with (Q) after all, so there is no need to go to the length of accepting (H). Or so the argument goes.

This is an expedient reply. It says we should give up the claim that x is better than y, because it is not x that is better than y, but rather that the change from y to x that is good. Hence, properly speaking it is the change that is better than y (which we agreed was without value). The dismissal response therefore concludes that the case discussed (x is better than y) does not support (H).

The dismissal is surely too quick. The question is, why should we generalise this kind of reasoning? Further, why should we think 'better' comes, so to speak, with a monistic rather than a pluralistic view on what the correct value bearers are? According to the dismissal argument, the value depicted by 'better' accrues to a kind of relation, a change, which in the case at issue holds between x and y. To insist that it is the change that is good rather than x might be substantively correct in some cases, but it does not follow from the logic of 'better' that outcome x cannot be better than the status quo y.

For instance, can we not take the canvas to represent a kind of status quo? Leaving the canvas as it is preserves the status quo. However the canvas is interpreted, when I think of the yellow-spotted canvas being better than the empty one, I certainly feel reluctant to accept that what I am comparing is, actually, not the colour spotted canvas with the blank one, but rather the change with the blank canvas.

It might be objected that I am putting too much into the notion of a change here. Why not say that it is rather the relation between x and y that is good? However, now things are getting a little bit too metaphysical. Talk about relations might just as well be a way of talking about a relatum with a relational property, in which case we would be back to square one. There are other ways of understanding relations, but it seems peculiar to hold that the logic of 'better' is tied to a particular metaphysical view of relations. Be that as it may, my main objection to the dismissal of the canvas case boils down to a simple contention about the example we are considering: there is an odd ring to the idea that a relation of some sort is said to be better than a concrete object such as a canvas. A change, or a relation, can be better than another change or relation. But is the comparison of a canvas and a relation even meaningful?[15] Perhaps it is. However, I suspect that, to the extent that it does make sense, what we are in fact comparing is not a change and a canvas, but

[15] For one thing, the constitutive relata of the relation are also what the relation is being compared with.

rather the value of (a fact about) a change versus the value of (a fact about) a canvas. Whether these items alone, rather than the concrete canvases, have any such monadic value is precisely what is under discussion, so assuming that they have value is not going to settle anything.

8. Instrumental and contributive value, and 'good' in an attributive sense

I turn now to a more plausible conservative response to our case. It might at least work in some cases. Consider again our canvas with a yellow spot. I have suggested that it seems to be possible for someone to evaluate the canvas with a yellow spot as better than the empty canvas, but that it does not follow from this that the yellow-stained canvas is good.[16] Or, consider another example. Your partner wonders what you think about the armchair in your living room. Should it be moved to another location? Your view is that its location is neither good nor bad. As it is, you do not have an opinion about the armchair. Your partner is apparently of a different opinion, and she moves the furniture, and asks now for your opinion. You say 'This is better', and when asked why, you reply 'Because now I can reach the lamp without getting up from the armchair'. T*he question then is: Must you* now recognise that reaching the lamp without getting up is good?[17]

At this juncture, it is time to specify what exactly we have in mind by 'good'. Depending on whether we have final goodness (i.e., goodness for its own sake) or some other kind of goodness in mind, the conservative interpretation will appear more or less plausible. To begin with, let us assume that in the examples so far considered we have been referring to final goodness. I venture to say that this is the less plausible reading of the cases. In particular, the armchair case is difficult to see as one that is about final value.

[16] Suppose someone asks: 'But why is the yellow painting better than the empty canvas?' Another might reply: 'Because I prefer to look at something rather than nothing'. This reply seems to give us the supervenience base of 'better than' or the constitutive ground (see, here, Rabinowicz and Österberg (1996) and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2003)). If that is correct, there is no need to bring in any other values. Of course, you may think that looking at something is finally good, but in my view, this is not a particularly convincing thought. Let me also stress that I am not saying that this person is right to say that 'better' and preference are connected with each other in the above way. However, since I think language users do use 'better' in this way, this needs to be taken into account when we examine the logic of 'better'. More on this matter in the final section.

[17] As mentioned at the outset, I will sidestep the complication that the goodness we have in mind here might be, not goodness, but goodness for someone. The distinction between good and good-for brings in its train the distinction between better and better-for.

A conservative might at this point suggest that the examples should be understood to be about what is *attributively* good.[18] If we understand them in that way, they no longer appear counterintuitive. For instance, the painting is not good for its own sake but rather good *qua* painting. In fact, a number of influential philosophers have argued that 'predicative goodness' is problematic, and even does not make sense unless we understand it in terms of an expression where 'good' is attributively used.[19] However, the importance of the attributive/predicative distinction in value theory is controversial. For instance, Andrés Garcia has recently argued that 'we can favour things either as kinds of things or for someone's sake, but in such a way that we also favour them for their own sakes or for the sake of their effects'.[20] If 'good in a way' value can be interpreted as goodness of the final or instrumental variety, this would seem in one sense to trivialize the predicative/attributive distinction. The discovery that the examples are best understood to involve attributive goodness would definitively take the sting out of the objection.

Given the importance ascribed to the predicative/attributive distinction, a minor digression may be worthwhile. Attributivists tend to be sceptical about the idea that we can transform a 'predicative' phrase such as 'x is good' into 'x is a good K'—where K refers to the kind of thing to which x belongs and which 'good' is said to modify. For instance, Geach maintained that not just any kind of K will do here. In order to play the role of a category-filler in value statements, K must provide a standard allowing us to identify their exemplary representatives. Geach and others have argued that not everything can play this role of category-filler.[21] For instance, facts and state of affairs are too thin an entity, in Geach's view, to provide such standards.[22] I am inclined to agree with Geach on this matter. However, since it seems to make sense to evaluate at least some facts as good, or better than other facts, I find it hard to discard predicative uses of 'good' that cannot be understood as elliptical attributive expressions.

[18] In its attributive usage 'good' is a category modifier ('a good philosopher', 'a good knife'), while in predicative usage it stands on its own (like in 'pleasure is good). I thank Daniel Telech and Patrick Todd for reminding me of the attributive sense of 'good' during my talk in Lund.
[19] Geach (1956), Foot (1985), Hursthouse (1999), Thomson (2008), Kraut (2011) and Almotahari & Hosein (2015).
[20] Garcia (2019), p. 691.
[21] Geach (1956).
[22] See Thomson (2008), who rules out states of affairs from what she refers to as 'goodness fixing kinds'. Cf., Rønnow-Rasmussen (2021), Chapter 1, pp 54-55.

Garcia is right to think we can finally, or instrumentally, favour objects such that it 'cuts across the [good in a way] domain'.[23] Nonetheless, we might be sceptical about the idea that we can transform claims such as 'x is good' into 'x is a good K' without some semantic cost. In my view, that cost is unavoidable. This sort of transformation will not work, at least, in cases in which 'x is good' is a full-fledged evaluative expression. Unlike attributivists, I think attributive uses of 'good' are not fully evaluative expressions when they are understood in the way attributivists understand them.[24] If by 'x is a good killer', I convey that x attains a higher degree than whatever is standard for killers, I am not categorically commending x, which I would be if I said 'x is finally good'. Rather, I am informing a listener about how well x fares with regard to some standard for good killers. This relativising of the (attributivist's) attributive sense is absent when 'good' is used predicatively. I might agree with the standard, or have no opinion about it, or even be critical of it. Either way, I can still use and understand 'x is a good killer', suggesting that it is not a fully-fledged evaluative expression.

Whether or not attributive uses are fully evaluative, we should expect my examples above to be equally counterintuitive when we understand them to be about what is 'finally good in a way'. So are they? I believe they are. It is hard, for instance, to see the yellow-spotted painting as good for its own sake *qua* the object it is—e.g., *qua* painting. That still strikes me as something that is not necessarily the case.

Perhaps we should not compare it to the standard of paintings? Perhaps it is best to regard as some other kind of object. For instance, the spotted painting is good (for its own sake) *qua* object to look at. Again, however, I do not find this a convincing proposal about what I am logically committed to endorsing. Insisting that in our examples 'finally good' should be read attributively would not, therefore, obviously clear the way for a conservative attack on (H).

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[23] Garcia (2016), p. 52.

[24] Cf., Scanlon (2011), who argues that attributive senses are not fully normative. He illustrates this with the following example: 'We all know what it means for something to be a good dandelion root, and perhaps the fact that something is a good dandelion root gives a gardener reason to take particular care to rip it out. But the claim that something is a good dandelion root does not in itself involve any such claim about reasons' (pp. 444-445). However, the point made in the main text is one about what kind of speech act is semantically undertaken in uttering 'x is good' and what kind of speech act is undertaken when we utter 'this is a good K' understood in the way attributivists tend to understand it. If these acts are not identical, which they are not, there will be a cost to the transformation in question. In saying that 'x is a good K', meaning 'x is measuring up to a higher degree than the average or standard K', a speaker is at best performing an indirect commendatory speech act. Cf. Hare (1957).

Now, a conservative might try turning the argument around. He, or she, alluding to a version of C1 in terms of final value, could agree that our examples do not involve final goodness; any speaker who, in such cases, makes a better-than comparison is either linguistically confused or must somehow have final value in mind. Since it is hard to see these examples as cases of final goodness, the conservative will conclude that the speaker should withdraw their better-than judgment.

The radical interpretation appears nonetheless to be at least as plausible as the conservative one. Why? One reason is that it just seems unbelievable that the only options we have are to ascribe to the speaker either linguistic confusion (they should not be using 'better') or idiosyncratic views about what has final value. It is unclear to me why a canvas with a yellow spot must be regarded as good for its own sake.[25] Goya's or Picasso's *Las Meninas* are much better candidates for that accolade.

In my view, conservatives are more likely to advance the issues if they interpret (Q) and (H) as being about instrumental and contributive goodness rather than non-derivative final goodness alone. In fact, I think they would be well advised to agree that (H) is reasonable when read as a statement about non-derivative final value alone. It would seem more plausible to argue that once we take (H) to range over other kinds of value as well, especially instrumental and contributive value, (H) looks conspicuously unreasonable.

So suppose the reason why the yellow-spot painting might strike us as better than the empty canvas is that we think there is a good painting, as it were, in the offing, that has begun with, or will be partly constituted by, this yellow spot. This new response has it that it is in virtue of this prospective, but not yet existent, good painting that we can make sense of the idea that the yellow-spotted canvas is better than the empty one. If this is right, we have defended, it seems, the idea that betterness is grounded in value. If x is better than y, this must be because in the case of the yellow-spotted canvas x is good because it contributes, or is a means, to some z that is good. On one interpretation, x's goodness is derived from z, and therefore x is better than y.

Whether or not we agree with this interpretation, it is important to notice that it is the contributive or instrumental value of x, not the value of z, that is making x better than y. For one thing, z represents what x will turn into later

[25] A hedonist might argue that it is not the yellow-spotted canvas that is finally valuable but rather the experience of it. This may be a plausible substantial position to take, but no logic of 'better-than' will tell us that hedonism is correct.

(a good painting), so obviously at this point z has no value because it has yet to come into existence.[26]

If this is the correct analysis, then what is better, in this case, is related to what is instrumentally or contributively good. Hence, it seems the conservative now can reject (H). There is, after all, value accruing to the relata in the relation. It just turns out to be instrumental or contributive value.

This line of reasoning seems sound.[27] However, the extent to which it supports the rejection of (H) will depend in part on how we conceive of instrumental and contributive value. Two decades ago I suggested an analysis of instrumental value in which I separated two fundamental senses of the term 'instrumental value'. Something analogous to what I said then can be said about contributive value. Some self-quotation might therefore be in place:

> Standard suggestions—such as '*x* is an instrumental value' means '*x* is conducive to something that has final value'—are not very helpful, if we want to find out just what the speaker means by 'instrumental value'. Such suggestions tend to leave us in the dark with regard to whether *x* is a bearer of something that belongs to the category of value or whether *x* merely is somehow related to something belonging to this category. In other words, to say of an *x* that it is an *instrumental y*, does not yet determine whether *x* is a *kind of y* or not. What happens here is something that seems to occur with many expressions that are employed to qualify something. Just as 'quicksilver' does not refer to a kind of silver, 'instrumental value' may not refer to a kind of value.[28]

To say that x is a contributive value, similarly, leaves us in the dark about whether x is a bearer of value or merely contributes to the final value of the whole. In the case of instrumental value we seem to be able to grasp the idea that something is a means to something else without having recourse to the idea that this something is valuable. This suggests that we need an argument to the effect that some means are bearers of strong instrumental value (i.e.,

[26] One might object that, in that case, x has no value derived from z, since z does not yet exist. However, here I will ignore this complication. We can always imagine making a claim about what took place in the past.

[27] If we assume an FA analysis of value it will be harder to endorse (H). If x but not y is a means, and we ought to favour it, then x, according to FA analysis, has value. Thus, in that case we could say that x is better than y because x is a means and y is not, so our better-than claim implies that x is valuable. The question then is: Do all means provide us with reasons (or 'oughts'). I think the answer to that is No.

[28] Rønnow-Rasmussen (2002), p. 24. Cf. Moore (1903), p. 24, and Lewis (1946), pp. 384–385.

belong to the category of value) and some are not (i.e., the alleged value bearer merely relates to something that belongs to the category of value). Can we say something similar about contributive values? Can we understand what it is to contribute to a whole without eventually endorsing some value judgement?

In the painting case, it seems we do have an idea of what it means to say that the yellow spot partly contributes to, or partly constitutes, the whole painting, and that that idea does not necessarily commit us to an evaluation. After all, we can describe the painting in purely descriptive terms (e.g., "with the exception of a yellow spot, it has no added paint"). Something similar is true in the armchair case. We can understand that the chair, in its new location, enables the person to do something formerly impossible.

If instrumental and contributive value are susceptible of two interpretations, we eventually need an argument to the effect that the contributively or instrumentally valuable objects are not merely related to what is valuable, but are genuine bearers of something in the category of value. Suppose they are not values at all, but are merely means or contributions to what is valuable. In that case, we need to support the thesis that if a better-than relation is due to x being a contributive or instrumental value, it might still be the case that (H) is correct—at least, given the interpretation of H that I have favoured to this point. This eventuality will indeed be the result if we interpret (H) to range over values, and not merely objects that contribute, or are means, to what is valuable. Such objects might or might not be genuine values. Betterness may sometimes be grounded in weak contributive values that are not really values at all, but rather are items we refer to as instrumental or contributive values (because they relate to something of final value). In such a case, (H) would not necessarily be challenged. It would remain a viable option.

Could one not argue in the following way? If some 'better-than' claims are about strong instrumental or contributive values and others are about weak instrumental or contributive values, then we are dealing with what is, essentially, a merely terminological issue. (H) applies only to some cases. In others, 'better-than' will logically have relata that are either finally valuable, or instrumentally or contributively valuable. Certainly, this would be an incentive to introduce a new term. However, as things are now, it is hard to see how the logic of 'better' somehow would be confined to only one of these senses of 'better' *qua* 'instrumental/contributive value'. Since evaluations expressing better-than relations in terms of means or contribution are legion, we have landed in what seems to be, from a radical's perspective, an interesting observation. The idea that betterness must have values in its

ground is challenged by (H), since better-than evaluations sometimes are about weak (instrumental or contributive) values. In some cases, contrary to appearances, what is better need not actually have any 'real' value in its supervenience base.[29]

9. Counterintuition and thick values

(H) might strike us as a radical and implausible thesis. However, it can be argued that the radicalism it represents is no more than superficial. To see this, consider a related thesis:

> *The Value Detachment thesis*: Better-than need not be grounded in any values at all.[30]

Just as few of us would object to the idea that goodness (or any other value, for that matter) need not be grounded in any values, so too, in my view, betterness need not be so grounded in (or supervene on) values. If this is right, resistance to (H) may strike us as exaggerated. We should therefore endorse (H).

On one interpretation of the value detachment thesis, the above reasoning looks to be correct. However, on another reading the thesis itself appears highly controversial. On the former (much less radical) reading, we should for clarity's sake, add to 'Better-than need not be grounded in any values at all' the following proviso: 'but it must be grounded in value-making features'. If we do not add something to this effect, the thesis will actually be just as controversial as (H). However, once read in this way, the value detachment thesis cannot be referred to in order to strengthen the case for (H). If there are value-makers, value seems to be, at least potentially, present. An advocate of (H) cannot therefore piggyback on the alleged plausibility of the value detachment thesis.

(H) remains a controversial claim. Let us therefore consider another objection to it. One could argue that x is better than y, if not in terms of final or instrumental or contributive value, then at least in terms of some thick, rather than thin, value.

Consider the following possibility. Arguably, a mental or physical change that a person undergoes must, if it is not a good or less bad change, be morally desirable, or admirable, or display some other positive thick value

[29] For instance, the yellow-spotted canvas might be better than the empty one because you happen to think it is more promising. Here again, a strong or a weak kind of value might accrue to what is promising.

[30] I owe thanks to Henrik Andersson for pointing out that while (H) is a radical thesis, the value detachment thesis is not.

property in order to be a better change than one involving no values. Intuitively, a change that disposes a person to assist people in need is desirable, but the growth of a single hair is without value—at least, in most situations. If this is indeed the case, we might have a reason to dismiss (H). For we can maintain that what the logic of better requires is that at least one relatum of the better-than relation bears a thin, or a thick, value or disvalue.

The radicals' reply to this is foreseeable, though. They will raise the same issues as they did about 'good'. That x is, for instance, finally admirable is certainly not logically implied by 'x is more admirable than y'. After all, x might be less 'dis-admirable' (so to speak) than y. So, we are back to the issue whether there are cases in which x as well as y are valueless (but where x nonetheless is assessed as being better than y). Since we can also distinguish between what is finally, contributively or instrumentally admirable, the radical will make the same points about these values as they did about final, contributive and instrumental goodness. Therefore, it would not obviously serve the conservative's case to argue that (H) is falsified by examples in which 'more admirable' is analysed in terms of x being finally, instrumentally or contributively admirable. The reasons here would be similar to those discussed earlier.

As I suggested at the outset, there are analytical suggestions that would settle the conservative-radical issue swiftly. Here is one such: 'x is better than y' is (or we should take it to be) analytically reducible to a disjunction like the following one:

(i) x is more valuable/contains more goodness than y, *or*
(ii) x is valuable/good and y is neutral in value, *or*
(iii) x is neutral in value and y is disvaluable/bad, *or*
(iv) x is less disvaluable/contain less badness than y', or …

However, in the present context, it would be frustrating to resolve the issue between the radical and the conservative by what seems to be semantic fiat.[31] Perhaps 'better' is reducible to a disjunction like the one above. This is what we are trying to figure out. The interesting thing about the radical approach is that it harbours more than one way of dealing with the counterintuition that might still linger vis-à-vis the value detachment thesis and the examples discussed here. Radicals take the detachment idea *either* to express a

[31] Invar Johansson has rightly pointed out that it need not be semantic fiat. It could be a constructivist proposal or there may be a Carnapian explanation behind the proposal. However, unless this kind of 'solution' provides an explanation of why we should either endorse or reject (H), it strikes me as a second-best attempt to resolve to the issue concerning the reasonableness of (H)—at least, at this early stage of the investigation.

synthetic truth about possible supervenience bases *or* to be an idea that is consistent with the meaning of 'better'—albeit one that is different from the more complex disjunctive proposal.

10. In favour of radicalism

We have considered some reasons why one might find the detachment idea puzzling. We have also considered some radical responses to these reasons. Below I shall consider two ways in which radicals might attempt to explain away some of the puzzling features of 'better-than' expressions. Meanwhile, however, a conservative reply is worth considering. According to this, some value simply must be carried by the relata. It need not be thin or thick final, instrumental or contributive value. However, it must be some (other) sort of value. Perhaps this value is *relative value*? That is, at least, a notion that is not obviously subsumable under any of the three value notions just listed. Arguably, when x is better than y, x has a value relative to y, or y has a value relative to x. In the first possibility, if we compare x to something else, z, x will not have this 'value-relative-to-y'. It might have no value at all or mere value-relative-to-z'.

However, relative value does not in itself provide what the conservative requires. The notion of a relative value leaves it open what kind of value we are dealing with. Where x has a value relative to y, the only thing we know is that, whatever this value is, it is a value that relates in a certain way to y. That is it. For all we know, the relative value might therefore be betterness rather than a monadic value like goodness. As long as it is not specified what sort of value we are dealing with, this reply will fail to be convincing.

Let us next ask whether anything further can be said in favour of the radical view. That is, is there anything radicals can add besides the following points?

> (A) There are examples of non-idiosyncratic better-than claims that it is counterintuitive to interpret as being about final values—be they thin or thick values.
> (B) These examples cannot all be reduced to cases involving thin or thick instrumental and contributive values in the strong sense.

Could the radical add a more positive account, rather than merely question the conservative position? One bold manoeuvre would be to introduce a biconditional (the antecedent and consequent of which relate tautologically to each other). On this (analytical) suggestion, 'x is better than y' if and only if 'x is more valuable than y'. This biconditional is innocuous, on the radical

view, since 'x is more valuable than y' and 'x is better than y' are consistent with x's not bearing any monadic value or disvalue at all.

One might be sceptical about this proposal, though. Rabinowicz, for instance, (in personal communication) has questioned whether we are prepared to accept the radical's suggestion about what 'better' means. Are we ready to say, for instance, that robbing someone is more valuable than killing him? As he points out, although we can (and do) say that it is better to rob someone than to kill him, it would be odd to say that the latter is more valuable. Perhaps he is right about this, and it is indeed linguistically weird, or even incomprehensible, to take these two theses to express one and the same thing. My linguistic intuitions are obviously less firm on this matter. It would definitely be odd to say that robbing the person is valuable. However, saying that robbing is *more* valuable than killing seems less odd, and, as Robert Pál-Wallin has suggested (personal communication), saying 'robbing is less disvaluable than killing' is even less strange. Anyway, here the 'radical meaning interpretation' was suggested primarily as an alternative to the disjunctive analytical claim mentioned at the end of Section 9.[32]

In their efforts to explain why it remains acceptable to say that 'x is more valuable than y' even when neither x nor y are valuable, radicals also have access to a more substantive response. Although it would not follow, for instance, from the fact that x is better than y, that x is more valuable, or more good, than y, that certainly would be an understandable evaluation to make about x—even if it is agreed that x has no monadic value. As long as we know that x is better than y, it seems understandable that we would want to evaluate it as more valuable than y. Suppose we do not take 'more valuable' to entail that x or y is in fact valuable/disvaluable. In that case, it should be fine to evaluate x as more valuable, according to at least one radical response.

To what extent we should reform the way in which words are to be understood is a question the answer to which lies beyond my aims here. Top-down reformatory approaches seldom work, so my guess is that the biconditional will face resistance. Radicals might therefore have to stick with the substantive proposal: if you think one thing is better than something else, then the former is more valuable, albeit as a matter of evaluation, not logic.

A final note is apposite, not least because it considerably complicates the assessment of the two views we have considered here. The note is of a more general, methodological character. One might argue it is still an open

[32] One might also question whether this alleged analytic claim is in any sense informative. Being informative is gradable, so perhaps the claim can be defended on the basis that it is somewhat informative. For the biconditional claim to be genuinely informative, both antecedent and consequent would require further substantive grounding-explanations.

question whether the radical or the conservative view is the more plausible view. The radicals have yet to provide us with a convincing example of a better-than relation whose relata lack value. The few examples I have presented here are insufficiently carved-out to lend full support to the idea that there are better-than relations between relata of no value. This seems correct. However, it is vital to understand that radicals might well agree with this. They would merely insist that the questioning of the examples leads one off the subject, or at any rate is not a proper form of engagement with their view and argumentation, unless it can be shown that those examples make no sense. Radicalism is a view about the logic of 'better-than'. It is not a view about which 'better-than' judgments are true or false. Therefore, the logic of 'better-than' they have allegedly outlined is consistent with examples of 'better-than' that are false or even lack a truth-value (even non-cognitivists would accept that 'better' is governed by some logic). So, if we want to resist their examples, it has to be not because we disagree that one thing is better than something else, but instead because we cannot understand, or make sense of, what is being said. Perhaps the examples discussed in this paper make no sense. Personally, however, I am inclined to think that they do make sense, even if explaining in what way they make sense is difficult.

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