



# Value Pluralism versus Value Monism

Christian Blum<sup>1,2</sup> 

Received: 31 October 2022 / Accepted: 5 June 2023 / Published online: 13 July 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

Value pluralism is the metaphysical thesis that there is a plurality of values at the fundamental level of the evaluative domain. Value monism, on the other hand, is the claim that there is just one fundamental value. Pluralists, it is commonly argued, have an edge over monists when it comes to accounting for the conspicuous heterogeneity of the evaluative domain and the rationality of regretting well-justified decisions. Monists, in turn, seem to provide a far more plausible account of rational evaluative decision-making. I argue that the impression of a theoretical stalemate, which is suggested by the exchange of those arguments, is premature. An assessment of the sub-positions in both camps, in conjunction with an analysis of value fundamentality based on the notion of grounding, reveals that certain versions of pluralism and monism—which I call moderate positions—can counter the respective objections. Thus, moderate value pluralism and moderate value monism emerge as the strongest positions in both camps. I conclude that the further debate should center around those two positions.

**Keywords** Value theory · Metaethics · Value pluralism · Value monism · Grounding

## 1 Value Pluralism Versus Value Monism: a Stalemate?

Due to its ever-growing popularity in moral, political, and legal philosophy, there are many formulations of the central tenet of value pluralism. Its proponents argue that there is more than one “basic” (Finnis, [1980] 2011: 82, Riley, 2000: 153, Christians & Ward, 2013: 80), “ultimate” (Berlin, 1969: 168, Crowder, 1994: 293), or “fundamental” (Kekes, 1993: 189, Skorupski, 1996: 101, Schaber, 1999: 71, Galston, 2002: 35, Chang, 2012: 12) value. Regardless of terminological differences, all value pluralists can be said to defend the metaphysical thesis that there

---

✉ Christian Blum  
chr-blum@gmx.de

<sup>1</sup> Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften Hamburg, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Berliner Tor 5, Hamburg 20099, Germany

<sup>2</sup> AMD Akademie Mode & Design Berlin, Pappelallee 78/79, Berlin 10437, Germany

is a plurality of values at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain (see Mason, 2011: 15). Value monism, which, despite of its predominance throughout the history of philosophy, is defended only by a few contemporary authors (Dworkin, 2012; Hurka, 1996; Klocksiem, 2011; Moen, 2016; Regan, 1997),<sup>1</sup> is based on the opposing metaphysical thesis: namely, that there is only one singular value at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain.

Unsurprisingly, value pluralists neither agree on the number of items on their lists of fundamental values nor on the exact entries. The spectrum ranges from a “very modest pluralism” (Jacobson, 2011: 5) that admits only few very general values such as pleasure, beauty, friendship, and knowledge to very permissive accounts that also include many highly specific values like insightfulness, originality, and historic sensitivity (Chang, 2004a, 2004b); and there are many positions in between those two extremes. Value monists, too, disagree on their candidate for a singular fundamental value. The most influential positions advocate pleasurable mental states (hedonism), the satisfaction of preferences (preferentism), or moral goodness (Moorean monism). This diversity raises the question which items ought to be put on the list of fundamental values—if one wants to be a pluralist; or which singular value ought to be assumed—if one wants to be a monist. I will remain neutral on these questions. The more pressing concern seems to be whether one wants to be a pluralist or a monist in the first place. First, I will introduce the strongest arguments against each position.<sup>2</sup> Second, I will show that the impact of those arguments varies greatly depending on which sub-positions within the pluralist and monist camps are assumed. This approach has the advantage of providing a clear outline of this debate for readers unfamiliar with the issues at hand.

Value pluralism, its proponents argue, derives its plausibility from accounting for strong pre-theoretical intuitions concerning the nature of the evaluative domain and evaluative decision-making. The first argument may be labeled the Heterogeneity Argument. It proceeds from the observation that there is a vast plurality of valuable entities that—by all appearance—are very heterogeneous. This class encompasses the pleasure of eating roast pork, the knowledge of our universe and the laws that govern it, the play Danton’s Death by Georg Büchner, loving relationships, selfless acts, and many more things. Value pluralists argue that it is inconceivable how there could be just one fundamental value that pervades all those valuable entities. It is, as Ruth Chang puts it, “hard to believe that bearing, promoting, or respecting that value is ultimately all there is to their being valuable” (Chang, 2012: 5). Value monists, though, must make exactly this claim and furthermore, it is argued, they must be committed to the claim that the only evaluative difference between those things is the quantity of the singular value born, promoted or respected by them. Doing

---

<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the majority of influential practical philosophers in the last 2000 or so years—ranging from Plato and Aristotle over Immanuel Kant and Georg W.F. Hegel to Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and George E. Moore—have, either implicitly or explicitly, assumed the position of value monism. It is only relatively recently that value pluralism has become the dominant paradigm of value theory. Its origins in the contemporary debate hark back to the works of John Dewey and William D. Ross (see Rescher 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive overview see Mason 2011 and Chang 2012.

so, they run afoul of our ordinary intuition. Value pluralists, on the other hand, can account for the heterogeneity of valuable entities by claiming that those entities instantiate distinct fundamental values.

The second argument is called the Argument from Rational Regret (see e.g., Williams, 1973; Stocker, 1990), and it is best explained by an example. It seems perfectly rational if a mayor, who is concerned with construction planning, reaches the assessment that it is all things considered best to build a highway through a forest in order to reduce traffic congestion and, thus, to improve the life of her constituents; and if she regrets, at the same time, that a natural space must be sacrificed for that goal. Value monists, it seems, must reject this assessment. Since according to them all evaluative decisions are made with respect to one fundamental value, it is irrational to regret having chosen the best alternative—that is, that alternative which best promotes that value. The inferior alternative cannot possess any properties that would make it preferable to the superior one and that are not contained in it. According to value pluralism, though, there may be a good reason for the mayor to regret her choice. If one assumes that both options instantiate distinct fundamental values, she must disregard one of these values in favor of the other. It may well be that it is all things considered best to build a highway through the forest, but this does not compensate for the loss of the value which is deemed of lesser significance. And this loss makes it rational, irrespective of the action being the right one, to regret having acted just so.

Value monists retort to this criticism by pointing out that theirs is not only a more simple and elegant axiology, but, most importantly, offers the only plausible account of rational evaluative decision-making (see e.g., Northcott, 2005; Williams, 2011; Moen, 2016). The objection may be labeled the Incomparability Argument. If there really was a plurality of fundamental values that matter for evaluative choice, it would be inconceivable how agents could compare their relative merits—i.e., weigh them off against each other—in the absence of a more fundamental, and hence unifying, value. Value pluralists, it seems, cannot account for a common standard with respect to which it is true that either one value is superior to the other or both are of equal merit. The proverbial comparison between apples and oranges illustrates the point of the objection: Being asked which one of both fruit varieties is better, one usually replies that both are good—but in very different ways. There is no common standard with respect to which the value of apples could be compared to that of oranges. This has disastrous consequences for the rationality of evaluative decisions: If fundamental values conflicted by favoring incompatible alternatives, agents would be incapable of judging which course of action carries greater evaluative weight and thus ought to be pursued. Evaluative decision-making would be plagued by irrationality. Value monism alleviates such threats to practical rationality by turning decision-making into a problem of arithmetic: Any choice between incompatible options amounts to a choice between different amounts of a singular value.<sup>3</sup> And although

---

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that not all accounts of value monism subscribe to this view. For instance, Plato famously argues that the idea of the good sustains all other forms (both ethical and non-ethical), yet itself is beyond any measure or quantification (see Ferber & Damschen 2015). The same is true for the various branches of the Divine Command Theory, whose pro-

there may be epistemic problems when it comes to determining the quantities instantiated by each option, this does not, in principle, preclude their comparability.

At first glance, this exchange of arguments suggests the conclusion that value pluralism and value monism end up at a stalemate (see Talisse, 2011: 100). Monism denies deeply held intuitions about the heterogeneity of the evaluative domain and the rationality of regretting justified decisions; value pluralism falls short of accounting for the rationality of evaluative decision-making. In short, both accounts seem equally unsatisfactory. A closer look, however, reveals that this conclusion is at best premature. Neither value pluralists nor value monists form homogenous camps but can be divided into sub-positions; and not all of these sub-positions are affected by the abovementioned arguments to the same degree. In the following, I will first sketch the sub-positions in the value pluralist camp and then those in the value monist camp.

## 2 Radical Value Pluralism versus Moderate Value Pluralism

Proponents of value pluralism can be grouped into two major sub-positions that may be labeled, for lack of an established terminology, *radical value pluralism* and *moderate value pluralism*. The radical fraction, which makes up the vast majority of value pluralists, includes, among many others, Isaiah Berlin (1969), Bernard Williams (1973), Nagel [1979] (2012), Martha Nussbaum (1986), Charles E. Larmore (1987), Elizabeth Anderson (1993), John Kekes (1993), William A. Galston (2002), and Christine Swanton (2003). It is characterized by the shared assumption that the central metaphysical thesis of value pluralism necessitates a second thesis which may be labeled the No Common Standard Thesis: namely, that in cases of conflict, the relevant fundamental values cannot be weighed off against each other with respect to a common standard of comparison. Thus, all radical value pluralists agree with the monists' contention to the degree that the values' fundamentality precludes any unifying consideration in regard to which their relative strengths can be ascertained and ranked. Any evaluative standard of comparison that would allow for such a weighting would necessarily have to be a singular "super-value" (Crowder, 1994: 295) that is more fundamental than the values at stake and from which the former are (in some sense) derived. However, assuming such a "super-value" would amount to a straightforward endorsement of value monism and a rejection of value pluralism respectively. In other words, since value pluralists are committed to the claim that there is more than one value at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain, and since any standard with regard to which conflicting values could be weighed off and ranked would have to be a monistic "super-value," value pluralists must reject the notion of a common standard of comparison for cases of conflict between fundamental values.

---

Footnote 3 (continued)

ponents consider God's command the singular and fundamental principle of evaluative decision-making (see Wierenga 1983). However, I won't delve into these issues any further.

Despite sharing the No Common Standard Thesis, radical value pluralists sharply diverge when it comes to the question of what this thesis entails for the rational resolvability of conflicts between fundamental values. Defenders of incomparabilism, whose most prominent representative is the earlier Berlin (1969),<sup>4</sup> argue that the No Common Standard Thesis implies that these types of conflict are categorically excluded from rational solutions. Given that there is no common consideration with respect to which the relevant values can be ranked, it is meaningless to even ask if one alternative is better than the other or if they are of equal merit. Underlying this approach is the assumption that evaluative comparisons between two options must always be comparisons that proceed, either explicitly or implicitly, *with regard to some respect* in terms of which one is better than the other or both are equally good; and that there cannot be any *comparisons simpliciter*.

Since values at the fundamental level of the evaluative domain cannot be compared with regard to some such respect, they cannot be compared at all. Thus, the incomparabilist branch of radical value pluralism bites the bullet when it comes to the Incomparability Argument. However, its proponents deny that doing so they incur a deficit in their theory: The impossibility of making reasoned choices between practically incompatible alternatives instantiating different fundamental values—although tragic—is, according to Berlin, an essential aspect of human existence. To nonetheless strive for solutions to such problems is a feature of a totalitarian thinking. We are left with no other option than to decide on the basis of our own preferences and thus terminate, rather than solve, value conflicts. It is this fact, though, that conveys such importance upon our freedom of choice and explains why we value it so highly.

Many other radical value pluralists have emphatically rejected Berlin's position and denied that the No Common Standard Thesis entails incomparabilism. The comparabilist strand of radical value pluralism is closely connected to a neo-Aristotelian approach towards practical reasoning defended by, e.g., Anderson (1993), Larmer (1987) and, most prominently, Nagel ([1979] 2012). These theorists claim that agents need not refer, either explicitly or implicitly, to a comprehensive consideration in order to arrive at a reasoned choice between conflicting fundamental values, but can instead rely on the faculty of *phronesis*, i.e., practical wisdom. By virtue of this faculty, an agent simply "sees" which one of the incompatible alternatives is the better one—though she is, by necessity, unable to provide further justification for her choice. Consequently, radical value pluralists who subscribe to comparabilism must disagree with Berlin insofar as they presuppose that comparisons between fundamental values need not be comparisons with regard to some respect in which one is better than the other, but are comparisons *simpliciter*; and they claim that practical wisdom is the faculty by which agents reliably arrive at correct judgments about which value is weightier *simpliciter*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kekes (1993) and Galston (2002) also sympathize with the earlier Berlin's position. In his later writings, most prominently in an essay written together with Bernard Williams (1994), Berlin seems to at least partially abandon the position of incomparabilism.

Obviously, the incomparabilist and comparabilist strands of radical value pluralism face very different challenges. The Berlinian approach may account for intuitions about so-called hard moral dilemmas in which agents appear incapable of making well-justified choices between conflicting values (i.e., are unable to determine if one alternative is better than the other or if both have equal merit); but it is not at all clear whether intuitions about such dilemmas cannot also be explained by the epistemic shortcomings of the relevant agents (see McConnell, 2010). By and large, though, this version of radical value pluralism conflicts with the strong pre-theoretical conviction that the vast majority of value conflicts are indeed amenable to rational solutions. This holds obviously for conflicts between two of Berlin's "favorite" fundamental values, namely liberty and equality. Legislative bodies constantly face decisions that require weighing off both values (e.g., in the area of economic policy); and although final choices often remain controversial and subject to continued public deliberation, there is little doubt among deliberators that such conflicts allow for reasoned choices. In fact, the very notion of political deliberation is underpinned by the presupposition of comparability. For if choices between freedom and equality were arbitrary by necessity, reasonable disagreement about their relative merits would be impossible; and the exchange of arguments about the justificatory status of policies that concern both values would be pointless (see Talisse, 2011).

Comparabilists, on the other hand, face the problem of providing a convincing account of the relation of being better or weightier simpliciter because they claim that practical wisdom is the faculty by which agents reliably track this relation between fundamental values. To put the argument in a nutshell: By endorsing the No Common Standard Thesis *and* arguing that fundamental values can be compared by agents who possess phronesis, comparabilists are committed to the claim that those agents do not track relations such that one value carries greater weight with respect to a common evaluative consideration, but relations such that one value carries greater weight simpliciter. In this case, though, they must provide a plausible explanation of what it is for one alternative that instantiates a fundamental value to be better simpliciter than another alternative that instantiates a different fundamental value. Otherwise, one cannot conceive of phronesis as the kind of faculty that tracks relations of being better simpliciter (but probably other betterness relations) because one cannot plausibly hold that there are those kinds of relations in the first place; and in this case, the introduction of the faculty of practical wisdom does not save radical value pluralism.

Unfortunately, it is highly controversial, whether the notion of being better (or worse, or of equal merit) simpliciter can be made sense of at all. Judith J. Thomson (1996, 2008) and Chang (1997) argue that the expression "A is better than B" must necessarily be understood as shorthand for "A is better than B in respect R" because "better than" is a predicative and not an attributive relation term. Thus, a person who claims that "A is better than B" may be ascribing to A and B the relation of being better with respect to artistic beauty, alleviating world hunger, or being a burglar's tool. There is, however, "no such thing as *the* relation that people are ascribing to A and B in saying those words" (Thomson, 2008: 59, emphasis in original). Richard Arneson (2010) takes issue with this line of argument. He claims that the

notion of one alternative being better simpliciter than another can indeed be made sense of: The former alternative can be said to instantiate more non-relative goodness in the Moorean sense than the former. Regrettably, Arneson's reply holds no comfort for the comparabilist strand of radical value pluralism since accepting it constitutes a collapse into monism. Obviously, value pluralists do not want to claim that there is a fundamental property of goodness pervading both options in virtue of one is better than the other. Irrespective of whether Thomson and Chang or Arneson have it right, the prospects look grim: Either the notion of better simpliciter does not even get off the ground or it commits its proponents to value monism. In either case, it is clear that resorting to the notion of phronesis does not save the comparabilist account. If one wants to hold on to the notion that phronesis tracks relations of betterness simpliciter, one ends up (at best) with a Moorean account of monism. If one wants to hold that phronesis does not track relations of betterness simpliciter but, for instance, relations of betterness in respect R, one gives up the No Common Standard Thesis.

The moderate version of value pluralism is defended by relatively few theorists, namely Chang (1997, 2004a,b), George Crowder (2002), and Michael Stocker (1990). It is characterized by the assumption that the central tenet of value pluralism does not necessitate the No Common Standard Thesis, but allows for a comprehensive evaluative consideration in regard to which the relative weights of conflicting fundamental values can be ascertained. Moderate value pluralists thus claim that the values' fundamentality does not preclude a common standard of comparison. We may call this claim the Common Standard Thesis.

Since Chang provides the by far most thoroughly developed account of moderate value pluralism, I will delineate this position by reference to her work. She argues that all comparisons between conflicting fundamental values proceed, either explicitly or implicitly, in terms of a more comprehensive value—a so-called covering value—that has the conflicting values as parts and determines their relative weights under given circumstances.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the part-whole relation must be understood a constitutive relation such that the conflicting values contribute constitutively to the content of covering value. One of Chang's own examples helps to elucidate this point. Suppose a vacant chair at a department of philosophy must be filled and the choice has narrowed down to two candidates A and B. While A is a highly original thinker but knows little about the history of philosophy, B is completely unoriginal but a little bit more historically sensitive than her competitor. Whom should one choose? The value of originality favors A, the value of historical sensitivity favors B; but despite of this conflict of values, it is clear that one ought to choose A. And being asked why this is so, the natural answer is that A has more philosophical talent. Originality and historical sensitivity (together with other values like clarity of thought and precision) contribute to

<sup>5</sup> Instead of a "covering value," Stocker speaks of a "higher-level synthesizing category" (Stocker 1990: 172) with regard to which conflicting fundamental values are weighed off. Despite this terminological difference, Chang's and Stocker's accounts are similar in most relevant aspects; Crowder (2002) completely adopts Chang's nomenclature and her line of argument.

making it the case that a person possesses philosophical talent; and it is the specific combination of those values born by A that make her more philosophically talented than B. The covering value in the case of the vacant department chair thus is philosophical talent. It is the common evaluative standard with respect to which—all other things being equal—the great advantage of A in terms of originality outweighs her small disadvantage in terms of historical sensitivity.

The bottom line of Chang's argument is that all conflicts between fundamental values are analogous to the case of the vacant department chair. If a parliament is faced with the decision of whether to pass a law that will hugely improve upon aggregate utility, though at the price of slightly decreasing economic equality, the relative weight of both options (i.e., passing and not passing the law) is determined by a covering value that has aggregate utility and economic equality as contributory parts. The same holds for cases in which agents face decisions to weigh off justice and mercy, loyalty, prudence, etc. That the assumption of covering values for all the latter cases might strike us as odd is, according to Chang, due to the fact that they are—other than in the case of the vacant department chair—nameless. We do not possess a vernacular term for a common standard of comparison with respect to which the relative strengths of, e.g., justice and mercy are ascertained. The namelessness of said covering values, however, is according to Chang no viable objection against assuming them if one wants to hold to the plausible idea that fundamental values are comparable.

Chang is skeptical as to whether the various covering values that allow agents to weigh off fundamental values form a unified structure with a super-covering value on top, but she does not discuss her concerns in detail. It seems quite natural, though, to make exactly this assumption. To see why this is so, let us reconsider the case of the vacant department chair. The original question was why one should choose the candidate who possesses far greater originality and only a little less historical sensitivity than her competitor. The answer was that one ought to do so because that candidate is more philosophically talented. However, a further question is in the offing, namely: Why ought one to choose the future employee on the grounds that she possesses more philosophical talent, rather than, say, economical or musical talent? I would assume that the answer must eventually turn out something like this: because it is all things considered best to choose employees for departments of philosophy on the basis of their philosophical talent, rather than on the basis of their economic or musical talent. The question is what the expression "all things considered best" could refer to if not a more comprehensive covering value that has all relevant covering values as parts. The only way to reject the notion of a super-covering value would be to claim that the inquiry must come to an end at the level of "simple" covering values that have fundamental values and not other covering values as parts and that it is a brute fact that, e.g., we ought to choose employees for departments of philosophy based on their philosophical talent. But this discontinuation is artificial. It *does* make sense to inquire why we should weigh off the relative merits of incompatible alternatives with respect to *some* standard of comparison, rather than *another*. And if it does make sense, there must be something with respect to which it makes sense, namely a super-covering value that tops a unified structure of covering values.



This point is of some importance because it invites the following objection: If moderate pluralists are committed to assuming a unified structure of values with a super-covering value on top, the suspicion suggests itself that their account is no alternative to radical pluralism at all, but rather a monistic position in disguise. How can one assume, critics may contend, a unified value structure and still hold on to the metaphysical claim of value pluralism according to which there is a plurality of values at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain? In order to corroborate the Common Standard Thesis, defenders of moderate value pluralism must thus make plausible the idea that covering values are less fundamental than those values whose rational comparability they facilitate and that the super-covering value is, in turn, less fundamental than “simple” covering values. This concern is all the more pressing since they do not elaborate on the metaphysical relationship between fundamental values and covering values but simply posit that the assumption of the latter does not violate the fundamentality of former.

### 3 Radical Value Monism Versus Moderate Value Monism

Proponents of value monism can be grouped into two sub-positions as well: *radical value monism* and *moderate value monism*. Radical value monism rests on the claim that there is only one value at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain—and that this value has only one relevant dimension, namely, quantity. Let us call this claim the Unidimensionality Thesis. According to this thesis, the only evaluative difference between valuable entities is the amount of the singular value promoted or instantiated by them. Jeremy Bentham’s (1789, 1988) hedonistic monism is considered the chief representative of this position. He claims that the singular value relevant for evaluative choice is pleasure; and he understands pleasure as a sensation that is characterized by the introspectable property of pleasantness (see Hurka, 1996). Since pleasure, according to Bentham, allows for discrete quantification, it provides a simple standard of comparison for evaluative choice: When faced with a decision between incompatible options, agents ought to consider which option promotes or instantiates most units of pleasure and then pursue the respective course of action.

These units of pleasure, Bentham and those who follow in his tracks may concede, might well come in different guises and have—apart from the shared introspectable property of pleasantness—phenomenal qualities that distinguish them from another (see Moen, 2013): The overwhelming pleasure of a lifetime achievement may have a different “feel” to it than the guilty pleasure of watching a trashy horror movie late at night or the indulgent pleasure of eating a bowl of ice cream. These different introspectable aspects, however, are, according to the Unidimensionality Thesis, irrelevant for evaluative choice. What matters is only how many of those units are promoted or instantiated by a relevant option. Thus, five units of ice cream pleasure carry, e.g., the same evaluative weight as five units of lifetime achievement pleasure.

Despite providing a simple and elegant standard of comparison, radical value monism is vulnerable to both the Heterogeneity Argument and the Argument from

Rational Regret. First, it seems counter-intuitive that the only evaluative difference between, say, the knowledge of our universe and the laws that govern it and the play Danton's Death by Büchner could be given by some amount of pleasure (or some other singular value) instantiated or promoted by those two things. Maybe both things indeed have the potential of providing specific amounts of pleasurable sensations, but it seems hard to believe that generating amounts of pleasure (or some other singular value) is all that there is their being valuable. Second, it is inconceivable how this position could account for the phenomenon of rationally regretting well-justified decisions. If evaluative choice is always only concerned with quantities of a singular value there cannot be any grounds for regretting having chosen the superior alternative over the inferior one. For doing so would be regretting having chosen a greater amount of one value rather than a lesser amount of the same value; and this seems clearly irrational.

Defenders of radical value monism may retort to the first objection by suggesting that theirs "is a theory, not about values as such, but about *intrinsic* value, and although monism is (arguably) committed to the view that what is intrinsically valuable is homogeneous, it is not committed to the view that extrinsic value is homogeneous." (Moen, 2016: 1377, emphasis in original). However, as mentioned above, the point of the Heterogeneity Argument is exactly that what makes someone's knowledge of the laws of physics or their life-long friendships valuable is not exhausted by them being preconditions to, say, pleasure or being pleasurable themselves. Rather, it is argued, things like knowledge, autonomy, friendship, and achievement hold non-instrumental value, too, and this non-instrumental value is best explained by their own non-instrumental characteristics (Moore, 2013). It would be unduly time consuming to address the explanatory shortcomings of each variant of radical value monism in regard to the Heterogeneity Argument. Therefore, I shall only briefly consider the hedonistic variant as an example: It would seem that one person's life that has, due to self-deception or some elaborate third party manipulation, only the introspective appearance of featuring certain forms of knowledge (say, about physics, arts, and history) and another person's life, which actually features these types of knowledge, are evaluatively different; and this is so even if they exhibit the same pleasure-pain ratio over time (Nozick, 1971). However, if that is the case—and robust everyday intuition supports that claim—, then the radical monistic reply in its hedonistic variant fails to convince. It cannot account for the intuitive judgment that one life is lacking something in terms of intrinsic value that the other life clearly has.

Of course, monists may seek to rebut this argument by claiming that the respective intuition is misguided: We may have the impression that there is more to the difference between the abovementioned items than the amounts of a singular value instantiated or promoted by each of them; but this impression is due to epistemic shortcomings or some fundamental misunderstanding on our part (Newey, 1998: 500f.). The problem is, of course, that radical value monists owe us an account of why the respective intuition is nonetheless so widespread and persistent. In other words, they would require an extensive debunking argument that showed why we have a good reason to discard our intuitions about the heterogeneity of the evaluative domain despite their ubiquity. But there is no such account in sight.

The second line of response, which targets the Argument from Rational Regret, seems more promising. It states that radical value monism can account for Rational Regret, even though evaluative choices are always only choices between different quantities of a singular value (Schaber, 1999: 73, Moen, 2016: 1378f.). Suppose an agent has to choose between giving eight units of one value—say, pleasure—to a person A and giving ten units of that same value to a person B. In this case, the agent ought to choose the latter course of action; but, it is argued, she still has cause for regret because A comes away empty handed. This line of reasoning is, however, only superficially appealing. Its appeal is due to a subtle change of subject. We do well to distinguish clearly between, first, regret over the fact that one is faced with a situation where it is impossible to provide pleasure for both A and B and, second, regret over having made the choice of providing pleasure for B instead of A. It is hard to deny that radical value monism can account for the rationality of the former case of regret. But this is not the issue of the Argument from Rational Regret. The pressing question is not whether on a radical monist account agents have reasons to regret the fact that they are confronted with choices where they must let one potential beneficiary go empty handed. Rather, the question is whether they can have reasons to regret their best possible choice itself. The answer is no. As Elinor Mason pointedly states, the agent may “just feel[] sorry for A, but there has been no moral loss, as ‘pleasure for A’ as opposed to pleasure itself is not a moral value.” (Mason, 2011:11) Radical value monists, who subscribe to hedonism, argue that pleasure itself is the value that matters for evaluative choice—not A’s pleasure or B’s pleasure—and accordingly they cannot hold that in favoring B over A, the agent incurs a loss of some distinct value that would give her a reason to regret her choice.

Another, rather ingenious counter argument espoused by Ole M. Moen (2016: 1379) holds that “[e]motional attachment [...] has the power to explain why we sometimes regret that a lesser value was not realized even though a larger value was.” On this account, then, we are mistaking the emotional stress caused by a tough evaluative decision for the uncompensated loss of a distinct fundamental value. Given that humans strive for consistency in practical decision-making to lower cognitive overload and are strongly (though irrationally) motivated by loss aversion (Kahneman, 2011), this is a parsimonious account. Yet, I remain skeptical. Because from the dispassionate viewpoint of an uninvolved observer, agents facing a decision-making conflict where two putatively fundamental values are at stake (recall the example of the mayor in “Sect. 1”) still have a reason to regret their best choice. The intractable impression of a loss that one has cause to be regretful about cannot be explained away; it persists even if the one who makes the judgment has no emotional attachment to the issues at stake whatsoever.

Unlike radical value monism, its moderate counterpart is based on the thesis that the singular fundamental value has two relevant dimensions, namely quantity and quality. This claim may be called the Duodimensionality Thesis. The most prominent historical advocate of this position is John S. Mill ([1863] 1998); it has been defended most recently by Thomas Hurka (1996) and Guy Fletcher (2008). These authors opt for a hedonistic account of moderate value monism. The argument for this position proceeds from the plausible assumption—already mentioned above—that pleasurable sensations have, apart from the shared property

of pleasantness, further qualitative aspects that distinguish them from each other. Other than radical value pluralists, however, moderate value pluralists claim that these aspects matter for evaluative choice. And they do so in two ways: First and foremost, they form, as Mill insists, a hierarchy of higher and lower pleasures. The pleasure of a lifetime achievement may have, on this account, more merit than, say, the pleasure of eating ice cream: Five units of the former sort of pleasure carry greater weight than five units of the latter sort of pleasure. Thus, the evaluative difference between valuable items is, according to this account, not only given by the quantity of units of pleasure instantiated or promoted by them, but also by the quality of the respective units of pleasure; and for an agent to make a well-justified evaluative choice between incompatible options is to weigh off those options with regard to both dimensions.

Secondly, the introduction of the quality dimension helps, as Hurka argues, to account for the phenomenon of rational regret over well-justified decisions. If the evaluative difference between incompatible options is given not only by the quantity of the pleasure units born or promoted by both alternatives, but also by their quality, the agent who is faced with said choice is bound to miss out on one qualitatively distinct form of pleasure. And this fact gives her cause to regret her choice—even if it is, all things considered, the right one.

Thus, moderate value monism seems to fare significantly better than its radical counterpart when it comes to the Heterogeneity Argument and the Argument from Rational Regret. The heterogeneity of valuable entities need not be explained by reference to a plurality of fundamental values instantiated or promoted by said entities; we can instead resort to the claim that those entities promote or instantiate qualitatively distinct aspects of a singular fundamental value. The feeling of regret experienced by agents over having to neglect one apparently fundamental value in favor of another apparently fundamental value is, in turn, only the regret over foregoing one qualitative aspect of a singular value in favor of another one.

Nonetheless, moderate value monism faces a serious challenge. Its proponents must convincingly demarcate the idea of a singular fundamental value with a qualitative dimension from that of a plurality of fundamental values. The reason is that Mill's talk about higher and lower pleasures with distinct phenomenal features gives rise to the suspicion that, on this account, the notion of a monistic value reduces to a mere aggregate that lacks any substantive unity and only collects together a range of more specific evaluative considerations that are metaphysically prior to it. As long as there is no clearly defined sense in which an evaluative consideration can be said to be a quality of a singular value, it seems natural to explain the heterogeneity of pleasurable sensations—each of which has distinct evaluative import—with the assumption that there is a plurality of pleasure values at the fundamental level of the evaluative domain, rather than one unitary pleasure value. If that was the case, moderate value monism would collapse into value pluralism. To avoid this collapse, its proponents must explain what makes two evaluative considerations two qualities of a single value as opposed to two distinct values. In lacking such an account, it seems that radical value monists do well to deny that qualitative differences between pleasurable sensations have any evaluative relevance—at least as long as they want to stay monists.

However, even if moderate value monists succeed with this task, they still have to deal with problems of evaluative comparisons and rankings that do not befall the radical variant. On the one hand, they must explain in virtue of what it is the case that specific aspects of the monistic value carry—*ceteris paribus*—greater weight than other aspects of that value. For instance, in order for moderate hedonistic monists to make plausible the idea of higher and lower pleasures, they must offer an account of what it is about lifetime achievement pleasures and ice cream pleasures that make five units of the former weightier than five units of the latter. On the other hand, they must explain how both dimensions, i.e., qualitative and quantitative, of the monistic value are comparable in order to make sense of rational decision-making. For even if we grant as unproblematic that five units of lifetime achievement pleasure outweigh five units of ice cream pleasure, it seems less clear how five units of the former fare *vis a vis* 1000 or 1,000,000 units of the latter. In short, they owe us a standard of comparison with respect to which it is true that a certain quantity/quality combination is better, worse or of equal merit *vis a vis* another quantity/quality combination.

#### 4 Interim Conclusion

In my view, the discussion of the sub-positions of the value pluralism versus value monism debate prompts two central questions that must inform further inquiry. The *first* is whether value pluralism allows for a common standard of comparison without turning into value monism. In other words: Is the notion of a comprehensive evaluative consideration with respect to which it is true that one fundamental value has greater or equal weight compared to another fundamental value in fact compatible with there being a plurality of values at the fundamental level of the evaluative domain? Moderate value pluralists answer this question in the affirmative; radical value pluralists answer this question in the negative. If the latter have it right, value pluralism cannot repudiate the Incomparability Argument. Either, the notion of betterness simpliciter invoked by radical value pluralists does not even get off the ground, or it commits them to value monism after all.

The *second* question is whether value monism is compatible with there being evaluatively relevant qualities of a singular monistic value. In other words: Is the idea of different aspects of a monistic value that have distinct evaluative import consistent with there being one value at the fundamental level of the evaluative domain? Moderate value monists answer in the affirmative; radical value monists answer in the negative. If the latter have it right, value monism succumbs to the Heterogeneity Argument and the Argument from Rational Regret since the defense strategies offered by this position fail.

In short: If the answer to both questions is no, value pluralism and value monism are indeed caught in a stalemate, and both suffer from problems that make them equally implausible. If the answer to only one question is yes, we should consider this position the most plausible one. If both questions are answered with a yes, we end up with two plausible positions; and the further debate should center around those approaches.

I wish to argue that the best way to tackle both questions is to address three issues that have received surprisingly little attention. The first is the notion of *fundamentality*. Radical and moderate value pluralists disagree on whether the values' fundamentality precludes a common standard of comparison; radical and moderate value monists disagree on whether the idea of distinct value qualities is compatible with there being just one fundamental value. Thus, it is vital to determine, first of all, what it is for a value to be fundamental and what the metaphysical status of a fundamental value is vis a vis non-fundamental values. Only if we have clear grasp on the notion of fundamentality with respect to the evaluative domain can we begin to evaluate the strengths of the arguments offered for the respective sub-positions.

The second is the notion of a *covering value*. Given that it is possible to establish a notion of value fundamentality, we must determine if the notion of a covering value can be made sense of and, if so, what it is for a value to be a covering value and what the metaphysical status of a covering value is vis a vis its contributory values. For the moderate value pluralists' sake, it had better not turn out that covering values must be understood as being more fundamental than their contributory values. For in this case, moderate value pluralists would deny that a covering value can serve as a standard of comparison for values at the most fundamental level of the evaluative domain. Furthermore, since the assumption of covering values suggests a unified value structure with a super-covering value on top, their position would collapse into monism. Put positively: It is in the interest of moderate value pluralists to conceive covering values as being less fundamental than their contributory values.

Third is the notion of *value quality*. We must determine if the notion of value quality can be made sense of and, if so, what it is for an evaluative consideration to be a value quality and what its metaphysical status is vis a vis the value of which it is a quality. For the moderate value monists' sake, it had better not turn out that value qualities are best understood as metaphysically prior, i.e., more fundamental than the value of which they are qualities. For in this case, the notion of a singular monistic value would boil down a mere umbrella term that only collects together a range of distinct evaluative considerations, thus turning the account into a form of value pluralism. In other words: Moderate value monists will want to claim that value qualities are (in some sense) less fundamental or posterior to a singular monistic value.

In order to tackle these three issues, we require a conceptual tool. I shall argue that the best instrument for analyzing the ideas of value fundamentality, covering values, and value quality is provided by the notion of *metaphysical grounding*. In the following, I shall provide a brief sketch of the grounding notion and then apply it to the issues at hand.

## 5 Grounding: a Short Excursion

The introduction of the grounding notion into the metaphysical debate is motivated by the insight that our explanatory practice is not exhausted by causal explanations, but also features a distinct form of non-causal metaphysical explanation (Audi, 2012; Fine, 2001; Trogdon, 2013). Consider the following examples: An act is

morally right because it is instance of promise-keeping; a glass is fragile because of its specific molecular structure; the current conflict in Syria is a civil war because it is an armed struggle between domestic groups. In these and similar cases, we do not cite facts that are causally responsible for other facts; we cite facts in virtue of which other facts obtain and are what they are. Successful metaphysical explanations thus track a very different kind of dependence relation between explanans and explanandum than causal explanations, namely a constitutive form of determination. This relation is labeled grounding.

Grounding relations obtain not only between facts, but also between entities such as individuals, properties, states, and events (deRosset, 2013; Schaffer, 2009). The notion of grounding is commonly taken as a primitive (Rosen, 2010). But we can still explicate what ties cases of grounding together. As Louis deRosset puts it: "One common thread is that the entities that ground *e* are supposed to be the entities in virtue of which *e* exists and has the nature it does." (deRosset, 2013: 5). Grounding relations, thus understood, may be either full or partial. An entity *A* is fully grounded in an entity *B* if *A* obtains in virtue of *B*. For example, the disjunctive property of being white or square is fully grounded in the property of being white. An entity *A* is partially grounded in an entity *B* if *B* contributes, together with other entities, to making it the case that *A* obtains. For example, the fact that *S* knows that *p* is partially grounded in the fact that *S* has the true belief that *p*; it is, according to a reliabilist account of knowledge, fully grounded in the facts that *S* has the true belief that *p* and that *S*'s belief that *p* was produced by a reliable cognitive process.

Grounding relations are governed by three structural principles: irreflexivity, asymmetry, and transitivity. The first principle states that no entity can ground itself or contribute, together with other entities, to making it the case that it obtains. It seems evident, for instance, that a distribution pattern has the property of being just not in virtue of being just; it has the property of being just on, e.g., a Rawlsian account in virtue of maximizing the benefits of the least-advantaged members of society. The second principle states that there is no mutual grounding; if an entity *A* is grounded in an entity *B*, then *B* cannot be grounded in *A*. The idea behind this principle is that when we cite the grounds for an entity *A*, we cite objects that are strictly prior to *A* in an explanatory order (see Rosen, 2010: 116). Given this ordering, those objects cannot be grounded by *A* because then they would cease to be strictly prior to the former. If we argue, for example, that an act is morally right in virtue of being an instance of promise-keeping, we cannot, at the same, time hold that it is an instance of promise-keeping in virtue of being morally right. The third principle states that if an entity *A* is grounded in an entity *B*, and *B* is grounded in an entity *C*, then *A* is also grounded in *C*. An example from naturalist metaphysics helps to elucidate this point. Defenders of this view hold that distinct aspects of human life, such as having intentional states, are not brute but obtain by dint of some constellation of biological facts. These facts, in turn, are considered as dependent upon quarks and electrons and so forth. Thus, it seems reasonable to hold that intentional facts, ultimately, obtain in virtue of facts concerning quarks and electrons.

Accepting the grounding notion has several advantages and consequences; I will only mention three points that are directly relevant for this inquiry. One appeal of

the grounding notion is that it entails a hierarchical view of reality that is intuitively plausible (see deRosset, 2013: 1f.). According to this view, reality is structured in layers such that there are higher up strata of facts and entities that are determined by and derived from lower down strata of facts and entities which, in turn, stand in the same relation to even lower down strata and so forth—up to a point where we arrive at a stratum which itself depends on nothing.<sup>6</sup> The naturalistic version of this view, which is most commonly endorsed, claims that the higher up layers are populated by evaluative, intentional and social facts, and entities while the lower down layers are inhabited by biological, chemical, and finally, physical facts and entities.

Furthermore, it is useful for analyzing the metaphysical key concepts of fundamentality and derivativeness (see Schaffer, 2009: 373ff., Bennett, 2011: 27). In absolute terms, we can define a fundamental entity as an entity that is not grounded in anything. A derivative entity, in turn, can be defined as an entity that is grounded in something. In relative terms, we may say that for an entity A to be more fundamental than an entity B is for A to be lower down in the hierarchical grounding structure of reality than B. Correspondingly, for an entity A to be less fundamental than an entity B is for A to be higher up in that structure than B.

Finally, it sheds light on the distinction between two kinds of relations among property types: determinable-determinate relations and genus-species relations (see Rosen, 2010: 126ff.) Consider the statements that every red thing is colored but not vice versa and that every square is a rectangle but not vice versa. Both reference particular-general relations between property types. Being red is a particular way of being colored, and being square is a particular way of being rectangular. There is a significant difference, though: While red is a determinate of the determinable colored, square is not a determinate of the determinable rectangular. Instead, it must be understood as a species of the genus rectangular—if we define a species in the classical sense of being a conjunction of genus and differentia. As Gideon Rosen puts it: “To be a square (species) just is to be an equilateral (differentia) rectangle (genus).” (Rosen, 2010: 127). The same does not hold for the determinate red. It cannot be defined as a conjunction of colored and some other property X.

This difference has genuine metaphysical import. It makes perfect sense to say that a ball is colored in virtue of being red; it is clearly wrong, however, to say that it is red in virtue of being colored. Rather, it may be red in virtue of being, say, purple, or scarlet. Consequently, we can say that determinates ground their determinables; in this case, then, the more general property type is less fundamental than the more particular property type. By contrast, the genus-species case works the other way around. It does not make sense to say that a geometrical figure ABCD is rectangular in virtue of being square. Rather, what makes it the case that ABCD is a rectangle is the fact that it is a right quadrilateral. Hence, species do not ground their genus. Instead, they are partially grounded by them, since ABCD belongs to the species

---

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that the well-foundedness of grounding relations, i.e., the idea all layers of reality are, ultimately, grounded in one layer which itself is not grounded in anything, is contested. For a discussion of this issue, see Rosen (2010: 116) and Bennett (2011).



square in part because it belongs to the genus rectangle. In this case, then, the more general property type is more fundamental than the more particular property type.

## 6 Applying the Grounding Notion to the Issues at Hand

Now let us apply the conceptual tool provided by the grounding notion to the issues at hand. At first glance, it seems that a fundamental value should be understood as a value that is not grounded in other facts and entities. In this case, then, value pluralists would hold that there is more than one value that is ungrounded in absolute terms, whereas value monists would hold that there is only one value that is ungrounded in absolute terms. At a closer look, though, this phrasing is too strong. On this account, both value pluralism and value monism would be incompatible with a naturalistic metaphysics, that is, with the claim that evaluative facts, together with social and intentional facts, are grounded in more basic natural facts. It might well be the case that some proponents of value pluralism and value monism will want to make this claim, but it seems preferable that both theories as such be neutral on this point.

I believe that a more plausible way of understanding the notion of value fundamentality is the following: A value is fundamental just in case it is not grounded in other values; if it is grounded in other values, it is derivative or, as I shall prefer to say, non-fundamental. The notion of value fundamentality as it figures in the debate between value pluralists and value monists pertains to the evaluative domain only, and the definition given above takes this fact into account. Thus, it is neutral with regard to the question whether fundamental values, thus understood, are also fundamental in the stronger sense, that is, ungrounded in absolute terms; or whether they are not and hence grounded in other facts and entities. In this case, then, all value pluralists hold that there is more than one value that is not grounded in other values, whereas value all value monists hold that there is only one value that is not grounded in other values.

An example should illustrate the abovementioned distinctions. Let us consider a value that regularly appears on the lists of proponents of value pluralism: beauty. What makes it the case that something is beautiful, that is, that something instantiates the value of beauty? Value monists will give a metaphysical explanation that makes reference to a singular fundamental value. Hence, they will claim that something is beautiful in virtue of being, say, pleasurable (if they are hedonists) or good (if they are Moorean monists) or bearing some other singular fundamental value. Value pluralists, on the other hand, cannot provide a metaphysical explanation that makes reference to further evaluative facts. There is, on their account, no more basic value born by the respective object in virtue of which it is beautiful. Those pluralists who subscribe to a naturalist metaphysics can, however, cite further non-evaluative facts about that object (e.g., its specific shape, color, texture, or sound) that make it the case that it is beautiful. By contrast, pluralists who do not accept a naturalist metaphysics, cannot cite such facts. They must deny that there are further evaluative and non-evaluative facts by dint of which the object bears the value of beauty. It just does. Period.

Now that the notion of value fundamentality is established and we have defined value pluralism and value monism on these grounds, I shall discuss moderate value pluralism which is the more promising account in the value pluralist camp compared to radical value pluralism; then I will proceed to the discussion of moderate value monism which, in my view, has similar advantages vis a vis its radical counterpart.

Moderate value pluralism counters the Incomparability Argument by introducing a standard of comparison that, allegedly, does not violate the central thesis of value pluralism, namely the covering value. To see if this strategy succeeds, let us consider again the case of the vacant department chair from “Sect. 2.” I take it that the following must be true:

If (1) originality and historical sensitivity are fundamental values.

If (2) philosophical talent, the covering value, is a non-fundamental value.

If (3) originality and historical sensitivity are rationally comparable with respect to philosophical talent.

And if (4) all other conflicts between fundamental values are analogous to the case of the vacant department chair.

Then (5) all fundamental values are rationally comparable with respect to non-fundamental values.

In my view, premises (1) and (3) possess great intuitive appeal, and premise (4) is backed up by the arguments offered in “Sect. 2,” but I acknowledge that there may be some doubts as regards their plausibility. However, let us postpone these issues for the moment and consider premise (2). It seems highly plausible that (2) is true. Both originality and historical sensitivity are more fundamental values than philosophical talent in the sense that the former are not grounded by the latter. It seems quite wrong to say that a person possesses originality or historical sensitivity in virtue of being philosophically talented. Regardless of whether we are asked to explain what makes it the case that someone is a very original thinker, or whether we are asked to explain what makes it the case that someone is immensely historically sensitive, we do not cite facts concerning philosophical talent. Metaphorically speaking, the explanatory arrow does not point from philosophical talent to either originality or historical sensitivity since neither depends in its nature and existence on the former. By contrast, it seems hard to deny that both originality and historical sensitivity are more fundamental than philosophical talent in the sense that the former values both partially ground the latter. Both contribute, together with a specific set of other values like clarity and precision, to making it the case that a person possesses philosophical talent. Thus, if we are asked to explain what makes it the case that a person possesses great philosophical talent, we will cite facts concerning their immense originality, strong historical sensitivity and so forth. In turn, if we are asked what makes it the case that somebody possesses little philosophical talent, we will cite facts concerning their low degree of originality, meager historical sensitivity and so forth. In short, if we understand value fundamentality in terms of grounding and apply this understanding to the relation between the covering value, philosophical talent, and its contributory parts, we arrive at the conclusion that philosophical talent is a less

fundamental value than those values for which it serves as an evaluative standard of comparison.

Thus, moderate value pluralists will want to hold that the evaluative domain is populated by a plurality of values that are not grounded in other values but ground other values, namely, covering values, that serve as evaluative standards of comparison for the former. However, as I have suggested in “Sect. 2,” we ought not to stop there, because it seems sensible to ask why one should invoke one standard of comparison for a conflict between fundamental values rather than another (e.g., why we should base our decision on philosophical talent, rather than musical or economic talent). Thus, the notion of a super-covering value suggested itself. It seems, though, that we need not conceive of this super-covering value as a monistic value that is more fundamental than all other values. Rather, we may say that it is a value that is even higher up—and not lower down—in the hierarchy of values and, hence, a value that is grounded in covering values and serves as a standard of comparison for the former in just the same way that covering values serve as standards of comparison for fundamental values. Admittedly, it seems odd at first glance to say that fundamental values can be rationally compared with respect to less fundamental values and that their standards of comparisons are higher up and not lower down in the structure of the evaluative domain. But if the above argument is correct, this is just how it is. This point brings us back to the other premises, whose discussion we had briefly postponed.

One might want to challenge the argument based on the objection that premise (1) is implausible, that is, that neither originality nor historical sensitivity are fundamental values and that, hence, the argument does not show what it purports to show. Critics would have to corroborate this objection by demonstrating that both values are, in fact, grounded in other values. The question, however, is how devastating this demonstration would be. I believe that it would not be devastating. For even if it turned out that neither originality nor historical sensitivity are fundamental in the sense of not being grounded by other values, it would still hold that they are more fundamental than philosophical talent—the value with respect to which their relative merits are rationally compared. Thus, we could still hold on to the idea that the case of the vacant department chair shows that there are values that are rationally comparable with respect to an evaluative consideration that it less fundamental than the former. And if this is the case, it stands to reason that the same should hold with respect to values that are not grounded in other values. Critics would have to explain why the case of the vacant department chair is an exception, an anomaly of the evaluative domain which is—apart from this very special example—not structured in the way proposed here. In other words, once we have admitted that there is one case in which two values are comparable with respect to a less fundamental value, we can either claim that this case is extraordinary, but then we would have to explain, first, what makes this case extraordinary and, second, why the evaluative domain should be fragmented in such a way. Or we can simply accept the idea that this case is, in fact, exemplary for the evaluative domain.

Another problem with premise (1) is, of course, that it is principally controversial insofar as it states that there are (at least) two fundamental values, rather than just one—which is a claim that value monists reject. They do so, however, on the

grounds that value pluralism as such entails incomparability; and it is exactly the point of this argument to show that this objection does not hold for the moderate version. So let us leave this point aside.

If one wants to object to premise (3), it will not do simply to deny that originality and historical sensitivity can be weighed off with respect to philosophical talent. Because if we must explain why one should choose candidate A, who is very original and not very historically sensitive, rather than B, who is not very original and only little bit more historically sensitive than her competitor, we can indeed say that this is so because the combination of values born by A make her more philosophically talented than B—and that philosophical talent is what matters in the case of the vacant department chair. However, one might argue that it is unclear how philosophical talent allows for a comparison between both values. Here is what we can say: Both values contribute constitutively to making it the case that a person is philosophically talented; and the more they contribute, the more philosophically talented that person is. Now, both values—which in this case favor incompatible alternatives (originality favors A, historical sensitivity favors B)—can be weighed off with regard to how much they contribute to making A and B philosophically talented. And it is clear from (from our understanding of philosophical talent) that the little advantage in historical sensitivity born by B does not contribute as much to making her philosophically talented than the great advantage in originality born by A.

As regards premise (4), one might want to object that other conflicts between fundamental values are disanalogous to the case of the vacant department chair: Just because in this example a covering value can be identified with respect to which two fundamental values are rationally comparable does not mean that all other choice situations are structured the same way. Here, however, the same reply suggests itself as the one I have already offered in the discussion of premise (1). Critics would have to explain what it is that makes this case so unique, and they would have to contend themselves with a fragmented view of the evaluative domain. Furthermore, we should not reject the idea of covering values solely on the grounds that we seldom have vernacular terms for evaluative considerations in respect to which we compare the relative merits of conflicting values. As Chang rightly observes “[t]he namelessness of a value is just an accidental product of our naming practice.” (Chang, 2004a: 3).

Let us now turn to the discussion of moderate value monism which I consider the more promising account in the value monist camp compared to radical value monism. It counters the Argument from Rational Regret and the Heterogeneity Argument by introducing a qualitative dimension to the notion of a singular fundamental value which, allegedly, accounts for rational regret over well-justified choices and for the heterogeneity of valuable entities. To see if this strategy succeeds, I shall consider the hedonistic version of moderate value pluralism since it is the most thoroughly worked out version of this account. It would seem that the following must be true:

If (1) pleasure is the only fundamental value.

And if (2) pleasure has different qualities that have distinct evaluative import without being fundamental values themselves.

Then (3) there is only one fundamental value and yet agents may have cause for rational regret over well-justified choices, and valuable entities are heterogeneous.

As with the first premise of the argument for moderate value pluralism, premise (1) is, of course, principally contested insofar as value pluralists deny it and claim that there is more than one fundamental value. They deny this premise, however, on the grounds that value monism as such cannot account for rational regret and the heterogeneity of valuable entities; and it is exactly this objection that the above argument seeks to rebut. So let us leave this point aside. For our purposes, it suffices to say that pleasure is a good candidate for a fundamental value, meaning that at the very least there is nothing intrinsic to the notion of pleasure that would contradict this claim.

The crux is premise (2). How can we make sense of the idea that there is just one unified fundamental value—pleasure—, and yet there are different qualities of that value—different forms of pleasure—each of which has distinct evaluative import? I propose the following answer: The different forms of pleasure must be understood as species of the common genus pleasure; hence, they are less fundamental than the former insofar as they are partially grounded by it. To see why this is plausible, consider the definition of a species as given in “Sect. 5.” For something to be a species, we said, is for it to be a conjunction of genus and differentia (that is, some property X). This seems to fit well, since pleasures are sensations that all share the introspectable property of pleasantness, but can be distinguished by further introspectable features; such as the overwhelming feeling that accompanies the pleasure of a lifetime achievement, the guilty tinge that inheres in the pleasure of watching a trashy horror movie, or the indulgent feeling that characterizes the pleasure of eating ice cream.

Thus, on this account, a certain sensation is, for instance, an ice cream pleasure in virtue of being a pleasure and possessing a specific introspectable property that one experiences while eating ice cream; the latter property distinguishes it from other pleasures, and hence is its differentia. And it is this property which explains its distinct evaluative import compared to other forms of pleasure, and thus, on the one hand, makes it reasonable to regret have chosen one pleasure over another and, on the other hand, accounts for the heterogeneity of valuable entities.

We should note that the genus-species model also fits significantly better than the determinable–determinate model since determinates, other than pleasures, are not characterized by a shared property. Furthermore, if different pleasures were to be conceived of as determinates of the common determinable pleasure, it would follow that a sensation would be a pleasure in virtue of being, say, an ice cream pleasure. And this seems wrong. Consequently, we can hold on to the idea that in a hedonistic version of moderate value monism, the singular value pleasure is more fundamental than its qualities, the different forms of pleasure.

Even if this argument succeeds, though, there is another issue that must be dealt with. At the end of “Sect. 3,” I argued that a moderate value monist who subscribes to hedonism owes us explanation of, first, why certain higher pleasures

carry—*ceteris paribus*—greater weight than other lower pleasures and, second, why certain amounts of the former are or are not outweighed by the latter. I would suggest the following answer: It is the nature of the genus—here, pleasure—that explains why certain species such as the pleasure of lifetime achievement or the pleasure of helping a friend in need are more important than rather trivial ones like the pleasure of watching a trashy horror movie; and why a certain amount of a lower pleasure does or does not outweigh a certain amount of a lower pleasure. A full understanding of the nature of pleasure, understood as a unified value that grounds each of its forms, would yield a complete quantitative–qualitative hierarchy with respect to which the relative merits and demerits of incompatible options could be compared.

Of course, there are vastly different possible accounts of the nature of pleasure (or other monistic values conceived as genera with distinct species) and elaborating upon them is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I shall only touch on this topic in passing. For instance, a broadly Aristotelean variant that focuses on moderation to achieve the famous “gold mean” might suggest an equable distribution of various higher and lower pleasures over time to avoid excess. Thus, while holding, on the one hand, that moral and intellectual pleasures are superior to purely physical ones, because they involve the exercise of higher cognitive capacities, defenders of such a view could still argue that in certain situations lower pleasures carry greater weight. If I were to ask myself if an evening alone is better spent by re-reading the notoriously difficult, yet delightfully intriguing *Transcendental Deduction* from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* or by drinking a glass of Chardonnay and putting on some easy listening jazz, the answer may well depend on what I have done the previous nights. If the answer is always reading Kant, then it is all things considered better to uncork that bottle and turn on the record player. Because on this account, the nature of pleasure is inextricably linked to leading a balanced life that neither veers into philosophical asceticism nor into dionysian debauchery.

## 7 Conclusion and Outlook

Now that the notions of a covering value and of a value quality have been made plausible, we can answer the two questions that came up in “Sect. 4.” *First*, value pluralism does allow for a common evaluative standard of comparison for conflicting values without inadvertently turning into monism. The mistake made by value monists and radical value pluralists alike is to assume that values can only be weighed off in terms of a more fundamental value, that is, a value that grounds the conflicting values. The analysis of the notion of the covering value, which we undertook by reference to the case of the vacant department chair, shows that it is perfectly sensible that values can be compared in terms of a less fundamental value, that is, a value that is grounded by the conflicting values. Thus, we can take the Common Standard Thesis to be plausible. *Second*, value monism does allow for there to be qualities of a singular fundamental value without inadvertently turning into value pluralism. The key is to conceive of the singular monistic value as a genus and to understand the various value qualities as species of that genus. In this case, then, the singular monistic value is more fundamental than its various qualities in that it grounds the

former and determines their relative weights in terms of a quantitative–qualitative hierarchy. Thus, we can take the Duodimensionality Thesis to be plausible.

In view of these results, it is time to take stock of the debate between value pluralists and value monists. I began this inquiry by noting the suspicion that pluralism and monism might be caught in a stalemate. The Heterogeneity Argument and the Argument from Rational Regret suggested that monists deny deeply held intuitions about the diversity of the evaluative domain and the rationality of regretting well-justified evaluative choices. The Incomparability Argument, in turn, suggested that pluralists cannot account for rational evaluative decision-making. Thus, both accounts appeared equally implausible. A closer look at the debate, however, revealed that there is one sub-position in each camp that bears the potential of countering the respective objections, namely moderate value pluralism and moderate value monism. For moderate value pluralism to succeed, it was necessary to make sense of the notion of a covering value that serves as a non-fundamental standard of comparison for fundamental values. For moderate value monism to succeed, it was necessary to come up with an account of a singular fundamental value with distinct and evaluatively relevant qualities. I argued that both puzzles can be solved by analyzing more clearly the notion of value fundamentality as it figures in the debate between pluralists and monists; and I suggested that one ought to understand value fundamentality in terms of grounding. Applying the grounding notion to the questions at hand helped to make plausible both moderate value pluralism and moderate value monism: Moderate pluralists hold, in my view, that ungrounded values are comparable in terms of values that are grounded by them, i.e., covering values; moderate monists hold that the relationship between the singular fundamental value posited by them and its different qualities is a relationship between a genus and its different grounded species.

In a certain sense, this result is sobering. It was impossible to clearly rule out one of both sub-positions as implausible. Instead, two positions emerge that possess considerable plausibility in light of the arguments discussed in “Sect. 1.” Consequently, I conclude that the further debate between value pluralists and value monists should center around those two approaches. We ought to lay aside radical pluralism and radical monism and rather focus on discussing the respective merits and demerits of moderate pluralism and moderate monism.

I do not want to enlarge upon this issue in greater detail, but only mention two discussion points. The first point concerns the Heterogeneity Argument. It is true that moderate monism offers an account of the heterogeneity of valuable entities—rather than attempting to explain it away, as radical monism does—by claiming that those entities promote or instantiate qualitatively distinct aspects of a singular fundamental value. The question is how well this approach fares against the competing proposal offered by pluralism. It is at least a stretch to claim that the evaluative differences between our knowledge of the universe and a selfless act can be wholly accounted for in terms of distinct qualitative aspects of a single value such as pleasure. It stands to reason that attaining this kind of knowledge and performing that kind of act both provide very distinct pleasures; but the question remains as to whether this is all that there is to their being valuable. In this regard, moderate pluralists still seem to have an edge on moderate monists since they can account for the

heterogeneity of valuable entities by claiming that those entities instantiate distinct fundamental values.

The second point concerns the issue of quantitative parsimony. If one rejects a naturalist metaphysics and thus denies that values are grounded in more fundamental natural facts, it would seem that moderate monism has an advantage over moderate pluralism in terms of parsimony since it posits only one evaluative entity that is ungrounded in absolute terms, rather than many such entities. However, value theorists, who endorse a naturalist metaphysics, need not concern themselves with this issue since the criterion of parsimony applies only to absolutely ungrounded entities (see Schaffer, 2009: 361). Thus it has, on their account, no bearing on the quantity of fundamental values.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Anderson, E. (1993). *Value in ethics and economics*. Harvard University Press.
- Arneson, R. J. (2010). Good, period. *Analysis*, 70, 731–744.
- Audi, P. (2012). Grounding. Toward a theory of the in-virtue-of relation. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 109, 685–711.
- Bennett, K. (2011). By our bootstraps. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 25, 27–41.
- Bentham, J. [1789] (1998). *Principles of morals and legislation*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- Berlin, I. (1969). *Four essays on liberty*. Oxford University Press.
- Berlin, I., & Williams, B. (1994). Pluralism and liberalism. *A Reply*. *Political Studies*, 42, 306–309.
- Chang, R. (1997). Introduction. In R. Chang (Ed.), *Incommensurability, incomparability, and practical reason* (pp. 1–34). Harvard University Press.
- Chang, R. (2004a). All things considered. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, 2–22.
- Chang, R. (2004b). Putting together morality and well-being. In P. Baumann & M. Betzler (Eds.), *Practical Conflicts* (pp. 118–158). Cambridge University Press.
- Chang, R. (2012). Value Pluralism. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 1–18). [http://ruthchang.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/VALUE\\_PLURALISMsubmittedupdateforweb1.pdf](http://ruthchang.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/VALUE_PLURALISMsubmittedupdateforweb1.pdf). Accessed 3 Oct 2022.
- Christians, C. G., & Ward, S. J. (2013). Anthropological realism for global media ethics. In Nick Coul-dry, Mirca Madrianou, & Amid Pinchevski (Eds.), *Ethics of Media* (pp. 72–88). Basingstoke: Plagrave Macmillan.
- Crowder, G. (1994). Pluralism and liberalism. *Political Studies*, 42, 293–305.
- Crowder, G. (2002). *Liberalism and value pluralism*. Bloomsbury.
- DeRosset, L. (2013). Grounding explanations. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 13, 1–26.
- Dworkin, R. (2012). *Justice for hedgehogs*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.



- Ferber, R., & Damschen, G. (2015). Is the idea of the good beyond being? Plato's "epekeina tês ousias" revisited (Republic, 6, 509b8–10). In N. Debra, H. Tarrant, K. Mika, & S. Eero (Eds.), *Second sailing: Alternative perspectives on Plato* (pp. 197–203). Espoo: Wellprint Oy.
- Fine, K. (2001). The question of realism. *Philosopher's Imprint*, 1, 1–30.
- Finnis, J. (1980). 2011. *Natural law and natural rights* (2nd ed.). Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fletcher, G. (2008). The consistency of qualitative hedonism and the value of (at least some) malicious pleasures. *Utilitas*, 20(4), 462–471.
- Galston, W. A. (2002). *Liberal pluralism: The implications of value pluralism for political theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hurka, T. (1996). Monism, pluralism, and rational regret. *Ethics*, 106, 555–575.
- Jacobson, D. (2011). Fitting attitude theories of value. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (pp. 1–15). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fitting-attitude-theories/>. Accessed 3 Oct 2022.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kekes, J. (1993). *The morality of pluralism*. Princeton University Press.
- Klocksiem, J. (2011). Moorean pluralism as a solution to the incommensurability problem. *Philosophical Studies*, 153, 335–349.
- Larmore, C. E. (1987). *Patterns of moral complexity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mason, E. (2011). Value Pluralism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (pp. 1–25). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-pluralism/>. Accessed 3 Oct 2022.
- McConnell, T. (2010). Moral dilemmas. In: E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (pp.1–16). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas/>. Accessed 3 Oct 2022.
- Mill, John S. [1863] 1998. *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moen, O. M. (2013). The unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains. *Philosophia*, 41, 527–543.
- Moen, O. M. (2016). An argument for intrinsic value monism. *Philosophia*, 44, 1375–1385.
- Moore, A. (2013). Hedonism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (pp. 1–16). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/>. Accessed 24 May 2023.
- Nagel, T. [1979] 2012. The fragmentation of value. In T. Nagel (Ed.), *Mortal questions* (pp. 128–141). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Newey, G. (1998). Value-pluralism in contemporary liberalism. *Dialogue*, 37, 493–522.
- Northcott, R. (2005). Comparing apples with oranges. *Analysis*, 65, 12–18.
- Nozick, R. (1971). 'On the randian argument', in Reading Nozick, *Essays on anarchy, state, and utopia*. J. Paul (ed.), Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, pp. 206–231; reprinted in R. Nozick, *Socratic puzzles*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. pp. 249–264.
- Nussbaum, M. (1986). *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Regan, D. (1997). Value, comparability, and choice. In R. Chang (Ed.), *Incommensurability, incomparability, and practical reason* (pp. 129–150). Harvard University Press.
- Rescher, N. (1969). *Introduction to value theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Riley, J. (2000). Crooked timber and liberal culture. In *Pluralism. The philosophy and politics of diversity*, ed. Maria Baghramian, and Attracta Ingram (pp. 120–155). London/New York: Routledge.
- Rosen, G. (2010). Metaphysical dependence, grounding and reduction. In B. Hale, A. Hoffmann (Eds.), *Modality, metaphysics, logic, and epistemology* (pp. 109–136). Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schaber, P. (1999). Value pluralism: Some problems. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 33, 71–78.
- Schaffer, J. (2009). On what grounds what. In D. Chalmers, D. Manley, R. Wasserman (Eds.), *Metametaphysics. New essays on the foundations of ontology* (pp. 357–383). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skorupski, J. (1996). Value-pluralism. In D. Archard (Ed.), *Philosophy and pluralism* (pp. 101–115). Cambridge University Press.
- Stocker, M. (1990). *Plural and conflicting values*. Oxford University Press.
- Swanton, Christine. (2003). *Virtue ethics A pluralistic view*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Talisso, R. B. (2011). Value pluralism and liberal politics. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 14, 87–100.
- Thomson, J. J. (2008). *Normativity*. Open Court Publishing.
- Thomson, J. J. (1996). Evaluatives and directives. In G. Harman & J. Thomson (Eds.), *Moral relativism and moral objectivity*, (pp. 124–154). Oxford: Blackwell.

- Trogon, Kelly. (2013). An Introduction to grounding. In M. Hoeltje, B. Schnieder & A. Steinberg (Eds.), *Varieties of dependence. ontological dependence, grounding, supervenience, response-dependence (Basic Philosophical Concepts)* (pp. 97–122). Munich: Philosophia Verlag.
- Wierenga, E. (1983). A defensible divine command theory. *Noûs*, 17(3), 387–407.
- Williams, A. M. (2011). Comparing incommensurables. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 45, 267–277.
- Williams, B. (1973). Ethical consistency. In B. Williams (Ed.), *Problems of the self* (pp. 166–186). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.