

Philosophy 2180, 2015.

Assignment 2

Applying Kuhnian ideas about incommensurability to theories about why people smoke

This assignment challenges students to apply Kuhn's ideas about scientific incommensurability to a contemporary example. The two chapters on Kuhn in our textbook (*Theory and Reality*) are an important starting point for this assignment. In particular, look at section 6.3 where the two forms of incommensurability are described in detail. After reading these sections, I suggest that you read the article by Goldfarb, Leonard and Suranovic (2000) from start to finish. Do not be frightened if you encounter unfamiliar terms. Do your best to understand the points that they are making, perhaps by taking notes as you read. Then focus on the following questions.

1. Godfrey-Smith distinguishes two kinds of incommensurability. Briefly explain how they differ. Why does he take one form of incommensurability to be more serious than the other?
2. The article "choosing among paradigms: rival theories on why people smoke" (Goldfarb et al. 2000) identifies two alternative economic theories that are invoked to explain why people smoke. The main thesis of the paper is that these theories are incommensurable. Notice that this is a slightly different kind of example than the ones Kuhn relied on. In Kuhn's examples, scientific paradigms followed one another in historical succession. After a paradigm had "shifted", he claimed, the former scientific paradigm was incommensurable with its predecessor. However, in the smoking example, two or more paradigms are thought to be present simultaneously within the discipline of economics.

Let's agree for the sake of argument that the rational choice theory is a distinct scientific paradigm (in the broad sense) from the non-rational choice theory. The question is whether these two paradigms are in fact incommensurable.

- a) Briefly outline, in your own words, the defining features of these two paradigms.
- b) Explain how *each* of the following pieces of evidence can be accommodated by the two paradigms:
 - i. As the cost of smoking increases, the number of smokers decreases.
 - ii. Smokers express regret about having started.

- iii. Most attempts to quit fail, but people who persist in their attempts to quit sometimes succeed.
 - iv. Some people overestimate the risks of smoking, while others underestimate them.
- c) In a paragraph or two, explain whether you are convinced that these two paradigms are incommensurable. Why or why not? Make sure to explain what sort of incommensurability you are talking about (see question 1).
3. a) Section V of the paper presents two other paradigms which are, according to the authors, even more difficult to reconcile than rational vs non-rational choice theories. These are the “liberal” versus “paternalistic” approaches to public policy. See if you can explain why, according to these authors, these two approaches are incommensurable.
- b) In a separate paragraph, explain whether you find this argument convincing.

This assignment is to be submitted by Courselink no later than 6:00 pm on October 7th. I estimate that the assignment should take about 4 pages (1.5 spaced, 12 point font). It is okay if your assignment is slightly longer or shorter than this. Focus primarily on answering the questions in clear and thoughtful terms.