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Moral Dilemmas

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B-Entry (304 words)

A moral dilemma is a situation where an agent's obligations conflict. Debate in this area focuses on the question of whether genuine moral dilemmas exist. This question involves considering not only the nature and significance of dilemmas, but also the connections between dilemmas, the logic of obligation, and moral emotions.

Certain cases involving difficult choices suggest that moral dilemmas exist. These cases also suggest that dilemmas are significant because they show that moral theory cannot help with these choices. If this is right, morality may be unimportant because it may be a system of inconsistent rules that cannot be used as a guide that tells us what to do. But this understanding of the cases is disputable. Perhaps the cases show that agents can be ignorant about what they ought to do. Or perhaps dilemmas are not significant because moral theory tells agents to do the most important of their obligations.

On the other hand, principles from the logic of obligation or *deontic logic* can be used to argue against the existence of moral dilemmas. Principles of deontic logic such as the 'ought' implies 'can' principle and the agglomeration principle, which says if you ought to do *a* and ought to do *b*, then you ought to do *a* and *b*, taken together with the assumption that moral dilemmas exist, turn out to entail a contradiction. This means that one of these principles must be given up, or else it must be the case that moral dilemmas do not exist

Careful consideration of the moral emotions has suggested that dilemmas do exist. It is appropriate for agents to feel guilt only if they ought to have done otherwise. In cases involving difficult choices, it is appropriate to feel guilt no matter what course of action is taken. This suggests that such cases involve genuine dilemmas.

1. The Nature and Significance of Moral Dilemmas (956 words)

A moral dilemma is a situation where an agent ought to do some act, *a*, and ought to do another act, *b*, but cannot do both *a* and *b*. Philosophical reflection about moral dilemmas typically begins by considering cases like the following case originally due to Jean-Paul Sartre (1946). A young man has to decide whether to stay at home to take care of his ailing mother or to leave home to fight with the resistance who are opposing an unjust regime. In this case, it is natural to think that he ought to fight with the resistance because it supports a just and righteous cause. And it is also natural to think that he ought to stay home and care for his beloved and ailing mother.

Taken at face value, this case supports the existence of moral dilemmas or situations in which an agent ought to do *a* and ought to do *b* but cannot do both *a* and *b*. And taken at face value, it seems that the predicament the agent in Sartre's case is in is philosophically significant because he faces an important choice and moral theory cannot tell him which option to chose.

But there are certain strategies that suggest that we may not have to take things at face value and so may not have to admit that these cases involve philosophically significant moral dilemmas.

The first strategy is to deny that the cases support the existence of moral dilemmas. To see why this might be plausible, notice that we do not know some relevant features of this case. In particular, we do not know which of the acts is most important: we do not know whether it is more important for the young man to stay at home or fight with the resistance. The idea, then, is that we are not actually under conflicting obligations in this case. Instead, we ought to do the most important of the acts and simply don't know which act is the most important.

This strategy relies on the idea that one of the acts is more important than the other. A difficulty of this approach is that there are two kinds of cases in which there is no act that is the most important. The first kind of case involves acts whose importances are incommensurable (Nagel 1979). In Sartre's case for example, we might think that the acts are of incommensurable importance in the sense that they are so different that we cannot sensibly rank one as more important than the other. The second kind of case involves acts that are equally important. To adapt an example from Ruth Barcan Marcus (1980), consider an agent who has made two equally important promises but cannot keep both. Since no act is most important in these cases, we cannot explain away the appearance of moral dilemma in the way suggested by the first strategy. So these kinds of cases support the existence of moral dilemmas (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988).

This does not however show that there is anything philosophically significant about the existence of moral dilemmas. The reason why it doesn't establish this is that there is an important distinction between *prima facie* obligations and *all things considered* obligations (Ross 1930). If we are *prima facie* obligated to do something, this means that there is something to be said in favour of doing it. For instance, we are *prima facie* obligated to help those in need and keep our promises. Evidently, these obligations can conflict. For example, suppose a woman has promised to meet her friend for lunch at noon, but on her way to lunch she sees someone who is drowning in a lake. Suppose that if she saves the drowning person, she will not be able to make it to lunch. In cases like this, she is under conflicting *prima facie* obligations.

But these kinds of conflicting obligations are not philosophically significant because they do not show that an agent faces an important choice that moral theory cannot help with. Instead, a good moral agent in this case would break the promise and help the stranger. This is because if we take into account all of the morally relevant facts, the thing that this agent ought to do overall is save the drowning person. There are conflicting *prima facie* obligations, but this does not show that there are conflicting *all things considered* obligations.

Applying this idea to Sartre's case, we can allow that it involves conflicting obligations while denying that it is a philosophically significant moral dilemma by saying that the case involves conflicting *prima facie* obligations. Of course, we do still face the question of what the agent ought to do *all things considered* in this case. And since cases like Sartre's and Marcus's involve incommensurable or equally important considerations, we will not be able to say, as in the case involving meeting a friend for lunch or saving someone who is drowning, that the agent ought to do one of these acts in particular *all things considered*.

Instead, it seems we should say that what the agent ought to do all things considered is disjunctive: *all things considered* the agent ought to fight for the resistance *or* stay at home (Donagan 1984). Since recognizing a disjunctive obligation does not commit us to thinking that there can be a situation in which an agent ought to do *a* and ought to do *b* but cannot do both, this disjunctive strategy gives us a way of explaining Sartre's case without accepting that there are moral dilemmas. Thus, recognizing a disjunctive obligation to either fight or serve gives us an alternative analysis of Sartre's case according to which it does not involve a moral dilemma.

2. Arguments Against Moral Dilemmas from Deontic Logic (885 words)

The second issue surrounding moral dilemmas concerns their logic. In particular, there are plausible principles of deontic logic, the logic of obligation, that entail that a contradiction or some other undesirable result follows from the existence of conflicting obligations. While there are many such arguments, here we will consider only two. These two arguments rely on three principles concerning the logic of 'ought'.

The first principle says that if it ought to be that *a* and *b* follows from *a*, then it ought to be that *b*. Some evidence for this principle is that we reason well when we reason in accordance with it: Suppose that a law has been passed that requires all citizens to register to vote. And suppose this makes it the case that it ought to be that all citizens vote. It seems that reasoning from this claim to the claim that it ought to be that some citizens vote is good reasoning.

The second principle says that if it ought to be that *a* and it ought to be that *b*, then it ought to be that *a* and *b*. Some evidence for this agglomeration principle is that we reason well when we reasoning in accordance with both it and the first principle. Suppose that Smith ought to fight in the army or perform alternative public service (because, e.g., the law says so). And suppose that Smith ought to not to fight (because, e.g., his religion is pacifistic). It seems that reasoning from these two claims to the claim that Smith ought to perform alternative public service is good reasoning. This case illustrated why it is desirable to have the second principle by providing an argument for adopting the package of both first and second principles (Van Fraassen 1973, Horty 2003, Goble 2009). Using the first principle alone we cannot derive 'Smith ought to serve' from 'Smith ought to fight or serve' and 'Smith ought not to fight'. However, the agglomeration principle tells us that 'Smith ought to fight or serve and not fight' validly follows from the premises 'Smith ought to fight or serve' and 'Smith ought not to fight'. Applying the first principle to this result allows us to derive the desired conclusion, 'Smith ought to serve'.

The third and final principle is the 'ought' implies 'can' principle. It says that if you ought to do *a*, then you can do *a*. While there are a variety of motivations for this principle, one motivation for it comes from our practices of giving advice. To illustrate, suppose we were to advise Joan about what she ought to do. If we were to tell her to do something that she cannot do such as draw a square circle, she would rightly feel that we have given her bad advice. The 'ought' implies 'can' principle explains why this advice is bad: it is bad advice because it is certain to be false.

With these three principles in hand, we can now consider two problems about moral dilemmas. The first problem involves the 'ought' implies 'can' and agglomeration principles. The argument begins by supposing that there are conflicting obligations. That is, it begins by supposing that it ought to be that *a*, it ought to be that *b*, and it cannot be that *a* and *b*. Using the

agglomeration principle, we can derive that it ought to be that a and b . And then using the ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle we can derive that it can be that a and b . This contradicts our starting assumption that it cannot be that a and b . So this problem shows that if we accept the agglomeration principle, the ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle, and conflicting obligations, we are committed to a contradiction (see Lemmon 1962).

In order to accept moral dilemmas while not having to accept a contradiction, we must reject either the agglomeration principle or the ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle. However, rejecting the ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ principle alone will not be enough to solve a second problem involving conflicting obligations. This second problem only relies on the agglomeration principle and the first principle (if it ought to be that a and a entails b , then it ought to be that b). Suppose that it ought to be that a , it ought to be that b , and it cannot be that a and b . By agglomeration, we can conclude it ought to be that a and b . Since it is impossible for a and b to be true and since a contradiction entails everything, the first principle tells us that it ought to be that c for any c at all. This shows that if we accept conflicting obligations, the first principle, and the agglomeration principle, we have to accept that there is an explosion of obligations (see Goble 2009). While this may not be as bad as a contradiction, it is nonetheless unacceptable.

In recent years, increasingly sophisticated logics of conflicting obligations have been developed in response to these problems. These logics try to do two things. First they try to avoid the sanctioning contradictions and other undesirable results (see Chellas 1976). And second they try to provide alternative explanations of the cases that we used to support the principles of deontic logic that we relied on (see Horty 2003, Goble 2009).

3. Arguments for the Existence of Moral Dilemmas from the Moral Emotions (717 words)

While issues in logic put pressure on us to reject moral dilemmas, considering moral emotions put pressure on us to accept moral dilemmas. This was perhaps first noticed by Bernard Williams (1965). We can illustrate Williams’s idea by returning to Sartre’s example of the young man who must choose between fighting with the resistance or staying at home to help his mother. It is natural to think that it is appropriate for him to feel guilty for not staying at home if he chooses to fight with the resistance and similarly, that it is appropriate for him to feel guilty for not fighting for the resistance if he chooses to stay at home. As Williams put it, in cases like Sartre’s there is a *moral residue* no matter what the agent chooses to do.

To see why this puts pressure on us to accept moral dilemmas, we need to know something about the nature of the moral emotion, guilt. Plausibly, it is appropriate for agents to feel guilt for failing to do some act only if they ought to have done that act (or, perhaps, only if they know or believe they ought to have done that act). To see why this is plausible, return to the case where an agent has promised to meet her friend for lunch but ends up breaking the promise because she is saving someone who is drowning. In this case, it seems inappropriate for this agent to feel guilt, because it is not true that that she ought (all things considered) to have kept her promise, and she does not believe that in this case she ought to have kept her promise.

If this is the right thing to say about the nature of guilt, then the fact that the agent will feel guilt no matter what he does in Sartre’s case provides some evidence for the claim that this agent is in a philosophically significant moral dilemma. After all, it only makes sense for him to feel guilty for failing to fight for the resistance if he ought to have fought for the resistance and

similarly it only make sense for him to feel guilty for failing to stay home if he ought to have stayed home. Thus, it seems that the only way the moral emotions an agent feels in this case make sense is if he is in a philosophically significant moral dilemma.

One response to this argument begins by conceding that there is some sort of moral residue left over if the agent chooses to fight for the resistance, there is some sort of negative attitude or feeling that it is appropriate for the agent to have toward his failure to stay at home. Having conceded this, the response continues by noting that this residue provides evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas only if the negative attitude that is appropriate is the attitude of guilt. And in order to know that this attitude is guilt rather than some other negative attitude, we would have to know that this attitude is one that is appropriate only if the agent ought to have stayed home. But the claim that the agent ought to have stayed home (or the claim that he believes or knows this) can hardly be used in a non-question-begging argument for the existence of moral dilemmas. After all, admitting this is tantamount to simply accepting that there are moral dilemmas. Thus, this reply suggests that the argument from moral emotions can only establish that there are moral dilemmas if it assumes from the start that there are moral dilemmas (McConnell 1978).

This reply assumes that the only way to distinguish between guilt and other negative attitudes toward an agent's own past actions is by judging that the agent ought to have done otherwise. This assumption is plausible if we accept views according to which the only difference between feeling guilty and have some other negative attitude is that guilt requires it to be the case that the agent ought to have done otherwise. But if we are not convinced that such views are correct, this response will not be decisive. We may be able to distinguish between guilt and other negative attitudes without appealing to the claim that the agent ought to have done otherwise.

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