Are moral dilemmas real?

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Announcement

- Forthcoming lectures will be re-scheduled!
Moral dilemma

- A technical concept
- not moral conflict – ubiquitous
- Not a quandary or epistemic dilemma (not about not knowing what’s the best thing to do)
- Whatever you do, is wrong

“I’m having an ethical dilemma. I’m trying to decide whether to have some.”
Examples

- Sartre’s student
  - Obligation to go fight with the Resistance (WWII)
  - Obligation to stay home and look after his mother
- Obligation to keep promises but sometimes keeping a promise may be wrong
- 2 conflicting promises
- Sophie’s choice - someone else is forcing us to do the wrong thing
WHO

- A number of challenging ethical issues are raised by a potential influenza pandemic.

- These include:
  - priority of access to healthcare resources with increased demand and possible shortages;
  - obligations of healthcare workers in light of risks to their own health; and
  - the fine balance between reducing disease spread through isolation and travel measures whilst protecting the right of individuals to freedom of movement

- Are these dilemmas?
Moral conflict

- A - duty to do X
- A - duty to do Y
- A cannot do both X and Y, i.e. doing X means not doing Y and vice versa
- Duty to do X = duty not to do Y

• Can one have a duty to do Y and a duty to do not Y?
What are dilemmas?

- Are such conflicts, dilemmas?
  - Both duties ‘hold’
  - No duty *overrides*/cancels the other
  - Whatever the agent does – moral failure
- Dilemma: conflict of two duties that is
  - Unresolvable or
  - Resolvable but with a remainder/residue – still a breach of duty
The problem with dilemmas

- Brings out some fundamental questions about morality
  - Is this a sign of inconsistency? Even worse, paradox?
  - If the same action both required and forbidden, ‘this would put an end to ethical judgment’.
  - If there really are moral dilemmas, especially irresolvable ones, have moral considerations run out? No guidance in ethical decisions
    - Can morality condemn us to moral failure?
  - How are we to think of moral duties?
Views

- **Dilemmas – are impossible – No REAL dilemmas**
  - Impossible that morality could impose on agents two ‘ought’s when both cannot be fulfilled
  - Either one statement – not true or
  - The actions – not really incompatible

- **Dilemmas – are possible – no inconsistency**
  - Resolvable – with a remainder
    - Some duties/moral requirements – stronger than others
  - Not resolvable – incommensurable values
Kantians

- Kantian – rationalist – morality founded in reason
  - Deontological – duties – no exceptions
  - Moral duty – declares actions to be **necessary**
    - Two rules declaring actions necessary cannot conflict
    - The conflict is merely apparent; only one obligation holds
    - ‘a conflict of duties and obligations is inconceivable’
  - Even such theories leave room for duties that are less ‘stringent’, less…necessary
Utilitarians

- The right action – depends on the consequences (utility)
  - Usually in contrast to Kantian or deontological views; but they agree on dilemmas
  - “If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible” (Mill)
- Incompatible duties but one prevails – overrides the other – no real dilemma
  - No remainder!
- One value (monism) – what contributes more to that
  - But can that be a homogenous value?
  - Also a single value can give rise to conflicts
In favour of dilemmas

- Bernard Williams
  - Moral conflicts – more like conflicts of desire – the rejected one – not abandoned
  - Conflicts of duties (or ‘ought’s) - the one defaulted on still stands
    - **Evidence: regret!**
      - There is a moral ‘remainder’
    - Maybe irrational? – but there are cases of reasonable regret!
      - but maybe regret for the consequences? Not for doing something wrong
    - Inconsistent personal moral code; not a feature of a consistent moral code
Other arguments

- Feelings of regret can hardly show something about a remainder.
- If anything – guilt is appropriate when failing to comply with a moral duty.
  - but will only show something if appropriately felt.
  - It presupposes more than shows that there are moral dilemmas.

- There are many (incommensurable) values – they can conflict.
  - But dilemmas are about conflicts of duty or requirements.
  - Moral and non-moral values – practical (not moral) dilemmas.
  - Also different roles and social groups.
Single value conflicts

- E.g. promise keeping, Sophie’s choice, trolleys
- But doesn’t the principle dictate what’s to be done?
  - E.g. promise-keeping – second promise – not valid
  - Trolleys – save more lives!
  - Sophie’s choice? – save one life?

- Maybe there is a resolution but without remainder? – have we not done something wrong?
If moral duties are ‘what is best morally speaking’ / what one must do – no real dilemmas (2 things cannot both be what is best to do!)

If moral duties have a single source (e.g. well-being) – also no dilemmas
- Or maybe resolvable ones – with remainder?
- Strange view?

If many, incommensurable sources of duty (values) – dilemmas
- Irresolvable?
- Hierarchy of values? But then a single scale?
On a lighter note…