

Moral Dilemmas Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the structure of moral paradoxes, arguing that moral dilemmas are grounded in moral agents and necessitate the same explanation as the logical behavior of these agents. Consequently, logical and moral laws derive from a different source than nomological and metaphysical laws. Furthermore, it is asserted that logical and moral laws are pluralistic in nature, permitting numerous logical deviations without leading to absurdity.

KEY WORDS: Inconsistency, moral dilemmas, paradox, pluralism.

1. Introduction

The logic of action, obligation, and responsibility has developed in many directions. Formalizing human behaviour must respect the intuitions we attribute to it and explain the various outcomes that behaviour generates. It has been shown that classical logic, as a widely accepted logic of reasoning, limits such formalization, particularly due to its consistency and maximality conditions. Briefly, a theory is consistent when it excludes the truth of a proposition together with the truth of its negation. On the other hand, a theory is maximal when it exclusively requires either the truth or falsity of a proposition.

The problem is that many moral dilemmas give rise to paradoxical and inconsistent situations. Here is an example from Weber:

A liar, a cheater, a shameless scoundrel, is the government executive. Ousting him is imperative. He cheats in elections; so if the opposition party contests his rule, they lose; the lying cheater cannot be deposed without some lying and cheating. If successful, the opposition will only have succeeded in installing a new lying cheater. And worse, if the effort is unsuccessful, then the opposition

has surrendered its principles in shame. Yet there is great importance in unseating the sitting cheater. (Weber 2007: 240)

As a result, we are obliged to cheat because we need to win against a cheater. However, we cannot cheat because cheating is morally wrong. Therefore, we are obliged to do the impossible: to cheat and not to cheat. This is a contradiction.

In what follows, I provide a relatively simple solution to moral dilemmas based on several assumptions:

1. I will assume that moral dilemmas are intrinsically inconsistent paradoxes and that their explanation should not be confined to merely consistent means.
2. I will assume that morality and its laws are structurally more akin to logic than to science and metaphysics.
3. I will assume that an approach capable of addressing various philosophical issues in logic can also be applied to moral issues.

2. An Overview of the Paradox

I will start with a structure of moral dilemmas. Usually, a paradox appears when an event A leads to a result, and its negation (or omission) leads to the same result. That is, $A, \sim A$, leads to the same result:

A implies P ,
 $\sim A$ implies P ;
 Therefore P .

Applied to the obligation cases, 'ought' usually implies 'can' and given Ought (P) denotes the moral necessity (or obligation) and Can (P) stands for the alethic possibility of P , we get

If Ought (P), then Can (P).

The moral paradox in its full beauty looks then as follows:

Ought (P) and Ought ($\sim P$)
 Therefore Ought (P and $\sim P$)
 Therefore Can (P and $\sim P$).

In the background of the argument is a deeply entrenched Kantian assumption that morality is reduced to rationality, and rationality neces-

sarily entails consistency. Many moral dilemmas result in contradictions simply because they lead to inconsistency.

An important distinction is in order: an action is supererogatory, or ‘beyond the call of duty,’ when it is morally good but not required. The action is inherently valuable because it leads to a good result, but there is no obligation that we must perform it. For instance, I can buy ice cream for a random person on the street, and since I do not expect anything in return, my action is good; nevertheless, the action is not morally required. On the other hand, there is an interesting counterpart to supererogatory action called hypererogation. Following Weber (2007), hypererogatory action requires doing an impossible task. For instance, in the case of the cheater, we are necessarily required to act, yet we already know that whatever action we take, it results in a negative outcome. In sum, a hypererogatory act is both obligatory and impossible.

The literature on moral dilemmas offers various ways of addressing them. To avoid paradoxes, these approaches often relativise obligations by differentiating moral beliefs of various moral systems. With this plurality of moral systems in mind, dilemmas can potentially be resolved, and consistent solutions can be presented. We rank these systems and, as a result, explain away the dilemmas in a consistent manner. In this paper, I take the opposite approach. Specifically, I discuss a different and more straightforward strategy for dealing with moral dilemmas. Instead of aiming for consistent solutions, my strategy proposes a non-consistent yet coherent solution.

3. Non-Classicality

The consistency of any (not only) philosophical theory is usually considered the minimal condition for the theory to be considered. If a theory fails the consistency test, it is a straightforward reason to reject it. In Western philosophy, this logical prejudice goes back to Aristotle. True contradictions are not only false. It is even unthinkable to assume their truth because if we suppose so, anything would follow from the assumption ($A, \neg A \models B$).

Nonetheless, as Priest, Routley, & Arruda (1989) and Weber (2007) diagnose, some moral dilemmas are resistant to accurate and consistent analysis, prompting the question: why should we ‘bang our heads against a brick wall trying to find a solution’ if the solution is right in front of

us? In other words, if logical paradoxes are 'brute facts,' we must learn to live with them.

That being said, paradoxes have led to a rethinking logic from a different perspective. Since the emergence of self-referential paradoxes (Priest 2007), the phenomenon of vagueness (Ripley 2011), information states (Barwise 1997), and many hyperintensional belief contexts, the long-standing validity of classical logic has been challenged from several angles. One such perspective questions the overall validity of classical logic. Specifically, it has been shown that one of the fundamental classical principles, the so-called explosion principle, has undermined many otherwise promising theories, leading to its stubborn acceptance, often discouraging philosophers from achieving positive results. This stance can be described as a paraconsistent revolution.

As the name suggests, paraconsistency denies the standard view that contradictions are meaningless. In particular, paraconsistent logic denies that logical consequence is explosive. Therefore, it is not the case that a contradiction A and $\sim A$ implies any arbitrary proposition B . Consequently, this denial allows us to accommodate logically controlled and meaningfully informative inconsistencies. More generally, the example of paraconsistency paves the way for many alternatives because challenging any other logical principle triggers the development of a distinct logical system and its corresponding applications. Thus, the reasoning concludes with the possibility of logical pluralism. I will discuss the consequences in turn.

4. Logical Pluralism

Logical pluralism is the thesis that classical logical consequence is not the only logical consequence available. The validity of logical consequence varies and depends on the domain to which it applies. Given the variety of domains, it is not surprising that a plurality of this kind has emerged. Among the other virtues of this liberation of logic is the simplicity it brings to philosophical analysis. As Beall and Restall put it:

One virtue is that the plurality of the consequence relation comes at little or no cost. Another is that pluralism offers a more charitable interpretation of many important (but difficult) debates in philosophical logic than is otherwise available; we will argue that pluralism does more justice to the mix of insight and perplexity found in many of the debates in logic in the last century. (Beall & Restall 2006: 31)

Moreover, the reasons for considering such plurality transcend the subject matter of logic itself. The need for distinct logics is especially important in the analysis of intensional as well as hyperintensional phenomena. To start with the former, intensional distinctions are crucial for understanding various philosophical notions such as properties, propositions, counterfactual conditionals, and dispositions. In order to grasp these distinctions, the apparatus of possible worlds allows us to individuate and differentiate between extensionally equivalent yet distinct phenomena. Without going into details (Divers 2002), possible worlds have proven to be a sensitive tool for making such distinctions because their variety is sufficient to account for otherwise delicate distinctions. A simple possibility schema:

(P) It is possible that P if and only if there is a possible world, w , such that at w , P

is further supplemented with a 'kind of modality' parameter, depending on what type of modality is to be analysed. For instance, given '@' stands for the actual world, 'w' stands for a possible world, and the modality at issue is nomological modality, we get (PN)

(PN) It is nomologically possible that P at @ if and only if there is a nomologically possible world, w , such that at w , P

while (PN) is further developed into (PN*)

(PN*) It is nomologically possible at @ that P if and only if there is a possible world, w , such that w shares the laws of nature with @ and at w , P.

So far, so good. However, nomological modality is not the only modality, and the schema (P) may have another interpretation, namely one that concerns logical possibility:

(PL) It is logically possible that P at @ if and only if there is a logically possible world, w , such that at w , P

and

(PL*) It is logically possible at @ that P if and only if there is a possible world, w , such that w shares the laws of logic with @ and at w , P.

Logical pluralism thus has an additional motivation. Besides simplicity, the plurality of logical laws is methodologically reminiscent of the plurality of nomological laws. While laws of nature determine the dividing line between nomologically possible and impossible worlds, by the same reasoning, laws of logic establish the dividing line between logically possible and logically impossible worlds.

To sum up, viewing moral dilemmas as rooted in internally inconsistent obligations can be understood from a clearer perspective. First, moral dilemmas frequently arise in our everyday reasoning. Second, any approach that addresses them should not be classical unless we are comfortable with an explosion. Third, we can learn from an already accepted methodology without introducing an *ad hoc* approach. This trio of reasons structures the path I will follow in the next section.

5. From Nomological to Logical Possibility

Inspired by the above considerations, let me start with the query, ‘How do we formulate laws of nature?’ Uncontroversially, nomological explanations take off from investigating scientific facts. Scientific facts are those that serve as inputs into the analysis, and their generalizations lead to accurate explanations as well as successful predictions. For instance, one conception of laws of nature that is best suited for such generalization is the so-called regularity theory. As Lewis puts it:

...a contingent generalisation is a law of nature if and only if it appears as a theorem (or axiom) in each of the true deductive systems that achieves a best combination of simplicity and strength. A generalisation is a law at a world *i*, likewise, if and only if it appears as a theorem in each of the best deductive systems true at *i*. (Lewis 1973: 73)

Indeed, it is far from clear which statements count as laws, although some guidelines are available. Namely:

I take a suitable system to be one that has the virtues we aspire to in our own theory-building and that has them in the greatest extent possible given the way the world is. It must be entirely true; it must be closed under strict implication; it must be as simple in axiomatisation as it can be without sacrificing too much information content; and it must have as much information content as it can have without sacrificing too much simplicity. A law is any regularity that earns inclusion in the ideal system. (Or, in the case of ties, in every ideal system.) (Lewis 1983: 367)

Roughly speaking, this conception of laws of nature enables us to answer both questions regarding nomological modality. It provides us with an

account of the individuation of laws of nature and gives us criteria for delineating nomologically possible worlds from nomologically impossible worlds. The latter are simply those that do not share the laws of nature of the actual world as prescribed in (PN*)

Now, what about logically possible worlds? Inspired by monological possibility, the starting point in articulating the laws of logic is to identify logical facts. One candidate for logical facts is the inferential practice of a particular community. In any case, human reasoning is widely considered the bearer of logical inferences, and correct and incorrect reasoning is evaluated against widely accepted logical practices. Next, we need to generalize the inferences into the axioms of the best and strongest inferential systems. In other words, a linguistic community is equipped with the practice of inferring, and what is to be generalized are the rules that govern the entire practice of logical inference. Of course, humans make mistakes in their inferences and often engage in fallacious reasoning. Nonetheless, it is theoretically possible to identify facts about inferences that depict regularities in the inferential practice, and these regularities would play the role of the laws of logic in my sense. In particular, a generalization is a logical law if and only if it appears as a theorem in a true inferential system (at w) that achieves the best combination of simplicity and strength (at w).

Interestingly, the world 'w' parameter is unimportant for two reasons. One reason is that one world can easily contain two incompatible linguistic communities and, consequently, distinct sets of inferential regularities. Second, this perspective avoids worlds in which no humans exist. It is debatable to even think of such worlds, yet this is unimportant for present purposes.

What about morality? Having established an account of the laws of logic, we can approach moral laws from the same perspective. Namely, following Kant, if morality arises from rationality, then moral action requires rational action. Additionally, if rational action is bounded by logical reasoning, an account of morality should be more similar to an account of one's reasoning rather than to that of an independent world. Humans are rational and moral agents, which places the analysis of morality on par with the analysis of human reasoning. If the universalization of logical facts into logical laws tracks logical inference, then the universalization of moral facts into moral laws follows the same path.

Finally, recall that the plurality of possible universalizations of logical inferences gives us a plurality of logics. Such plurality allows classical

logic in its pure beauty but leaves room for alternative, non-classical logics. If logical pluralism is a valid perspective on logic, then different domains of discourse require distinct logics. Furthermore, if a particular domain diverges significantly from classical logic, a non-classical logic can effectively address it, as demonstrated by Weber's example. For it might turn out that this latter approach provides more elegant, simpler, and more intuitive results. Similarly, if morality articulated in obligations is akin to logic, there is no surprise that obligations can compel us to engage in inconsistent actions. As far as moral practice requires different regularities among moral facts, a distinct moral system is better suited to explain and even prescribe the right actions.

This account of logical and moral laws is only a preliminary project and exacerbates, rather than solves, the moral dilemmas debate. Yet, although it is highly underdeveloped, one crucial lesson follows from my strategy. Unlike nomological modalities, logical and moral modalities do not 'carve reality into its joints.' If logical theories are systematized along the lines of logical facts, logical practices, and laws of logic, then this world may contain a plurality of equally valid logics. Analogously, if the existence of moral facts depends on agents and their moral profiles, and if modal profiles are individuated by moral rules, the same story applies. In sum, the actual world can host incompatible moral laws, including 'forms of pathology' but not 'mere linguistic spandrels,' such as hypererogatory obligations.

Conclusion

I conclude with a conditional thesis: if moral dilemmas are fleshed out in terms of moral rules, and if the systematizations of these rules exist within competitive moral systems, then hypererogatory obligations are inconsistent, period. This inconsistency arises from the fact that the moral rules governing them are themselves inconsistent. If these rules are justified by the community, it is only to be expected that no explosion follows. Moreover, it is precisely the non-classical character of these rules that prevents the triviality result. Moral dilemmas are inconsistent, yet they remain meaningful. They are inconsistent because the rules that generalize them allow for true contradictions. However, they are meaningful because non-classical logics, as one of many available logics, validate true contradictions and yield positive and, importantly, coherent results.¹

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