

E. J. Lemmon and BeTTY's place in moral theories

by Jennie Hiles

In his article on "Moral Dilemmas", E. J. Lemmon (1962, cited Guttenburg et al 2017 p117), when discussing the type of dilemma in which an individual encounters a situation they are morally unprepared for, comments that the desire to **be true to yourself** may well be "... an appropriate consideration in the development of a new moral outlook", but he then states he does not pursue this as a topic because "...I confess myself to be quite in the dark as to what the sense of these words is.". It seems odd on one hand to consider that being true to oneself is a potentially important element in the construction of an individual's moral outlook and on the other to admit to not understanding how the words should be interpreted. This essay will explore the idea suggested by the phrase in the context of normative moral theories and conclude that although it cannot form the basis of a moral theory in its own right, if there is anyone who must have been true to himself in his writings on moral theory, it was Lemmon. If it was otherwise - by his own words - he was no philosopher...

Whatever nuances of interpretation are put on the phrase "being true to yourself" (BeTTY), the words themselves convey only a focus on the individual, not on any external rules, duties or obligations that person may see themselves living under (e.g. laws, social norms). Deontological theories of morality, whilst laying importance on good will in the motivation of the individual carrying out an act, have no room for individuality in the actions taken. The 'good will' comes solely with acting from duty in accordance to moral law. So, from a Kantian perspective, the only moral actions are those that are universalizable and conform with 'doing your duty', irrespective of whether the action happens to coincide with the one that individual being true to themselves would have taken. Arguably¹, for a deontologist, there is no need to conceive of the development of a new moral outlook in response to a moral dilemma, as there would be no situation in which the categorical imperative could not be applied. So BeTTY has no place in deontology but, as will be discussed shortly, there are similarities in the way an action guided by that phrase could be judged as moral or not.

From a utilitarian perspective, individuals' desires to be true to themselves *can* be taken into account, but only as part of an overall utility equation. If the greatest happiness for the greatest number (GHGN) happened to be the consequence of BeTTY, then the action is considered moral irrespective of whether the individual actually considered GHGN before acting². There is no requirement for such a consequentialist to develop a new moral outlook, as all situations would be covered by the GHGN principle, so BeTTY also has no place in the utilitarian landscape other than in the utility calculus.

Virtue ethics is firmly focused on the individual, so the phrase feels like it should fit most comfortably here. Surely an individual adopting BeTTY as their moral compass must reflect a virtuous person? This is of course not necessarily the case if acting in a way that is BeTTY conflicts with what a virtuous man would do. Having said that, this highlights a weakness in virtue ethics in that it lacks a decision process to identify what a truly virtuous person would *actually* do, so there is an argument to say that BeTTY is an important component in virtue ethics: who is to say that the person responding in a way that is "true to himself" isn't in fact the one with the more fully formed moral intelligence interpreting the moral facts correctly, *not* the majority who incorrectly believe they know what the virtuous man would do? Or, in

1 Not all deontological moral theorists deny the existence of moral dilemmas (McConnell, T, 2018)

2 I.e. different from deontology, where the motive is more important than the result

the absence of *any* idea of what a virtuous man would do - such as Lemmon's example of being morally unprepared - using it as a basis of deciding what the moral facts are and therefore a course of action.

Could BeTTY be the basis of a moral theory in its own right? One obvious difficulty with this idea is that there is nothing to say that the person adopting BeTTY to guide their actions is necessarily adopting a recognizably moral position³. Taking the example of the Oxford Riots moral dilemma involving merchant Nicholas and the 20 students⁴: if he kills one student, it will save the remaining 19 and himself, otherwise they will all die. If you equate BeTTY with being honest with yourself, the reasons for an action may show morally good faith or morally bad faith: if Nicholas decides to kill a student, was his primary motivation to save the other 19 students or, if he's really honest with himself, was it because he wasn't absolutely certain the townsmen wouldn't kill him too for refusing to act⁵? Would he have still killed a student and risk being charged with murder if he thought his life was not in danger? If he can honestly answer that his action was to save the 19 students, then he could be considered to be acting morally - in good faith - whereas if he primarily acted 'to save himself' it is clearly a selfish act and there is no moral element: he is acting in bad faith and deserves to be charged with murder. On the face of it, if Nicholas killed in good faith, then you might even have an argument to convince a deontologist of your good motives⁶, and it looks good morally under the other two theories too: consequentialists would like the outcome and virtue ethicists would approve of the virtue of selflessness. From this perspective BeTTY looks good as moral theory, but this presumes that BeTTY will lead you to a moral action, which of course it doesn't: if Nicholas killed in bad faith it could still be the case that he was being true to himself. BeTTY cannot form the basis of a good moral theory in its own right, as it is not action-guiding in any moral sense: it can just as validly lead to a selfish and immoral act as to a moral one.

Perhaps this is a reason for Lemmon's difficulties with the phrase. He recognized it as an important element in building a new moral position, but at the same time that it holds no guarantee of the moral character of the individual. It can't be assumed that somebody being true to themselves is trying to do either the 'right', the 'good' or the 'best' thing with respect to the rest of us. Or, even with the best intentions morally, the person might be misguided when trying 'to do the right thing' based on BeTTY. Human societies need laws and rules to operate, and whilst civil disobedience can serve to overturn bad rules and laws, if everyone went around being "true to themselves" in everyday situations, it's likely there would be anarchy.

Turning back to Lemmon's article, it is very interesting to note the content of a digression he made in which he reflected on the role of the philosopher. He believed if anyone is going to give guidance in the matter of "what should I do?", it should be the philosopher, as they can best analyse the validity of ethical arguments⁷. He commented that a philosopher is not entitled to hold beliefs (political, religious or otherwise) that are not philosophically defensible. In a way this was Lemmon answering his own question regarding the sense of the words "true to himself" as they applied to him. To all intents and purposes, he recognized he

3 ... even leaving 'being true to yourself' psychopaths out for the purposes of this discussion!

4 Online course adapted exercise (Trinity2018.conted.ox.ac.uk. 2018) originally from Bernard Williams (Smart J, Williams B 1973).

5 This is modifying the original scenario slightly

6 Ignoring a 'do not kill' rule would still be immoral to a deontologist

7 Lemmon (1962), cited Guttenburg et al 2017 p116

could only claim to be a philosopher if he could philosophically defend all the beliefs he held when being “true to himself”. If this was his own philosophy, it is not surprising that he then went on to suggest that BeTTY must in some way be a consideration when resolving the particular kinds of moral dilemmas that require the development of new morality. His whole identity as a philosopher depended on him being able to defend any position he held, so it is natural that when theorizing about how a new morality would come about he would try to imagine himself in that position and identify what he would do in that situation: be true to himself.

So, whilst she cannot be a universal recipe for morality, BeTTY can still be useful in the resolution of moral dilemmas, and for Lemmon she was an essential element in the make up of that set of people that are true philosophers!

Bibliography

Blackburn, S. (2001) “Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy” Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Guttenplan S, J Hornsby, C Janaway. (2003) “Reading Philosophy” Blackwell Publishing.

McConnell, T (2018), "Moral Dilemmas", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/moral-dilemmas/>.

Shafer-Landau, R. (2013). “Ethical theory”. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Smart J, Williams B (1973) “Utilitarianism: For and Against” Cambridge University Press.

Trinity2018.conted.ox.ac.uk. (2018). Unit 5.7: Morality. Trinity2018. [online] Available at: <https://trinity2018.conted.ox.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=649&chapterid=958> [Accessed 2 Jul. 2018].