Moral Dilemmas and the Growth of Moral Knowledge
By Bob Petersen

I am going to argue that genuine moral dilemmas exist, and that it is not possible to make them disappear simply by developing a moral theory which does away with them. This is because, in reality, we do not follow static, fully defined moral theories (that may potentially eliminate moral dilemmas). On the contrary, our moral knowledge grows over time, and new problems continually arise for us to solve. It is when we encounter new dilemmas not addressed by our existing moral structures that genuine moral dilemmas can arise.

A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent ought to do action A, also ought to do action B (or ~A), and the agent cannot do both A and B. What makes a moral dilemma genuine is when the obligation to do either A or B does not override the obligation to do the other (Richardson, 2018). Thus, making either choice essentially results in a moral failure.

Note that this situation can arise only if the moral theory in question does not provide a definitive answer of what to do in every case.

The debate over whether it is possible to construct a moral theory that potentially eliminates moral dilemmas is long and ongoing (see McConnell, 2018 for a summary), and I am not going to attempt to solve that debate in this paper. Rather, I'd like to look at the moral principles that we actually follow, and whether the moral dilemmas we encounter there are genuine or not.

In practical ethics, the purpose of morals is to make decisions about what to do. Genuine moral dilemmas are, in a sense, a failure of our moral structures to direct us. Moreover, it is possible to construct moral theories that allow for genuine moral dilemmas. For example, one may hold that one must never cause someone's death under any circumstances and also that one must never lie under any circumstances. Construct a scenario in which one must decide between causing someone's death and lying to prevent it, and you have a genuine moral dilemma. That is, you are obligated to choose A and also obligated to choose B, but it is not possible to choose both, and neither overrides the other because both moral rules are absolutes.

More interesting is whether you can eliminate genuine moral dilemmas. For the sake of this discussion, I will assume that this is also possible — that we can in fact create an idealized moral theory that eliminates genuine moral dilemmas. Perhaps it is as simple (and perverse) as "When a choice arises, choose randomly". Any moral theory aiming to eliminate genuine moral dilemmas must be able to tell you how to respond correctly in all situations, typically with a way to rank choices hierarchically as well as a way to resolve equivalent choices. Such a theory is described as "uniquely action-guiding" (McConnell, 2018).

Moreover, to actually eliminate genuine moral dilemmas, the agent must be able to follow the theory perfectly, with the ability to make the correct choice in all situations. However, humans are not only moral creatures but also knowledge-driven. By knowledge-driven, I mean that we make decisions based on the knowledge we have accumulated. For example, we may choose not to smoke based on the knowledge that cigarette smoking is quite harmful to our health. Without that knowledge, our decision process for choosing whether or not to smoke would be impacted. While by no means the only influence, knowledge and reason are a significant part of our deliberative decision making. Moreover, as a society, we are continually growing our knowledge, which enables us to solve new problems, control our world in new ways, and create more knowledge. This new

knowledge and these new solutions also create new problems, which creates a cycle of new problems, knowledge, and solutions (Deutsch, 2011). In short, we live in a world of progress.

What does this have to do with our morality? Quite a lot, in fact. Just as our knowledge in other areas is not static, our moral knowledge is not static either. And as we gain new knowledge, new moral problems arise that we have not encountered before. For example, at one point in history it was believed that non-human animals were automatons without capacity to feel pain or have emotions. Learning that this is not the case has forced us to develop moral theories of how to treat animals, which share our capacity for pain and suffering but still differ from humans in important ways. The old way of treating animals as unfeeling objects no longer sufficed, but treating them as we treat humans wasn't workable either. New moral solutions were needed.

How do we address these new moral problems as they arise? If they are addressable with existing moral structures, we address them. If not, we are forced to make new moral structures. We do that in the same way that we make progress in the physical world — through applying knowledge and reason. And as we do this, we make moral progress.

What does this mean for genuine moral dilemmas? Genuine moral dilemmas are moral dilemmas that are not addressable with our current moral structures. Otherwise, if our moral structures had a way to address a moral dilemma, we would make a choice and the dilemma would effectively cease to exist (Guttenplan, 2003, p. 108). Thus, because we do not follow idealized, static moral theories perfectly, but rather encounter new moral problems and generate solutions over time, genuine moral dilemmas can and do exist. They exist in that space between problem and solution.

Perhaps the most basic objection to this argument is to point to a moral theory that could in principle eliminate moral dilemmas. If that were sufficient, the debate would have long since been over, because, as I have discussed, it is possible to make a trivial theory that eliminates all dilemmas. Rather, it must be shown that we as agents can implement such a theory and follow it successfully in all cases. Moreover, our best moral theories, just like our best theories in other areas, are the ones that we are continually developing and refining through reason and knowledge. If our best theories do not eliminate genuine moral dilemmas, it is small comfort that some lesser theory can do so.

Another objection may be to question whether this type of adaptive morality exists at all. A strong piece of evidence supporting the view that it does would be if we could show that our morals have improved over time. Setting arguments for moral relativism aside, it is clear that this is true. While we continually create new problems to overcome, our practical decisions about right and wrong one thousand or even a few hundred years ago were quite different than they are today. One hundred and fifty years ago, it was common in the United States to own other human beings as property.

Women's rights, restrictions on child labour, and declines in violence are all examples of moral progress made in our relatively recent history. If we accept that we have made moral progress, how has that happened? It is certainly possible that some of this progress is simply from becoming better at applying existing moral principles. But, as I argued in the case of animal rights, the growth of human knowledge continually presents us with new problems, and we are forced to find new solutions, often making forward progress as we do so.

Lastly, one may object that the assertion that we have not yet figured out the solution to a new moral problem merely means that this is an epistemological issue, not a true ontological moral dilemma (McConnell, 2018). In other words, merely not knowing which choice to make is different

from a dilemma which does not have a solution. My counter to this is that it is not simply that we do not know which choice overrides the other, but that we have not yet invented the appropriate moral structures. If our current moral structures do not enable us to resolve a moral dilemma, then the dilemma is genuine regardless of whether a future structure may resolve it or not.

In conclusion, our moral knowledge is not constant but continually progressing. With new knowledge, we encounter new problems that sometimes require new solutions. The gaps between new problems and new solutions leave room for genuine moral dilemmas. The very fact that humans are able to grow, learn, and solve problems is the reason that genuine moral dilemmas are possible.

Bibliography

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