

Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition (Michaelmas 2023): Second Prize

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Are there genuine moral dilemmas?

The concept of moral dilemmas has been at the forefront of philosophical debates for centuries, shaping the notions of ethical decision-making. In the simplest of terms, “any and every predicament in which there are moral considerations both for and against a proposed course of action may be called ‘a moral dilemma’” (Donagan, 1993, p. 8). While the reality of the dilemmatic dialectic is universally understood, to date there remains plenty of contention on whether *moral* dilemmas, especially *genuine* ones exist. Various intellectuals have historically sought to demonstrate that the perception of a dilemma being of moral nature is reducible to logical and semantic oversights.

In this essay I will endeavor to demonstrate that genuine moral dilemmas do exist. Drawing on political philosophy, I will also provide commentary on the perceived perils of analyzing moral dilemmas through formal semantics and metaphysics. “Ever since Descartes, Western philosophy has been dominated by the view that what we cannot prove by formal logic, what we cannot know with mathematical certainty, is necessarily arbitrary, irrational, subjective” (Perelman, 1980, ix). It is my position that both the logical approach and insistence on moral dilemmas existing only on an ontological level, jeopardize the pragmatics of morality, thus allowing for the contextualization of genuine moral dilemmas to dissolve within syntax and not be contemplated in the domain of material existence and lived experience.

Let us begin by a simple syntax and semantic analysis of the term “genuine moral dilemmas”. The noun “dilemma”, deriving from the Greek “δῖλημμα”, signifies a “choice between two unpleasant or difficult alternatives” (Garner, 2009, p. 257). Coupled with it we have the adjective “moral”, from the noun “morality”. “Morality” can be defined descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, morality refers to “certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behavior” (Gert, 2020); normatively, it denotes to a “code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people” (Gert, 2020). Despite bisemy, notice how, in both cases, the word points to behavioral frameworks of cultures and societies, rooted in material conditions and the consensus on the collective lived experience.

In the phrase “genuine moral dilemmas”, “moral” is used as an adjective. Adjectives are identified as expressions “that alter, clarify, or adjust the meaning contributions of nouns” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, p. 526). As a modifier to “dilemma”, “moral” adjusts its meaning to denote those dilemmas that are concerned with the societally desirable courses of action in a certain conundrum, often in a situation where neither outcome is optimal or even acceptable. Here we encounter a problem, namely that “the moral law isn’t the same everywhere” (Durkheim, p. 232). It is outside of the scope of this essay to examine the sociological discrepancies in the perception of morality, but the clarity regarding morality being a phenomenon rooted in material experience of groups remains.

The use of the adjective “genuine” is the first formal problem pertaining to my argument. Given that the phrase “moral dilemmas” does not carry any other modifiers, on a semantic level it is a generalizing statement representing *all* moral dilemmas unless otherwise specified. In that respect, it ought to *already denote* ingenuity. Using “genuine” as a subjective modifier here

ought to either represent a linguistic intersection, or a rhetorical device, but since there is no semiotic default through which to interpret a generalizing statement as anything but *genuine in itself* – therefore negating the need for such intersective clarification – linguistically speaking, I can only conclude the latter. It is understood that the term “genuine moral dilemmas” is used to connote a philosophical debate analyzing the nature of dilemmas from their epistemic or ontological aspects, but the phrasing itself is pernicious, distancing the discourse from the material realities of moral dilemmas, anchoring it in the domain of the metaphysics instead.

This brings us to the practical aspects of the debate on moral theory, best introduced through an example. One of the most famous anecdotes on morality comes from Jean-Paul Sartre (1957), who “tells of a student whose brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940” (McConnell, 2022). The student desires to avenge his brother by fighting the Germans, but his cohabitating mother finds him the only consolation in her life. On the one hand, the student ought not to risk his life and leave his mother alone; on the other, he ought to avenge his brother by fighting the aggressors. His is a practical moral dilemma that will either way lead to “one of two morally reprehensible courses of action” (Chaturvedi & Sahni, 2019, p. 305).

Nevertheless, “at a practical level, moral dilemmas call out for a resolution” (Mason, 1996, p. 3). For rationalist theories, such as that of Thomas Aquinas or Immanuel Kant, the practical resolution *is* a logical one - they argue that the concept of genuine moral dilemmas “involves logical contradictions” (Chaturvedi & Sahni, 2019, p. 306). In particular, Kantian deontological ethics emphasizes the inherent nature of moral duties. Relative to the moral significance of these duties, an agent ought to *always* know which course of action is the morally right one. Therefore, a genuine ontological dilemma in the moral sense cannot even exist. Even if the agent herself is not aware of this, it ought to *always* be clear what the *right* course of action is.

If an agent fails to understand which duty takes precedence, deontologists consider this a “mere” epistemic or “apparent” moral dilemma. However, dilemmists, including myself, would object that “such principles simply *presuppose* that moral dilemmas are merely apparent” (Chaturvedi & Sahni, 2019, p. 309).

Deontology does not provide a universal hierarchy of duty applicable to every situation - it does not tell us what Sartre’s student ought to do. Moreover, its reliance on formal semantics cannot negate that, in a moral dilemma, both horns fall within the remit of moral consideration and consequence. More succinctly, just because modal logic and absolutist deontological theory suggest there is *always* a *right* course of action, doesn’t mean that the moral dilemma in question is not genuine in the sense of involving two options which give rise to legitimate concerns. So long as one cannot precisely quantify the universal “rightness” of a certain course of action, what is dismissed as an “apparent” dilemma remains, in fact, a genuine one. It would be optimal to live in a world where an agent always knows with certainty which choice is the morally superior one, but this is far from the civilization’s material reality. Deontology has no answers on how a working class mother can morally approach a dilemma of whether to purchase the cheapest goods from manufacturers who exploit their workforce, or leave her children with no toys or clothes.

Rule consequentialism is another rationalist critique of genuine moral dilemmas, albeit from a consequentialist perspective. It considers that the right action is “the one that is in conformity with a set of moral rules which, if generally accepted, would tend to produce better results than any other set of viable rules” (McNaughton & Rawling, 1998). For rule consequentialists,

adhering to the rule that maximizes overall well-being becomes the rational course of action, therefore negating the ingenuity of perceived moral dilemmas. This moral theory also falls short as it does not account for the nuanced details and specific contexts of dilemmas, nor can the above successfully refute the ingenuity of an agent's moral division in a dilemma. Like deontology, rule consequentialism does not produce a viable framework for practical assessment of the course of action which would bring about maximal overall well-being.

In defense of deontology and rule consequentialism, stating their practical failure to provide a hierarchy of moral duties and principles is itself not a valid argument against their fundamentals, but it does successfully underscore the futility of combating the existence of moral dilemmas through logic, semantics, or nebulous universalism. "After all, the aim of philosophy cannot be to simply explicate the existing system of moral principles. Philosophy should question the current system, evaluate it, ground it, replace it, etc." (Iczkovits, 2012, p. 3). Those academic frameworks which negate the ingenuity of the dilemmas people face, jeopardize the very social order, which depends on material solutions and moral consensuses understandable to the average person. Perhaps most importantly, a moral order unintelligible to the common folk opens the door to exploitation and oppression at the hands of the ruling classes.

In conclusion, while the existence of *genuine* moral dilemmas might be refuted by certain interpretations of the semantic structures that bring about dilemmas themselves, the material reality in which people are forced to choose between two unfavorable outcomes cannot. My hope for contemporary discourse on moral philosophy is that it will forego the focus on semantics or metaphysics, instead turning attention to the structural and systemic problems which perpetuate the existence of moral dilemmas in the general populace worldwide. As Alan Donagan pointed out, moral dilemmas vanish when morally indefensible practices are abandoned (Donagan, 1993, p. 7).

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