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Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics*

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Article:

Recently it has been argued that there are genuine moral dilemmas and that any theory which does not account for this fact is an unrealistic one.[1] This represents a challenge to an assumption that most moral theorists have held: an adequate ethical theory must not allow for genuine moral quandaries. John Stuart Mill, for example, in the last paragraph of the second chapter of *Utilitarianism*, seems to be committed to such an assumption. Many others have also assented to this view.[2] The consensus among those who hold this view seems to be that if a theory allows for moral dilemmas then there is some sense in which it is incoherent or inconsistent. Yet, oddly enough, the sense in which such a view would be incoherent is rarely, if ever, spelled out. Put another way, there seem to be no arguments for the belief that genuine moral dilemmas must be ruled out. W. D. Ross does suggest that if the same action were both morally required and forbidden, then "this would be to put an end to all ethical judgment."[3] But how this would put an end to all ethical judgment, Ross does not explain. Once one sees that few, if any, arguments have been advanced to support the commonly held assumption, one realizes that the recent challenges must be taken seriously.

Thus the main questions to which this paper is addressed are these: Must an adequate ethical theory allow for genuine moral dilemmas? Or must an adequate theory rule out such cases in order to avoid incoherence? I shall approach these questions by first spelling out two different senses in which our ethical reasoning might be thought to be inconsistent if there are genuine moral dilemmas. Discussing these two senses of inconsistency will cast light on the original questions. The conclusion that I shall eventually argue for is that we have good grounds for supposing that an adequate moral theory must rule out genuine dilemmas.

Part I

The first way in which the existence of moral dilemmas might be thought to lead to ethical inconsistency is this. The conjunction of three theses, each of which seems plausible and each of which is accepted by some philosophers, is inconsistent. The first thesis of the inconsistent triad is that there are genuine moral dilemmas. That is, there are situations in which an agent ought to do each of two things both of which he cannot do. If the situation is *genuinely* dilemmatic, then one is presented with two conflicting ought-claims and no further moral consideration is relevant to resolving the conflict. By contrast, a situation is merely apparently dilemmatic if two ought-claims conflict, but there are overriding moral reasons for acting on one rather than the other. Let us call the view that there are genuine moral dilemmas thesis (T1). The second thesis, (T2), is the view that 'ought' implies 'can.' This thesis states that the following is a principle of deontic logic: $OA \supset \Diamond A$. This principle is sometimes taken to be an axiom of deontic logic.[4] The third thesis is that the following principle of deontic logic holds: $(OA \,\&\, OB) \supset O(A \,\&\, B)$. This thesis, which I shall call (T3), is also an axiom of standard deontic logic.[5] The following argument, (A), shows that the conjunction of these three theses is inconsistent.[6]

(A)	(i) OA	premise
	(ii) OB	premise

(iii) $\sim \Diamond (A \& B)$	premise
(iv) $O(A \& B) \supset \Diamond (A \& B)$	premise
(v) $(OA \& OB) \supset O(A \& B)$	premise
(vi) $O(A \& B)$	(i), (ii), (v), propositional calculus
(vii) $\sim O(A \& B)$	(iii), (iv), propositional calculus

Lines (i), (ii), and (iii) represent thesis (T1). Theses (T2) and (T3) are set out in lines (iv) and (v) respectively. Or more accurately, lines (iv) and (v) are particular instances of these theses. Since lines (vi) and (vii) are contradictory, we know that the conjunction of the three is inconsistent. So at least one of the theses must be relinquished.

It is obvious that there are at least three solutions to this problem. Each of these solutions involves giving up one of the theses in question. Thus one may say that argument (A) forces us to give up the view that there are genuine moral dilemmas; that is, it shows that (T1) must be dropped. Or to put the point more cautiously, it shows that a condition of adequacy for any ethical theory is that it not allow for genuine moral dilemmas. One who defends this view will claim that lines (i) - (iii) cannot be jointly satisfied. The denial that there can be genuine moral dilemmas may be expressed as follows:

(ND) $(OA \& OB) \supset \Diamond (A \& B)$

Let us call this view *solution* (*1*). Others will claim that (A) shows that `ought' does not imply 'can.' If one omits line (iv) and line (vii), which depends on (iv), one will have a counterexample to this principle. This position I shall call *solution* (*2*). *Solution* (*3*) is the view that the third thesis is the one that can be relinqushed most reasonably. Defenders of this position will claim that argument (A), minus lines (v) and (vi), provides a counterexample to the deontic distribution principle. Adopting any one of the three solutions enables us to avoid the inconsistency, but it does so at the expense of forcing us to give up a thesis that at least some have found plausible. So if there are genuine moral dilemmas, then we are forced to give up one of two theses, each of which one has some reason to hold. In this sense one may regard the existence of apparent moral dilemmas as a challenge to the consistency of our current moral beliefs.

Argument (A) shows that standard deontic logic is indeed committed to ruling out the possibility of confliction obligations. This same point can be made in another way, and in so doing it will be shown that (T1) leads to a second sense of ethical inconsistency. A principle, stated as an axiom in standard systems of deontic logic,[7] is the principle of deontic consistency, (PC).

(PC) $OA \supset \sim O \sim A$

Intuitively (PC) just says that the same action cannot be obligatory and forbidden. To allow that the same act can be morally required and forbidden is not logically contradictory, but it does seem strange. If one accepts another principle of standard deontic logic,

(PD) $\Box(A \supset B) \supset (OA \supset OB)$,

it can be shown that (T1) entails the denial of (PC).[8] So if there are genuine moral dilemmas, then our ethical reasoning is inconsistent in the sense that we are committed to both OA and $O \sim A$, propositions that are contraries according to (PC). And if we give up (PC), we shall also have to drop at least one of two other principles, each of which is accepted in most standard systems of deontic logic. The first is that if an action is obligatory then it is permissible. The second is that 'permissible' is definable by 'not ought not.'

(a) $OA \supset PA$
(b) $PA \equiv \sim O \sim A$

(a) and (b) entail (PC). So if moral dilemmas provide a counterexample to (PC), then at least one of these two principles must be given up too. Again we see that systems of standard deontic logic must rule out the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas. This shows that if (T1) is true, then our moral reasoning is radically different from what it is supposed to be by standard systems of deontic logic. I shall use the phrase `the problem of moral dilemmas' as an abbreviated way of indicating that thesis (T1) represents a challenge to such basic moral principles as (T2), (T3), (PC), (a), and (b).

Part II

The problem set out in argument (A) will seem pressing only if each of the three theses is at least plausible. And one will need to worry about the adequacy of (PC) only if a good case can be made for (T1). I think that one can make a prima facie case for each of the three theses. I shall not document the reasons that have been given to support the principle that 'ought' implies 'can.' These are well known, since this so called Kantian principle is accepted by many. It is, of course, not an uncontroversial principle. A number of different objections have been raised against it. Nonetheless the thesis is held by many. One may wonder, though, why anyone would find (T3) plausible. One can cite at least two reasons for supporting this thesis. The first is simply that at the intuitive level (T3) seems plausible. If one ought to do each of two things, it seems quite natural to think that one also ought to do both of them. Or if there are a number of things each of which one ought to do, it is reasonable for one to think that he ought to do all of these things. A second reason for holding (T3) is this. Many have been struck by the close analogy between the modal operator '$\Box$' and the deontic operator 'O',' and between the modal operator '$\Diamond$' and the deontic operator 'P.' Since obligation can be and has been construed as a kind of deontic or moral necessity, the analogy is a natural one. Some even say that if the analogue of the characteristic modal axiom, $\Box A \supset A$, is added to deontic logic, the resulting systems are identical in form.[9] To briefly illustrate the parallels, the following analogous principles do hold in standard systems of modal and deontic logic. (Here, of course, the modal operators are to be understood as logical necessity and possibility.)

(1) $(\Box A \text{ v } \Box B) \supset \Box(A \text{ v } B)$	(1') $(OA \text{ v } OB) \supset O(A \text{ v } B)$
(2) $\Box(A \supset B) \supset (\Box A \supset \Box B)$	(2') $O(A \supset B) \supset (OA \supset OB)$
(3) $\Diamond(A \text{ v } B) \equiv (\Diamond A \text{ v } \Diamond B)$	(3') $P(A \text{ v } B) \equiv (PA \text{ v } PB)$
(4) $\Diamond(A \text{ \& } B) \supset (\Diamond A \text{ \& } \Diamond B)$	(4') $P(A \text{ \& } B) \supset (PA \text{ \& } PA)$

In addition, the following analogous principles do not hold in standard systems of modal and deontic logic. (Since the counterexamples to these principles are well known. I shall not state them.)

(5) $\Box(A \text{ v } B) \supset (\Box A \text{ v } \Box B)$	(5') $O(A \text{ v } B) \supset (OA \text{ v } OB)$
(6) $(\Diamond A \text{ \& } \Diamond B) \supset \Diamond (A \text{ \& } B)$	(6') $(PA \text{ \& } PB) \supset P(A \text{ \& } B)$

The modal analogue of (T3), $(\Box A \text{ v } \Box B) \supset \Box(A \text{ v } B)$, clearly does hold in standard systems of modal logic. So this gives one some reason for believing that (T3) holds as well. And, as we have seen, (T3) is an axiom of standard deontic logic. Though these reasons are not conclusive ones, they surely show that the thesis is at least plausible.

But is thesis (T1) plausible? At least three reasons have been given for holding (T1). The first is that there are examples of situations that at least appear to be genuinely dilemmatic. One well known example is discussed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Existentialism and Humanism*. This is the case of the student who believes that he ought to join the French forces and try to help defeat the German army. He also believes that he ought to stay at home and take care of his mother, who desperately needs his help. But clearly he cannot satisfy both of these ought-claims. Another example of an apparent moral dilemma occurs in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Angelo takes over the government of the city and immediately condemns to death one of his subjects, Claudio, for the crime of lechery. Isabella, Claudio's sister, goes to plead for her brother's life. She is a devout worshipper and a nun. Angelo tells her that he will free her brother only on the condition that she will sleep with him. As a sister

and one devoted to her family, Isabella believes that she must do what is in her power to save her brother's life. As a nun, however, she is morally committed to preserving her virginity. Whatever she does, she believes that she will be doing something wrong.

A second reason for holding (T1) recognizes the importance of moral rules in our ordinary reasoning about ethical matters. It is always possible for two moral rules to conflict. And it is not just that it is logically possible that moral rules will conflict. If one looks at the complexity of the moral lives of most agents, one can hardly doubt that moral dilemmas will arise.[10] Most people take part in many different roles in society and are members of many different social groups. One incurs different obligations or duties as a friend, citizen, worker, spouse, etc. Given that each of us is involved in a complex network of relationships, it is very likely that some of the ought-claims binding on us will conflict and we will find ourselves in moral dilemmas on some occasions.

A third reason has been given to support the claim that there are genuine moral dilemmas. When agents face apparently dilemmatic situations they often experience regret after they act. Furthermore, in many cases this regret seems quite appropriate and certainly not irrational. Thesis (T1) provides a simple explanation for why a conscientious moral agent experiences this feeling and why it is not irrational. The agent experiences regret because he has failed to do something that he ought to have done. This provides evidence that the situation is genuinely dilemmatic because in many of these cases the agent sees that even if he had acted on the other of the conflicting alternatives he would still feel regret.[11] According to the advocates of solution (2) this regret shows that the agent ought to have done *both* of the incompatible things, though in fact he could not do both. Hence dilemmatic situations show that 'ought' does not imply 'can.' Defenders of solution (3) argue that this shows that the agent ought to have done each of the two things, though not both. Thus the existence of moral dilemmas forces us to reject (T3). But on either of these views, the regret that the agent experiences is taken as evidence for (T1).

It is fair to conclude that each of the three theses is at least plausible. Since this is the case, one can see why the problem of moral dilemmas is a worrisome one.

Part III

As I suggested earlier, I shall argue that the first solution is the most plausible one. If there are good reasons for saying that an adequate moral theory must not allow for genuine dilemmas, then the two kinds of ethical inconsistency described earlier will have been escaped. One will have avoided the problem to which argument (A) calls attention by showing that there are, after all, good reasons for giving up the first thesis of the inconsistent triad. The second problem will have been bypassed because one will not be forced to give up (PC) if (T1) is false.

Before proceeding, through, a preliminary remark needs to be made. In arguing that (T1) is false I am not necessarily ruling out the possibility that an agent can, by doing something forbidden, put himself in a situation where no matter what he does he will be doing something wrong. For example, one can take two promises that he knows conflict. Thus no matter what the agent does, he will break one of the promises. The situation arose, however, because the agent did something wrong. One might call situations like this dilemmatic; but if this were the only kind of dilemma that one could encounter, we would not be tempted to say that moral dilemmas show that our reasoning about ethical matters is incoherent. As one author suggests, "The existence of such cases is not morally disturbing, however, because we feel that the situation is not unavoidable: one had to do something wrong in the first place to get into it."[12] I shall, therefore, use the term 'genuine moral dilemma' to refer only to those quandaries, if there are any, which arise through no fault of the agent himself. Self-imposed moral predicaments may raise a number of philosophical problems (such as the problem of expressing contrary-to-duty imperatives in a standard deontic logic).[13] But if this were the only type of dilemma that was possible, one would not be likely to conclude that our moral reasoning is incoherent.

As we have seen, there are good reasons for holding (T1). The first task in defending solution (1) is to show that these reasons are not sufficient to guarantee the truth of (T1). Let us begin by considering the third reason given to support the view that there are genuine moral dilemmas. Is there any way to explain the appropriateness of the feeling of regret that an agent in a dilemmatic situation experiences without holding (T1)? To reiterate, the presence of regret is thought to show that the agent believes that he failed to do something that he ought to have done. And since he also believes the ought-claim that he acted on was binding on him, the situation was genuinely dilemmatic. It can be shown, however, that it does not follow that regret is appropriate only if the agent believes that he has failed to do something that he ought to have done. Regret, as it is ordinarily understood, is appropriate if some good has been lost, or if some bad, even if unavoidable, has obtained.[14] It is perfectly consistent and quite reasonable to say that an agent has done what he believes he ought, all things considered, to have done and feels regret. If one is in a situation where all available alternatives are in some sense bad and one did not create the situation by doing something wrong, then the case might be thought to be genuinely dilemmatic. If, however, there is a least evil alternative, it seems reasonable to say that there is one thing that the agent really ought to do, and the situation is not a genuine dilemma. In such circumstances doing the least evil act is surely the most rational thing to do, and one cannot regret having done the most rational thing. But one can regret being in a situation where only bad alternatives are open to one. That is, one can regret having to live in a world where such cases arise. The upshot of this is that the appropriateness of an agent's feeling regret after having acted in an apparently dilemmatic situation is not sufficient to show that the situation was genuinely dilemmatic.

The defender of (T1) may try to remedy this account by claiming that agents who act in apparently dilemmatic situations experience *remorse*, and not merely regret. Remorse, as a moral feeling, is appropriate only when the agent experiencing it believes that he has done something morally wrong.[15] If one assumes that remorse is the feeling that a conscientious agent should have after acting in an apparently dilemmatic situation, then (T1) will follow trivially.[16] It does so at considerable expense, however. This feeling (regret, remorse, or whatever) that a moral agent is expected to have is usually cited in a way that is supposed to provide an interesting *argument* for (T1). But if one assumes that the feeling the agent should have is remorse, one will have begged the question against the advocate of solution (1) (because the standard philosophical account of remorse says that the feeling is appropriate only if the agent has done something wrong). It however, we take this feeling to be regret, then we can, as I have already shown, explain why agents in apparently dilemmatic situations have this feeling and why it is appropriate that they do. More importantly, that agents appropriately experience regret acknowledges that apparently dilemmatic situations are difficult. This difficulty is something that those who believe that there are genuine moral dilemmas want to emphasize. One can account for it, though, without holding (T1). So unless there are special reasons for taking this feeling to be remorse, it seems that we are justified in taking it to be regret. And if we are, the third reason is not sufficient to establish (T1).

We may now deal with the first two reasons for holding (T1). The first reason for believing that there are genuine moral dilemmas is that there are numerous examples of situations that certainly appear to be dilemmatic, like the case of Sartre's student or the predicament of Isabella in Shakespeare's play. And what will the defender of (T1) say to the person who believes that an adequate moral theory must not allow for genuine dilemmas? He will probably confront him with these examples and say, "If there are no genuine moral dilemmas, then what should the agent do in this situation?" But to suppose that the defender of solution (1) must always be able to answer this question is mistaken. It is not incumbent upon the advocate of solution (1) to supply the correct moral answer to every apparent quandary. The advocate of solution (1) may admit — and I shall develop this suggestion in more detail later — that there are cases in which we do not know what the agent ought, all things considered, to do. In other areas of inquiry, for example, history or physics, there may be some evidence supporting one hypothesis and some evidence supporting a conflicting hypothesis. That one does not know which hypothesis is correct does not by *itself* cast doubt on the claim that there is a uniquely correct answer to the question at issue. So too the admission that one does not know what an agent in a conflict situation really ought to do does not by itself cast doubt on solution (1). Since this admission can be made, the first reason given to support (T1) is not sufficient.

The second reason cited to show that (T1) is true is that the sources of one's obligations and duties are numerous and diverse, and it is highly probable that these will come into conflict. The advocate of solution (1) cannot, of course, deny that obligations can and do sometimes conflict. That is, there are sometimes cases where each of two ought-claims seems to apply to a situation but both cannot be satisfied. It does not follow from this, however, that there are genuine moral dilemmas. No one will deny that there are cases of moral conflict where one ought-claim clearly overrides the other. One such case is when one's obligation to help an accident victim overrides one's obligation to meet a friend for lunch (as one promised to do). One may regard this as a paradigm case of one ought-claim overriding another.[17] Since there are cases where the overriding relationship does hold, the *mere* fact that two ought-claims can or do conflict does not show that there are genuine moral dilemmas. And this is so even if one does not know in some particular case which ought-claim takes precedence. The overriding relationship may still hold such cases.

I have, up to this point, argued for a fairly weak claim: viz., the reasons usually given to support (T1) do not guarantee the truth of that thesis. A defender of (T1), however, might well grant this. He might claim, though, that the burden of proof is still on the advocate of solution (1). The reason for this, he might argue, is that he has shown that there *appear* to be genuine moral dilemmas. The first two reasons that he gives to support (T1) show this. True, he will admit, it is possible that in every conflict case one ought-claim overrides the other. But since in many cases we do not know which, if either, overrides the other, appearances support the view that there are genuine moral quandaries. In short, the burden of proof will be on one who claims that these appearances are deceptive. This response is, I think, correct. It shows that the defender of solution (1) has more work to do; he needs to give some reason(s) for believing that (T1) is false.

Part IV

There are two phenomena that are frequently associated with dilemmatic situations. One is that agents facing apparent quandaries frequently seek *moral advice*. Sartre's student is a case in point. It is important to note that the student sought advice because each of two moral claims seemed equally incumbent on him, and he could not jointly satisfy them. The second phenomenon is that after acting on one or the other of the alternatives, agents in these apparently dilemmatic situations often *experience moral doubt*. They wonder if they have done the right thing; or more typically, they worry that they have done the wrong thing. And not only do agents in these situations seek moral advice and experience moral doubt, but in addition in many of these cases we are ordinarily prepared to say that such behaviour is appropriate, reasonable, and maybe even expected. That such behaviour is regarded as appropriate can easily be explained by the advocate of solution (1). By contrast, it seems that advocates of (T1) cannot adequately account for this fact. Let me explain why this is the case.

Suppose that an agent who is in a situation such that it seems that he ought to do each of two things both of which he cannot do asks another person for moral advice. If the person whom he asks believes that there are genuine moral dilemmas and that the agent is in one, then this person will simply advise the agent that he ought to do each (or both)[18] of the two actions. The agent would hardly consider this a satisfactory answer. He would not have asked for advice had he anticipated this answer. His asking for advice indicates that he believes that there is some one thing that he ought to do and he is trying to find out what that is. And since we ordinarily regard such behaviour as appropriate, it seems that we too believe that there is some one thing that the agent ought to do. The behaviour is appropriate because the agent does not know what he really ought to do. But if the advocate of (T1) is correct, the agent does know what he ought, everything considered, to do. He ought to do each (or both) of the actions. It seems, then, that the defenders of (T1) cannot claim that the agent is genuinely trying to discover what is really morally required of him. Since (according to them) the agent already knows what he ought to do, they are committed to saying that such behaviour is irrational. Either that or they will have to explain the behaviour as being something other than what it appears to be.

Moral doubt is also often associated with apparently dilemmatic situations. After acting in such situations a person will often ask, "Was what I did right?" Depending on the seriousness of the apparent dilemma, the person may worry about this for a long time, especially if certain undesirable consequences of his actions are frequently evident to him. One can imagine the doubt that Isabella might have experienced had Claudio actually

been executed. And if Sartre's student had decided to join the French forces and his mother had subsequently died, the doubt he would have experienced would probably have been long-lasting. Furthermore, in cases like these we think that this doubt is appropriate and certainly not irrational. If one holds (T1) (and also believes that the agent in question has just faced a genuine dilemma), then the answer to these questions that the agent raises will be obvious. He will say that of course the agent failed to do at least one thing that he ought to have done. He may say that the agent is not blameworthy, assuming that he did not get himself into the predicament by doing something forbidden. But as long as the agent recognized the force of each of the ought-claims *before* he acted, then it seems that the advocate of (T1) cannot take these questions seriously. He will have to explain them as being something other than what they appear to be. He may, for example, say that the agent is involved in some sort of self-deception or act of bad faith, and is merely trying to get someone to persuade him that he did nothing wrong. Whatever he says, however, it seems that he cannot allow that this experience is genuine moral doubt. Yet I think that most of us want to say that in many such cases this moral doubt is genuine. If it is, then it seems that the advocate of (T1) will be hard pressed to explain it. That he seems to be forced to treat this phenomenon as something other than what it appears to most of us to be is a weakness of his view.

What I have shown so far is that there are two phenomena commonly associated with dilemmatic situations that seem either inexplicable, irrational, or something other than what they appear to be if one holds that (T1) is true. But suppose that one denies (T1). Can the person who opts for solution (1) explain these two phenomena adequately? I think that he can. There is a way of looking at and explaining apparent moral dilemmas which is both plausible and open to the advocate of solution (1). An apparently dilemmatic situation is one where two (or more) ought-claims seem to be applicable to one's situation, one cannot act on both of these, and one *does not know* on which of these one ought, everything considered, to act. If this is a plausible account of apparent moral dilemmas, then one can support solution (1) and still explain the phenomena that it seems the advocate of (T1) cannot adequately explain. The first phenomenon, that moral agents frequently ask what they ought to do even after they learn that two moral rules or principles seem to be applicable to their situation, is easily explained. An agent asks the question because he does not know what he really ought to do. The case is one of *moral conflict*, but not a genuine moral dilemma (thus I use the term 'moral conflict' in a somewhat technical sense), simply because each of two incompatible ought-claims seems legitimate and one does not know on which one ought, all things considered, to act. The agent believes that there is one thing that he really ought to do, but he does not know what it is. That after acting in apparently dilemmatic situations agents often experience moral doubt also can be explained by the advocate of solution (1). When a person is in such a situation, he frequently must act within a limited period of time. So he may well be forced to choose between the conflicting alternatives even though he does not know on which he ought to act. If at the time of his action he was not sure what he really ought to do, it is quite reasonable that after the fact he wonders if what he did was what he really should have done. Of course, doubt may arise even if the agent was not uncertain before acting. In such cases the agent does not recognize the conflict-nature of his situation until after he has acted.

In section III I showed that giving up thesis (T1) is not as costly as one might think. One can, contrary to what some of the advocates of solutions (2) and (3) think, account for why it is not irrational for agents who have faced apparently dilemmatic situations to experience regret even if (T1) is false. In this section I have argued that unless we support solution (1) we cannot account for the appropriateness of an agent's seeking moral advice before acting (in an apparently dilemmatic situation) or for experiencing moral doubt after acting.

Part V

If my argument is correct, then at the very least the burden of proof has been shifted to those who claim that there are genuine moral dilemmas. Put another way, a prima facie case for solution (1) has been made. Unfortunately, though, there is what appears to be a fatal objection to this argument. The person who claims that there are genuine moral dilemmas does, it seems, have a way of accounting for the appropriateness of an agent's seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt. The person who holds (T1) can draw a distinction between cases of *actual* moral dilemmas and cases that are *only* apparently dilemmatic. He can allow, that is, that in some cases when two ought-claims conflict there are moral grounds for saying that one takes precedence over the other. And he may even grant that such grounds exist when at first glance this does not appear to be the

case. What he cannot allow, of course, is that every conflict case there is a morally preferable alternative. The importance of this distinction is this. The defender of (T1) can admit that when one is in an apparent moral dilemma he cannot be sure that the situation is genuinely dilemmatic. Since this is the case, it is quite reasonable for (and perhaps even required of) the agent to seek moral advice. If the situation is not genuinely dilemmatic, others may be able to help the agent discover what he really ought to do. Even if the situation turns out to be genuinely dilemmatic, it may be that one ought to take all reasonable precautions before acting. So even if one holds that there are genuine moral dilemmas, it seems that he can account for the appropriateness of an agent's seeking moral advice in such circumstances.

The same line of reasoning applies to experiencing moral doubt after the fact. If one has to act in a situation that is apparently dilemmatic but may not actually be so, one might needlessly do something wrong. If the situation is a genuine dilemma, then one cannot help but do at least one wrong thing. If, however, the situation is merely an apparent dilemma, then there is just one thing that the agent really ought to do. Moral doubt is appropriate because the agent *might* have done something wrong when he could have avoided doing so.[19] So the defender of (T1) can give essentially the same explanation of an agent's seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt as the advocate of solution (1) can give.

It seems, then, that the person who says that there are genuine moral dilemmas can get around what initally appeared to be a very forceful argument against (T1). This response, however, is not without some difficulties. The key to the move made by the defender of (T1) is his being able to distinguish moral dilemmas from those that are only apparently dilemmatic. An important question must be asked, though. Does the advocate of (T1) have a criterion (in the epistemic sense) for distinguishing situations that are truly dilemmatic from those that erroneously appear so? Notice that if he did have a plausible criterion he would, in effect, have a straightforward argument for (T1). I know of no such criterion, however. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that there is no such criterion; even the defender of (T1) can and must grant this. (He must grant it in order to explain why advice-seeking and the experiencing of doubt are appropriate.)

If there is no criterion for picking out genuine dilemmas from apparent ones, then one must raise another question. Given that an agent is facing a situation that at least appears to be a dilemma, when will it be rational for him to seek advice and experience doubt? There seem to be at least two different responses that the defender of (T1) might make. First, he might claim that advice-seeking and experiencing doubt are *always* appropriate because it is impossible for one to tell whether he is an apparent dilemma or a genuine one. To take this line is to admit that one must treat every case as *if* it were only an apparent dilemma. But this puts the defender of (T1) in a very weak position. If he admits this much, one may wonder what grounds there are for ever thinking that one is in a genuine dilemma. It seems that there are none. To grant that we must presuppose that each case we face is only an apparent dilemma is surely to give the advocate of solution (1) all that he needs. After all, the advocate of (T1) is recommending that we behave as if solution (1) were correct. Admittedly this is compatible with (Ti). But the strongest claim that a defender of this thesis could make is the following: looking back, as it were, over a whole range of cases, one may say that some of these cases were genuinely dilemmatic; however, one cannot correctly identify the real dilemmas. But even this innocuous version of the first thesis will not be defensible. One will not be able to give any reasons to support (T1). Notice, for example, that one will no longer be able to point to examples of apparent dilemmas as a reason for holding (T1). Any case to which one points will be one where seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt are appropriate because one *does not* know (according to the advocate of (T1) himself) what he really ought to do. By his own admission, then, there are no situations that are known to be dilemmatic. That there are genuine dilemmas must, it seems, be accepted on faith. Surely this first response is not the one that the defender of (T1) will want to make.

Suppose, however, that the defender of (T1) takes a second line. Suppose he says that seeking advice and experiencing doubt in apparently dilemmatic situations are not always rational. He may say, for example, that if an agent in an apparently dilemmatic situation has good reasons to believe that it is a genuine dilemma (though he can never know for sure), then seeking moral advice and experiencing doubt will be irrational. In these cases, he might say, resignation or a Stoic-like attitude is more appropriate. One immediate problem with this response

is spelling out what will count as good reasons for believing that one's situation is genuinely dilemmatic, and it is not easy to imagine what the defender of (T1) might say. Perhaps one should merely "take a second look" at the available data. If the situation still appears to be dilemmatic, then one may assume that it is really dilemmatic. It may be that one should take all reasonable precautions, but doing so need not include going out of one's way to seek moral advice or to experience doubt. The problem with taking this line is that it will render as inappropriate in far too many cases behaviour that most of us would not regard as such. Surely the ongoing doubt that Sartre's student is likely to experience is not irrational. And Isabella's seeking moral advice after much pondering (taking several "second looks") does not seem inappropriate. Of course, most of us may be wrong in thinking that this doubt is not irrational or that this adviceseeking is not inappropriate. But since the advocate of (T1) must treat these cases in a way that does not seem proper, it is up to him to show that these appearances are deceptive.

The first thesis, then, conflicts (in a fundamental way) with the way that we regard situations of moral conflict. If one defending this thesis says that seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt are always appropriate when one is facing an apparent predicament, then he will be giving up too much to the defender of solution (1). If he says that such behaviour is not always appropriate, then he must spell out under what conditions It is inappropriate. And as we have seen, the most natural way of spelling this out commits him to treating some behaviour as inappropriate when we would ordinarily regard it as quite reasonable.[20] We now can see that the objection to the argument put forth in section IV is not one that the defender of (T1) can press. Given this, there are good grounds for believing that (T1) is false.

Part VI

In spite of the above argument, some may still want to claim that there are genuine moral dilemmas. Many who hold (T1) do so because they believe that those who advocate solution (1) must present an unrealistic picture of the moral life. In particular, to deny that there are moral dilemmas is to be much too optimistic about the moral life. One author, referring to a version of what I call solution (1), says, "This view seems to me to make the moral life too easy."[21] Though this is a common reaction to the thesis that an adequate ethical theory cannot allow for genuine dilemmas, it is nonetheless a mistaken one. The advocate of solution (1) is not committed to a view that depicts the moral life as too easy. In fact, I have already shown that one who supports solution (1) can explain why the moral life is difficult. When an agent is in an apparently dilemmatic situation he has some reason to believe that he ought to do each of two things both of which he cannot do. He does not know, however, which of these things he ought, all things considered, to do. He will necessarily fail to do at least one of the things, and some sort of harm will ensue. (This is why regret is appropriate in such situations.) Many apparently dilemmatic situations leave one little time to contemplate or deliberate. The difficulty, then, is that an agent may have to act without knowing what he really ought to do.[22] Even if the agent had more time to deliberate, the situation may be so difficult that he still will not know what to do. It is because of this feature of the moral life that an agent's seeking moral advice or experiencing moral doubt is appropriate. And unless we are prepared to say that such behaviour is inappropriate, we are committed to believing that (T1) is false. So, ironically, some of the difficult aspects of the moral life can be accounted for only if we assume that there are no genuine moral dilemmas.

Some critics have asserted that it is no comfort to an agent facing an apparently dilemmatic situation to know that there is, in principle, a morally correct solution to his problem even though it is currently unknown to us.[23] The agent must still face a difficult moral problem. To cite this as an objection to solution (1), however, is to misunderstand the purpose of that view. Such a critic seems to be attributing to the advocate of solution (1) the view that dilemmatic situations only appear to be difficult, and if the agent just reflects he will see that the difficulty is only apparent. Solution (1), however, does not entail this. The difficulty involved in apparently dilemmatic situations is not *illusory*, as we have just seen. Solution (1) was never intended to comfort moral agents facing conflict situations. If it is intended to comfort anyone it is the moral theorist who is worried — or at least should be once he sees the problem of moral dilemmas — about the consistency of our moral reasoning. Not only is solution (1) not intended to comfort moral agents facing apparent quandaries, but it explicitly calls

attention to the difficulty of such cases. That solution (1) gives no comfort to agents in conflict situations is not a weakness of the view; it is rather an indication of the realistic picture of the moral life that it presents.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to defend an assumption which has been held, but not really argued for, by many ethical theorists: an adequate moral theory must not allow for genuine dilemmas. The most important result of this argument is that it provides a solution to the problem set out in argument (A). We do have good reasons for giving up the first thesis of the inconsistent triad. And this allows us to retain the most basic principles of deontic logic as well, viz., (PC), (a), and (b).[24] We may conclude, then, at least with respect to the problem of moral dilemmas, that our basic ethical reasoning is not incoherent.

Notes

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1. Those who have argued for or asserted this position include the following: E. J. Lemmon, "Moral Dilemmas," *Philosophical Review* **71** (1962), pp.139-58; Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume **39** (1965), pp. 103-24, and *Morality; An Introduction to Ethics* (Harper & Row, 1972); Roger Trigg, "Moral Conflict," *Mind* **80** (1971), pp. 41-55; Bas C. van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command." *Journal of Philosophy* **70**(1973), pp. 5-19; and P. H. Nowell-Smith, "Some Reflections on Utilitarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **2** (1972-3), pp, 417-31.
2. To mention just a few who hold this view, see David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 21; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 133-34; and Hector-Neri Castañeda, *The Structure of Morality* (Charles C. Thomas, 1974).
3. W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 60. Ross also claims (p. 86) that *simply* drawing the distinction between prima fade obligations and actual ones shows that the problem of moral dilemmas is non-existent. It will be clear, however, that merely drawing this distinction does not solve the problem of moral dilemmas as I shall set it out; it rather presupposes what the solution is.
4. See Brian F. Chellas, "Conditional Obligation," in S. Stenlund, ed, *Logical Theory and Semantic Analysis* (D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1974), p. 23.
5. See Dagfinn Follesdal and Risto Hilpinen, "Deontic Logic: An Introduction," in Hilpinen, ed., Deontic *Logic: Introductory and Systematic Readings* (D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1971), p. 13.
6. An informal account of this argument is presented by Bernard Williams in "Ethical Consistency," p. 118. Throughout this work *'OA'* is to be read 'X (the agent to whom the ought-claim is addressed) ought, all things considered, to do *A*'. The qualification 'all things considered' indicates that the ought-claim is not merely a prima facie one. 'PA' is to be read 'X' is permitted to do *A*'. The logical connectives are to be understood in the usual way. However, the model operators should not be taken to stand for logical possibility and necessity (unless otherwise noted). The 'can' in the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' usually involves a notion stronger than mere logical possibility; the same is true of the 'cannot' in the assertion that there are moral dilemmas. As a result the modal operators should be taken to stand for something like *physical* possibility and necessity.
7. See Follesdal and Hilpinen, "Deontic Logic: An Introduction," p. 13.
8. Even those who argue that there are moral dilemmas accept (PD). See, for example, E. J. Lemmon, "Deontic Logic and the Logic of Imperatives," *Logique et Analyse* **8** (1965), p. 40, and van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command," p. 15. The argument which shows that the advocate of (T1) is committed to giving up (PC) is a simple one and is set out in my "Moral Dilemmas and Requiring the Impossible," *Philosophical Studies* **29** (1976), pp. 410-11.
9. See William H. Hanson, "Semantics for Deontic Logic," *Logique et Analyse* **8** (1965), p. 178.
10. This point is made by R. W. Beardsmore in his *Moral Reasoning* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 111.
11. Several authors have suggested that this argument shows that there are genuine moral dilemmas. See, for example, Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," pp. 109-13, and Roger Trigg, "Moral Conflict," pp.

47-52. Williams uses this argument to try to establish what I call solution (3); Trigg, to establish solution (2).

12. Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* **1** (1972), p. 143.
13. This problem is set out by Roderick Chisholm in his "Contrary-to-duty Imperatives and Deontic Logic," *Analysis* **24** (1963), pp. 33-36.
14. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 422 and pp. 442-44.
15. See P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Penguin Books, 1954), p. 26.
16. This needs to be qualified. It must also be the case that the agent still regards the alternative that he acted on as morally required. An agent might, in retrospect, believe that there was a morally preferable alternative in the situation that he faced. If the agent acted on the alternative that he now believes was morally wrong, then remorse would be appropriate even though the situation was not genuinely dilemmatic. Remorse might also be appropriate if the agent put himself in the dilemmatic situation by doing something forbidden, such as knowingly making conflicting promises.
17. It would be helpful to have an account of what is involved when one ought-claim overrides or has more moral weight than another ought-claim. No such account is presented here. One very provocative attempt to elucidate this concept is presented by Robert Nozick, in his "Moral Complications and Moral Structures," *Natural Law Forum* **13** (151601, pp, 1-50.
18. The advocate of solution (2) will advise him that he ought to do both; the defender of solution (3), that he ought to do *each*.
19. If in moral matters we held a view something like "let bygones be bygones," then moral doubt would not be appropriate here. But we do not hold such a view. We have such notions as duties of reparation or duties to make amends, and if a person did the wrong thing in a situation that was only apparently dilemmatic he may well incur some such duty.
20. There may, of course, be a way of spelling out the second line of reasoning which does not commit the advocate of (T1) to these undesirable consequences. But until a different alternative is suggested, the criticism stands. I do not see any obvious way to alter this second line of reasoning to make the view more plausible.
21. E. J. Lemmon, "Deontic Logic and the Logic of Imperatives," p. 45.
22. Some may think that because an agent must sometimes act without knowing what he really ought to do, this shows that 'ought' does not imply 'can'. Rut in such situations the agent surely can do what he ought to do in many senses of the term, including both the physical and logical senses.
23. This objection is presented by Bas C. van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command," p. 12, and Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* **2** (1972-73), p. 161.
24. One may wonder just how basic (PC) is. E. J. Lemmon, in "Deontic Logic and the Logic of Imperatives," p. 51, claims that if (PC) does not hold in a system of deontic logic, then all that remains are truisms and paradoxes. If this claim is correct, then there are obvious theoretical advantages in retaining (PC).