Moral Dilemmas and Deontic Logic

Abstract

Call the following situation a moral dilemma: you are under an all-things-considered obligation to perform one action, and you are under an all-things-considered obligation to perform another action, but it is practically impossible for you to perform both these actions. Opponents of moral dilemmas often employ deontic logic to argue that moral dilemmas are impossible. David Brink has prominently developed two such arguments, aiming to show that in combination with certain intuitively plausible principles, the assumption that there are moral dilemmas leads into contradictions. I look at two initial objections to Brink's arguments and argue that they do not hold up to scrutiny. I then develop my own criticism of Brink's arguments by focusing on one of the principles he invokes, Obligation Execution. It holds that if you are all-things-considered obligated to ϕ and ψ-ing would prevent ϕ-ing, then you are under an all-things-considered obligation to not-ψ. Brink renders this as $(O(\phi) \wedge (\psi \,\square\!\!\rightarrow\, \neg\phi)) \rightarrow O(\neg\psi)$ to employ as a premise in his arguments. However, interpreting the embedded conditional in the antecedent as a counterfactual allows us to derive absurd obligations if the original obligation $O(\phi)$ is violated. It might be countered that since Standard Deontic Logic as a whole faces this paradox from violated obligations, it should not be given much weight. In response, I show how the two cases are relevantly different in both cause and scope of the problem. Instead, we might try to weaken Obligation Execution by turning the embedded conditional into a strict implication. This, however, makes the principle too weak for Brink's arguments to be valid. Finally, we might interpret the conditional as expressing practical necessity for human agents, analogous to the practical impossibility involved in the definition of moral dilemmas. But this would allow us to infer that the negations of practical impossibilities are obligatory. We could, for example, derive obligations to die, to be somewhat irrational or to not have all valuable knowledge. I conclude that there is no tenable formalization of Obligation Execution strong enough to make Brink's arguments against the possibility of moral dilemmas valid.