

Moral Equivalence Judgements

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1. Introduction

A common type of moral inference

- (1) Action a is morally right [or wrong].
- (2) There is no morally relevant non-moral difference between actions a and b .
- (3) Therefore, action b is morally right [or wrong].

Premise (2) is a paradigm example of what I call a *moral equivalence judgement*.

What I will argue for

- Moral equivalence judgements are a distinct resource in ethical theorizing with a theoretical power that moral philosophers have tended to underestimate.
- In particular, moral equivalence judgements can take over (at least to some extent) theoretical roles from moral principles.

2. Moral equivalences and their logical properties

Morally equivalent actions, defined

Two actions x and y are morally equivalent if, and only if, each of the following is the case: (i) both x and y are morally right [or wrong], and (ii) x and y are right [or wrong] in virtue of the same non-moral fact (i.e. there is a property F such that x and y both are right [or wrong] because they are F).

[I will mostly skip the ‘[or wrong]’ addendum in what follows.]

Two views about right-making

- Orthodox view: right-making is an instance of grounding, and grounding carries metaphysical necessity. Thus, if some action is right because it is F , then, necessarily, all actions that are F are right.
- Dissenting view: whether some factor that is right-making in one case is also right-making in another might depend on the presence or absence of factors that are not part of the actually or potentially right-making fact itself. Thus, it is possible for an action x to be right because it is F while another action y that also is F is wrong.

The transitivity of the moral equivalence relation

Assume that for each morally right action x , there is a unique right-making property that makes x right. Then, the moral equivalence relation is transitive.

Moral equivalences, singular moral judgements, moral principles

- Singular moral judgements: ‘action a is morally right [wrong]’.
- Moral principles: ‘an action x is right [wrong] if, and only if, and because, x is F ’; ‘if an action x is F , then x is right [wrong] because it is F ’; ‘if an action x is F , then this is [or provides] a moral reason in favour of [against] x ’; ‘all actions that are F are morally equivalent’; etc.

- ‘*a* is morally equivalent to *b*’ neither contradicts ‘*a* and *b* are right’ nor ‘*a* and *b* are wrong’. Moral equivalences, therefore, do not entail singular moral propositions.
- ‘*a* and *b* are morally equivalent’ neither entails anything about which actions are right [or wrong], nor anything about which actions are favoured [or disfavoured] by moral reasons, nor anything about which (other) actions are morally equivalent. This is why equivalences do not entail moral principles.
- Thus, holding a moral equivalence judgement neither commits one to holding a specific singular moral judgement nor to holding a specific principle.

Objection and reply

- Objection: ‘if moral facts are grounded in non-moral facts and if grounding carries metaphysical necessity, then there are principles’.
- Reply: it is one thing to say that there is a principle and quite another to actually state, or have a view about, what that principle is. In order to be able to put a principle to theoretical work, one should have a view about what that principle is.

3. *Equivalence judgements as an additional theoretical resource*

Rescue dilemmas and the ‘individualist lottery’

- Consider the following scenario:
ISLAND. You can save either five people on one island or a single person on another. There are no morally relevant differences between the islanders. All will die if you do nothing.
- Timmermann (2004) holds that in cases such as these, morality requires you to perform what he calls an ‘individualist lottery’: you ought to employ a random mechanism with as many equiprobable outcomes as there are individuals in need of help. Then, you are to save the individual selected by the random mechanism – and, if there are others around, those others as well.
- The Timmermann view entails that performing an individualist lottery in ISLAND and performing one in the following scenario are morally equivalent:
ISLAND*. Six persons are in need of help, each of them is located on a separate island. You can only travel to one of these islands and, consequently, only save one.

Upshot

- Making explicit equivalences entailed by an ethical theory can helpfully supplement one’s understanding of the normative content and commitments of the theory.
- Given that we have independently considered judgements about moral equivalences, these can helpfully figure in reflective equilibrium reasoning.

4. *Moral explanations and moral guidance without principles?*

Goals of ethical theorizing and the role of principles

- Ethical theories are often taken to be about saying something informative on what makes actions right, and to offer guidance in moral decision making.
- Many hold that both of this cannot be done without appealing to moral principles.

A stylized example involving a principle

- Consider a set of two particular moral judgements, ‘*a* is morally right’ and ‘*b* is morally right’. When these are supplemented by the principle ‘an action *x* is right if, and only if, and because, *x* is *F*’, the result is a set of inferentially related moral judgements.
- This ‘theory’ allows for deriving judgements about which actions are right and about what makes a specific action right.

A stylized example involving an equivalence judgement (rather than a principle)

- Consider again the example of a set of two particular moral judgements, ‘*a* is morally right’ and ‘*b* is morally right’. When these are supplemented by the equivalence judgement ‘*a* and *b* are morally equivalent’, the result is a set of inferentially related moral judgements.
- As far as guidance is concerned, the inferential structure induced by equivalence judgements is not necessarily less helpful than the one induced by strict principles.
- As far as providing explanations is concerned, much depends on whether you have the orthodox or the dissenting view about the ‘because’ in ‘action *x* is right because it is *F*’:
 - Option 1: under the orthodox reading of the ‘because’, you will only be able to infer judgements of the form ‘*x* is right because it is *F*’ if principles are available. If the latter is not the case, then explicit moral explanations will not be forthcoming. Equivalence judgements, however, can get you to judgements of the form ‘whatever makes it the case that *x* is right also makes it the case that *y* is right’ – which is more than nothing.
 - Option 2: under the dissenting view about the moral ‘because’, equivalence judgements can help you to infer judgements about what makes actions right without principles entering the scene.

5. Reflective equilibrium without principles?

Inconsistencies without principles

- Equivalence judgements can contribute to generating inconsistencies to remove which is part of the point of reflective equilibrium reasoning, without principles having to be involved.
- Example [if there is time]: TROLLEY – LOOP – LOOP-BRIDGE – FOOTBRIDGE

Increasing coherence without principles

Equivalence judgements can add to the degree of inferential connectedness of a set of moral beliefs. There is, thus, no *ex ante* reason why they might not be equally good as principles at increasing coherence in the way required for reflective equilibrium.

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