Ethical Theorizing with Moral Equivalences

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1. Introduction

Individual moral judgements vs. moral principles
Ethical theories should provide more than just a collection of individual moral judgements. And moral principles seem to be what is additionally required.

Equivalence judgements …
Two actions are morally equivalent if, and only if, there are no morally relevant differences between them.

… and why they are interesting
–   Equivalence judgements are an alternative to moral principles when it comes to going beyond a collection of individual moral judgements in ethical theorizing. In particular, it turns out that following the method of reflective equilibrium does not necessarily involve an appeal to moral principles.
–   The normative content of an ethical theory can be represented in terms of the moral equivalence classes induced by the theory, i.e. by the classes of actions that are, as implied by the theory in question, morally equivalent.

2. Equivalence judgements

Moral equivalences and moral reasoning
–   'Action a is morally right. There are no morally relevant differences between action a and action b [i.e., a and b are morally equivalent]. Therefore, b is morally right.'
–   Equivalence judgements and universalizability ('no difference in moral properties without a difference in non-moral, but morally relevant properties').

'a is morally equivalent to b' defined
Two actions a and b are morally equivalent if, and only if,
        (i) a and b have the same moral status (i.e. both are either right or wrong), and
        (ii) a and b are right or wrong because of the same non-moral facts.
The relation of moral equivalence clearly is reflexive, symmetric, and transitive.

Equivalence judgements, individual moral judgements, and moral principles
–   Holding individual moral judgements commits one to equivalences judgements, but not vice versa.
–   Holding moral principles commits one to equivalence judgements – but not necessarily vice versa.

3. Moral equivalences and reflective equilibrium

Reflective equilibrium: the idea
Following the method of reflective equilibrium in ethics involves developing our ethical theories out of the set of our considered moral judgements with a view to making the theory consistent with these judgements and coherent. In the course of doing this, elements of the theory as well as some of our considered moral judgements might need to be revised.

Reflective equilibrium and moral principles
A characteristic piece of reasoning involving principles: 'Principle P is, on reflection, intuitively plausible. P entails that action a is morally wrong. That a is morally wrong is, on reflection, intuitively *im*plausible. Therefore, either P needs to be rejected, or the belief that a is wrong is to be abandoned.'
Different types of considered judgements enter the picture. The logical relations between the different judgements involved narrow down the options that are possible in cases of clashes.

Reflective equilibrium and equivalence judgements
A characteristic piece of reasoning involving equivalence judgements: 'a is, on reflection, morally right. a is, on reflection, morally equivalent to b. This entails that b is morally right. On reflection, however, b is morally wrong. Therefore, either the equivalence judgement, or one of the two individual moral judgements, needs to be abandoned'.
In the relevant respects, the situation is analogous to what is going on when principles are involved.

4. Representing ethical theories using equivalence judgements

Representing ethical theories in terms of moral equivalences
Let T be an ethical theory, and let A be the set of actions. Then, T induces a partitioning of A in moral equivalence classes (MECs), i.e. classes of actions that are, according to T, morally equivalent. The normative content of T can be represented by its partitioning of A and a function assigning to each equivalence class a deontic status.

Ethical monism

> x is right if, and only if (and because), x is F,
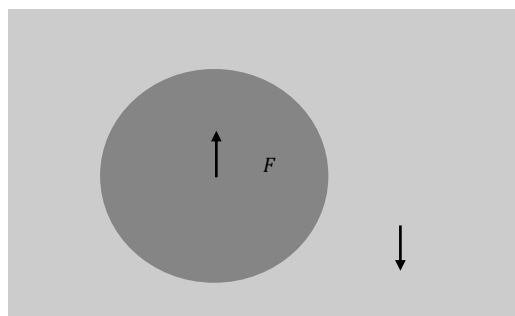
> The boundaries between the MECs can helpfully be described in non-moral terms.

Ethical pluralism

If *x* is *F*, then this is a moral reason to *x* ('there is a *prima facie* duty to keep one's promises').
If *x* is *G*, then this is a moral reason *not* to *x* ('there is a *prima facie* duty not to harm others').
There are no principles for dealing with cases of conflict.
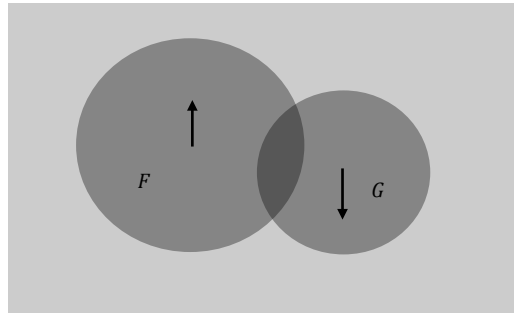
Not all boundaries between the MECs are helpfully describable in non-moral terms.

(Radical) particularism

None of the boundaries of the MECs are helpfully describable in non-moral terms.

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