Reflective Equilibrium Without Principles

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1. Introduction

Ethical theorizing beyond singular moral judgements

Reflective equilibrium (RE): moving back and forth between moral principles and what they entail with regard to individual cases and considered singular moral judgements.

Main points of the talk
(i)   Principles are dispensable for the purposes of RE. In RE reasoning, moral equivalence judgements ('there are no morally relevant differences between … and …') can take over the role of moral principles.
(ii)   Equivalence judgements are an interesting tool in ethical theorizing since they are located on a conceptual ground on which generalists and particularists can meet without first having to resolve their dispute about the extent to which there are defensible moral principles.

2. Moral equivalence judgements

Singular moral judgements and moral principles
(i)   Singular moral judgements: a is right (wrong); a is right (wrong) because a is F.
(ii)   Moral principles: an act x is right (wrong) if, and only if, and because, x is F.

Universalizability and moral equivalence judgements

(i)   (U)   If an act x is right (wrong), then any act that is not different from x in any morally relevant non-moral respect is also right (wrong).

         a is right.
         There is no morally relevant non-moral difference between acts a and b.
         (U).
         Therefore: b is right.

(ii)   [Def. 1] Acts x and y are morally equivalent ($x \equiv y$ for short) if, and only if, there are no non-moral differences between x and y that are relevant for these acts' deontic status.

         [Def. 2] Acts x and y are morally equivalent if, and only if, x and y both are morally right (wrong), and there is a property F such that x is right (wrong) because of F and y is right (wrong) because of F. [F is the property making x and y right (wrong).]

         [Def. 3] Two situations S and S' are morally equivalent ($S \equiv S'$) if, and only if, there are descriptions of the acts available in S and S', respectively, such that, under these descriptions, there is a one-to-one-correspondence between acts in S and acts in S' that are morally equivalent.

Some logical points
(i)   Principles entail equivalences: 'x is right (wrong) if, and only if, and because, x is F' entails 'all acts that are F are morally equivalent'.
(ii)   Singular moral judgements such as 'a is right (wrong)' neither entail equivalences nor principles: 'a is right (wrong)' entails (together with universalizability) 'all acts that do not differ from a in morally relevant respects are right (wrong)' – this, however, is not a principle of the relevant sort.
(iii)   Singular moral judgements involving a 'because'-clause entail principles: 'a is right (wrong) because it is F' entails 'if an act is F, then it is right (wrong) because it is F' and, thus, 'all acts that are F are morally equivalent').
(iv)   Equivalences such as 'a is morally equivalent to b' neither entail singular moral judgements nor moral principles.

3. Reflective Equilibrium (I): principles and equivalence judgements

RE reasoning: singular moral judgements & moral 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 implausible. Therefore, either P needs to be rejected, or the belief that a is wrong is to be abandoned.

RE reasoning: equivalence judgements & principles
Principle P is, on reflection, intuitively plausible. P entails that acts a and b (or situations S_1 and S_2) are morally equivalent. That this equivalence holds is, on reflection, intuitively implausible. Therefore, either P needs to be rejected, or the belief that a and b (or S_1 and S_2) are morally equivalent is to be abandoned.

Case study: rescue dilemmas
(i)   Assume that you can save either one person or a group of persons (not containing the first) and that everyone will die if you do nothing. Timmermann (2004) defends the view that, in such situations, 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 (i.e. if the person selected is a member of the group), those others as well.
(ii)   This view implies that the following two situations are morally equivalent:
        ISLAND. You can save either five people on one island or a single person on another. There is no morally relevant difference between the islanders. All will die if you do nothing.
        ISLAND[*]. Six people 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.
        Many will regard this equivalence judgement as highly counterintuitive and see the fact that Timmermann's view has these implications as speaking against his account.

4. Reflective Equilibrium (II): doing without principles
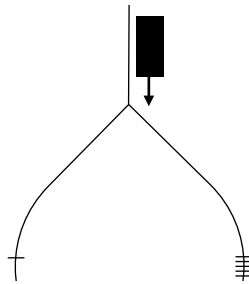
The point of RE reasoning
Start with different sorts of well-considered moral judgements and enhance coherence by removing conflicts between the judgements that you start out with or that occur underway and by increasing the degree to which the moral judgements are inferentially connected.

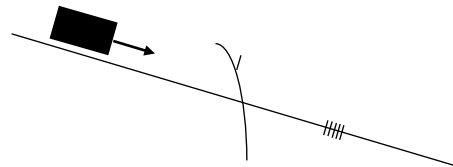RE reasoning: singular judgements and equivalence judgements
Act *a* is, on reflection, morally right. Act *a* is, on reflection, morally equivalent to *b*. This entails that *b* is morally right as well. On reflection, however, *b* is morally wrong. Therefore, either the equivalence judgement, or one of the two singular moral judgements, needs to be abandoned.
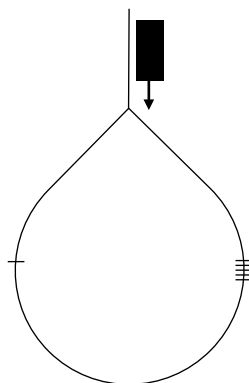
Case study: TROLLEY, FOOTBRIDGE, &c.
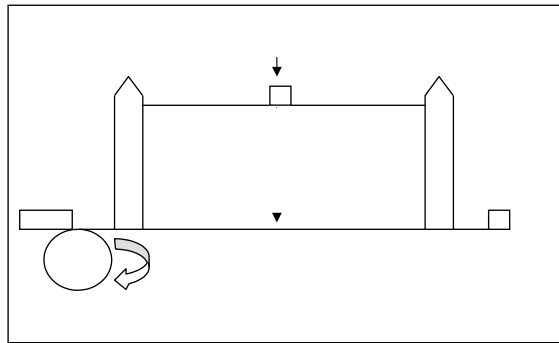
TROLLEY

FOOTBRIDGE

LOOP

Wide-spread considered judgements: TROLLEY $\equiv$ LOOP; TROLLEY $\not\equiv$ FOOTBRIDGE (and FOOTBRIDGE $\not\equiv$ LOOP).

LOOP-BRIDGE

(Otsuka 2008: 102)

One might hold: LOOP and LOOP-BRIDGE are morally equivalent; and so are LOOP-BRIDGE and FOOTBRIDGE. Then, however, one arrives at an inconsistent set of equivalence judgements, which is why one of these has to go:

TROLLEY ≡ LOOP; LOOP ≡ LOOP-BRIDGE; LOOP-BRIDGE ≡ FOOTBRIDGE;
TROLLEY ≢ FOOTBRIDGE.

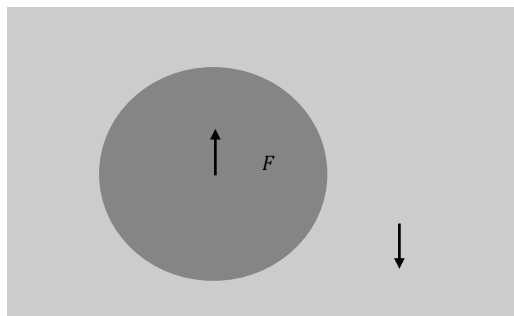This is an example for the sort of reasoning schematically introduced above.

5. Representing ethical theories in terms of moral equivalences

Moral equivalence classes
(i)   The normative content of an ethical theory can be represented in illuminating ways 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.
(ii)   Let T be an ethical theory, and let A be the set of actions. 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.

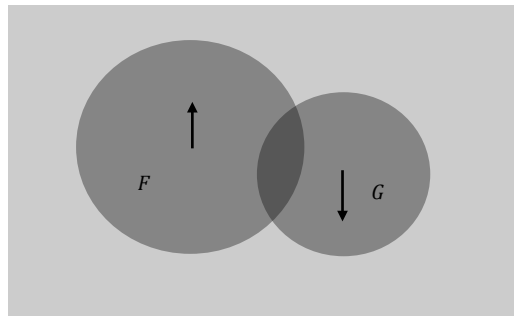Ethical monism

x is right if, and only if (and because), x is F.

The boundaries between the MECs can be described in non-moral terms.

Rossian 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 can be described in non-moral terms.

(Radical) particularism

> *There are no defensible moral principles.*

None of the boundaries of the MECs can be described in non-moral terms.

6. Conclusion

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