

Moral Equivalences and Ethical Theories

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1. Introduction

A common moral inference

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

(2) is the paradigm example of a *moral equivalence judgement*.

Aim of this talk

I want to convince you that moral equivalence judgements are an independent and powerful resource in ethical theorizing.

2. Moral equivalence judgements

Moral equivalences, defined

Two actions *x* and *y* are morally equivalent if, and only if:

- (a) both *x* and *y* are morally right, or *x* and *y* are morally wrong, and
- (b) *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*).

Moral equivalence judgements, singular moral judgements, moral principles

- (i) 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 if 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.
- (ii) ‘*a* is morally equivalent to *b*’ neither contradicts ‘*a* and *b* are right’ nor ‘*a* and *b* are wrong’. Equivalence judgements, therefore, do not entail singular moral judgements.
- (iii) ‘*a* and *b* are morally equivalent’ entails that there is a non-moral property *F* such that both *a* and *b* are right (or wrong) because they are *F*, but nothing about what this property is. Equivalences, therefore, do not entail moral principles of the form ‘all actions that are *F* are morally equivalent’.
- (iv) Thus, holding a moral equivalence judgement neither commits one to holding a specific singular moral judgement nor to holding a specific principle.

3. Making equivalences explicit

Rescue dilemmas and the ‘individualist lottery’

- (i) 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.
- (ii) Timmermann (2004) holds that in cases such as these, morality requires you to perform 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.

- (iii) This 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.

4. Reflective equilibrium without principles

Reflective equilibrium in ethics: the idea

Formulating and justifying an ethical view involves starting with different sorts of well-considered moral judgements and enhancing coherence by removing conflicts and/or by increasing the degree to which the moral judgements are inferentially connected.

Reflective equilibrium reasoning (I): principles vs. equivalence judgements

An example for an episode of reflective equilibrium reasoning involving a clash between a principle and a considered equivalence judgement:

‘On reflection, the principle that persons ought to be treated as ends in themselves is intuitively plausible. This principle entails that performing an individualist lottery in ISLAND is morally equivalent to performing one in ISLAND*. That this equivalence obtains is, on reflection, intuitively implausible. Either the judgement that the actions in question are not morally equivalent is to be abandoned, or the principle needs to be rejected.’

Reflective equilibrium reasoning (II): doing without principles

- (i) Three well-known scenarios:

TROLLEY. A runaway trolley threatens to kill five workers down the track. It will do so unless you push a button and thereby divert the trolley on a side track – in which case one worker on the side track will be killed.

FOOTBRIDGE. A runaway trolley threatens to kill five workers down the track. It will do so unless you push a person standing on a footbridge down on the track – in which case the trolley will be stopped by that person who, however, will be killed by the trolley.

LOOP. As TROLLEY, but with an additional piece of rail: the side track circles back on the original track. If the trolley is diverted, then the one on the side track will be killed and the trolley will be stopped. If there were nobody on the side track, then the trolley would circle back and kill the five.

- (ii) Wide-spread intuitions:

‘Turning the trolley in TROLLEY is morally permissible (or even required), while pushing down the person in FOOTBRIDGE is morally wrong. Moreover, the additional piece of rail that distinguishes LOOP from TROLLEY is not a morally relevant difference between these two scenarios.’

This entails:

- (*) ‘Turning the trolley in TROLLEY and turning the trolley in LOOP are morally equivalent.’

- (iii) Consider now the following scenario devised by Otsuka:
 LOOP-BRIDGE. A runaway trolley threatens to kill five workers down the track. It will do so unless you push a button and thereby let the trolley make a detour via a loop that circles back on the original track. In passing through this loop, the trolley triggers a person standing on a footbridge to fall onto the main track. In this case, the trolley will, after it has circled around and is back on the main track, be stopped by the person who, however, will be killed by the trolley.

Plausible views:

(**) ‘Turning the trolley in LOOP is morally equivalent to turning it in LOOP-BRIDGE; and turning the trolley in LOOP-BRIDGE is morally equivalent to pushing the person in FOOTBRIDGE.’

(*) and (**) entail:

(***) ‘Turning the trolley in TROLLEY is morally equivalent to pushing the person in FOOTBRIDGE.’

Conclusion (***) contradicts that turning the trolley in TROLLEY is right whereas pushing the person in FOOTBRIDGE is wrong. Either one of these judgements, or (*), or (**), is to be abandoned.

- (iv) The example shows that inconsistencies creating coherence pressure and thereby fuelling reflective equilibrium reasoning do not necessarily involve principles.

Reflective equilibrium without principles?

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

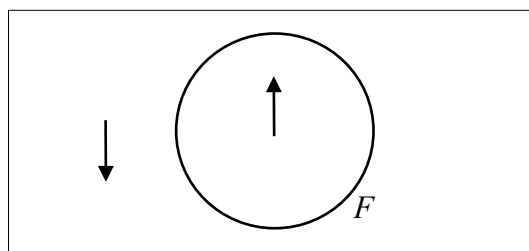
5. Moral equivalence classes

Representing ethical theories

The normative content of an ethical theory can be represented in terms of the moral equivalence classes (MECs) induced by the theory, i.e. in terms of the classes of actions that are, as implied by the theory in question, morally equivalent.

Monism

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



Different forms of pluralism

If x is F , then this is a moral reason favouring x .

If x is G , then this is a moral reason disfavouring x .

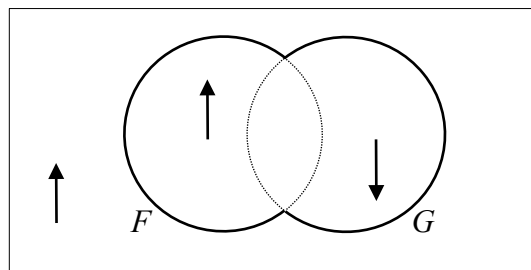
[E.g., F could be ‘the keeping of a promise’, and G could be ‘an act of harming’]

If an action is neither F nor G , then it is right (optional).

If an action is F and not G , then it is right (obligatory).

If an action is both F and G , then it is right if F is weightier than G and wrong otherwise.

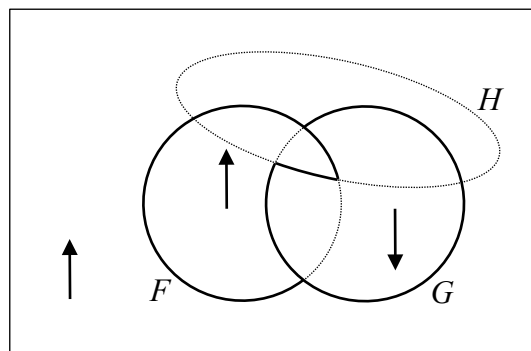
As far as this goes, the MEC representation can be depicted in the following way:



Different forms of pluralism say different things about what is the case if an action is both F and G .

Pluralism I

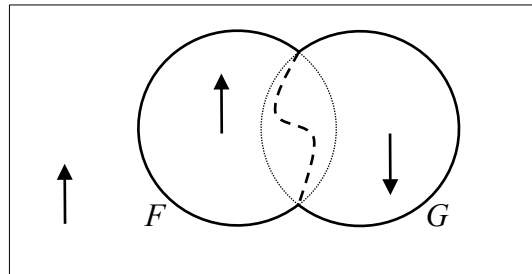
If an action x is both F and G and if x is furthermore H , then x is right. If it is both F and G , but not H , then it is wrong.



It is characteristic for this form of pluralism that all boundaries of the MECs induced by it can be completely described in non-moral terms. This is the MEC-equivalent of the fact that this form of pluralism specifies an informative principle of weighing moral considerations in cases of conflict.

Pluralism II

According to other forms of pluralism, there are in general no informative principles of weighing – there is, in other words, in general no non-moral way of specifying the conditions under which one of two (or more) conflicting moral considerations is most weighty.



It is characteristic for this form of pluralism that not all boundaries of the MECs induced by it are specifiable in non-moral terms.

6. Conclusion

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