

Barcan Marcus 1980, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency"

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March 8, 2015

Single-Principle-ing

Early in the paper, Barcan Marcus considers and rejects the “single-principle” solution to moral dilemmas.

Why, exactly?

Problem 1: unreasonable to believe we can capture all moral phenomena under a single principles.

Problem 2:

“There is always the analogue of Buridan’s ass... All other considerations may balance out... however strong our wills and complete our knowledge, we might be faced with a moral choice in which there are no moral grounds for favoring *x* over *y*.” (125)

This is confusing. It should be uncontroversial that sometimes there is no moral ground for favoring one option over another – but this is just a case of indifference/equality/on-a-par. Why would such a case lead to dilemmas?

Kantianism?

Nope!

“Unregenerate act utilitarianism”? May avoid dilemmas, but *not* because of its single-principle status. Rather, because it doesn’t assign deontic verdicts to acts *per se*¹, but rather to their consequences in a given circumstance.

- Confused: the consequentialism doesn’t seem to be doing the work in ruling out dilemmas. Imagine a consequentialist with two injunctions: (1) maximize utility, and (2) maximize equality.

¹ E.g. promise-keeping, promise-breaking, acts of respect or contempt, etc.

Does this not count as “consequentialism” because it is not saying “maximize *the good*”? Then it looks like consequentialism is being *defined* as a single-principle moral code, and so again the single-principle-ness is doing the work.

On Defining ‘Consistency’

Barcan Marcus wants a definition that allows moral dilemmas. In fact, this isn’t too difficult.

Strangely, consistency of moral code has often been defined in terms of universal quantification: “a code is consistent if it applies without conflict to all actual – or more strongly – to all possible cases.” (123) “Analogously, we can define a set of rules as consistent if there is some possible world in which they are all obeyable in all circumstances in *that* world.” (128)

Contrast: a set of sentences *S* is consistent if there is *some* possible world at which every member of *S* is true.

Questions about this formulation:

- (i) Why ‘obeyable’ vs. ‘obeyed’?

'Obeyable' is a modal, so on the standard analysis it just means there's an accessible possible world at which all are obeyed. Thus her definition becomes: there's an accessible world w at which there is a world w' accessible from w such that all rules are obeyed at w' .

Here's what she says:

"Note that I have says 'obeyable' rather than 'obeyed' for I want to allow for the partition of cases where a rule-governed action fails to be done between those cases where the failure is a personal failure of the agent – an imperfect will in Kant's terms – and those where 'external' circumstances prevent the agent from meeting conflicting obligations. To define consistency relative to a kingdom of ends, a deontically perfect world in which all actions that ought to be done are done, would be too strong; for that would require both perfection of will *and* the absence of circumstances that generate moral conflict." (128)

(ii) Does this make consistency too cheap?

Example: the following pair of rules is consistent on her definition:

- R1: If sentient creatures exist, then *maximize* their sum total utility.
- R2: If sentient creatures exist, then *minimize* their sum total utility.

Response: Consistency is only a "necessary but not a sufficient condition for a set of moral rules."² (130)

Games vs. moral codes. Example of the card game (black trumps red; high trump low). Games are essentially chancy, whereas we want a moral code to be such that, if we "stack the deck" correctly, we won't run into dilemmas.

Worry: Does this response collapse to the priority-rule approach, wherein there *is* a way out of the dilemma?

Barcan Marcus: No. Such rules help us make the best of the predicaments we inevitably find ourselves in, "But, if we do make the best of a predicament, and make a choice, to claim that one of the conflicting obligations has thereby been erased is to claim that it would be mistaken to feel guilt or remorse about having failed to act according to that obligation... But that is false to the facts." (130)

There seem to be two reasons Barcan Marcus thinks we need to accept moral dilemmas:

- 1) They explain the appropriateness of guilt
- 2) They help motivate us to set up our lives so as to avoid the bad situations that give rise to such dilemmas.

Given just S4, this the 'obeyable' formulation collapses to the 'obeyed' one. The puzzle is that *Barcan Marcus* obviously would have known this, so why did she formulate it this way?

Yet you might think that these are inconsistent – Contra Barcan Marcus, they "no guide to action under any circumstance" (129) and yet are still consistent on her definition.

² For a set of moral rules to be...? Adequate? Acceptable? Coherent?

Worry: Can't a (dilemma-free) consequentialist accommodate both pieces of data?

Guilt: sometimes it would be best to have a disposition that makes you feel guilty even when you do what (given the circumstances) is best.

Motivation: we can recognize that sometimes the best option is still very bad, and so one has reason to try to avoid getting oneself into such situations.

Further Questions

- 1) What's the status of dilemmas on Barcan Marcus's account? Sometimes she talks as if there is *best* option in such a case. Does this mean she denies the "Permissibility of choosing your best option" principle?
- 2) On her version of " 'Ought' implies 'can' ": you ought to set things up so that you can do what you ought to do! (134-5)
- 3) The limits of moral evaluation:

Forster and Worster

"Forster may not want Worster for a friend; a certain possibility of intimacy may be closed to them which perhaps Forster requires in a friend. Worster may see in Forster a sensibility that he does not admire. But there is no reason to suppose that such appraisals are or must be moral appraisals. Not all questions of value are moral questions, and it may be that not all moral dilemmas are resolvable by principles for which moral justification can be given." (136)

"Best available reasons" (133); "even where the reasons for doing *x* outweigh, and in whatever degree, the reasons for doing *y*" (126)

Can they be solved by non-moral, but still normative principles? Are there dilemmas of all-things-considered practical reason?