

Morality, Prudence, and Choice

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What should we do when our moral obligations conflict with what is best for ourselves?

Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900): the 'profoundest problem' in ethics

Some examples

You might have *moral* reason to help a friend moving, but *prudential* reason to stay home and getting some pressing things done.

You might have *moral* reason to reduce your carbon footprint, but *prudential* reason to take the flight to Thailand for vacation.

You might have *moral* reason to agree to be vaccinated against a virus, but *prudential* reason to refuse provided that enough other people will be vaccinated.

You might have *moral* reason to accept that a windmill farm is set up in our neighborhood, but *prudential* reason to protest it as reducing your quality of life.

Standard View (S)

- (1) Different types of normative reasons can be *compared* with one another. [COMPARABILITY]
- (2) When reasons are in conflict, we can determine what we ought to do all things considered by *weighing* their relative strength. [DETERMINABILITY]



Two parts

Assessing the
Standard View

Developing
Alternatives to the
Standard View

Three alternatives

- **A** reformulates **(1)** and **(2)** in **(S)**.
- **B** accepts **(1)** in **(S)** but denies **(2)**.
- **C** denies both **(1)** and **(2)** in **(S)**.

Alternatives to weighing (A)

- *Silencing*: One reason determines what to do in the given circumstances; no other considerations have any weight.
- *Canceling (undercutting)*: One reason holds that another reason is not a reason in the given circumstances.
- *Exclusion*: One reason holds that another reason is not the right kind of reason to make a particular kind of choice.

Rationalism (B)

- *Strong Rationalism*: An agent ought all-things-considered to X insofar as she is rationally required to X.
- *Weak Rationalism*: There is no unique answer to what an agent ought to do all things considered if she is fully rational.
- *Moral rationalism*: What an agent ought all-things-considered to do is what she is morally required to do.

Normative pluralism (C)

- Normativity is fundamentally divided between different normative standpoints without a common basis for comparisons.
- There is no overarching normative perspective, as moral and prudential reasons do not compare across types.
- There are truths about what we *morally* ought to do and *prudentially* ought to do, but there is nothing that we *just plain ought to do*.



Susan Hurley (1954-2007)

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- “The analogy between one-person conflict and many-person conflict is sometimes taken to support attempts to model techniques for resolving many-person conflicts on techniques for resolving one-person conflict, on the assumption that the former techniques are no more problematic than the latter. (...) But the analogy can be turned on its head: it can be taken to support skepticism about the possibility of rationally resolving one-person conflicts, on the assumption that this possibility is no *less* problematic than the possibility of rationally resolving many-person conflicts. [...] If there are grounds for skepticism about the possibility of rationally resolving conflicts between persons, and if conflicts within persons are in many-ways like conflicts between persons, then there may be grounds for skepticism about the possibility of rationally resolving conflicts within persons as well.” (*Natural Reasons*, 1992, p. 227; originally in *Mind* 1985)

A doctor's choice

- “Consider the following case. Suppose that the deliberator is a doctor who can treat only one of three urgent cases of the same illness; his alternatives are to treat a , b , or c . The illness has very similar symptoms and effects in the three cases, and the treatment would be equally successful applied to any of them. a , b , and c are all free of family obligations. a has had bad health all his life and has several other serious conditions; b has another, somewhat less serious complaint, while the illness in question is c 's only complaint. b is the doctor's own patient of long standing, c has been referred to him by a colleague, and a is a foreigner attending a conference of mathematicians in the doctor's vicinity (which b and c are also attending). Finally, c promises to make brilliant advances in some branch of pure mathematics if cured of the disease, while a has somewhat less talent and b somewhat less still.” (*Mind*, 1985, p. 503)



A doctor's choice

Entitlement	Equality	Excellence
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a

b

c

b

c

a

c

a

b

To bring this closer to
(my present) home...



Companies may be excluded or placed under observation if there is an unacceptable risk that the company contributes to or is responsible for:

- serious or systematic human rights violations
- serious violations of individual's rights in situations of war or conflict
- the sale of weapons to states engaged in armed conflict that use the weapons in ways that constitute serious and systematic violations of the international rules on the conduct of hostilities
- the sale of weapons or military materiel to states that are subject to investment restrictions on government bonds
- severe environmental damage
- acts or omissions that on an aggregate company level lead to unacceptable greenhouse gas emissions
- gross corruption or other serious financial crime
- other particularly serious violations of fundamental ethical norms

Arrow's impossibility theorem

- There is no function from individual orderings of alternatives to a social ordering that meets the following conditions:
 - *P (Weak Pareto Principle)*: For any alternatives x and y , if all individuals prefer x to y , then society prefers x to y .
 - *D (Non-Dictatorship)*: There is no individual such that, for all alternatives x and y , if that individual prefers x to y , then society prefers x to y .
 - *U (Unrestricted Domain)*: For any set of alternatives and any set of individuals, the domain of the social welfare function includes all orderings of alternatives by individuals.
 - *I (Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives)*: For any alternatives x and y , if the preferences of all individuals as between x and y remain the same, then the preference of society as between x and y remains the same; that is, the preferences of society as between x and y depend only on the preferences of individuals as between x and y .

The analogue with deliberation

- There is no function from orderings of alternatives by specific criteria to an all-things-considered ordering that meets the following conditions:
 - P^* (*Dominance*): For all alternatives x and y , if all criteria rank x above y , then x ranks above y all things considered.
 - D^* (*Non-Dictatorship*): A coherence function must not give so much weight to one criterion that it outweighs any criterion that conflicts with it under any circumstances; that is, it must not be the case that there is one criterion such that any one alternative's superiority over any other according to this criterion always results in its superiority all things considered, regardless of how other criteria rank those alternatives.
 - U^* (*Unrestricted Domain*): For any set of alternatives and any set of criteria, the domain of the coherence function includes all orderings of alternatives by criteria.
 - I^* (*Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives*): For all alternatives x and y , if the rankings of x and y by all criteria remain the same then the ranking of x and y all things considered remains the same; that is, a deliberator's ranking of a pair of alternatives all things considered depends only on the ranking of those alternatives by all relevant criteria, and not on the rankings of other alternatives.

Single-profile conditions: Parks; Kemp and Ng

- Single-profile (Bergson-Samuelson) vs multiple-profile (Arrow): “The Bergson-Samuelson social welfare function is not concerned with counterfactual possibilities about the content of preferences, but only with the content of actual preferences, whatever that may be, just as a moral theory is not concerned with what the content of the relevant values might have been, but only with what it is.” (Hurley, *Mind* 1985, 512)
- N^* (*Neutrality with respect to Non-Criterial Information*): For any alternatives w , x , y , and z , if all criteria rank w and z in the same way they rank x and y , then w and z must be ranked in the same way, all things considered, as x and y .

Single-profile conditions: Roberts

- L^* (*Like Cases*): For any alternatives $w, x, y,$ and $z,$ if x and w are members of one equivalence class collecting alternatives with just the same non-criterial characteristics and y and z are members of another, and if the rankings by all criteria of x and y are the same as their rankings of w and $z,$ then the ranking of x and y all things considered must be the same as the ranking of w and z all things considered.
- R^* (*Richness*): For any ordered triple $\langle X, Y, Z \rangle$ of equivalence classes, which collect alternatives with just the same non-criterial characteristics, and any ordered triple $\langle A, B, C \rangle$ of complete specifications of criterial characteristics, there exist three distinct alternatives characterized by A and membership in $X,$ by B and membership in $Y,$ and by C and membership in $Z,$ respectively.

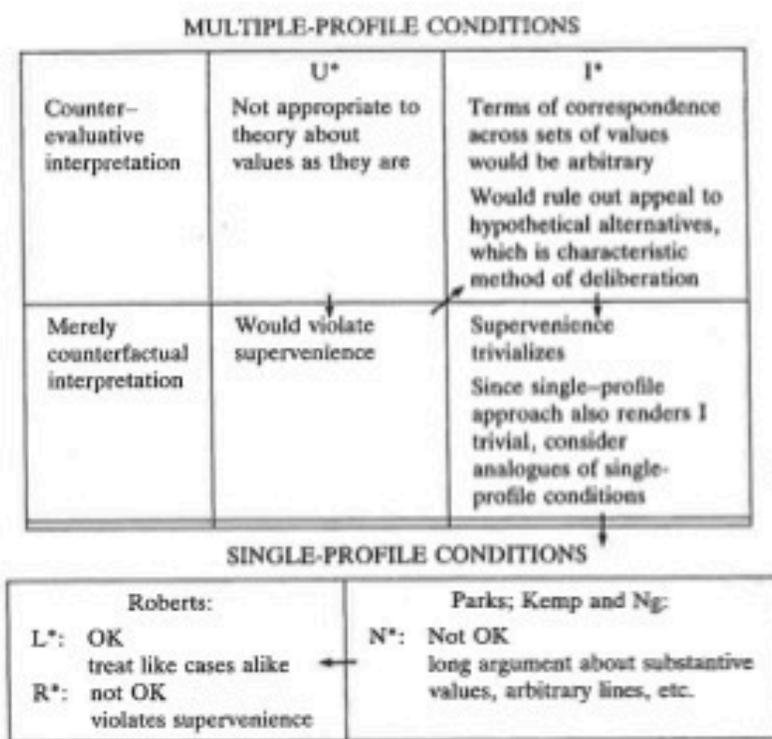


FIGURE 12.2

descriptions, and so cannot be a reasonable constraint to impose on theories about the relationships among conflicting values. The existence of coherence functions is not threatened by impossibility results that depend on R^* .

7. Summary and Conclusion

We have now considered the analogues of three sets of conditions that give rise to impossibility results for social choice, and have found good reason to reject some condition in each analogous set as a condition on the kind of theory sought in deliberation about conflicting values. Thus we may conclude that none of these results threaten the existence of coherence functions or

can reasonably be required to meet formally analogous conditions, then their impossibility will follow. Coherence functions can, arguably, be required to meet conditions P^* and D^* . With respect to U^* and I^* : when these conditions are interpreted counterevaluatively, they are incompatible with the basic method of deliberation, which involves seeking a substantive theory about the relationships among the values we actually have by considering how they would apply or have applied to alternatives other than those at issue. When these conditions are not interpreted counterevaluatively, however, the requirement of supervenience both invalidates U^* and renders I^* empty. The difficulties of defending these analogues of multiple-profile conditions suggested considering analogues of conditions that produce single-profile impossibilities. We have two suggestions as to how an independence condition may be reformulated in the single-profile literature. By analogy to the first suggestion, we could derive impossibility results by using condition N^* , which requires neutrality with respect to non-criterial information. But this is not a reasonable constraint to impose on the theories represented by coherence functions: it would either render them gratuitously crude or would involve the transformation of the substantive values that are its subject matter to an extent that would be incompatible with their discrete characters. By analogy to the second suggestion, we could use condition L^* , which merely requires that cases alike in all respects be treated alike. This requirement cannot be resisted. However, to get an impossibility result with this condition we also need to impose a reformulation of condition U^* . But the reformulation, R^* violates supervenience, and therefore it is not a reasonable condition to impose on coherence functions. The course of argument summarized in this paragraph is represented in Figure 12.2.

More generally still, the character of the theory sought in deliberation about a substantive theory about specific values made trouble for the counterevaluative interpretation of the multiple-profile conditions and for the neutrality condition, while the requirement of supervenience made trouble for any other interpretation of the multiple-profile conditions and for the single-profile richness condition. In earlier chapters, in particular those of Part I, we found that both substantive and formal constraints on interpretation were needed to defend against a challenge of indeterminacy. In this chapter, we have found that both substantive and formal constraints on the theory represented by a coherence function are needed to defend against a challenge of overdetermination.

What we are thinking...

- Does Hurley's argument work?
 - We are specifically looking into her treatment of single-profile views, especially her arguments against *Neutrality* and *Richness*.
- How does Hurley's work bear on the way the 'profoundest problem' is understood?
 - We think (hope?) that it can be used to map the conceptual landscape of the different ways of defending or objecting to the Standard View.
- Can it be used to provide a solution to the problem?
 - Our hunch (half-baked argument, at best) presently is that there is no real problem once the rational choice apparatus is brought to bear on the problem.
 - More precisely, we expect that the problem will be the embarrassment of riches: there might be many ways of resolving the clash of values and the final resolution would have to come from outside: from the courts or other institutions.

Second workshop: Morality and Choice

WORKSHOP

Morality and Choice



There is a long-standing challenge in ethical theory, what Henry Sidgwick has called the ‘profoundest problem’: that practical reason is dual, that prudence and morality cannot be fit together into one coherent framework in which their conflict is rationally resolved. At the same time, using, reinterpreting and transforming the Arrow-Sen social choice theoretical framework, Susan Hurley - most prominently in her

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Thank You!
