A NOTE ON AN ARGUMENT ABOUT MORAL DILEMMAS

Pedro Merlussi
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro

Abstract: There's an important argument to the effect that the existence of moral dilemmas is inconsistent with a pair of intuitively plausible principles of deontic logic. In this short note, I present a counterexample to a principle employed in this argument, namely, that if $\sim CA$ (where $\sim$C stands for "cannot"), then it is physically necessary that $\sim$A. The counterexample can be avoided if we formalise a moral dilemma differently, but that has the upshot that one principle the argument relies on is not an intuitively plausible principle after all.
Keywords: Moral dilemma, physical possibility, ability.

Resumo: Um argumento importante conclui que a existência de dilemas morais é inconsistente com diversos princípios intuitivamente plausíveis da lógica deôntica. Nesta breve nota, apresento um contraexemplo a um dos princípios utilizados nesse argumento, a saber, o princípio de que, se alguém é incapaz de executar uma ação, então é fisicamente necessário que essa ação não será executada. Esse contraexemplo pode ser evitado caso formalizemos um dilema moral de outra maneira; no entanto, ainda tem a consequência de mostrar que um dos princípios sobre os quais o argumento se apoia não é, afinal, tão plausível quanto parece.
Palavras-chave: Dilema moral, possibilidade física, habilidade.

There is an argument in debates about moral dilemmas that tries to establish the inconsistency of accepting both moral dilemmas and some intuitively plausible principles of deontic logic. A moral dilemma is a situation where someone is morally obligated to do each of two actions but is unable to do both. Let us have a look, for example, at William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, which is often mentioned as a paradigm case of a moral dilemma. Suppose that Sophie and her two children find themselves held captive at a Nazi concentration camp and that a guard tells her that only one of her children will be allowed to live. If she chooses neither, then both will die. So it is up to Sophie to decide which child won't be killed, and she has the same reasons to save both. Thus, it seems as though she has the obligation to save both children, even though she is unable to do it. Let "OA" stand for "A is obligatory," and let "$\sim C$" stand for "cannot." In symbols, a moral dilemma

may be thought of as the conjunction of the following:

1. OA
2. OB
3. $\sim C$ (A & B).

Now, it has been frequently noted that 1–3 conflicts with two standard principles of deontic logic. The first principle just says that if an action is obligatory, then its denial is not obligatory, which boils down to saying that the same action cannot be both obligatory and forbidden:

(PC) $OA \supset \sim O\sim A$.

The second principle is a bit more technical. Suppose that B is a necessary consequence of A. The principle tells us that, given only this much, if it is obligatory that A, then it is also obligatory that B:

(PD) $\Box(A \supset B) \supset (OA \supset OB)$.

Now the argument may be put forward as follows (MCCONELL, 1976, 2018):

1	OA	premise
2	OB	premise
3	$\sim C(A \wedge B)$	premise
4	$\Box\sim(A \wedge B)$	3
5	$\Box(B \supset \sim A)$	Taut. Consequence, 4
6	$\Box(B \supset \sim A) \supset (OB \supset O\sim A)$	PD
7	$OB \supset O\sim A$	5, 6
8	$O\sim A$	2,7

9	$OA \supset \sim O \sim A$	PC
10	$\sim O \sim A$	1, 9
11	$O \sim A \wedge \sim O \sim A$	8, 10

Is the above argument cogent? In this short note, I aim to argue that the above argument is invalid. The argument is invalid, I show, not because there is something wrong with (PC) or (PD), but because the inference from 3 to 4 is invalid. Call it *the inference*. To show what is wrong with the inference, we need to answer the following question: How are we to understand the box in (PD)? That is, how are we to understand the operator "necessarily" in the argument?

Is it logical necessity? If so, it is hard to see what the connection is between 3 and 4. Suppose that Ed is unable to do three hundred pushups and throw a stone faster than the speed of light. If the inference is valid, then it should follow that it is logically necessary that ∼(Ed does three hundred pushups and throws a stone faster than the speed of light). But that does not seem to follow, for it is logically possible that both conjuncts are true: it is logically possible that Ed does three hundred pushups, since a proposition is logically possible iff it is not a contradiction; and it is also possible that Ed throws a stone faster than the speed of light, since this proposition only violates a law of physics, not a law of any logic. Following McConell's suggestion (2018), to make the appropriate connection between 3 and 4, it seems, the box should be read as physical necessity.

The thought here is that from the lack of ability to φ, one can infer that it is physically necessary that $\sim\varphi$. Undoubtedly, the concepts of physical necessity and abilities are somehow connected. Of course, it sounds plausible to say that if a certain event is physically impossible, then no one can do it. But the step from 3 to 4 goes the other way around, and this is what I object to.

Imagine Ed going to get a new light bulb and inserting it into a specific socket because there is a missing light bulb there. Unbeknownst to him, however, the new bulb is an indeterministic device whose behaviour is completely random. Whether the light is turned on is something that is not up to him; for it depends on the indeterministic device. So, it is possible that the light turns on and possible that it does not, in the sense that both outcomes are consistent with the laws of physics. Now, is Ed able to turn on the light? I do not think so, for the behaviour of the light bulb is completely random, and

outside his control.[1] Let p stand for "the light turns on." Therefore, it is plausible to say that ~Cp.

However, in light of this, it does not follow that it is physically necessary that ~p, that is, the light does not turn on. To say that it is physically necessary that the light does not turn on is to say that it is not physically possible that the light does turn on. But this does not follow. Because the light bulb's behaviour is random and outside Ed's control, it is (physically) possible that the light does not turn on and physically possible that it does.

One could object by claiming that if Ed flips the switch and the light is turned on, then he is able to do it. But I deny this claim. If the light bulb's behaviour is, in fact, random, then the fact that Ed turned it on is a matter of luck. (Note that the assumption is not that Ed is unable to do it because the bulb's behaviour is indeterministic, but because it is outside his control). If it is a matter of luck, then he is not able to do it. Luck and control are clearly at odds. As Anthony Kenny points out, a hopeless darts player may, once in a lifetime, hit the bull, but be unable to repeat the performance because he does not have the ability to hit the bull' (KENNY, 1975, 136).

Many mundane examples would serve as counterexamples to the inference. Consider events like earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes. They are all unpredictable and can happen without any warning. We don't have the ability to stop them from happening, but it does not follow that they are physically necessary.

Accidents are unpredictable and can occur at any time as well, like getting hurt by a falling object or slipping on a damp floor. Even though it is obvious that such accidents are not physically necessary, it often appears impossible to stop them from happening when they do.

What sort of structural reason do we have for believing that the counterexample is successful? Clearly, it is plausible to think that physical impossibilities constrain our abilities,[2] so that we are not able to do what is physically impossible. But of course, this is not the only factor that constrains our abilities. Undetermined or lucky (but still indeterministic) events, though physically possible, may be outside our control. If so, then the argument about moral dilemmas is invalid, even if we accept (PC) and (PD). If the concepts of ability and physical necessity follow some kind of logic, that logic will not include the inference from $\sim CA$ to $\Box\sim A$.

[1] See also van Inwagen (1983, 8).

[2] See, however, Fara (2010) for a very interesting argument against the view that physical or metaphysical impossibilities rule out capacities. The argument is presented in the context of Fitch's knowability paradox.

Before concluding the paper, I will address an important objection raised by an anonymous reviewer. The reviewer proposes an alternative approach to characterising a moral dilemma that eliminates the need to talk about abilities, so that one wouldn't need to appeal to the inference from 3 to 4 in the argument. The suggestion is that moral dilemmas crucially involve situations in which performing action A rules out performing action B, and vice-versa. In this sense, the actions are mutually incompatible, leading to the conclusion that, necessarily, it is not the case that A and B. The idea, then, is that this sort of necessity might very well be that of causal or physical necessity.

Let's break down the objection. According to the reviewer's proposal, a moral dilemma is a situation in which:

1. OA
2. OB
3. Necessarily not (A & B).

As previously stated, the necessity here is not logical or metaphysical, but rather a weaker notion, such as physical or causal necessity. This formalisation of moral dilemmas suffices to argue that moral dilemmas are inconsistent with (PD) and (PC).

This is a very good response. The reviewer correctly points out that moral dilemmas involve mutually incompatible actions. Yet, while this formalisation avoids the initial objection to the inference, I still believe the main argument is unsound because we can now see more clearly why (PD) fails.

If the box in (PD) involves logical necessity, then I believe there is some initial plausibility to it. If it's necessary that p implies p, then the fact that p is obligatory implies that p is obligatory. But there are, of course, reasons to think that *O* is not closed under entailment. Suppose I promise to paint your house's door. It is necessary that if someone paints your door, then the door exists. While it might well be obligatory to paint your door (because I promised to do so), it does not follow that it is obligatory for the door to exist, even though if I paint your house's door, then the door exists.

But on top of that, if the operator is understood as causal or physical necessity, then why should one accept (PD) in the first place? Notice that (PD), when understood in this way, is not part of Standard Deontic Logic (HILPINEN, 2001). It merely asserts that if p is obligatory, then whatever is physically or causally implied by p is also obligatory. It does not say, as Standard Deontic Logic does, that if p is a theorem, then the claim that p is obligatory is also a theorem. Therefore, counterexamples are even easier to

find. Suppose Ana promised her friend to set an alarm early in the morning, but doing so causally results in her friend waking up really angry. It is obligatory for Ana to set the alarm, and it is causally necessary (in this scenario) that if she sets the alarm, then her friend wakes up angry. However, it is not obligatory that her friend wakes up angry.

The mere existence of a moral dilemma also constitutes a direct counterexample to (PD). Consider the case of Agamemnon in Aulis: leading the Greeks to Troy entails sacrificing Iphigenia, and saving Iphigenia entails preventing the Greeks from sailing. Now, if we accept (PD), then it should follow that if Agamemnon has the obligation to lead the Greeks to Troy, then he *has the obligation* to sacrifice Iphigenia. But I think one ought to question why causal or physical necessity implies a moral obligation. To be sure, Agamemnon must or is forced to sacrifice Iphigenia. Yet the way in which he is forced to do it is not the sort of way that counts as an obligation. If there's some conceptual connection between causal necessity and moral obligation in this case, then I think the conclusion is that Agamemnon *is not obligated* to sacrifice Iphigenia, that he is *not*, as it were, morally blameworthy for sacrificing her, since he was forced to do it.

My reply then is that we can explain away the (alleged) intuition behind (PD) by distinguishing two senses of "must". If Agamemnon has the obligation to save Iphigenia, then he must prevent the Greeks from sailing. But this is just because he is causally forced to do it, not because he is obligated to do it. If he *does* have the obligation to prevent the Greeks from sailing, this obligation does not follow from the fact he is causally (or physically) necessitated to do it.

Moral dilemmas might well be incompatible with some intuitively compelling principles. But (PD) is not one of them.

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Email: p.merlussi@gmail.com

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