Moral Dilemmas and Vagueness

PHIL2511 Paradoxes
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Admin

Required reading: Sainsbury, Chapter 2, Section 2.4; Chapter 3, Sections 3.1-3.2

Required reading for next seminar: Sainsbury, Chapter 3, Sections 3.3-3.5

Essay 1 due: Thursday March 7, 5pm (Hand in to Philosophy Office)

Useful article on writing philosophy papers: http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

Moral Dilemmas

Def: a moral dilemma is a case where every action available to an agent is morally bad, but at least one action ought to be done

Possible instances of moral dilemmas are the Shipwreck and Sophie's Choice.

The Shipwreck

- Thirty survivors of a shipwreck are crowded into a lifeboat intended to hold seven
- A storm is coming up; the lifeboat has to be lightened if anyone is to survive
- The captain reasons that he morally ought to force some individuals to go overboard and drown
- He perseveres in this view, even while recognizing that anyone he selects to throw overboard will be an innocent person, and that it is bad to kill an innocent.
- The captain thinks he is morally obliged to do something morally bad

Sophie's Choice

- Sophie is required by a guard in the concentration camp in which she in interned with her two children to select one of them to be killed.
- If she refuses to choose, both will be killed
- By choosing one child for death, Sophie saves the other.
- The same act is both saving a life and causing a death;
- It is both morally required and morally bad

A paradox concerning moral dilemmas

(D) There are possible moral dilemmas

(O) If B(A) then O(~A) (If an action A is bad, then one ought to not do A)

(C) If O(~A) then ~O(A) (If one morally ought not to A then it is not the case that one ought to do A)

The assumptions lead to a contradiction.

The paradoxical argument

1. There is a possible moral dilemma (by D)
2. Then there is a possible person x such that

i) x's available actions are A1,…, An;

ii) A1,…, An are all morally bad; and

iii) For one of the actions, Ai, x ought to do Ai

3. Hence, O(Ai) and B(Ai)
4. So, by (O), O(Ai) and O(~Ai)
5. So, by (C), O(Ai) and ~O(~Ai), which is a contradiction!

Sainsbury's argument against (C)

Preference and desire is similar to obligation, but principles analogous to (C), such as (P), fail in the case of preference and desire.

(P) If I prefer to do A, then it is not the case that I prefer to do not A

Sainsbury's counterexamples to (P):

i) I would prefer not to go to the dentist (it takes time and is disagreeable)

ii) I would also prefer to go to the dentist (to aviod worse problems from dental neglect)

Sainsbury's argument against (C) (cont)

Since (P) fails, we should also think that (C) fails. In particular, we should think that (C) fails in the case of moral dilemmas just as (P) fails in the dentist case

For example, in the shipwreck case, the following are both true:

i) The captain ought to kill innocent people (so that some can survive)

ii) The captain ought not to kill innocent people (since it is wrong to kill innocents)

Reply to Sainsbury

We need to distinguish overall preference and non-overall preference

Def: X overall prefers to do A iff, all things considered, X prefers to do A rather than doing any alternative action

Def: X non-overall prefers to do A iff, relative to X's beliefs and desires, there is a consideration in favour of X doing A

Reply to Sainsbury (cont)

(P) Is true of overall preference, thought not true for non-overall preference.

Similarly, (C) is true for overall moral ought.

Def: X (overall) morally ought to do A iff, all things considered, X morally ought to do A

An argument for (C)

(AGG) If O(A) and O(B), then O(A and B)

(CAN) If O(A) then Can(A) (If one ought to do A, then one can do A)

Suppose O(A) and O(~A)

Then, by (AGG), O(A and ~A)

Then, by (CAN), Can(A and ~A)

But ~Can(A and ~A).

So the supposition that O(A) and O(~A) is false.

Conclusion: (C) is true

Sainsbury's argument against (CAN)

(CAN) has counterexamples such as:

i) A drunken driver ought to negotiate the curve accurately, even if his condition makes it impossible for him to accomplish this

ii) An addict ought to stop taking the substance, even if he cannot give it up

Sainsbury's argument against (CAN) (cont)

- The attraction of "ought implies can" is that in many cases in which the ability is lacking, we excuse failure to act in accord with the obligation
- But this does not mean that the obligation is absent or somehow nullified
- Maybe the agent is excused; but this would make no sense if there were no obligation for him to be excused from

Argument against (AGG)

- Against (AGG), it might be argued that there is a maximum total degree of obligation that can be imposed on a single agent
- If actions A and B are each very demanding, it seems coherent to hold that each is obligatory whereas their conjunction is not
- For example, perhaps I ought to give large amounts of money to charity.
- Perhaps I also ought to give large amounts of money to provide de luxe care for my aging mother.
- But I cannot do both

Examples of Sorities type paradoxes

- Tallness
- Redness
- Baldness

In ancient times, a similar paradox was told in terms of a heap, and a Greek word for ‘heap’ – *soros* – has given rise to the use of the word ‘sorities’ for all paradoxes of this kind.

What do Sorities paradoxes have in common?

Answer: In each case, the key word in the paradox – ‘tall’, ‘red’, ‘bald’, ‘heap’ – is vague.

Def: A word is vague iff it admits border cases

Def: A border case of a word is a case in which we don’t know how to apply the word or not, even though we have all the information that we would normally regard as sufficient to settle the matter

Theories of vagueness (see p. 42)

1. Vagueness is absence of fact: When it is vague whether someone is tall, there is no act of the matter whether or not he is tall. The reason we do not know what to say in borderline cases is that there is nothing to know.
2. Vagueness is absence of definite truth: a person is borderline for ‘tall’ just on condition it is neither definitely true or definitely not true that she is tall
3. Vagueness is absence of a sharp boundary. E.g. in a series of men of closely similar but steadily diminishing height there is no last (definitely) tall man, and no first (definitely) non-tall man.

Theories of vagueness (cont)

4. Vagueness is incompleteness in meaning. A vague expression is a bit like a partial function in maths. Words whose meaning is fully specific and complete are not vague.

5. Vagueness is indecision: “The reason it’s vague where the outback begins is not there’s this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different border, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word ‘outback’. Vagueness is semantic indecision” (Lewis 1986, p. 212)

Theories of vagueness (cont)

6. Vagueness is a feature of the world: some things, like mountains, are vague, because it is vague what their spatial extent is: others, like properties, are vague because it is vague what things they apply to

7. Vagueness is ignorance: there are sharp boundaries (facts of the matter, definite truth or falsehood, etc.), but we cannot know where they fall

Note: Some of these theories (1-7) might be compatible with each other, while others are incompatible with each other.

The Paradox of the Heap: the Premises

(1) A 10,000 grained collection is a heap

(2) If a 10,000 grained collection is a heap, then a 9,999 grained collection is a heap

(3) If a 9,999 grained collection is a heap, then a 9,998 grained collection is a heap

……..

(10000) If a 2 grained collection is a heap, then a 1 grained collection is a heap

The Paradox of the Heap: the Paradoxical Argument

If we apply modus ponens (1) and (2), we get

(2*) A 9,999 grained collection is a heap

Modus Ponens: From ‘A’ and ‘If A then B’, we can derive ‘B’

The Paradox of the Heap: the Paradoxical Argument (cont)

If we apply modus ponens to (2) and (2*), we get

(3*) A 9,998 grained collection is a heap

If we apply modus ponens to (3) and (3*), we get

(4*) A 9,997 grained collection is a heap

And so on and so forth, until we get

(10000*) A 1 grained collection is a heap

Types of responses to the paradox

i) Accept the conclusion of the argument

ii) Reject the reasoning as faulty

iii) Reject one or more premises

Response (i) is clearly unpalatable: the one grained collection is not a heap!

In the next two seminars, we will consider several types of responses of type (ii) and (iii).