

MORAL DILEMMAS AND THE LOGIC OF OBLIGATION

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I have pondered everything
Yet I cannot find a way
—Aeschylus¹

1. THE QUESTION

Let a genuine moral dilemma be any situation answering to this description: (1) an agent, M, is categorically (absolutely, all things considered) obliged to do A, and can do A; (2) M is categorically (etc.) obliged to do B, and can do B; (3) M cannot do *both* A and B.

Can there be genuine moral dilemmas? There are those who answer “obviously not,” on the grounds that such a thing would be an affront to morality, reason and/or logic.² And there are those who answer “obviously so,” on the grounds that such things are not infrequently met with, in literature and in life.³ This paper sides with those who maintain that dilemmas are possible.

2. THE STATE OF THE DEBATE; THIS PAPER’S APPROACH

Christopher Gowans has characterized defenders of dilemmas as being, typically, “experientialists”; their opposite numbers are, on average, “rationalists.”⁴ These are useful terms, expressive of

genuine, entrenched differences in temperament and outlook. Defenders of dilemmas do tend to build defenses on Moorean lines:⁵ here is one dilemma (brandish *Antigone*); here is another (brandish *Agamemnon*); so there are moral dilemmas; actual implies possible; moral dilemmas are possible. In this way, the *experience* of moral tragedy gets offered up as primary evidence for the possibility of dilemmas.

But this style of argument fails to cast a clear light over the rationalist camp, to judge by the behavior of its inhabitants. They persist in maintaining high regard for counter-arguments to the conclusion that moral dilemmas entail contradictions and/or the collapse of the edifice of human ethics: P & -P and/or (in the words of W. D. Ross) “an end to all ethical judgment.”

It is easy to be underwhelmed by the force of waves of tragedy, no doubt, when the price of acknowledging that force seems so high. So, by way of defending the possibility of dilemmas, this paper will not multiply Moorean demonstrations. It

will answer the arguments offered by the other side.

David Brink offers three, couched in the formal language of deontic logic.⁶ Others have offered similar arguments, but Brink articulates them well and is obligingly explicit about variants. This paper will interweave exposition of his arguments with exposition of four lines of dilemmic defense (logical outworks of the Moorean main line) built up over the years to meet Brink-type attacks. Finally, an alternative defense of dilemmas will be offered.

A few preliminary points: it is granted from the start—though the radical wing of the experientialist party may balk at this—that if there *were* anything logically contradictory about moral dilemmas, that would be a decisive objection. Defenders of dilemma would have to hang up their horns and let clearer heads prevail; likewise, if human ethical judgment universally collapsed (though it is hard to take this threat *quite* seriously).

Also, it is duly noted that many moral theories exclude moral dilemmas. This paper does not attempt to refute such theories, by proxy, by defending dilemmas (so Kantians and utilitarians need not dig in their heels right at the start). The thesis will be that—*pace* Brink—it is no truth of *logic* that moral dilemmas are impossible. Possible bold extensions of this narrow, logical point will be considered (all too briefly and speculatively) in the paper's final section.

3. THE CORE OF BRINK'S ARGUMENTS

Brink offers a complex "recipe" for moral dilemmas, ten ingredients long. But his arguments against them hinge on three conditions only, corresponding to those enumerated in §1. Thus:

1. Act A is (absolutely) obligatory.
2. Act B is (absolutely) obligatory.
3. It is not possible to perform both A and B.

Formalizing:

1. $O(A)$
2. $O(B)$
3. $\neg\Diamond(A\&B)$ ⁸

(1)–(3) appear, in formal dress or *mufti*, as the first three steps of every argument against the possibility of moral dilemmas. All are *reductiones ad absurdum* on conjunctions of these premises.

4. THE FIRST ARGUMENT

Brink constructs his first argument with the aid of two principles. The first is known (thanks to Bernard Williams) as the "agglomerative principle": if one ought to do one thing, and another, one ought to do both.

AP $(O(\alpha)\&O(\beta))\rightarrow O(\alpha\&\beta)$

Brink terms the second principle "voluntarist." It expresses the well-known, oft-articulated, widely subscribed, badly understood thesis that "ought implies can."

VP $O(\alpha)\rightarrow\Diamond(\alpha)$

Given (1)–(3), AP, and VP, a contradiction is derivable:

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. $O(A)$ | [P] |
| 2. $O(B)$ | [P] |
| 3. $\neg\Diamond(A\&B)$ | [P] |
| 4. $(O(\alpha)\&O(\beta))\rightarrow O(\alpha\&\beta)$ | [AP] |
| 5. $\therefore O(A\&B)$ | [1, 2, 4] |
| 6. $O(A\&B)\rightarrow\Diamond(A\&B)$ | [VP] |
| 7. $\therefore\Diamond(A\&B)$ | [5, 6] |
| 8. $\therefore\Diamond(A\&B)\&\neg\Diamond(A\&B)$ | [3, 7] ⁹ |

Apparently one or more bits of (1)–(7) must go. There are three options: deny some piece of (1)–(3), deny AP, or deny VP. Defenders of dilemmas will (Brink presumes) favor one of the latter two options, or both. Brink favors the first. But he is fair-minded about the prospects for denying AP or VP. He thinks it might be possible to weaken the former, after which it would read (one presumes):

Weak AP:

$((O(\alpha)\&O(\beta)\&\neg\Diamond(A\&B))\rightarrow O(\alpha\vee\beta)).$

Informally: if you are obliged to do one thing, and another, and you cannot do both, you are obliged to do one or the other.

VP is also subject to doubt—at any rate, attack—on various grounds. Brink admits it might be compelled to dwell in bracketed uncertainty.

5. RESPONSES TO THIS ARGUMENT

In his 1965 paper, “Ethical Consistency,” Bernard Williams was one of the first philosophers to defend forthrightly the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas. (Before 1965, it seems, experientialists were unforthcoming about their experiences, unclear about them, or playwrights.) Williams presents the challenge to dilemmas in more or less the terms Brink does, and is inclined to solve the problem in the manner Brink admits may be possible. Williams casts doubt on AP and VP. The latter he characterizes as “less than luminous”; the former he suggests we “waive.” Williams decides that, on balance, the existence of moral dilemmas is *more* self-evident than the truth of the conjunction of AP and VP.

But this proposed solution may be deemed unsatisfying, as it were, experientially. How so? It seems that at least part of what *bothers* agents like Agamemnon, when they manage to get themselves in these fixes, is that, so far as they can tell, AP and VP are *true*.¹⁰ At any rate, the likes of Agamemnon *do* reason in accordance with these principles. So the king sits in his tent at Aulis, his mind running through (1)–(8) in some *very* informal sense. He *can* save his daughter. He *can* lead the Greek army to Troy. He *ought* to do both; therefore there *ought* to be some way he *can* do both. But there *isn't*. So it *must* be the case that one or the other obligation can be given up. Neither *can*. This goes on for weeks.

To be fair to Williams, this is just what he means to emphasize about Agamemnon, whose case he discusses:

It seems to me a fundamental criticism of many ethical theories that their accounts of moral conflict and its resolution do not do justice to the facts of regret and related considerations: basically because they eliminate from the scene the *ought* that is not acted upon.

Yet it is hard to see how Williams’s own suggestion that we waive or weaken AP and VP does justice to this view. More specifically, Williams seems wrong, by his own lights, to propose waiving AP; VP is trickier, as the next sections show.

6. SUPPOSE AP IS “WAIVED”

Suppose one “waived” AP, while keeping VP. Presumably this would not mean denying *any* agglomerativity adheres to ethics. In cases where ‘O(A)’ and ‘O(B)’ obtain, and in which there is no conflict, ‘O(A&B)’ is true. In cases of conflict, one must fulfill *either* one *or* the other obligation. In short, Weak AP is true. For Agamemnon, the choice becomes a clean disjunction: *either* kill your daughter *or* abandon the war effort.

But why, if Weak AP is a true, deontic principle, does it not provide a *solution* to Agamemnon’s ethical dilemma—a *justification* for tipping the scales one way or the other, by Buridan’s Ass coin toss if necessary? Why should Weak AP not *refute* Williams’s thesis that there are moral dilemmas? For that matter, how is the conception of O(A) and O(B) as absolute obligations to be maintained if this trump, Weak AP, can be played at any time? (And if there are no such things, how can there be dilemmas?)

To pose the problem in the experiential idiom Williams favors: why should Agamemnon *morally* regret killing his

daughter? To be sure, it is natural he should regret she is dead, just as he would have regretted her death in an accident. And this was no accident. As the Chorus laments: “Still there drips in sleep against the heart/ Grief of memory.”¹² But these nightmares, though potent, are just dreams: irrational stuff. By light of day, Agamemnon’s act is defensible with reference to Weak AP.

Williams appears to think something of the sort might actually be right. He suggests, somewhat uncertainly, that “an admirable moral agent is one who on occasion is irrational.”¹³ True enough, one suspects; but in the present context this concedes too much to the denier of dilemmas, who will be happy enough with the result that the opposition is simply being irrational. To be gripped by impulses, feelings, regrets—however admirably—is not *yet* to be caught in the coils of a *genuine* dilemma.¹⁴

7. WHAT ABOUT VP?

Suppose instead of “waiving” AP (weakening it) one were to waive VP. The issue here is complex and far afield from the solution ultimately to be proposed. But, briefly: there is a clear sense in which weakening VP must be *part* of the right answer. If dilemmas are possible, it must be possible for an “ought” to outpace a “can.” And, on the face of it, this is easily arranged. One can acquire more debt than can be paid off, make promises one cannot keep. In this way, defenders seem poised to make quick work of VP. But, predictably, its subscribers will be too shrewd to leave the thin edge of the wedge unblunted. In cases where obligation outstrips capacity, the fault lies in the antecedent failure to anticipate incapacity. Or else the obligations are not absolute.

Though initially pleasant to pursue, this line quickly recedes into a murky and

strategically insignificant swamp. For, although “ought implies can” is, as Williams says, “less than luminous,” it would hardly be feasible to extinguish it entirely, while preserving the *experiential* character of moral dilemmas. If Agamemnon were flatly *incapable* of doing one or the other of the two things he is obliged to do, that would be a *different sort* of tragedy: one of impotence. Moral dilemmas are, surely, tragedies of choice.

Thus, though it would obviously be challenging enough to establish, to the satisfaction of skeptics, the possibility of a certain sort of bad moral luck (an “ought” that outruns a “can”), it seems that *merely* doing so would not suffice to establish the possibility of moral dilemmas. What further thing *would be* sufficient is not clear.

To put the point another way, by way of reiterating a point made already: moral agents caught in (apparently) dilemmic situations *do* reason in terms of *both* AP and VP—or something *very like* VP. And it is (or should be) no part of the view of defenders of dilemmas that the agents in these situations are simply confused.

In sum, VP seems too slippery a device for smiting one’s enemies, be they defenders or deniers of dilemmas. The principle has coherence, stability and an impressive bibliographic pedigree stretching back to Plato. But it may not be true. Intuitive considerations suggest it ought to be weakened, but it is by no means clear in what way defenders of dilemma should wish VP to be weakened—let alone how they could set about proving it should be weakened to the most convenient degree for their purposes.

And, in the end—credit to Brink for noticing this—the dispute is less consequential than it may at first seem. The next section turns to Brink’s second and third arguments, neither of which depends on AP or VP in any form.

8. THE SECOND AND THIRD ARGUMENTS

Brink's second argument hinges on two new principles. The first he calls "obligation execution": if you are obliged to do something, and doing something else would prevent it, you are obliged *not* to do the something else.

OEP $(O(\alpha) \& (\beta \rightarrow \neg \alpha)) \rightarrow O(\neg \beta)$

The second principle says, in effect, "if you're damned if you do, then (by all means) don't." Formally:

DDP $O(\neg \beta) \rightarrow \neg O(\beta)$

The argument then runs (predictably) as follows:

- | | | |
|----|--|----------------------|
| 1. | $O(A)$ | [P] |
| 2. | $O(B)$ | [P] |
| 3. | $\neg \diamond(A \& B)$ | [P] |
| 4. | $\therefore B \rightarrow \neg A$ | [3] |
| 5. | $(O(A) \& (B \rightarrow \neg A)) \rightarrow O(\neg B)$ | [OEP] |
| 6. | $\therefore O(\neg B)$ | [1, 4, 5] |
| 7. | $O(\neg B) \rightarrow \neg O(B)$ | [DDP] |
| 8. | $\therefore \neg O(B)$ | [6, 7] |
| 9. | $\therefore O(B) \& \neg O(B)$ | [2, 8] ¹⁵ |

Argument two is best viewed side by side with number three, which adds yet two more principles. The first "asserts a kind of *correlativity* of obligatoriness and impermissibility."¹⁶ That is, if it is not permissible *not* to do something, one must do it. Thus:

CP $\neg P(\neg \alpha) \equiv O(\alpha)$

The second principle says, in effect, "if you aren't allowed to, you can't be made to."¹⁷

AAP $\neg P(\beta) \rightarrow \neg O(\beta)$

The first six steps of argument three are the same as those of two. Then:

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 7. | $O(\neg B) \equiv \neg P(B)$ | [CP] |
| 8. | $\therefore \neg P(B)$ | [6, 7] |
| 9. | $\neg P(B) \rightarrow \neg O(B)$ | [AAP] |
| 10. | $\therefore \neg O(B)$ | [8, 9] |
| 11. | $\therefore O(B) \& \neg O(B)$ | [2, 10] ¹⁸ |

9. THREE LESSONS

Brink's second and third arguments teach three lessons. First, it is instructive to see that AP, VP, and attendant puzzles can be set aside. Second, these arguments show how little is required to derive something that certainly *looks like* a contradiction from premises that entail the existence of a moral dilemma. The four principles Brink employs are fairly mild-mannered creatures. It seems doubtful they can be baited into flagrant bad behavior—except insofar as they bounce dilemmas.

One might, perhaps, attempt to embarrass OEP by postulating mutually unsatisfiable promises, then proving, by separate argument, obligations to break *both*. But—the response will run—it is immoral to make mutually unsatisfiable promises. Or else the problem is the possibility of a genuine dilemma is hereby covertly assumed from the outset.

Defenders will respond that it is worse to beg the question in the other direction, which is what Brink has effectively done. How so? Acceptance of his principles is tantamount to *assuming* the impossibility of dilemmas, under the thinnest of veils. Furthermore, defenders may urge that they win in case of a tie, i.e., if neither side can take a step without begging the question.

Why do defenders win in case of a tie? Because they are only concerned not to *lose*. So long as defenders are not convicted of illogic, they are free to wave their tragedies with impunity. This tie-goes-to-the-defender rule is a bit hard to referee, however, due to the final lesson Brink's arguments teach, as follows.

Brink's arguments show how far defenders of dilemmas must travel along the path plotted by their deniers. To reiterate a point made twice already: Brink's arguments express something *very like* what defenders of dilemmas themselves surely believe

is going on in the heads of agents like Agamemnon. His mind is running in frantic, hopeless circles. *This* is what it means to be caught in a moral dilemma.

In attempting to prove the impossibility of the beast, Brink may have effectively modeled its skeleton. In consequence, it would be inadvisable for defenders of dilemmas to kick apart the model too vigorously. That is, it would be inadvisable to seek escape from these seeming contradictions by conventional means—i.e., by flat denials of Brink's principles. Agamemnon surely reasons in accordance with *all* of them. And, to repeat, it is no part of the defender's case that Agamemnon is morally confused or irrational.

But reality abhors a contradiction. What is needed, then, is a way of *reinterpreting* lines of reasoning that are (1) undeniably characteristic of the thought of agents caught in dilemmas and (2) defined by Brink's principles and arguments so that (3) the conclusions of these lines of reasoning are not contradictions.

The solution to this puzzle is presented in §12 and following. §§10–11 intervene for completeness' sake. Two lines of dilemmic defense have been laid to rest (weakening or waiving AP and VP); the next two sections canvas two others.

10. THE POVERTY OF DEONTIC LOGIC

While Faust is offstage getting dressed, Mephistopheles poses as him for the benefit of a student who has the misfortune to drop by at a bad time, seeking advice about a course of study. The devil, true to his nature, advises the student to study *logic*, though the advertisement that follows is hardly winning:

Although in fact the fabric of thought
is like a masterpiece of weaving,
for which one treadle moves a thousand
threads

as back and forth the shuttles fly
and threads move quicker than the eye
and a single stroke makes a thousand ties,
nonetheless the philosopher comes
and proves to you it had to be thus:
the first was so, the second so,
and hence the third and fourth could never
exist.

The students applaud this everywhere,
but fail to master the weaver's art.

To understand some living thing and to describe it,

the student starts by ridding it of its spirit;
he then holds all its parts within his hand
except, alas! for the spirit which bound them
together—¹⁹

Mephistopheles' anti-logical ironizing expresses what many defenders of dilemmas seem to feel about the *form* in which deontic logicians cast their arguments against dilemmas. Here is Mary Mothersill in this vein (though the devil himself surely never goes out of style).

What bearing the axioms of deontic logic have on everyday moral reasoning has, in my opinion, yet to be made out. Why, for example, should we accept the agglomeration principle? At this very moment there are at least five things I ought to be doing instead of writing this paper, but it does not follow that I ought to be doing all five things and also writing this paper. In rejecting agglomeration, do I rely on the "ought" implies "can" principle? Yes, but I don't take *it* as a principle *either*, but only as an occasionally relevant reminder.²⁰

True enough, one may grant. Yet a striking feature of such observations about the complexity of ethical life is how inapplicable they *may* be the specific issue of moral dilemmas. How so? It is all very well to observe that any person whose life is not uncommonly uncomplicated will soon find herself treating ethical rules, at least for certain purposes, as rules of thumb. But Agamemnon is not caught in a complex web, where a tug here means a thousand

adjustments elsewhere. He is caught between a rock and a hard place. A moral dilemma just *is* a rock and a hard place (and an agent to work the pedals). Deontic logic *can* model such a simple, rigid state of affairs—or perhaps it can, for all Mothersill (or Mephistopheles) have shown to the contrary. So pointing up the poverty of deontic logic for almost all conceivable purposes seems notably *incomplete* as a strategy for defending moral dilemmas.²¹

11. STRATEGIES OF DILEMMIC AVOIDANCE

A fourth strategy for defending dilemmas is due to Ruth Barcan Marcus, who devotes two essays to development of a simple point: a game whose rules encode a potential inconsistency may be playable; for the problem may not emerge in the course of actual play. Why then should deontology *not* be like such a game: inconsistent, in the sense that it *may* admit dilemmas, yet “playable” all the same?²²

Marcus hereby opens a previously unnoticed seam in the fabric of the debate, exposing a formalist turn of mind concerning which one does well to ask: ought ethical theorists to think this way?²³ The *charm* of formalism is, in large part, its attendant atmosphere of infinity (always a handsome ornament to mortal thoughts, *if* one can afford it). As Wittgenstein says, one imagines a formal rule as a set of rails laid to infinity. In a sense, all steps are taken in advance. In whatever sense that is—if any—a potential contradiction anywhere brings down the *whole* edifice.

But *are* all steps taken in advance in the Kingdom of Ends? Anyone inclined to conceive of deontology in the least bit anthropologically will probably have little difficulty in answering in the negative. Ethics is part of the fabric of human life, like the law. (Life is lived a step at a time;

infinity can wait its turn.) We would not think to insist, *a priori*, that the law *does* not contain any awkward inconsistencies, though we do insist, pragmatically, that it *ought* not to.²⁴

But what should less anthropologically minded ethicists think? We may, as Marcus suggests, adopt strategies of dilemmic avoidance—“try to stack the deck so that dilemmas do not arise.”²⁵ But if we fail? Deniers of dilemma who believe the result would be a piece of embodied illogic have a strong response: the world *cannot* harbor contradictions. Logic does not depend on prudence and foresight for its preservation.

Two very different *styles* of thinking about ethics are obviously in competition here. It is difficult to *refute* a style. The point Marcus raises seems important—and is certainly interesting—but can apparently be made to cut both ways.

12. THE WAY

This paper’s solution to the problem of moral dilemmas is akin to Marcus’s. It, too, begins with an invitation to consider the features of a *game*—specifically, the game philosophers always talk about, if they talk long enough: chess. (There is no philosophical problem so blockishly resistant to treatment it cannot be budged by a good chess analogy.)

How is a moral dilemma like a chess game? There are two rules in chess, one stating that the king must always move out of check, another stating that he cannot move into it; and in every chess game that does not end in early retirement, these two rules eventually entail a sort of contradiction. But, of course, this is not so. A king who is in check, and unable to extricate himself legally, is *checkmated*.

The reader will guess the intended analogy: Agamemnon is in moral *checkmate*. If he does one thing, he becomes a bad

person; if he does the other thing, he becomes a bad person. Therefore, he *must* become a bad person. So obligation statements can be construed as *conditionals*. What Brink writes ‘O(A)’ means at the very least (though perhaps a good deal more): if you do *not* do A, you become (to some degree) bad. Let ‘ \otimes ’ denote this badness (this receipt of moral demerit points). Thus:

$$O(A) \equiv \text{df. } \neg A \rightarrow \otimes^{26}$$

Rewriting the first three premises of Brink’s arguments accordingly:

1. $\neg A \rightarrow \otimes$
2. $\neg B \rightarrow \otimes$
3. $\neg \diamond(A \& B)$

In light of this analysis, the way is wide open to Agamemnon. Since moral demerit is an unavoidable consequence of the conjunction of (1)–(3), the way to resolve the dilemma is to suffer moral demerit.

Of course, this is no comfort and no secret. When Agamemnon says he “cannot find a way,” he *means* that he cannot find a way *besides* the ones that will cost him his moral worth, either as king or father. The essence of the tragedy is that there is *no* such way. But this is not a *logical* problem. There is nothing *illogical* about the existence of a bad person.

And yet: this blithe consignment of Agamemnon to deontic perdition may seem a solution only a Calvinist chess master could love. Can it be right that some unfortunates are forked by fate—pinned by sin? And what of Brink’s principles? Rewriting obligations as conditionals does not, *per se*, block the emergence of contradictions; or so it would seem.

What will be argued next is that, in an odd and unobvious way, Brink’s style of obligation analysis—that of standard deontic logic, basically—effectively *stipulates away* bad behavior. It is really *only* from this stipulation that the impossibility of moral dilemmas appears to follow.

Whereas, of course, bad behavior is not just possible but (in most localities) actual.

13. BUT FIRST, SOME GROUND CLEARING

The point of the chess analogy is not that moral dilemmas are *exactly like* checkmate, nor that ethics is just a game. The point of the chess analogy is to bring out the outlines of a *possible* analysis of obligation statements. How *exactly* this scheme deflects the force of Brink’s deontic principles remains to be seen. In the meantime, suspicion may fall heavily on the mystery symbol, ‘ \otimes ’.

It is admittedly obscure *exactly* what moral demerit points are, or might be. Therefore, it is greatly to be hoped that the reader will simply admit to prior grasp of the fact that when you do a bad *thing*, you become (somehow) *bad*.

For example, Agamemnon might acknowledge that ‘ \otimes ’ denotes *miasma*—moral pollution. Switching tragedies: Lady Macbeth might see an \otimes marking the spot that will not wash clean. Christians understand, presumably, what it means to say, “on Judgment Day, the book of my sins will be opened and read out.” Persons neither Christian nor pagan enough to speak such colorful language do not regard it as incomprehensible. Everyone understands what it means to be *weighed down* by misdeeds; to suffer a *blot* on one’s character. Everyone understands not just *guilt*, defined in terms of a breakable rule, but additionally—the distinction is important—the ongoing state of *being guilty*.²⁷ Guilt *feelings*—unreliable indices to guilt—are perhaps yet a third item in the inventory.

At any rate, the badness of being a bad person is what is being gotten at—admittedly without much syntactic grace—by means of ‘ \otimes ’. And now this paper is poised

to expose Brink’s tacit exclusion of the possibility of bad behavior, through the failure to incorporate something like ‘ \otimes ’ into his formalism. Conveniently, the next section can work up to this point by way of extending a line of credit where credit is due.

14. CREDIT TO A. R. ANDERSON

This paper grew out of reflections on the literature on moral dilemmas. Pleasant was the prospect of settling a debate by pointing out, in effect, that it is not *logically* impossible to do wrong. A subsequent survey of the literature on deontic logic revealed, however, that others had been privy to this crucial datum since at least 1958, when A. R. Anderson published a short notice, “A Reduction of Deontic Logic to Alethic Modal Logic.”²⁸

Anderson proposes an analysis of obligation statements that anticipates the present one. He expands on it in “Some Nasty Problems in the Formal Logic of Ethics,” which opens with a plangent statement of his (and this paper’s) most basic thought:

When a rule says you are supposed to do something, and you don’t do it, that means you’ve broken that rule.

The thesis so put sounds innocuous enough, but such is the perversity of my professional colleagues and critics (the two collections being *almost*, if not exactly, co-extensive) that arguments on the matter seem to be required.²⁹

In fact, Anderson’s views have not been ignored. But they have failed to command acclaim commensurate with their correctness. And Anderson himself does not draw the conclusion, as this paper shall, that deontic logic should not exclude dilemmas. Anderson proposes axiomatizing them away.³⁰

15. BUT WHY?

Why does Anderson axiomatize away dilemmas? For two reasons. First, he apparently takes it to be self-evident that a true theory of ethics will not admit them. Fair enough; he is entitled to his opinion. Second, he notes that if one adopts a conditional analysis of obligation, together with an axiom guaranteeing that “the ‘bad thing’ is avoidable,” one can *prove* all deontic principles (including Brink’s) one is ever likely to want or need.

In honor of Voltaire’s famous doctor, let Anderson’s proposed bad-thing-avoiding axiom be dubbed the “weak Pangloss principle”:

WPP: $\diamond \neg \otimes$

This says it is *possible* this is the best of all possible worlds, ethically speaking.³¹ Possibly, *no* ethical demerit is suffered.

With WPP in pocket, a *reductio* is possible on the denial of *any* Brinkian principle—on DDP, for example:

- 1) $\neg(O(\neg A) \rightarrow \neg O(A))$ [Denial of DDP]
- 2) $O(\neg A) \& O(A)$ [From 1]
- 3) $A \rightarrow \otimes$ [From 2, and def. of ‘O’]
- 4) $\neg A \rightarrow \otimes$ [From 2, and def. of ‘O’]
- 5) $\square \otimes$ [From 3 and 4]
- 6) $\square \otimes \& \diamond \neg \otimes$ [From 5 and WPP]

(6) is a contradiction, so (1) must be denied. DDP is proved. One could complete the exercise by proving the rest of Brink’s principles but perhaps formal bells and whistles are at this point more distracting than helpful. If one strips them away, the thesis that Brink’s principles can be proved, on the basis of WPP, stands forth as baldly obvious. It says only that it would be absurd to deny *this*: “if my situation isn’t ethically hopeless, I will be permitted to fulfill my obligations; I will not be obliged

to do anything impermissible; I will not be damned if I do, and if I do not, etc.”

16. WHAT FOLLOWS?

It is obvious what defenders of dilemmas will make of WPP. It *assumes* they are wrong, and they will return the compliment. Anyone who believes moral dilemmas may be possible must regard WPP as possibly false, hence a poor candidate for deontic axiom-hood.

But deniers of dilemmas will now retort that if this complex of considerations is supposed to threaten Brink’s position, the bar is being illicitly raised. It is not Brink’s contention that his deontic principles can be *proved*. These principles are asserted as rationally self-evident—as *more* evident, anyway, than the possibility of moral dilemmas.

In fact, however, what the possibility of Anderson-style proofs shows is that Brink’s principles can plausibly be regarded as having a *status* different than he assumes. Specifically, Brink’s principles (including AP and VP) can be regarded as heuristically abbreviated conditionals. That is, DDP, OEP, CP, AAP, AP, and VP do not state necessary truths; but the following do: “if WPP, then DDP”; “if WPP, then OEP”; and so forth. And please pardon the alphabet soup spilling everywhere. In considering what follows, the reader should squint her mind’s eye until she sees past all these acronyms to a single, sheer *tautology*, lightly dusted with pragmatics.

To explain: a *second* level of conditionalization is being laid over first. In §12, obligation statements were conditionalized. Now deontic principles are being conditionalized. What is the connection? There is no logical entailment. Rather, there are *pragmatic* considerations.

Think again of chess. Confronting a sticky situation, more than one player has

asked herself *how* to avoid checkmate. This question might seem to overlook an obvious possibility. But, realistically, a player who asks this question, and finds it has no answer, can be counted on to draw the proper conclusion as quickly and correctly as a player who asks from the beginning *whether* it is possible to avoid checkmate.

Pragmatically, the reason for asking a “how” question, rather than a “whether” question is (plausibly) that the former is more psychologically efficacious. As Winston Churchill advises: “be an optimist; there’s not much point being anything else.” (Not that this advice would help Agamemnon—or any doomed king. But it cannot hurt.)

Pulling the thread through, and tying it back: it would be possible to propose “principles” of chess on the model of Brink’s deontic principles. (DDP: “If you are damned if you do—e.g., expose your king—there must be a way not to”; and so forth.) Obviously, such principles would not state truths. But there would be nothing unreasonable—indeed, something inevitable—about their *regulative* employment. It is positively a model of chess rationality to look and look for a move that may not exist, if it is the case that not finding it means losing. Such Churchillian procedures stiffen the spine, while perhaps sharpening the brain. By means of them one imaginatively constructs *ideal* chess worlds. Then one tries to get to these worlds; which, all too often, may be quite impossible.³²

These reflections apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Brink’s deontic principles. Plausibly, all moral agents *do* reason in accordance with them. It does not follow that they should be regarded as *true*. They can be regarded, rather, as heuristically abbreviated conditionals. *If* one is not in a morally hopeless situation, *then* DDP, OED, et al. will be true. So at all times treat DDP,

OED, et al. *as if* true. These heuristics will function as instructions for blueprinting *deontically ideal* possible worlds. If a contradiction emerges in the construction process, that means the (tacit) assumption that the actual situation is *not* hopeless must be false. The unavoidability of obligation violations is proved.

But *why* are these conditionalizations analytically *compelling*, over and against Brink's own interpretations of his principles? One hopes they simply *are*; if not, one need insist only that they are *coherent*. Put the point this way: Brink's denial of dilemmas hinges on hanging up defenders on a dilemma: either give up intuitive-seeming principles, or give up dilemmas. This is a *false* dilemma. For suppose (for the sake of argument) that Brink's principles are *not* absolute; the moral order of things admits of dilemmas. Under such circumstances, any moral agent capable of reasoning, who does not wish to do wrong, who is not unduly pessimistic, will adopt Brink's principles and treat them *as if* true. (Chess admits of checkmate, yet players proceed on the assumption it can be avoided.) This inevitable, *heuristic* employment of Brink's principles is surely sufficient to account for very strong intuitions in their favor. In this way, Brink's whole line of objection to the possibility of dilemmas is neatly side-stepped.

17. "BUT WHEN NECESSITY'S YOKE
WAS PUT UPON HIM . . ." ³³

A question whose partial answer may clarify some of the preceding reflections: What *sort* of yoke is the yoke of moral necessity, such as was put upon Agamemnon at Aulis?

It is sometimes said to be *very like* the yoke of metaphysical necessity. Though there may be truth to this, there is untruth to it as well. For moral agents can behave

badly, whereas nothing *impossible* ever, ever happens. One pattern of modal inference has no deontic analog: necessity implies actuality. There is no *contradiction* in the supposition that one ought to do A and does not. Yet it is surprisingly easy to get turned around on this basic point—to wander unawares in Panglossian realms. As Jakko Hintikka points out:

When we are thinking of or discussing normative matters, we often—unwittingly—slip into discussing something else. Without noticing it, we concentrate our attention, not on what can or cannot be realized, but rather on what can or cannot be realized *without violating any obligations* [italics in original].³⁴

How is the slip made? Philosophers may have a leg up, since they are habituated to a technical sense of "satisfaction": a set of statements is *satisfiable* if there is a possible world in which all are true. This usage may get crossed with a desire to *satisfy* obligations. One might, then—in a moment of punning weakness—assert that a set of obligations will be satisfiable if the set of statements asserting its existence is satisfiable. The repetitions of "satisfaction" make this sound tautological. In fact, it is simply mistaken.

Whatever the diagnosis, the effect of the slip will be as follows: one slides, unawares, from talk about the actual world into talk about a deontically perfect world in which all obligations *are* satisfied. One may—after taking a quick look around—conclude that there can be no genuine moral dilemmas *here*, which is true enough. What does *not* follow is anything whatsoever about the *actual* world.

Once clarity concerning domains of discourse is restored, defenders of dilemmas can grant that, to be sure, deontically perfect worlds contain no moral dilemmas. (It is illogical to suppose an angel—incapable of wrongdoing—could confront a moral

dilemma.) All the same, it does not appear to be a truth of *logic* that there must always be deontically perfect possible worlds counterpart to the actual one. So it is not a truth of *logic* that moral dilemmas are impossible.

18. DEONTIC PRINCIPLES AND PERFECT WORLDS

It is worth adding that talk about deontically perfect worlds may be instructive, so long as it is *not* inadvertent. Hintikka points out that by envisioning deontic perfection we may acquire a clearer notion of what he terms “deontic consequence”:

In a logical consequence, we are asking what the realization of *p* entails in any arbitrary possible world. In a deontic consequence, we are asking what the realization of *p* entails in a “deontically perfect world” or, in Kantian terms, in a “Kingdom of Ends.” . . . It is frequently much easier to be categorical about how things ought to be, i.e., how they would be in a “deontically perfect world,” than to figure out the complex duties one as a matter of fact has in the actual world. Hence one is likely to have firmer intuitions, too, about the former than about the latter.³⁵

In line with these observations, Hintikka outlines a semantics for deontic logic according to which its official subject matter turns out to be, basically, deontically perfect possible worlds. This proposal is mentioned because, workable or not, Hintikka’s thoughts on moral reasoning parallel this paper’s on morals and chess: namely, it may be efficacious to construct ideal positions, *then* to see whether they can be realized.

Also, the status of Brink’s deontic principles can now be stated one final time, in Hintikkaesque idiom: Brink’s principles are true of any possible world in which relations of deontic consequence hold. But the actual world (this surely needs no

argument) is deontically imperfect; ergo, relations of deontic consequence need not hold. Ergo, if contradictions can be derived from true premises stating the existence of obligations, plus Brink’s deontic principles, the proper conclusion is that *no* deontically perfect possible world is a counterpart to the world containing the obligations. Deontic dissatisfaction is unavoidable. But—since badly-behaved people are not embodied bits of illogic—it is no part of logic’s job to preclude this.

19. CONCLUSION

The bottom of the sea of logic is littered with fascinating and colorful wrecks, such as Leibniz’s *Monadology*, Russell’s *Principia Mathematica*, Frege’s *Grundgesetze*, and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—works having this much in common: they strove to turn more into pure logic than would admit of the transformation. Brink’s position suffers a like flaw, but may console itself for this fatality by joining very honorable company.

What else? Perhaps this logical result has some bearing on ethical theory. The reader who has trudged up the hill will be disappointed if there is no view from the top. Looking first one way, then the other: experientialists (in Gowans’s sense) will probably welcome a conclusion that is broadly conformable to their basic outlook. To be sure, they may evince Goethean bemusement at elaborate formal devices, worthy of Rube Goldberg, set to catch a mere mouse of a point. (So moral dilemmas are possible! One might have reached out and livingly grasped a thing like this!) But Mary Mothersill will be hereby enabled to explain how and why their intuitions that deontic principles are rules of thumb can be *correct*. Likewise, Ruth Barcan Marcus (who is no experientialist, but let it pass) will be able to explain how

strategies of dilemmic avoidance can coordinate, without contradiction, with certain deontic principles. Namely, the latter turn out to *be* instances of the former.

Last but not least, Bernard Williams can pursue an alternative route to the conclusion that ethical accounts ought to be—for lack of a better term—*thicker* than rationalists would have them. How so, “thicker”? Briefly: what divides rationalists and experientialists is not so much the latter’s taste for sad tales. That is more consequence than cause—consequence of an antecedent, deeply-held conviction that, in life, matters of deontology and axiology (duties and goods) are rather promiscuously met and mated, not just with each other but with questions of character, virtue, moral psychology, judgment—perhaps, as well, culture, politics, society and history. It takes the keen eye of the literary artist to capture life’s shifting ethical lights and shadows—to take in its full sweep and minute detail. This is why novelists and playwrights often seem ethically deeper and more insightful than the systems of the deepest thinkers.

Which looks, to rationalists, like rank capitulation. They will retort, with arch-Apollonian assurance: if philosophy—ergo, ethics—is not, in its inner-most essence, a matter of abstract, general thought and *reason* (rather than nice, literary observation) one would very much like to see the *proof* that this is so.

Which the present paper may, in some small measure, provide. How so? Assume the proposed, two-fold conditional analysis of obligation statements and deontic principles is admitted to be *possible*, i.e., coherent. Then there is some immediate pressure to acknowledge it as *necessary*. For deontic logic purports to be perfectly ecumenical, semantically speaking. Any *possible* “ought” claim *ought* to be expressible—e.g., “all is permitted,” even if no one

credits this Dostoyevskian proposition. Standard deontic logic cannot make sense of conjunctions of claims that entail dilemmas. Brink proves it. But this paper proposes a framework that can. Therefore, other things being equal, this paper’s framework is to be preferred to that of standard deontic logic on grounds of greater generality and expressive power.

This falls short of proof, but pressing on: assuming the proposed framework is indeed admitted to be more general. One would then expect it to be, as well, more abstract and, as it were, pure. But such does not appear to be the case. Through the obscure offices of ‘ \otimes ’, all sorts of “thick” considerations seem poised to enter the heart of the notion of obligation. This claim is as crucial to the point being argued as it is, admittedly, hard to prove. But how else is ‘ \otimes ’ *plausibly* to be analyzed, except as a *thick* mix of goods (bads), matters of character and virtue, moral psychology, and so forth?

One *might* have thought ‘ \otimes ’ was only, as it were, a traffic light blinking order and assurance along the busy avenues of the Kingdom of Ends. That is, WPP—the Weak Pangloss Principle—might have *seemed*, at first glance, merely a logical guarantee of the consistency of a self-contained, rational system. (Anderson seems to conceive of it in this way.) But generalizing up and away to the thicker, more down to earth, airy deontic heights, WPP is a substantive thesis concerning the availability of goods; surely a semi-axiological matter (whatever one makes of its optimism).

The paradox, then, is this: a system of deontic logic can only be *pure*, i.e., purged of all non-logical, non-deontic terms,³⁶ if it is not *general*. For it seems there will be possible deontic states of affairs, e.g., moral dilemmas, not describable in any *purely* deontic logic.

And now—before what is perhaps properly a small, logical point gets experimentally stretched over the entire Kantian quadrant of the field of ethical theory—a sober, respectful nod is due to the honored, rationalist opposition, who are sure to have found the speculations of this concluding

section dubious and distasteful; and who will have already come up with a half dozen ways and means of countering them—the discovery and exploration of which are left as exercises for the interested reader.

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NOTES

1. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (163–4); the *Oresteia* (Chicago, 1947), tr. R. Lattimore.
2. Plato's *Republic* and Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason* are *loci classici*. In the last thirty years Alan Donagan, Earl Conee, Terrance McConnell, Donald Davidson, and others have weighed in against dilemmas. Two anthologies provide fairly comprehensive coverage of ancient and modern sources: *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford University Press, 1987), ed. Christopher W. Gowans; and *Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1996), ed., H. E. Mason. These will be cited as Gowans, 1987 and Mason, 1996.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Ruth Barcan Marcus, E. J. Lemmon, and Bas Van Fraassen are of this party. They are represented in the above anthologies, except for Nussbaum, whose *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986) discusses Antigone's case; and Sartre, who discusses the possibility of moral dilemmas in "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (Meridian, 1956), ed. W. Kaufmann.
4. Christopher Gowans, "Moral Theory, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Responsibility," in (Mason, 1996).
5. With apologies to G. E. Moore, who almost certainly did not believe in moral dilemmas.
6. David Brink, "Moral Conflict and Its Structure," in Mason, 1996.
7. Brink, p. 106.
8. Brink makes a point of favoring black diamonds (signifying relevant forms of physical or psychological possibility) to white (the standard, metaphysical variety). But surely the A's and B's operated upon will only ever be possible in relevantly physical or psychological ways. And coordination of Brink's claims with metaphysical possibility claims may be necessary. Imparting a twist to Occam's sturdy implement: why multiply possibilities beyond necessity? White it is, then.
9. Brink, p. 108.
10. Mary Mothersill anticipates this point. "There is a sense, admittedly not very clear, in which the pro-D's [defenders of dilemma] need the two deontic principles [AP and VP]." ("The Moral Dilemmas Debate," in Mason, 1996, p. 70).
11. Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 175.
12. Aeschylus, pp. 179–180.
13. Williams, p. 175.
14. Williams would probably respond to all this that he is not *trying* to refute rationalism in its own terms, rather to shift the ground of the debate away from rationalist preconceptions. This is

a fair defense. Even so, the goal of *this paper is* to refute rationalism on its terms. So let the point be unpinned from Williams, that it may stand on its own.

15. Brink, p. 112.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Brink calls this “weak impermissibility.”

18. Brink, p. 113.

19. Johann Wilhelm von Goethe, *Faust*, Part I, 1922–1939 (Princeton, 1984), tr. S. Atkins.

20. Mothersill, p. 70.

21. Mothersill, like Williams, can plead innocent on grounds of uninterest in refuting rationalism on its own terms (see note 14).

22. Ruth Barcan Marcus, “Moral Dilemmas and Consistency,” in Gowans 1987, and “More About Moral Dilemmas,” in Mason, 1996. Marcus uses “consistency” differently than it is used here to characterize her position. For her, the rules of a game are “consistent” if possibly playable, “inconsistent” if impossible to play. (Compare: a set of claims is consistent if possibly all are true; otherwise, not.)

23. Marcus does not develop the point in quite this way, but (one hopes) would not wholly disapprove.

24. Probably some philosophers of law would deny this. Ronald Dworkin may be one, as Marcus suggests in a footnote.

25. Marcus, “More About Moral Dilemmas,” p. 27.

26. There is a problem using the material conditional to express a relation of entailment: namely, the material conditional does not express entailment. An awkward circumstance one would like to repair, but it exceeds the scope of the present paper.

27. Of course, if someone urges bloody murder, and is refused on grounds that, “I do not want to be a murderer,” this fails to get at a more *conceptually basic* reason for refusal: namely, murder is wrong. “I do not want to be a murderer *because* being a murderer is bad *because* murder is wrong.” Yet it does not seem absurd to cite self-interest in not being a murderer as a possible (partial) ground for not murdering someone. (One wishes one understood this better.)

28. A. R. Anderson, “A Reduction of Deontic Logic to Alethic Modal Logic,” (*Mind*, no. 265, 1958, pp. 100–103).

29. A. R. Anderson, “Some Nasty Problems in the Formal Logic of Ethics” (*Nous*, vol. 1, 1967, pp. 345–360, esp. p. 345). He tackles, and may solve, the aforementioned problem concerning the material conditional (see note 26).

30. Thus, though this paper must confess itself inadvertently and belatedly Andersonian (no true pioneer in the realms of obviousness) it can at least claim to be *revisitationistically*, inadvertently, belatedly Andersonian.

31. Syntax is being fudged. What is needed, strictly, is some sort of universal quantification. But that would necessitate unravelling the syntactic innards of ‘q’—it *must* have some—which would involve some hard, interpretive decisions. Just to give a hint: the ‘O’ operator most likely operates on *actions* (act individuals); but the badness of q is presumably the property of *agents*.

32. Chess author Jeremy Silman, on how to make a plan: “Don’t calculate! Instead, dream up various fantasy positions, i.e., the positions you would most like to achieve. Once you find a fantasy position that makes you happy, you must figure out if you can reach it. If you find that

your choice was not possible to implement, you must create another dream position that is easier to achieve” (Siles, *How to Reassess Your Chess*, 1993, p. 28).

33. Aeschylus, 217.

34. Jikko Hintikka, “Some Main Problems of Deontic Logic,” in *Deontic Logic: Introductory and Systematic Readings*, ed. Risto Hilpinen (Reidel, 1971), p. 78. Henceforth, (Hilpinen, 1971).

35. Hintikka, p. 78.

36. Consider Dagfinn Føllesdal and Risto Hilpinen’s definition of deontic logic as “the study of those sentences in which only logical words and normative expressions occur *essentially*” (“Deontic Logic: an Introduction,” in Hilpinen, 1971, p. 1). The question is: what is the scope of “normative”? If it is construed narrowly, i.e., to cover only deontology, it is doubtful the analysis of obligation sentences proposed in this paper counts as deontic logic. If it is construed broadly, it is doubtful a formal deontic logic is possible. (The definition, incidentally, is originally due to A. R. Anderson.)