Ethics, Logical Consistency, and Practical Deliberation

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Moral conflicts are real, and deontic logic will need to give up the 'agglomeration rule' in order to accommodate this fact. This point was made by Bernard Williams in his 1965 article, "Ethical Consistency," and it is a point with which Mathieu Beirlaen largely agrees. But Beirlaen believes Williams' solution to be "too crude," and proposes a modified rule of ◇-agglomeration instead. While I agree that Beirlaen's modified rule captures some of the spirit of Bernard Williams' thoughts about moral conflict, I nonetheless contend that even the most sophisticated deontic logic will overlook much of what everyday normative reasoning involves. I further contend that my own claim is in the spirit of Williams' thoughts too.

Moral conflicts are real, and deontic logic may need to give up the 'agglomeration rule' in order to accommodate this fact. This point was made by Bernard Williams in his 1965 article, "Ethical Consistency," and it is a point with which Mathieu Beirlaen largely agrees. But Beirlaen believes Williams' solution to be "too crude," and proposes a modified rule of ◇-agglomeration instead. Believing "the rule of ◇-agglomeration to be in the spirit of Bernard Williams' thoughts on the subject," Beirlaen contends that incorporating his modified rule "leaves us with a logic of *ought* that is sufficiently rich in order to account for our everyday normative reasoning" (*emphasis original*).

I agree that Beirlaen's modified rule is "in the spirit" of Williams' thoughts about how the structure of moral conflict might be formally described. But Williams' thoughts about ethical consistency extend well beyond that, and it seems to me that Beirlaen's essay obscures much that is significant in Williams' thoughts about what the fact of moral conflict implies about moral agency and moral choice. For Williams was also deeply interested in practical deliberation, that is, in those elements of our everyday normative reasoning that result in concrete decisions about what to do, and while he did not treat practical deliberation as completely divorced from ethical theorizing, neither did Williams simply equate it with abstract reflection about how moral concepts fit together and whether they ultimately form a consistent set. The first seven (of eight) sections of "Ethical Consistency" discuss issues of desire conflict that Williams describes as "both more pertinent and more complicated" than conflicts of belief (1965, p. 103). And his wider corpus, especially the essays collected in his volume on *Moral Luck* (1982), and his *Ethics and The Limits of Philosophy* (1986), demonstrate myriad ways in which the contingent facts of human existence serve as obstacles to ethical theory and practical choice. Hence, I believe it is also in the spirit of Williams' thoughts to point out that even the most sophisticated deontic logic will overlook much of what everyday normative reasoning involves.

Following Beirlaen, who himself follows Williams, I shall use the tragic story of Agamemnon to illustrate both the more logical and the more practical points. But it should be noted at the outset that there is a problem with this example. The problem is that some readers may doubt whether Agamemnon really does have two conflicting moral obligations, or think that Agamemnon himself must be somehow to blame for getting into such a jam, or be convinced that one of Agamemnon's obligations is so much more pressing than the other, that the practical choice is an obvious one. For readers who see the example this way, the logical points made by Williams and Beirlaen are likely to be missed, for such readers will immediately think that Agamemnon should just get his priorities in order, and that once he does so, his conflict will disappear.

The main character in *Sophie's Choice* might serve as a more effective example (see William Styron's 1979 novel, and Alan Pakula's 1982 film), since her conflict is not caused by irrational gods who order human beings to do immoral things, but only by other human beings who create situations where legitimate moral obligations are impossible for any person to fulfill. This makes it much less tempting to blame Sophie for her

tragic conflict, and much less obvious that there is any coherent kind of prioritizing she could do. But in her case, as in Agamemnon's, the details make all the difference, and the very features that make Sophie's choice more convincing as an example of genuine moral conflict are all the more likely to obscure the structural features used by Williams to substantiate the claim that moral conflicts are indeed real. Hence for the moment (but only for a moment), I encourage readers to set those more practical concerns aside and take seriously the possibility that Agamemnon's conflict is a genuine one. Once we have understood the logic of moral conflict, I think we will be better able to see why practical deliberation is an inescapable part of everyday normative reasoning too.

Why did Williams think we must give up the agglomeration rule? According to that rule, if Agamemnon ought to lead the Greek military expedition to rescue Helen from Troy, and Agamemnon ought to refrain from killing his daughter Iphigenia, then Agamemnon ought to both lead the expedition and refrain from killing his daughter. Crucially, Williams' point was not that there is some logical inconsistency between these two 'oughts:' in ordinary circumstances, as well as many possible worlds, military commanders with children are perfectly capable of fulfilling both such obligations at once. But the contingent facts of Agamemnon's case create a genuine moral conflict, for it turns out that unless he sacrifices his daughter to Artemis, the goddess will forever delay his expedition. These contingent facts do not change Agamemnon's obligations, notes Williams, but they are the real source of his conflict: things being what they are, he simply cannot *do* both of the things he correctly *thinks* that he ought. Again, some readers may dispute whether Agamemnon's thinking is correct, but note that we do not have to resolve that dispute to understand Williams' insight about the underlying logic of the situation. For Williams' reasons to give up the agglomeration rule have nothing to do with which of the two duties (if any) Agamemnon ought to accept or to act on in the end. That is, they have nothing to do with whether Agamemnon's beliefs about his own obligations are true. Rather, they stem from Williams' claim that moral conflict is a practical or contingent phenomenon, and hence that such conflict cannot be avoided even if our beliefs about moral obligations are true and can be expressed as a logically consistent set (Williams 1965, esp. Sections 4 & 8; cf. Beirlaen, esp. Section 2).

This claim is more important than it may at first seem. The fact of moral conflict is sometimes used, by the skeptic or cynic, to suggest that there are no answers in ethics, that morality itself is a jumble of conflicting values that push and pull the hapless moral agent in all sorts of behavioral directions, or that moral thinking operates without rhyme, reason or any underlying logic. But thinkers like Williams and Beirlaen remind us that such a view is mistaken, or at least that an alternative view is plausible. On the alternative view, moral conflicts exist because the world is a messy and confusing place, not because moral obligations themselves are logically inconsistent. That the world is difficult to navigate with even the most accurate moral compass, in other words, does not yet show that every compass is broken or that there is no real moral landscape to map.

Note too that (i) the main reason to think Agamemnon cannot be obligated to do both things he ought is also (ii) a reason to think Agamemnon is obligated to do one or the other. That reason is captured by the widely accepted principle 'ought implies can.' Williams briefly considered the possibility that this principle should be rejected (1965, p. 120), and Beirlaen does too (Section 6.2), but neither of them finds that option attractive. Their reasons, which I find convincing, are more conceptual than logical; the upshot of their various arguments is that if moral 'oughts' mean anything distinctive, it must be that we are obliged to actually *do* them. In other words, it is the *practical* force of 'ought implies can' that leads both Williams and Beirlaen to conclude that the agglomeration rule cannot be straightforwardly applied to a genuine conflict case. Applying that rule would require Agamemnon to both lead the expedition, and refrain from killing his daughter. But remember: once we accept his situation as an example of genuine moral conflict, the contingent facts of the situation make it the case that no matter how clearly he thinks about the conflicting obligations, no matter how desperately he wants to do each of them, fulfilling both of these 'oughts' is something that even a hero like Agamemnon simply cannot do.

Giving up the agglomeration rule enables deontic logic to make sense of the thought that Agamemnon *ought* to do each of the things (lead the expedition, avoid killing his daughter), without being committed to the further thought that he ought to *do* both

of them. Of course, the ability to formalize Agamemnon's choice in this way doesn't help us (or Agamemnon himself) figure out what course of action to choose. But at least it doesn't require us to suspect that it is irrational to think the world sometimes confronts us with moral conflicts of this sort. And neither does it require us to assume that people are always blameworthy or confused when they find themselves caught in such moral binds. As Williams puts it, "while there are *some* cases in which the situation was [the agent's] own fault, and the correct conclusion for [the agent] to draw was that [one] ought not to get into situations of that type, it cannot be believed that all genuine conflict situations are of that type" (1965, p. 118; *emphasis original*). Giving up the agglomeration rule is important, in other words, because it enables deontic logic to capture the fact that even the most practically astute moral agent cannot avoid moral conflicts. That, I believe, was Williams' main insight.

Yet as Beirlaen correctly points out, there are other kinds of cases in which agglomeration seems necessary to capture highly intuitive judgments about what we really ought to do (judgments, in other words, that seem just as credible as Williams' judgment that moral conflicts are real). Beirlaen cites cases in which multiple promises can (in fact) be kept seriatim, and in which a pacifist can (in fact) fulfill a civic obligation by performing alternative service in lieu of joining the army. Applied to Agamemnon's case, the key point is to see that the fact that a military commander was leading an important expedition could not ordinarily suffice as a reason to think he was not (or no longer) obligated to avoid killing his daughter, and the fact that he was not killing his daughter could not ordinarily suffice as a reason to think he was suddenly freed from the obligations of his military command. Yet if we give up the agglomeration rule altogether the implication would be that whenever an agent had discharged at least one of two (or more) obligations, that would suffice as a reason why the agent was no longer obligated to fulfill the other(s). And even if this is true of agents confronted by genuine moral conflicts, it does not seem a very plausible claim about the logic of obligation in general. Such a claim would completely eviscerate the principle of 'ought implies can' and, as Beirlaen puts it, "morality itself would be rendered vacuous" (Section 6).

Beirlaen proposes the modified rule of ◇-agglomeration as a way to prevent deontic logic from producing this result. According to the modified rule, "whenever it is impossible to do two things each of which you ought to do, the inference to the obligation to do both things is blocked" (Sec 5); yet when it is possible, the implication is not blocked and it follows straightforwardly that indeed you ought to do both. This does seem closer to everyday normative reasoning about what moral 'oughts' imply, while also acknowledging Williams' point that the sources of moral conflict are contingent facts rather than inconsistent beliefs about what one morally ought to do.

But now we can no longer put off the practical issues that everyday normative reasoning strives to answer (and that I asked readers to set aside until now). For now that we understand the logic of the situation, let us suppose that we had a fully developed system of the sort Beirlaen is inclined to pursue. Would such a system really solve Agamemnon's problem? More to the point, would Beirlaen's more nuanced deontic logic help us, or help Agamemnon himself, figure out which 'ought' to *do*? Can it explain why he ultimately chooses to sacrifice Iphigenia? And to the extent that his choice can be understood (perhaps even formally proved) as "the best he could do" in the circumstances, can it explain Agamemnon's overwhelming sense of regret? Or the thought that regret is something any decent human being confronted by moral conflict ought to feel, even or perhaps especially in cases where the conflict is purely contingent, that is, in cases where the conflict does not arise from any error in the agent's thinking, and where the agent is not in fact blameworthy at all? Like Williams, I suspect it cannot. The agent "may have regrets because he has had to do something distressing or appalling or which in some way goes against the grain, but this is not the same as having regrets because he thinks that he has done something that he ought not to have done, or not done something that he ought to have done" (1965, p. 110).

I should note that my worry is not that Beirlaen's improved deontic logic leaves no room for regret. Though I don't think better logic can solve Agamemnon's practical problem, I do think understanding the logic of moral conflict can help to bring the more practical points into focus, and that includes points about the nature and value of moral regret. After all, Beirlaen's system does imply that Agamemnon really ought to have avoided killing Iphigenia (nothing in the logic makes this 'ought' disappear), while also emphasizing that there is a possible world in which Agamemnon might have avoided killing her and led the expedition too. And once we understand

that this is the logic of the situation, regret makes a kind of emotional sense, and can even be explicated as a profound sadness at being unable to fulfill a genuine moral 'ought' paired with a deep longing that the world had been otherwise. Someone who did not give a whit about morality would not feel this sort of emotion, but someone who does give a whit is prone to feel it even more strongly after seeing that moral conflict cannot be avoided through clearer thinking about what the logic of ought entails. But of course, as far as that logic is concerned, choosing the other course of action would have been equally permissible (perhaps even equally good or right), and regret just as appropriate in the aftermath of that other choice as well. Hence we are still left with the question of why Agamemnon chose one ought over the other, not to mention the more general question of how any agent confronted by a genuine moral conflict might figure out which option to pursue.

So my real worry about Beirlaen's claim that a more nuanced logic can account for our everyday normative reasoning is two-fold. The first fold stems from concern that a too exclusive focus on logic does not leave much room for ethical theory to take up the phenomenon of practical deliberation. It does not make much difference whether that theory is consequentialist, deontological or *aretaic* (virtue-based). For whichever type one believes the best ethical theory to be, it is possible to articulate a system of normative claims that are perfectly consistent in a great many possible worlds, yet still to imagine concrete cases in our actual world where the contingent facts make those claims impossible to fulfill all at once, or even seriatim. Yet s*omething* makes Agamemnon choose one 'ought' rather than the other. And something makes us think that in doing so, Agamemnon acted well or badly, was blameworthy or was not, and was changed, for better or worse, by making the choice that he did. Whatever that something is (and it is probably a set of inter-related things), it is not a thing that can be adequately described by abstract and formal relationships that hold among logically consistent moral norms. I do not claim to know exactly what that thing is, but I suspect it is something concrete and embodied, having to do with the complex structure of Agamemnon's particular self and a host of contingent facts that turned out to be, as Williams himself might put it, Agamemnon's moral luck.

It might be thought that such concerns are the stuff of literature, classics, history or psychology. That is, it might be thought that such concerns fall outside the domain of philosophy proper. But even if it is too much to ask philosophy to provide concrete practical guidance in cases of this sort, it cannot be too much to ask it to adequately characterize the phenomena it takes up. Hence if we claim to account for everyday normative reasoning, I think we must at least be explicit about the relevance of all those other disciplines too. And regardless of which discipline they are thought to fall under, explicit reflection on those broader concerns also strikes me as one of the hallmarks of Bernard Williams' distinctive philosophical spirit.

Meanwhile, the second fold of my worry stems from the concern about just how philosophically tempting it is to pursue the more logical challenges involved in ethical theorizing to the exclusion of the more practical ones. Resolving such challenges is no small achievement, and the possible worlds philosophical ethics describe often include compelling moral ideals to which human beings would do well to aspire in their practical lives. Consider, for one example, the Kingdom of Ends or "systematic union of different rational beings through shared laws" which Kant describes as a "merely possible" realm (1785). Since Kant understands rational beings to be willing and able to act on moral laws, as well as to be agents who avoid coercing or manipulating the agency of all rational beings, I take it that a Kingdom of Ends would be one in which neither Agamemnon nor Sophie would be faced by the tragic choices that beset them in either the world depicted by Aeschylus, or the world created by Nazis (and others) during World War II. And I do not deny that attention to the underlying logic of ideal worlds plays an important role in the ability of any ethical theory to help us understand the gap between the ideal and the actual. But I do worry that such guidance is fairly limited in the face of real world moral conflicts that ultimately stem, as Williams points out, from purely contingent facts.

Can ethical theory do more than this? I certainly do not claim to have answered that question here. It seems to me that Williams' own answer was "No" (this is one way of interpreting his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*), though Tännsjö (2011) has recently made a convincing case that the correct answer is "Yes," and Herman (1996) has demonstrated that it is possible to

connect Kantian ideals with contingent moral facts in a much more detailed way than many of Kant's critics have realized. It also seems to me that a great deal of ethical theorizing has at least strived to do more, and that Beirlaen's arguments have not shown that this sort of striving is misplaced. And regardless of what ethical theory can do, it is abundantly clear that our everyday normative reasoning ultimately seeks practical answers. It is that fact, more than any other, that makes me wary of the claim that any logic can be "sufficiently rich," on its own, in order to explain how such reasoning operates.

Near the beginning of "Ethical Consistency," Williams apologizes for being "less clear than he would like" (1965, p. 103) when discussing phenomena like regret and conflict of desires, and their relationship to moral belief. But he does not apologize for suggesting "that a neglect of moral psychology and in particular of the role of emotion in morality has distorted and made unrealistic a great deal of recent discussion in ethics" (*ibid*). The situation has improved significantly over the past 45 years, but it seems to me we must still resist the temptation to allow purely formal considerations to dominate ethical theorizing. This is not to deny Beirlaen's claim that "deontic logic provides us with some extra tools in trying to keep our ethical theories free from contradictions" (Section 3). But it is a reminder that achieving such freedom is not the only thing we might want an ethical theory to do.

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