

PURITY AND TRAGEDY: THE INSOLUBILITY OF THE DILEMMAS DEBATE

By

CHRISTOPHER M. JOHNSON, B.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

© Copyright by Christopher M. Johnson, September 2005

MASTER OF ARTS (2005)

McMaster University

(Philosophy)

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Purity and Tragedy: The Insolubility of the Dilemmas Debate

AUTHOR: Christopher M. Johnson, B.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Elisabeth Gedge

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 103

Abstract

The debate about the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas began in earnest forty years ago with the publication of a paper by Bernard Williams which challenged the accepted wisdom in moral theory that moral dilemmas are impossible. Forty years later the debate carries on in much the same manner as it originally did, with the same sorts of claims being made both supporting and opposing Williams' position. Although arguments may have become more refined, they do not really appear to have advanced the debate, and so it seems the debate is in danger of stagnating and degenerating into a series of cross-assertions.

This thesis serves as a critique of the debate and an attempt to revitalize it by expanding the focus of its inquiry. Its primary claim is that the debate has been superficial in that it has concerned itself with the expression of worldviews but not with those worldviews themselves. By pointing out presumptions that are made by leading figures on each side of the debate, the suggestion is made that one's position on dilemmas is a function of one's meta-ethical commitments. Any consideration of the possibility of moral dilemmas must consequently take place at this level of meta-ethical commitment, and the suggestion is made that the best way to do this is in terms of one's commitment to moral purity or moral tragedy, the respective beliefs as to whether or not moral perfection is a guaranteed possibility in life.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dr. Elisabeth Gedge of McMaster University and Dr. Byron Williston of Wilfrid Laurier University for their support in this project. Both have shown both care and diligence in their treatment of my work, as well as in their treatment of me as I endeavoured to complete it. I consider myself fortunate to have worked with them both and am grateful for all their involvement. Thanks also to family for their support both tangible and intangible: life would have been much more difficult without you all there behind me. Finally, thanks to Dr. Wil Waluchow for his kind efforts on my behalf a couple of years ago, without which this project could not have been started, let alone completed.

Table of Contents

Introduction		1
Chapter One:	Deniers of Moral Dilemmas	5
	W. D. Ross	7
	R. M. Hare	13
	Terrance McConnell	18
	Thomas E. Hill Jr.	25
	Judith Jarvis Thomson	30
	Summary	32
Chapter Two:	Defenders of Moral Dilemmas	36
	Bernard Williams	38
	Ruth Barcan Marcus	45
	Martha Nussbaum	50
	Christopher W. Gowans	55
	Summary	60
Chapter Three:	Moral Worldviews	63
	What is a Moral Worldview?	64
	The Dilemmas Debate Revisited	73
	Open and Closed Worldviews	92
Chapter Four:	Conclusion	99
Bibliography		102

Introduction

In 1965 Bernard Williams published a paper in which he challenged the established wisdom in moral philosophy that moral dilemmas are impossible. Opposing two thousand years of mainstream theory, he presented an argument that defended the possibility of inescapable wrongdoing. The challenge he presented was so controversial and generated so much discussion, that the issue of moral dilemmas quickly became a hot topic in moral philosophy. Forty years later the debate carries on as to whether or not he was right, with scores of papers now written on the subject both supporting and opposing his claim.

Williams of course was not the first person to speak about the possibility of dilemmas. The Greek tragedians had spoken of moral tragedy as a structural feature of life, whilst the modern existentialists saw in dilemmas the failure of systematized ethics. But Williams was different from each of these groups in that he questioned why dilemmas are dismissed, instead of merely asserting their possibility or preaching the abandonment of ethics. Whereas it was consequently possible to dismiss the Greeks as primitive and the existentialists as radicals, Williams could not be so easily discounted especially with his analytic pedigree. His objections demanded response from those he criticized as he questioned their manner of reasoning, and so he was responsible for inaugurating the debate about dilemmas as opposed to his predecessors.¹

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre notes that the volume of literature on moral dilemmas is by far larger since the 1960's than in the entire period of written philosophy prior to this time. See his "Moral Dilemmas," p. 367.

Despite though the flurry of interest in dilemmas or at least in the need to reject them, the debate as to whether or not they are possible has not been all that productive. The arguments made on the one side or other perchance have become more elaborate, but it seems that the two sides are drawing no nearer to anything resembling consensus. Each side dismisses the other's objections as irrelevant to the claims they are making, and so it seems that the debate is stagnating as neither will amend their position. The focus of inquiry must thus be revised to understand why this is so, since it seems the debate is incapable of resolution in the manner that has been thus far attempted. By investigating why compromise is not an alternative we can comprehend the debate's true dynamic, and perhaps find a way to progress beyond stalemate without conceding either side to the other.

The purpose of this thesis is to consequently question the terms of the debate's current tenor. Rather than just see the debate as concerned with the possibility of moral dilemmas, the suggestion instead is that it should be seen to concern basic questions of moral reality. Depicted this way one can better understand why each side believes their position, and why they so steadfastly defend their position from the objections of those who believe differently. For seen in these terms it is not just one's position on dilemmas that is called into question, but the manner in which one understands oneself morally and the way one relates to the world.

The claim I thus make is one's position on dilemmas is the expression of one's meta-ethical commitments: different positions express different commitments and are defended accordingly in terms of them. When positions are appraised then it must be the

case they are appraised in terms of their context, for considered from without there is no appreciation of the reasons for which they are held. This is the reason there seems to have been so little progress in the debate about dilemmas, for there has never really been any unbiased engagement with the reasons people hold their positions. The positions of others have always been criticized on standards imposed by their critics, and so have never been considered within the framework their adherents believe them to be justified.

What this entails is that progress is possible if these meta- commitments are identified. This would allow us to see the presumptions that inform people's different positions, and help us to understand the reasons they hold them and why they hold them intransigently. It will also give insight into what is involved in holding a moral worldview, as well as into the possible outcomes when opposing worldviews come in conflict.

With this as the case, the plan of this project unfolds in the following manner. The first two chapters comprise a literature review in which the general position taken by each side of the debate is determined by a review of major figures. In chapter one, five philosophers are identified as representative of those who deny the possibility of dilemmas: they each have different philosophical methodologies and different approaches to denying them. The position of each is critically considered and their unarticulated presumptions identified. These are taken to indicate deniers' implicit meta-ethical commitments, and from them is determined the general norm of practicability that structures the denier's position.

Chapter two similarly considers the positions of four who defend dilemmas. Just like deniers their presumptions are identified and from these is established a general norm of extra-practicability. These norms however of practicability and extra-practicability are not analysed until the third chapter, after it is discussed what makes for a worldview. The suggestion is made in each of the first two chapters that these norms form different worldviews, but it is not until chapter three that we get to see what having different worldviews really means. There it is suggested that these norms result from deeper conceptions of moral existence which determine our moral experience. Briefly, deniers are said to believe in moral purity whilst defenders believe in moral tragedy. The chapter finishes with a discussion of how deniers and defenders can best understand each other given the fact that they have different worldviews. The suggestion is made that those with open worldviews have best opportunity for understanding each other, but that deniers and defenders have closed worldviews in which other worldviews are not recognized. The judgement is thus made that although progress is possible through understanding the debate in terms of different worldviews, neither deniers nor defenders are currently in a position to be able to do this.

Chapter 1: Deniers of Moral Dilemmas

My claim is that the debate in the philosophical literature regarding whether or not moral dilemmas are possible is superficial in the sense that it has been concerned with the expressions of worldviews but not with those worldviews themselves. Rather than tackling the implicit presumptions that give rise to claims either for or against moral dilemmas, or at least instead of recognizing these presumptions and appraising claims in terms of them, protagonists on each side of the debate pass them by and the debate is degenerating into one of cross-assertion.

In order to substantiate this claim, however, and to lay the ground for how I believe the debate should continue, what is required is an examination of the literature and the manner in which its voices express themselves and how they respond to each other. Through this it should become apparent that the tensions at play are between presumptions made, and that if the debate is to continue with fecundity it must be in terms of presumptions. With this in mind, the present and following chapter will take as their task the elaboration of leading voices in order to build up on each side a general understanding of what is presumed allowable in moral reasoning. The aim of this is to not only be able to engage in criticism of either position – although this will now be possible in a way it was not before – but so as to become clear about the terms of each side's argument. In this sense, this investigation is philosophically basic as an elucidation of premises from which validity and soundness can be questioned. Indeed, insofar as this elucidation has not already appeared in the literature, it might even be

claimed that those taking part in the debate are guilty for having betrayed basic philosophical method.

Those who reject the possibility of moral dilemmas often do so by making the distinction between apparent moral dilemmas and genuine moral dilemmas. This distinction is important because it allows them to respond to the evidence their critics present against their position, without requiring that at the same time they completely dismiss that evidence. On whatever grounds they provide, the response is that the situations their opponents take to be genuine dilemmas, in fact are only apparently dilemmatic and when properly understood resolvable. In this way, deniers of moral dilemmas feel they can acknowledge their opponents and the evidence they present, but critically, recognizing the difficulty of moral life but finding the conclusions of their opponents not only misguided but also variously limited, incompetent, imprudent, and indulgent.¹

Indeed, many deniers of moral dilemmas feel that one's take on them is especially indicative of the comprehensiveness and penetration of one's moral thinking. Although they admit conflict is common to moral experience, they say it is disingenuous to presume it irresolvable since moral dilemmas are fundamentally inconsistent and to accept them is to violate the basic structures of thought. What is consequently required is movement beyond the basic intuitions that seem to make dilemmas plausible, to a more reflective engagement which denies their possibility. As will be seen, this reflective

¹ Hare, for instance, says that some people "like there to be what they call 'tragic situations'; the world would be less enjoyable without them, for the rest of us..." (31-32)

engagement does not necessarily entail some formulaic method which always results in *the* right answer to a question of conflict, but it does involve the belief in such an answer, regardless of whether or not we can attain it.

Of those who reject the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, I take the following as representative: W.D. Ross for the intuitionist position; R.M. Hare for the utilitarian standpoint; Terrance McConnell for the arguments from deontic logic; Thomas E. Hill Jr. for the Kantian perspective; and Judith Jarvis Thomson for the non-consequentialist view. Over the following sections the position of each as it pertains to moral dilemmas will be laid out and critically assessed, and the common presumptions of what is allowable and disallowable in moral reasoning will be indicated. These commonalities will then be contrasted in the following chapter with those wrought from the arguments of those who accept on the contrary that dilemmas are possible.

W.D. Ross: Ethical Intuitionism

According to Ross, moral method should take as its starting point direct reflection on “what we really think about moral questions.” (39) He claims this is because our basic moral beliefs which inform our answers to these questions are dependable sources of moral knowledge, and as such form “the standard by reference to which the truth of any moral theory has to be tested.” (40) What this means is that Ross’s moral method is not to submit belief to theory, but to submit theory to belief. Thus, whereas other moral philosophers see it their task to question our basic moral beliefs, Ross thinks any such questioning is mistaken: no investigation into the ground of our beliefs will reveal

anything more than the beliefs already show, and so any investigation is to not only no avail, it is fundamentally misguided.

Now the reason Ross has such confidence in these moral beliefs is that he sees epistemic parallels between them and mathematical beliefs. “In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.” (30) And so just as mathematical axioms are self-evidently true, and we come through experience to recognize that all cases of $2+2=4$, so with maturity do we recognize our basic obligations by recognizing the *prima facie* rightness of particular types of actions. But unlike mathematical truths in which never does $2+2\neq 4$, the rightness of types of actions is not absolute: breaking a promise can sometimes be justified as when it saves someone terrible harm. It is this difference that explains why Ross says our moral insights are of *prima facie* rightness and not of rightness *simpliciter*; for when we see the rightness of keeping our promises, this rightness as it translates into obligated action is contingent on not being overridden by the rightness of other *prima facie* actions that conflict with it. Other things being equal we are morally obligated to act on our *prima facie* duties, but obligated acts unlike mathematical truths “have different characteristics that tend to make them at the same time *prima facie* right and *prima facie* wrong.” (33)

Because then our *prima facie* duties – those of fidelity (to tell the truth and to keep promises), reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence (21-22) – can conflict such that we cannot always act one every one of them, Ross says as a class they tend to be obligatory but have no actual claim on us. Our actual duties are rather only those *prima facie* duties most urgent in any situation. We are thus

only obligated to act on a *prima facie* duty if it does not conflict with any other *prima facie* duty, or overrides those with which it does conflict. (28 ff.)

What this means is that the “rightness of an act depends on its whole nature and not on any element in it” (33) – to determine rightness of action the action has to be seen wholly and not from particular standpoints. As singular actions are perspectively seen, the *prima facie* rightness of each action considered is a mere parti-resultant attribute that as such engenders no moral obligation. But when the situation is seen as a whole, and these *prima facie* duties are appraised in terms of each other and one’s actual duty is thenceforth determined, this actual duty is toti-resultant and the action considered is solely right or wrong. (28)

Now what is interesting about this as it relates to moral dilemmas, is that when the action is seen as a whole its parti-resultant attributes are indistinguishable as they are sublimated to the all-things-considered judgment of which action ought to be done. (123) In cases where *prima facie* duties conflict, then, there is no genuine moral dilemma at stake wherein what is right is inescapably wrong. For until one duty is determined actual, no *prima facie* duty has any genuine claim on us and there can be no real conflict of duties. And even though it might be difficult to know which duty is actual (these unlike *prima facie* duties are not self-evident but require experience and judgment) (31), and even though Ross interestingly suggests that most if not all of the time *prima facie* duties are in conflict (41), he also nevertheless maintains that there *is* a right action in every situation, namely that which has “the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness...over *prima facie* wrongness.” (41) So although it might be difficult to determine right actions

since there is no general principle by which to work through conflict (31); and although Ross admits because of this that we can never be entirely certain that a decision we have made is right or wrong (42); there is nevertheless assurance that a right decision does exist that maximizes *prima facie* rightness over wrongness, and which can objectively be held to be *the* morally right thing to do. (31)

What is evident then in Ross's theory is that the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas is ruled out through the definition of an actual duty. Actual duties are singular and complete: they cannot be fractional or internally inconsistent, and there can only be one in any situation. By its very nature, an actual duty takes into account any tentative *parti-resultant* claims to the contrary and by its very stature dismisses them. And since actual duties are after all our only source of moral obligation, those claims dismissed have no moral bearing on us.

But what is also apparent about Ross's theory is that its cogency depends on one sharing the basic beliefs that Ross claims are "the standard by reference to which the truth of any moral theory has to be tested." For if one's basic moral beliefs differ from Ross's it seems so too will the acceptability of the moral theory he develops from them – it is after all only by reference to those beliefs that the validity of moral theory is determined. As such, it seems evident that Ross's very distinction between *prima facie* and actual duties, which seems explicitly set up in order to avoid the sort of dilemmatic conflict he intuitively finds impossible, is questionable for those who on the contrary believe genuine moral conflict can occur. For why, they might ask, as this division requires, should something only have moral force when not in conflict with anything else? Why

should the moral force of my duty to tell the truth be contingent on my duty not to hurt people? The distinction Ross makes would have it in fact that if a promise were overridden by some other *prima facie* duty the moral situation would be as if that promise had never been made, and yet this seems suspect to people who disagree with Ross as to the possibility of dilemmas. (Ross's position also seems to deny the basic conceptual truth that promises create obligations – we cannot say there is any obligation to fulfill a promise until we know all the details about what fulfilling it would involve.²)

Indeed, the degree to which Ross's position on moral dilemmas has influenced his theory is further evident when we ask questions within the theory itself, for certain moves he makes seem inexplicable except for his rejection of the possibility of dilemmas. He says, for instance, that no *prima facie* duty carries any moral obligation, but that actual duties which do entail obligation are those that realize the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness over *prima facie* wrongness. But how can it be that the greater balance of one set of *prima facie* duties over another can result in actual obligation? If *prima facie* duties have no actual moral currency how can the balance of one set over another determine what ought to be done? To draw an analogy, it is as if Ross is weighing ten weightless black beans against ten weightless white beans to see which beans are heavier. If *prima facie* duties have no moral weight, then how can they be weighed against each other and how can the greater balance determine what morally ought to be done?

The solution to this problem is found in the fact that it is only by saying such sterile grounds can give rise to moral claims that Ross can make his intuition of the

² John Searle, 245.

general rightness of *prima facie* duties commensurable with his intuition that actual duties cannot conflict. Ross needs his theory to accommodate both intuitions, and if the theory that does this looks questionable in some ways, then his response is so be it: “loyalty to the facts is worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplicity.” (23) This is similarly the solution to another problem raised that finds difficulty in Ross’s claim that although we have the *prima facie* duty to bring into existence as much intrinsic goodness and as little intrinsic badness as possible (24), the intrinsic badness of an action that informs a *prima facie* duty against that action is discharged by the judgment that on the whole that action ought nevertheless be performed. For how, goes the objection, can the parti-resultant badness of the action disappear in the all-things-considered decision? Ross’s response to this is quite simply that his intuitions regarding non-conflict and objectively and exclusively right courses of action require it.

The point in this commentary is that from the basic ethical intuitionism Ross asserts, it is possible to go either way in accepting or rejecting moral dilemmas. Which way one goes depends upon the intuition one has regarding dilemmas, and if one rejects them it seems likely one will develop something similar to the distinction between actual and *prima facie* duties. But whichever side one happens to take, the intuition one has regarding dilemmas can be objected to by one’s opponents as begging the question. There is no real way to respond to this charge, for since the charge is based on intuition there is no investigative method by which to back one’s position.

What examination of Ross's theory has revealed, then, is not only how central his response to the question of moral dilemmas is to the development of his theory, but also how his take on the issue can be responded to by a counter-assertion as theoretically believable as his own. How one responds to the issue on an intuitionist model is consequently a matter of how the world appears to one, and this response will be effective in how one develops one's moral theory. This of course results in a certain ambivalence on the part of the person investigating dilemmas and the persuasiveness of the reasons against them. And so if one wants to know what makes for a reason against moral dilemmas – if one wants to give substance to Ross' intuition – it appears one will have to look elsewhere.

R.M. Hare: Critical Utilitarianism

Hare is one of those philosophers who believes that one's response to the question of the possibility of moral dilemmas is indicative of the depth of one's moral thinking. Superficiality, he says, is "more quickly revealed by what is said about this problem than in any other way." (26) One would expect, then, from this assertion, that Hare's denunciation of moral dilemmas will be instructive of the types of reasons generally offered against them.

In fashion typical to many who reject moral dilemmas, Hare claims that there are two different levels to moral thinking, and that those who accept the possibility of inescapable moral conflict confine their thinking to just the one. But to limit oneself like this, he says, is to engage in incomplete thinking; for at the critical level not engaged in

by those who accept the possibility of dilemmas one is faced with the requirement that conflict must be resolved. (26) Hare says in explanation of this that the concept of ‘ought’ operates differently at the critical than at the intuitive level of thinking, and that although the intuitive level suffices for most everyday situations, the critical level is essential for those cases where conflict occurs. (28)

At the intuitive level Hare says that our moral thinking is informed by what he calls, similarly to Ross, *prima facie* principles. These principles are the rather rough and simple moral injunctions that are taught us in childhood and learnt from our experience of decision-making. They have no specific content in that different people can have different *prima facie* principles, but they are distinct in that they are non-self-justifying and open to inspection. Indeed, these ‘intuitions’, as they are also known, can be questioned as both our upbringing and past decisions can be questioned, and are questioned insofar as we have reason to doubt them and their application to novel situations. For sometimes our basic moral rules are insufficient for the situations we find ourselves in, and are consequently in need of review. (40) But when we engage in this sort of scrutiny, we need appeal to something other than intuitions themselves to answer our questions; we are searching after all for grounds for our beliefs, and to appeal to intuitions would be viciously circular. So what Hare says we appeal to is reason, and by doing this he says we begin to operate at the level of moral thinking he calls critical.

Now our aim in critical thinking is to choose and adjust our principles so that “the general acceptance of them will lead to actions which do as much good, and as little harm, as possible.” (62) This may require change to our already-held principles, or it

may require creation of new ones. Either way, this utilitarianism is justified on rational grounds, and as such is the basic foundation for our moral principles. Insofar as we engage in critical thinking, then, we are guided by “the logical properties of the moral concepts” (by which he seems to mean this utilitarianism), “by the non-moral facts” (by which he means the facts of the situations we are faced with) “and by nothing else.” (40) The reason this critical thinking is required when our *prima facie* principles conflict, is because “nobody who actually uses moral language in his practical life will be content with a mere dismissal of the paradox that we can feel guilty for doing what we think we ought to do.” (31) Conflict must force reconsideration of our principles since although permissible at the intuitive level, it is intolerable at the critical. But how does this reconsideration take place?

Critical thinking applies to conflict by requiring the critical thinker to find a moral judgement he is prepared to make about not just the situation at hand, but about all similar situations “no matter what role he himself were to occupy in it.” (44) Hare is here asserting a form of contractarianism, although one guided by his utilitarian maxim that the principles of action we decide upon do as much good and as little harm as possible. What this results in is determination of how the situation characterized by the principles in conflict can best be resolved all-things-considered and from all points of view: “no judgement will be acceptable...which does not do the best, all in all, for all the parties.” (42) This determination, however, cannot take place without adjustment of the *prima facie* principles in conflict, since intuitively they require incompatible courses of action as each picks out different features of the situation as morally relevant. (41) As such,

critical thinking requires the qualification of one or both principles, so that their reformulation makes them compatible, and so that they can be agreed upon by all as the general principles for conduct in everyday life that are most likely to maximize goodness and minimize harm.

The idea behind critical thinking, then, is to engage in act-utilitarian thought to resolve dilemmas so as to generate general principles that can be followed in everyday life in rule-utilitarian fashion. If this is done well, then the *prima facie* principles for use in intuitive thinking will yield conflict in only “exceptional” circumstances. (50) For whereas before the *prima facie* principles in conflict required incompatible courses of action, their qualification now requires, for example, that in cases where they both apply to a situation the one give way to the other. The principles have been reformulated so as to account for each other (and others like them) in such a way that good is maximized and harm is minimized. (50-51) The conflict ceases to exist in that and all similar situations, and so as critical thinking is more and more successful conflict is gradually eliminated.

More so than Ross, then, we can see in Hare’s argument the reasons for his dismissal of the possibility of moral dilemmas, for his utilitarian model is such as to presume but one course of action in any given situation maximizes good and minimizes harm. Not only does this presumption rule out the possibility of evenly weighted courses of action (which would equally maximize good and minimize harm), its formulation is such that the minimized harm bears no moral significance apart from its being justified *as* minimized. That harm is done, to put this in other words, is of no moral concern so long

as that harm is minimized for the sake of maximized good; we need feel no compunction for such harm since by definition it cannot be wrong.

It is thus in this manner that Hare rules out the possibility of moral dilemmas – by singularly right answers and by justifying harm by means of a utilitarian calculus. To help us understand this model further, he offers his analogy of the archangel. (44 ff.) The archangel is an ideal observer who lacks human weaknesses of limited thought and limited knowledge and partiality to self. By using only critical thinking, she is able to determine all properties of situations and consequences of possible actions, and prescribes through this highly specific but universal principles as to how one should morally act. Now although the archangel is an exaggeration, and Hare says that we can never fully be archangels (45), that he posits her as the ideal reveals his faith in critical thinking to find singular and internally consistent solutions to cases of moral conflict. For even though the archangel is imaginary, her manner of thought is supposed nonetheless to be theoretically possible – there *is* a right answer to every situation if we are only clever enough to find it.

Now Hare seems to presume this is the case because of his appeal to reason; he does after all say that critical reflection requires the resolution of moral dilemmas. But why critical reflection should yield this conclusion is not entirely clear. There seems to be some deeper presumption, unarticulated, that the sort of harmony appropriate to scientific or logical reasoning should lend itself to reasoning about the moral life. But why should experience of moral conflict acquiesce to such standards? Why should the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle, for instance, or the law of bivalence

which are basic principles of logical and scientific investigation, be normative also for moral investigation? For insofar as reason's task is to explain the world in its various facets, to make it impossible that moral claims can clash is to introduce a requirement as to what counts as proper moral explanation, and by doing this to beg the question in favour of a particular worldview (one that requires that moral reasoning be congruent with scientific or logical reasoning) that could well be questioned and is questioned by those who reject the requirement.

What this suggests is that insofar as this presumption of Hare's permeates his moral theory, it permeates in such a way that it makes of reason demands that are already loaded against the possibility of moral dilemmas. Hare rules out their possibility before he even begins, because the world he investigates and his manner of investigation cannot allow them to be. But insofar as his requirement of moral harmony is questionable because of his understanding of reason, so is his rejection of dilemmas. How this can be so is clearer in the analysis of the view of Terrance McConnell, who although not a utilitarian like Hare, nonetheless expresses similar demands of reason in his work on deontic logic.

Terrance McConnell: Deontic Logic

McConnell's argument similarly to Hare rejects moral dilemmas on the grounds that any theory that accepts their possibility would be incoherent. Unlike Hare, however, who does not think that "tinkering with the calculus of deontic logic" (28) is helpful in clarifying the problems that moral dilemmas pose, and instead on reflection finds them

intuitively misguided, McConnell rejects them on logical grounds finding them incompatible with deontic principles. His claim is that the axioms of deontic logic are more probable than the thesis there are moral dilemmas, and that if the axioms and thesis conflict it is the latter that must be abandoned.

The axioms of deontic logic McConnell finds incompatible with the thesis of moral dilemmas (T1) are the principle of *ought implies can* (T2) and the principle of agglomeration (T3). As is known, a moral dilemma is a situation in which one ought to do two (or more) incompatible actions, for which the nonperformance of either one can be held morally responsible. The agglomeration principle states that if one ought to do each of two things, one ought to do them both, and the principle that *ought implies can* states that if one ought to do something, it must be possible to do that thing. These axioms symbolically, conjoined with the symbolic expression of a moral dilemma, create the following situation: (155-156)

Argument A

1. OA	Premiss
2. OB	Premiss
3. $\sim\Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	Premiss (1 – 3 together constitute T1)
4. $O(A \ \& \ B) \rightarrow \Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	Premiss (T2)
5. $(OA \ \& \ OB) \rightarrow O(A \ \& \ B)$	Premiss (T3)
6. $O(A \ \& \ B)$	(i), (ii), (v)
7. $\sim O(A \ \& \ B)$	(iii), (iv)

The contradiction (lines 6 and 7) that results from Argument A could have been differently devised, but the important point is that to avoid contradiction, as standard deontic logic requires of a theory, either T1, T2, or T3 must be relinquished. Any one of

these three solutions will avoid the inconsistency of Argument A, but only at the expense McConnell says of “forcing us to give up a thesis that at least some have found plausible.” (156) Now since the existence of moral dilemmas is that which is in question, the solution that rejects T1 (the thesis of moral dilemmas) cannot immediately be viable since this would undermine the very purpose of carrying out the investigation. What is required instead are grounds for why the other two solutions are not viable, and so by elimination or negative argumentation to require the abandonment of T1.

But despite this requirement, McConnell surprisingly only considers the plausibility of the solution that rejects T3. He suggests that the reasons for supporting T2 – the principle that *ought implies can* – are “well known” already and “accepted by many,” and although he admits that the principle is not uncontroversial he does not in any way investigate these objections or consider them worth his attention. (158) Instead, he just accepts T2, and goes on to defend the agglomeration principle (T3) on the grounds of its similarity to the accepted modal axiom ($\Box A \ \& \ \Box B \ \rightarrow \ \Box(A \ \& \ B)$). That the modal analogue of T3 holds in standard systems of modal logic is “reason for believing that T3 holds as well.” (158) Although McConnell admits this is not conclusive support for T3, he nonetheless finds it sufficiently convincing to move past any further consideration of it to discuss his suspicions of T1.

McConnell thus proceeds to argue against the existence of moral dilemmas by claiming that the evidence proffered in their defence can be better explained than by invoking them. He claims that the experience of regret, for instance, does not have to indicate a dilemmatic situation because feeling regret is consistent with believing one has

done what one ought to have done, all-things-considered. Regret “is appropriate [whenever] some good has been lost or some bad...has obtained” (161); and so regretting having done what one ought to have done can be explained by one’s having chosen the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. Such a choice does not however amount to a genuine dilemma, for such a choice is rationally made and rational choices are not conflicted.

Indeed, McConnell suggests there is always available a rational choice if one only knows how to look for it. Decisions may be difficult to make, but this does not mean that there do not exist “uniquely correct” rational answers. (162) For although obligations can ostensibly conflict, they can also be found to override each other and the rational task is to determine how this may be. What this means is not only that conflicting claims do not imply moral dilemmas, but that neither does the experience of uncertainty, since “it is not incumbent upon [deniers of dilemmas] to supply the correct moral answer to every apparent quandary.” (162) It is sufficient that there be singular right answers to moral problems; it is not necessary that one be able to provide them.

What we see in McConnell’s argument, then, is the same faith that Hare has in there being uniquely right answers to cases of conflict, the difference being that whereas Hare seems to critically intuit the impossibility of dilemmas, McConnell’s argument gives that intuition logical grounding. But McConnell’s reference to deontic logic to support his argument is suspect insofar as the axioms that constitute that logic beg the question against the possibility of dilemmas. Indeed, the principle of *ought implies can*, which McConnell does not even consider but merely accepts at face value, is a prime

example of this. The very problem of a moral dilemma is that one is morally required to do two things both of which one cannot. To thus accept in one's investigation of the possibility of such a situation, appeal to a principle that (having accepted agglomeration) explicitly says it cannot obtain, is to have already decided the issue before the investigation has begun.³ In a genuine, sincere inquiry into the possibility of moral dilemmas, uncritical acceptance of *ought implies can* is immediately a non-starter. For McConnell not to recognize this, and indeed to dismiss it as he so obviously does, is either to be disingenuous or oblivious to the actual nature of the problem that is being investigated.

But granting that McConnell is probably not disingenuous, what this suggests is that the principles of deontic logic so basically inform some people's moral thinking that they accept what follows from them even when this is contrary to what others claim to experience. The point is not so much that they should not do this, but that the question whether they should or not is not properly raised by McConnell. Our deontic principles are formulated as they are to reflect certain basic moral insights; but when they conflict with contrary insights to dismiss these others on the grounds of this conflict is to prioritize the one set but with no real explanation why. To suggest priority because of the internal consistency of one's logical systems is not adequate, since these logical systems – both modal and deontic – are expressly developed so as to maintain coherence and the integrity of their fundamental principles, which themselves are already presumptive.

³ For an example of how one can accept *ought implies can* and yet also accept moral dilemmas, see Bernard Williams in the next chapter.

Logical systems are edifices built in and to the glory of their founding principles, and so to support the foundation by the superstructure is to enter a vicious circle of explanation.⁴

Indeed, that this is the case with McConnell's position can further be seen when he separately appeals to deontic axioms other than agglomeration and *ought implies can* to show the inconsistency of the thesis of moral dilemmas. (157) McConnell writes that the thesis of moral dilemmas requires the rejection of the deontic principle (PC) which states $OA \rightarrow \sim O\sim A$. This principle is supported by two other basic principles: (a) $OA \rightarrow PA$ (if an action is obligatory, then it is permissible), and (b) $PA \equiv \sim O\sim A$ ('permissible' is defined by 'not ought not'). But insofar as these principles are justified only in terms of each other, and are formulated (implicitly or otherwise) to preclude moral dilemmas through their definition of obligation and permissibility, we can immediately see it is disputable to rule out moral dilemmas on grounds of their inconsistency with these principles. For it may well be – and this is the counter assertion – that what is obligated is not in every sense permitted, and that just because something is permitted in one way does not mean that in some other way it ought not to be done. To put this another way, what is troublesome with McConnell's approach is that he requires a precise match between obligation and permissibility that effaces any tension between them. For although it makes sense that obligation entails permissibility, this does not thereby mean

⁴ The claim is made later that circular reasoning is unavoidable. To avoid confusion, circular reasoning is vicious and hence problematic when it fails to be inclusive. The circular reasoning that is later accepted is that which is aware of its own limitations and provides for the possibility of what it nonetheless dismisses. See the section on open and closed worldviews in chapter three.

it entails complete permissibility – from a different perspective a different judgment might be made, in which case the action would be both impermissible and permissible.

We can see then that McConnell's rejection of dilemmas by means of (PC), precludes the possibility of actions being both permissible and impermissible precisely because he understands the relationship between obligation and permissibility so singularly, that he requires any claim of obligation to be complete and overriding and annihilating of any claim to the contrary. There just cannot be for McConnell two senses in which an action can be both obligatory and not obligatory, and because of this (PC) is sufficient to rule out moral dilemmas. But (PC) can be maintained as stated without requiring the rejection of the possibility of dilemmas, since it can merely be claimed that what is obligatory and thus permissible from one perspective can be forbidden and impermissible from another. The entailment of permissibility from obligation, in other words, can be maintained without requiring that obligation and permissibility be unified concepts even as they apply to singular actions.

What all this means is that although McConnell says that "if (T1) is true, then our moral reasoning is radically different from what it is supposed to be by standard systems of deontic logic" (157), this in and of itself is no reason to reject T1's claim, regardless of what McConnell himself claims. The reason for this is that standard systems of deontic logic are expressly developed and understood to preclude the possibility of moral dilemmas, and so to reject dilemmas by these systems is merely to beg the question. What McConnell's statement should rather direct our attention to is the more basic question of why various deontic claims (T2, T3, etc.) are given the weight they are by

McConnell, and why principles like (PC) are understood so as to preclude the possibility of moral dilemmas when they can quite possibly be understood differently. In the end the appeal to such claims and principles is only as convincing as they are themselves, and any critique, both positive and negative, has to take place at this level.

One last thing to mention is the rather curious claim that McConnell makes regarding self-imposed moral predicaments. McConnell is careful to mention that his dismissal of moral dilemmas does “not necessarily [rule] out the possibility that an agent can, by doing something forbidden, put himself in a situation where no matter what he does he will be doing something wrong.” (160) It is quite possible, he suggests, that one can be in a situation of inescapable wrongdoing if one has caused that situation by making, for example, two promises one knows conflict. This sort of situation does not challenge the coherence of our moral reasoning, and is not “morally disturbing...because we feel that the situation is not unavoidable.” (160) The suggestion seems to be that when situations are unavoidable their inconsistency with the principles of deontic logic is sufficient to rule them non-dilemmatic, whereas when they are avoidable there is either no inconsistency or this inconsistency is unimportant and one can consider oneself faced with a self-caused dilemma.

To say this however raises serious questions about the role deontic principles play and the source of our moral “disturbance.” For why should the requirement to do something one is also required not to do suddenly become acceptable and consistent with the principles of deontic logic when those requirements are incurred by one’s past wrong action? Why should the avoidability of a situation determine whether the logic is

threatened? For indeed, McConnell's claim regarding avoidable dilemmas actually changes the consistency demands of his logic – what was intolerable before becomes now acceptable. Yet he provides no reason why two people faced with the same choices in the same situation should be faced with on the one hand inescapable wrongdoing, and on the other a rational choice. His failure to explain why the world itself, or someone else's actions, cannot put one in a moral dilemma whereas one's own actions can, points to an unarticulated reason behind his position, one based perhaps on a deeper need than logical consistency since his appeal to consistency is itself inconsistent.

For McConnell to say that moral dilemmas are not morally disturbing when self-induced, but to imply that they are too disturbing if not, suggests that part of the reason for his rejection of them lies in his need to have available a course through life by which to keep his hands clean. It seems based on a need for an attainable or maintainable moral purity, which would also explain his claims that there is always a uniquely right answer to any situation, and that once-equal claims can be subordinated to each other without undergoing moral loss. This is speculation, but there does seem a sort of quasi-Christian rationalism about McConnell's position, one which presumes a moral harmony to the world attainable if we just make our decisions properly. And indeed, something similar to this is to be found also in Thomas E. Hill Jr., to whom we next turn.

Thomas E. Hill Jr.: The Kantian Perspective

Hill's attitude is similar to Hare's in that he believes moral theories are defended and confirmed to the extent they are able to resolve 'apparent' moral dilemmas. Insofar

as a theory yields contradictory prescriptions in hard cases, so that theory is incoherent and so it must be rejected. As a Kantian, then, the more specific question Hill is concerned with is “can one, within a broadly Kantian perspective, acknowledge that there are genuine moral dilemmas, tragic gaps in moral theory, and morally significant residues of feeling and attitude?” (170) A positive answer to this question requires either the emendation of the Kantian perspective, or its abandonment altogether.

Hill’s concern is that despite Kant’s declaration that a rational system can admit of no conflicts of duty, the principles presented in his *Groundwork* and in *The Metaphysics of Morals* seem to yield clashing prescriptions when applied to hard cases. Prohibitions after all against adultery, murder, slavery, and lying, and more generally the formula of humanity which holds that each person has unconditional value, appear not only to leave some apparent dilemmas to which they are applied unresolved, but actually to create others. (173) It is difficult as such to see how Kant’s declaration is to be borne out; but how such conflicts are to be resolved is not so interesting as the rationale behind the declaration that conflict must be resolvable. It is this rationale that determines after all the impossibility of moral dilemmas, and understanding it thus reveals the moral worldview by which Kant and his followers deem what they do acceptable and unacceptable, both possibly and permissibly.

Now Kant’s moral philosophy proceeds from the belief that to have a moral duty is to be under the practical command of reason. In and of itself this is not too informative; but when coupled with the proposition that reason cannot issue incompatible commands, it follows syllogistically that there can be no genuine conflicts of duty since

reason cannot require of us incompatible actions. It is this that is essentially the theoretical framework behind the Kantian view and rationale that rules out moral dilemmas. Reason is fundamentally coherent and cannot demand other than the same; and since obeying the commands of reason is the source of moral worth (to be disposed to do this is to have a good will), our moral appraisability cannot be subject to the inexorabilities of dilemmas. Consequently, although modern Kantians disagree as to whether the moral principles presented in Kant's works are correct, and if they are in need of qualification how to go about correcting them, a Kantian, as a Kantian, cannot allow that our moral principles (whatever they are) can put us in a situation in which we will be wrong no matter what we do. "[T]he rationalist conception of duty," Hill says, "refuses to tolerate moral dilemmas" (174); and so if it seems that in a situation all one's options are condemned, then it can either be presumed there remains a permissible option, or barring this that the principles structuring the alternatives are in need of being emended.

Indeed, Hill believes in the coherence of reason so strongly that he rejects the claims of other Kantians who say, similarly to McConnell, that moral dilemmas can obtain but only when agents themselves are at fault for them. He objects to Donagan, for instance, whom he singles out of these errant Kantians, for saying that performing the lesser of two evils is condemnable if one has brought these evils upon oneself since the evil of the action despite its (induced) unavailability nevertheless remains.⁵ (175) The reason for Hill's objection is that he sees this position as abandoning the central feature

⁵ Alan Donagan develops this position in The Theory of Morality.

of Kant's ethics that "moral principles and precepts can guide the decision making of every deliberative agent, the guilty as well as the innocent, to choices they can make without further wrongdoing." (176) This feature is fundamental and necessary to Kant's ethics because otherwise the Kantian understanding of duty as prescribed by reason ceases to make any sense: "it would be like saying that practical reason, after due reflection, unequivocally directs you now to refuse to take any of your available options, including doing nothing." (176) If this understanding of duty is to be maintained, then Donagan's position (and the support he finds for it in the philosophy of Aquinas) has to be rejected.

We can see then that Hill's argument against moral dilemmas proceeds directly from the ideal he holds – and which appears to be held (explicitly or implicitly) by all those we have looked at so far – of rational consistency. On the Kantian framework, moral action is determined by duty; duty is determined by reason; reason cannot require of us incompatible actions; ergo genuine moral dilemmas are not possible. The centrality of reason's role here is obvious, as is the claim that reason cannot allow for conflict. But what is questionable about this is the way in which these claims about reason apply to the moral sphere.

It is quite apparent that two incompatible actions cannot both be actually performed, and because of this the Kantian claim that moral dilemmas are impossible may seem compelling. But what is at stake here is not practical conflict – the conflict between two actually performed actions – but moral conflict: the concern is not with whether two incompatible actions *can* both be done, but with whether they *ought* both be

done, and insofar as this is the case reason's rejection of incompatible moral claims stands on shiffter ground. Now the reason for this shiffter ground lies in the connection implicit in Hill's discussion, but made famous by Kant, between ought and can. This has already been discussed somewhat in the commentary on McConnell, but it bears further mention here as regards Hill's Kantian argument. The principle basically says that it must be possible to perform the actions one ought to do; if one cannot do something, then one cannot be morally required to do it. Acceptance of this claim seems at the crux of Hill's argument given the strong commitment he has to the link between practical and moral impossibility – his claim after all is that the incompatibility of actions implies the incompatibility of their prescriptions. But this is questionable insofar as there can be held an ontological difference between actions and prescriptions, such that the incompatibility of two actions can be claimed not to necessarily entail the incompatibility of their prescriptions, and thereby their impossibility. For again, whereas it is clear that it is impossible for two incompatible actions to jointly obtain, it is not quite so immediately clear why the conjoint prescriptions of these actions must thereby be ruled out.

What this issue thus seems to depend upon is how appropriate it is to understand the moral life by and through the ideal of practical rational consistency. Why should what is morally obligated be determined (in part) by what is practically possible? The Kantian response to this is that morality is fundamentally grounded in reason, such that practical, rational limitations necessarily and comprehensively inform moral thinking.⁶

⁶ Think here of the formulation of the categorical imperative that says that only that action is to be performed whose maxim can be made a universal law. The test is one of logical consistency – what one is

But why moral thinking should be grounded in this way and subject to the same consistency demands as those appropriate to mathematics is unclear. Indeed, the Kantian position presumes this ground appropriate to the moral life, to the end that (at least on Hill's reading) there must always be available a course of action in any situation that is morally permissible, even if that action under any other circumstance would be deemed to be morally wrong. The entailment of this is not only that moral obligation implies practical possibility, but also that practical necessity implies moral permissibility.

But insofar as this connection between rationality and morality is questionable, so is the Kantian position in general and Hill's argument in particular. If the moral life is thought to involve more than just rational behaviour (as understood in this Kantian way), or something completely different⁷, then there can be reason to question Hill's rejection of the possibility of moral dilemmas. What will be required as such in order to properly understand Hill's position, and the position of those who are like him (which to some extent may well be all those looked at so far), is why there is presumed (necessary) this connection between morality and practical rationality. This will be difficult to do insofar as it will require unveiling implicit presumptions that most basically make up a moral worldview, but this will be necessary if progress is to be made in understanding the dilemmas debate. Indeed, the final philosopher to be considered in this chapter demonstrates how difficult this will be insofar as she does not even recognize the

morally obligated to do is determined by the logical coherence of the world when that action is performed universally. Insofar as this action faces practical limitations at this level, it is to be rejected.

⁷ Existentialists for instance think moral 'decisions' are made beyond the ambit of rationality.

relevance of the debate, and because of this presumably does not even understand what it is for her to have a moral worldview.

Judith Jarvis Thomson: Non-Consequentialism

Thomson's contribution to the moral dilemmas debate is not particularly notable because of the reasons she offers against them, but rather because of the way in which she so casually dismisses their possibility. Indeed, the reasons she offers are much the same as those we have already seen, but what is remarkable is how little significance she sees in these reasons since she does not see the question of moral dilemmas as sufficiently controversial to warrant any real concern or attention. Indeed, her response to a putative case of moral conflict between two options (i) and (ii) consists of no more than the testimony that "it is hard to see how anyone could plausibly say both that I ought to choose option (ii) *and* that I ought to choose option (i)." (161) Her position as such boils down to little more than the frank admission of her inability to understand what a moral dilemma could look like, and her suggestion that what to do in a situation that might be described as dilemmatic is simply to choose one option or another with no moral concern about the other not chosen. She says "nothing theoretically interesting turns on which choice we make" (60), and by saying this simply ignores the issues of moral remainders and inescapable wrongdoing. At best she might see these as pseudo-problems, and although people like Ross and Hare might agree with this, Thomson is unique in explicitly admitting as much, Ross and Hare thinking their critics deserving of at least some response and engagement.

Thomson thus warrants our attention because she represents overtly what really seems to be going on in the debate about moral dilemmas. Although people like Ross, Hare, McConnell, and Hill all give arguments against moral dilemmas, they base their arguments on presumptions they make which already rule out their possibility, and as such their conclusions merely admit what their presumptions have already foretold. Given this, Thomson's casual dismissal of dilemmas is not all that different from the arguments of these others; for although Thomson is so blunt in her approach, the arguments of these others essentially just give voice to the same presumptions and intuitions to which Thomson appeals in her rejection. Their arguments may help to clarify their presumptions in a way that Thomson does not, but since there is no real engagement with these presumptions – since they are appealed to but not defended – and since not everybody shares them, there is no real greater cogency to these arguments than there is to Thomson's outright dismissal. Essentially whether you accept or reject the possibility of moral dilemmas, neither approach will strike you as any more cogent than does the other: both are equally convincing or unconvincing depending on prior inclinations.

Summary

What has been revealed by our review of these five philosophers is that there are certain basic assumptions that underlie their dismissal of the possibility of dilemmas, assumptions they appeal to but do not really defend. For the most part, of course, it would be claimed that such defense is unnecessary, that these presumptions are bedrock

and that to question them is to question the parameters of reasonable moral thinking. But these assumptions are of course questionable insofar as there are people who believe that dilemmas are possible, and that indeed the moral life cannot be explained without making some reference to them. And so insofar as these philosophers claim their basic assumptions to be bedrock, it seems we are faced with a certain moral worldview incommensurable with that of those who adhere to different assumptions, since in each case the moral worldview seems to proceed from those assumptions. Any sensible conversation between the two parties would thus seem to have to regard these assumptions and moral worldviews as a whole, and not proceed in terms of arguments based on each side's presuppositions.

It is of course though difficult to see how this could be done given that objectors to moral dilemmas make their assumptions as necessary to reasonable moral thinking. How could such an individual engage in debate about what they see as flights of fancy or uncritical and impossible acceptance of certain ideas, without just appealing to their own standards of acceptability which preclude such considerations? How could Hill, for example, question the validity of reason's sole determination of morality, when for Hill what it means to be moral *is* to be rational in the way he suggests? Or how could McConnell engage the advocate of moral dilemmas in terms of worldviews when he accepts so basically the principles of *ought implies can* and agglomeration, which necessarily rule out moral dilemmas as contrary to moral possibility?

To get a clearer picture on this requires of course consideration of the basic presumptions made by those on the other side of the debate who accept the possibility of

moral dilemmas. But we can until then posit the general presumptions that give rise to the position that moral dilemmas cannot occur.

The claim that emerges from each of Hare, McConnell, and Hill, and on which Ross's intuition seems based as well as that of Thomson, is that the moral life either requires or permits⁸ a harmony of ideas and prescriptions. This seems especially from the arguments of Hare and Hill to be based on a certain conception of practical reason and of reason's connection to moral life and moral thinking. What this means is that these philosophers are concerned to understand the moral life in terms of what practicality demands or permits,⁹ rather than understanding it apart from this. Put another way, their morality is extremely practicable in that in no way is the ethical sphere unconnected to the practicable, and in no way can there be extra-practicable ethical considerations. How morality can be thought of extra-practicably will be evident after the presumptions of those who accept the possibility of moral dilemmas have been considered. This will help us to understand not only their moral worldview, but also to better understand the worldview just outlined above. To this task we now turn.

⁸ Remember that McConnell, although not Hill, accepts the possibility of inescapable wrongdoing if brought on by one's prior wrong action.

⁹ Both ought implies can and must implies permissibility.

Chapter 2: Defenders of Moral Dilemmas

The last chapter sketched the general position taken by deniers of genuine moral dilemmas and the sorts of arguments they present in their defense. In order to properly understand the slant of these arguments, though, and thus the dialectic of the dilemmas debate, it is important to recognize, as Christopher Gowans points out (Gowans, 2003), that claims regarding the impossibility of dilemmas tend to be reactionary, made mainly in response to the objections of others. The reason this is so is that for deniers of dilemmas the very issue of dilemmatic conflict only arises as a concern from without the moral paradigm within which they work. This moral paradigm so structures their moral thinking that dilemmatic conflict is not so much thought implausible (this comes later) as it is not really thought about at all; the paradigm can make no provision for dilemmas, and so their possibility is never really grappled with in the formulation of the denier's position.¹

What this means is that deniers only really engage the issue of dilemmas through the allegations of those who do not share in their paradigm. It is in this sense that deniers' claims regarding the impossibility of moral dilemmas are reactionary; for if it were not for these allegations there would be no reason for the question of dilemmatic conflict to confront them. The phenomenon as such only has status for deniers as

¹ Recall Thomson, for example, who sees little significance in the argument against moral dilemmas since she does not see the question of their possibility as warranting any genuine concern.

encountered through the worldview of others; it is not encountered as part of their own moral landscape and so does not need explaining only explaining away.²

Now the reason all this is important is because what it results in are much different styles of argument as presented by deniers and compared to defenders. When we looked at the deniers' arguments in the last chapter, their method was to explain why claims of dilemmas are misguided by providing 'better' accounts of the evidence offered in their support than the invocation of inescapable wrongdoing. In so doing, however, since they have the weight of the philosophical tradition on their side, their explanations did not typically engage the presumptions of their paradigm, nor consider how those presumptions could be criticized.³ I consequently provided some of this analysis to put together a general picture of the moral worldview of the person who rejects the possibility of moral dilemmas. But in considering the arguments of those who defend dilemmas, this analysis is to a much greater extent provided by the individuals themselves, since, given their opposition to the weight of the tradition, they must necessarily be that much more reflective in their approach as they cannot appeal to the authority of the tradition as can and do deniers. What we find as such in the arguments of defenders is a greater awareness of how norms of moral theory affect one's moral

² We can see this in each of the five people looked at in the previous chapter. The experience of conflict is not necessarily denied by any of Ross, Hare, McConnell, Hill, or Thomson (although they certainly diverge over the appropriateness of such feeling), but any suggestion that this experience implies or can imply genuine dilemmatic conflict is most definitely rejected by each, each thus finding it his or her task to provide alternative explanation of the experience than that the agent is in a situation of inescapable wrongdoing. (The strongest example of this is Thomson, for whom the possibility of dilemmatic conflict is so foreign that a cursory dismissal of it is a sufficient response to her critics. Her moral paradigm is so exclusive of dilemmatic conflict that even when forced to consider it she can in no way truly engage it.)

³ The weight of the tradition is sufficiently on their side to put this onus on those who oppose them. As is mentioned, defenders of dilemmas do indeed engage in this sort of reflexive criticism.

position. This means that defenders are better situated than deniers to recognize the subjectivity of their arguments, and it is mainly for their failure to do this that this chapter finds them at fault.

In constructing a general picture of the worldview held by those who defend the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, I take the following as representative: Bernard Williams, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Martha Nussbaum, and Christopher W. Gowans.

Bernard Williams

In direct contrast to the philosophical position as epitomized by the philosophers of the previous chapter, Williams says it is 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.” (EC 125) What he means by this, and the sort of injustice he is complaining of, is that these ethical theories in their treatment of moral conflict “eliminate from the scene the *ought* that is not acted upon.” (125) Williams’ claim then is that when we are in a state of moral conflict, it is not necessarily the case that “one *ought* must be totally rejected” (134); rather, the *ought* decided against can persist in its moral injunction, and we can appropriately feel regret for having decided against it even if we nonetheless believe that doing so was our best available course of action.

What Williams is engaged to do then in challenging the tradition’s standard is to raise “logical or philosophical questions about the structure of moral thought and language.” (115) In doing so, what we see in his approach is a certain reflection on the norms that govern ethical thinking and how the presumption of certain analogies between

different modes of thought have influenced moral theory. And although this reflection is not particularly reflexive in that it does not result in the claim that the norms influencing Williams' own position are presumptive, the ground is nonetheless laid for this claim and the assertion by one commentator that one's position on the possibility of moral dilemmas is necessarily a function of "one's having adopted certain positions in other substantive debates in moral philosophy."⁴

Williams' criticism of those who reject the possibility of moral dilemmas is that they understand moral reasoning on a standard better suited to epistemic belief. His claim is that this modeling has so influenced these people's thinking that they have transposed conclusions as to what they can believe onto what they think is morally possible. But since the end of moral reasoning differs from that of epistemology, to conflate the one to the other is mistaken and confuses moral reasoning. The case of moral conflict, for instance, when interpreted on an epistemic model, incorrectly requires all conflicting claims to withdraw in preference to those which are acted upon. This is because epistemically, the discovery that our factual beliefs are in conflict *eo ipso* weakens them until it is determined which of them are true and which of them are false: the actual world to which these beliefs refer cannot tolerate their dissonance, and since the concern with beliefs is to "get things straight" with regard to the world, erroneous beliefs must be abandoned. (122)

⁴ Julie McDonald, 49. It should be noted that although McDonald asserts this, apart from a reference to a statement of Alasdair MacIntyre, she in no way backs it up. MacIntyre states briefly in his paper "Moral Dilemmas" that the controversy over moral dilemmas should perhaps shift its focus to standpoints in moral theory. Despite this, it does not appear in the literature that his suggestion has been followed, hence the investigation of this project.

But Williams' claim is that there is no such demand as this in the moral sphere, and that to hold moral claims subject to epistemic standards is to have improper moral expectations. For unlike belief, he says, in the case of moral conflict we "do not think in terms of banishing error." (122) So better than an epistemic model by which to think of moral conflict, Williams suggests instead as more appropriate a model based on desire. When desires conflict, unlike beliefs, there is no requirement that the desires not realized have to be abandoned. This is because whereas truth is the arbiter of belief such that false beliefs must be rejected, desires are not subject like this to the possibility of their satisfaction: a desire decided against can still be desired, and its unfulfillment can be regretted despite the decision against it. When it comes to moral conflict, then, Williams' claim is that in a manner similar to unsatisfied desires, moral claims decided against can nevertheless retain their sanction. What this means is that it makes perfect sense, or so Williams believes, to say that in a case of moral conflict one can be faced with regret no matter how that conflict is resolved. One can sensibly regret not having fulfilled an obligation just as one can sensibly regret not having satisfied a desire. As Williams says, "conflicts of *ought's*, like conflicts of desires, can readily have the character of a struggle, whereas conflicts of beliefs scarcely can." (122)

Now Williams recognizes that his position might be objected to and that not all will accept feelings of moral regret as indicative of wrongdoing, especially if one feels that in acting one did so for the best. Indeed, he even goes so far as to recognize that some will characterize such feelings and the claim to their legitimacy as irrational. But he also claims that if what this means is that "a fully admirable moral agent" would not

display such regret in circumstances of conflict, then either this is “just false” (122), or it means that “an admirable moral agent is one who on occasion is irrational.” (125) In either case, Williams’ response to the levy of this objection is to call into question the norms of rationality, claiming either that the parameters of rationality are too narrow, or that irrationality is not always to be morally disvalued.

It is Williams’ belief then that when the discharge of one’s obligations contingently⁵ preclude each other, we can nevertheless be held responsible for those obligations we do not fulfill. In accepting this position, Williams acknowledges its clash with the accepted logic of moral thought, and as such he sets out to modify it. It was seen in the previous chapter that the viability of the notion that there are genuine moral dilemmas depends upon the viability of the agglomeration principle and the principle that ought implies can.⁶ Since both of these are accepted as axioms of deontic logic, it is often the case that moral dilemmas are rejected because of the price to deontic logic of abandoning them. But Williams’ suggestion is that contrary to this position the agglomeration principle “is not a self-evident datum of the logic of *ought*.” Indeed, he says that “if a more realistic picture of moral thought emerges from abandoning it, we should have no qualms in abandoning it.” (132) Conversely to McConnell, then, Williams believes that the agglomeration principle needs must be abandoned because “moral remainders” in the resolution of moral conflict (what McConnell referred to as

⁵ Williams is quite careful to confine his argument to “cases in which the moral conflict has a contingent basis.” (120) This means that he omits from his discussion conflict between intrinsically inconsistent moral principles (principles it would be impossible in any conceivable world to jointly act according to), and conflict between moral judgements and nonmoral desires.

⁶ Refer back to the section on McConnell for this.

‘T1’) require it: “the very fact that there can be two things, each of which I ought to do and each of which I can do, but of which I cannot do both, shows the weakness of the agglomeration principle.” (132)

What we see in Williams’ approach then is a reverse evaluation of the situation McConnell considers. For whereas McConnell finds the agglomeration principle sufficiently convincing to reject the possibility of moral dilemmas, because of the model of desire Williams adjudges the “realistic picture” the other way around. What we have then with the rejection of the agglomeration principle is that from the facts that (a) ‘I ought to do *a*’ and (b) ‘I ought to do *b*’ but (c) ‘I cannot do both *a* and *b*’, it does not follow by agglomeration that ‘I ought to do both *a* and *b*.’ And although by the principle *ought implies can* we can infer by *modus tollens* from (c) that ‘it is not the case that I ought to do both *a* and *b*’, since the agglomerated claim was never made this conclusion results in no contradiction and is as such “uninteresting.” What this means, however, is that from these premises (a – c) Williams can argue for moral remainders.

The argument Williams provides is that from ‘if I do *b*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *a*’, and ‘if I do *a*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *b*’, it can be concluded that whichever of obligations *a* or *b* is done, it is appropriate to feel regret for the other. Now it may well look from these two conditionals as if one’s moral responsibility for doing the action not performed is exempted, since it is certainly true that having done *a*, *b* cannot then be done and cannot be thus required to be done. But Williams’ claim is that since retrospectively *a* and *b* were individually possible and required, it cannot be claimed that by acting on one the moral claim of the other is

cancelled. This is because it does not follow from *a* being done that *b* should not have been done when both courses of actions were possibilities; and so although *b* is no longer obligated one is wrong for not having already fulfilled it. Only if we were to identify the ‘ought’ of moral principle (‘I ought not lie’) with the ‘ought’ of deliberative action (‘what ought I do?’) could it be concluded there is no wrongdoing in such situations. But such identification is a mistake, Williams says, and the logical picture it results in “impossible.” (134)

It is evident then from Williams’ argument the extent to which his analysis differs from those considered in the previous chapter, for in making his argument he has to recognize norms and presumptions that govern his opponents’ position. We see this when he criticizes the epistemic model, and suggests in its place a model appropriate to desire. But what we do not see in Williams’ argument is this same sort of reflection on himself – he does not consider how his own moral position is as much based on presumption as those he submits to critique. “It seems to me impossible”, he says, “to rest content with a logical picture which makes it a necessary consequence of conflict that one *ought* must be totally rejected in the sense that one becomes convinced that it did not actually apply.” (134) This picture of course is that which accepts the agglomeration principle and embraces the epistemic model as appropriate to moral thinking. But insofar as Williams’ confidence in moral remainders is that which gives rise to his frustrations, the criticisms he makes are born from that which precisely is in contention.

Now while there is nothing necessarily wrong with this in and of itself (one’s thinking after all must start from confidence in something), there is if Williams thinks

himself convincing to anyone who does not already share his position. Pointing out for instance epistemic modeling may be interesting to someone who rejects moral dilemmas, but it is unlikely that they would be persuaded by it as criticism; its ‘limitations’ after all will only be recognized by those already looking for an alternative. So while we see in Williams’ account a good demonstration of how one’s position in the moral dilemmas debate both influences and is influenced by one’s other positions in moral and non-moral philosophy,⁷ what we do not see him provide is any meta-ethical analysis of the issue more fundamentally at stake. For what Williams provides is not so much as he claims a “more realistic” picture of moral thinking, but a set of views more coherent with a particular moral intuition. The meta-ethical insight Williams is lacking then is not so much some judgement on a particular moral position, but that with different intuitions come different sets of views.⁸ To put this slightly differently, the insight that he lacks is reflection upon the meaning of a worldview built up through the mutual support of a variety of philosophical positions on a number of different issues. For as these positions are interrelated, so emerges from them a way of seeing, a way of doing, and ultimately a way of being. To call one such set of these positions “more realistic” then is not only rather churlish, it is fundamentally inadequate to understanding what a moral life is. For

⁷ He demonstrates this both in his criticism of the standard view and in the manner he argues his own, by showing how the analogy one uses between different modes of thought affects what one thinks of the possibility of moral dilemmas, and what are the rules of deontic logic.

⁸ It should be noted that in the different context of practical deliberation Williams does engage in this sort of consideration. In “Internal and External Reasons” he makes the broadly Humean argument that the only normative reasons for action are those relative to an agent’s antecedent motivations. This means that “external reasons” – those not held by an agent (but perhaps by a critic) – are not, and cannot be, effective in practical deliberation. However, at no time does he relate this discussion to his discussion on moral dilemmas, and so at no time does he engage in meta-ethical analysis of their possibility. (This Humean account itself is highly controversial; see McDowell’s “Might There be External Reasons?” for criticism.)

just as Williams' own position is informed by mutually supporting views regarding the possibility of moral dilemmas, so are his opponents' positions buttressed by views to the contrary.

Williams takes the right first step in recognizing the analogies of thought that give rise to his opponents' position, but he fails in not recognizing that the validity of his criticisms depends on one's having already accepted the position they are meant to demonstrate. His argument as such can only be convincing to those already converted, and to the extent that he expects of it anything more, he misunderstands not only his opponents' position but also that of his own.

Ruth Barcan Marcus

In similar fashion to Williams, Marcus argues for the reality of moral dilemmas by claiming that the experience of guilt in response to moral conflict is a reliable indication that the conflict is in fact dilemmatic. Moral guilt is a moral fact, she says, and "it is a better fit with the moral facts that all dilemmas are real." (193) But differently than Williams, or at least with different emphasis,⁹ it is Marcus' contention that when obligations conflict but the one outweighs the other, even then is the situation dilemmatic: "even when the reasons for doing x outweigh, and in whatever degree, the reasons for doing y ...the obligations to do each are not erased, even though they are unfulfillable." (193) What this means is that not only does Marcus think that moral

⁹ It is unclear exactly what Williams' position on this issue is: he never explicitly says that conflicts are dilemmatic when one obligation outweighs another, but neither does what he does say preclude this possibility.

dilemmas are possible, she sees them as occurring quite frequently, for any moral conflict on her moral standard is also a moral dilemma. “It is safe to say”, she accordingly claims, “that most individuals for whom moral principles figure...have confronted [moral] dilemmas.” (189)

But in order for Marcus to claim this position, she has first to respond to deniers who object that moral dilemmas breach the requirement of consistency in moral theory. For it is their claim that moral dilemmas only arise from inconsistency of principle, and that rather than accept their reality the principles instead must be amended.

In refutation of this objection, Marcus responds by calling into question the standard of consistency that requires that dilemmas be rejected as impossible. Speaking of the set of one’s general moral principles as a code, she claims that the understanding of consistency employed by her critics requires that one’s code apply “without conflict to all actual – or, more strongly – to all possible cases.” (190) But this standard is too demanding, Marcus charges: it inappropriately imports into the moral arena the sort of consistency appropriate to games, where at every stage of play there must be specific rules exactly determining the various ways in which the game can go on. But since our interest in moral life is not “merely in having a playable game whatever the accidental circumstances, but in doing the right thing to the extent that it is possible,” (196) we cannot as in games just abandon certain rules or invent new ones as fit to make our moral lives more determinate. For whereas moral principles are supposed to provide guidance for action, they can only do this in reference to what is right; and so although we persist

through conflict by making choices as best as we can, making the best of a predicament like this does not rid the situation of our other incumbent obligations.

What Marcus then suggests instead of the universal consistency of games, is a standard that considers a set of rules consistent “if there is some possible world in which they are all obeyable in all circumstances in *that* world.”¹⁰ (194) This alternative has the benefit of allowing moral conflict and thus of explaining moral guilt, in that the only conflict it disallows is that internal to the code: regardless of what the principles actually require, so long as the principles do not logically contradict each other the standard of consistency is met. And so although it may happen that circumstances are such that the actions engendered by one’s principles conflict, since these are due to the world’s contingencies the code’s viability is not threatened. It is only when things could not be otherwise, when the reason for conflict is not contingent, that conflict becomes problematic.¹¹

What all of this means, according to Marcus, is that rather than understand conflict as cause to amend one’s principles, the better course of action is to try to avoid its recurrence. We should not then choose our principles so as to avoid possible conflict, but should try to engineer our lives so that contingent moral conflict is minimized. Dilemmas are “data of a kind”, Marcus says, and “are to be taken into account in the future conduct of our lives.” (197) What this means is that in living our lives we should fulfill our obligations, but in times of conflict should attend to our guilt and the

¹⁰ Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ It should be noted here the sorts of things that Marcus presumably does not consider contingent: the laws of nature, for instance.

conditions of its occasion. For only through this and trying in the future to avoid these same conditions, can moral dilemmas in any meaningful way sincerely be avoided.

Now as has been seen before, it can still be objected to Marcus that the position she maintains is in violation of the agglomeration principle and the principle of *ought implies can*. But Marcus responds to this in the same way as does Williams, for accepting the entailment of possibility from obligation, she nevertheless rejects agglomeration. And so although Marcus says that for each of the conflicting obligations in a dilemma it is possible that either be performed, this does not mean that she thinks this true for the obligations taken together. For “just as ‘possible *P* and possible *Q*’ does not imply ‘possible both *P* and *Q*’...From ‘*A* ought to do *x*’ and ‘*A* ought to do *y*’ it does not follow that ‘*A* ought to do *x* and *y*’”. (200) Marcus rejects agglomeration, but because “‘ought’ does imply ‘can’ for *each* of the conflicting obligations *before* either is met...after an agent has chosen one of the alternatives, there is still something which he ought to have done and could have done and which he did not do.” With respect to the alternative not chosen consequently a wrong is committed and a burden of guilt, however small, is appropriate. This claim of course is a “departure from familiar systems of deontic logic” as Marcus well recognizes, but such departure is better she claims than departure from the “fact” of moral dilemmas as the unmodified logic requires. (200)

What we see then in Marcus’ account is the same sort of thing seen in Williams’. For just as Williams’ argument develops from his presumption that dilemmas are real, so Marcus does the same but similarly to Williams never engages in the meaning of this presumption. Her repeated justification for accepting dilemmas is appeal to the moral

facts, but the point she evades considering is that it is exactly these facts in dispute. Her argument as such is quintessentially circular in that the conclusion she reaches she begins from: from the presumption of dilemmas she argues for guilt, and from the experience of guilt that dilemmas are real.

Now Marcus does offer insight in the criticism she makes of her opponents' understanding of consistency, for in making this criticism she traces the relation between a norm of moral theory and a position held within it. But what this does not but should give rise to is reflection upon the very normativity of her own point of view. It should induce the consideration that while the circularity of her position expresses a worldview permissive of moral dilemmas, circular positions – as reflective of themselves and reflexively interpretive at their every stage expounded – can be multiple. Marcus should realize that the moral "facts" of her position are not facts *simpliciter*, and are only ever seen as such because of extra-factual reasons – they are value-infused by her moral norms as she heuristically interprets the world.

By failing to see this greater dynamic, what we see on analysis that Marcus is doing is not so much debating a contentious issue, but by articulating and asserting a counter-position, bypassing engagement with the role of normativity that is central to the question of dilemmas. The reasoning after all she presents to her critics is reduced to the assertion that their rejection of facts she accepts as real means the position they take must be wrong. And so although she can see that her opponents' position is informed by the presumption of norms, her critique of these norms on the grounds of her own means she is naïve to their role and the bias of her appraisal. Like Williams Marcus is somewhat

aware of the dynamic of the worldview of others, but her level of engagement is limited such that she is unaware of her own and its function.

Something similar to this is seen in the work of Martha Nussbaum, to whose historical inquiry we now turn.

Martha Nussbaum

Nussbaum's work on moral dilemmas is not so much an argument in their favour as the presentation of a worldview that accepts their possibility. For rather than engage with her critics in questions of logic or semantic meaning,¹² she presents in contrast to the morality they advance the morality of the classical Greeks. This should not be taken to suggest however a scholarly disinterest in moral dilemmas, for it is Nussbaum's belief that the alternative she suggests can convincingly speak for itself. Her position as such is that we should try to recover certain elements of the classical view, for we can only dismiss dilemmas she claims "at the price of self-deception." (FG 39)

Nussbaum's analysis begins with rejection of the Kantian claim that the treatment of moral questions in classical tragedy is morally primitive and misguided. For in contrast to this position that secures moral goodness in the dependable keep reason, it is Nussbaum's claim that the tragedians saw that "the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability." (2) Considering then tragedy and traditional Greek theology, Nussbaum argues that depictions of moral conflict should not at all be disparaged. For

¹² It is not however as if she refuses or is unable to do this. In response to Thomson in Goodness and Advice for instance she agrees with Williams that in deontic logic the principle of agglomeration should be abandoned.

what this inconsistency calls us to is reflection upon “the possibility that some degree of tragedy is a structural feature of human life.” (GA 117) And so although effacing tragedy might ensure our moral goodness, this can only be done by forgoing the complexities that make that goodness significant.

By attending to the lessons then of Greek literature and religion, Nussbaum believes we can better understand the depths of our moral ontology. And so when she analyzes Aeschylus’ plays on the problem of practical conflict, she aims to show not so much solutions to the problem as “the richness...of the problem itself.” (FG 49)

In both *Agamemnon* and *Seven Against Thebes* there are tragic decisions to be made, but in each of the plays the Chorus has reason to disapprove their resolution. In the case of *Agamemnon*, while the Chorus agrees that Iphigenia’s sacrifice is the choice that clearly is preferable, they object nonetheless to the insouciance with which Agamemnon puts to his task. For although the constraints of circumstance require his daughter’s death, the Chorus claims the killing “of one’s own...[is a] pollution that never grows old.” (41) The point the Chorus makes in this is that right choice means not always right action, for sometimes actions never are right no matter the reason they are chosen. That one is thus required to act does not make one morally blameless, for the act that one can be required to do can still be morally forbidden. Agamemnon’s failure to appreciate this and his lack of regret and remorse, reveals his failure “to respond to his conflict as the conflict it is.” (39) For it is not so much that he fails to know which action must be committed, but that “a piece of true understanding is missing” in his morally discerning that action: by refusing to suffer his action with the sorrow and struggle it is

due, he is emotionally deluded to the reality of the fact that he is committing murderous filicide.

In *Seven Against Thebes* there is a similar situation in that a justified action is censured. In defense of the city he is sworn to protect Eteocles must combat his brother. But rather than struggle between his civic obligations and the duties he has as a brother, having made his decision he goes into battle feeling “no opposing claim, no pull, no reluctance.” (39) Given that it appears he has no innocent option available to him, the Chorus of the play is reproachful of “the responses and feelings with which he approaches [his] action.” (38) For it is tears, they claim, and not their refusal, that are appropriate to his moral predicament, and so although he may reason well “he...show[s] the feelings of a criminal.” (38)

The problem Eteocles is accused of having is thus the same as Agamemnon’s: rather than face his action with an appropriate sensibility, he is ignorant of the wrongs he commits because of limited moral imagination. For having reached a decision in his case of practical conflict, the presumption is made that the case is soluble and that conflicting claims overridden are powerless. But since the conflict in fact is insoluble because not all obligations are met, the better response is as per the Chorus to acknowledge those obligations as failed. (42) Regret and remorse are appropriate then as well as a certain repulsion, since only in facing such self-rebuke is there appreciation of one’s true moral circumstance.

It is Nussbaum’s position, then, having considered Aeschylus’ plays, that the tragedy of conflict can only be avoided by deficiently responding to ethical claims. For

to believe that in cases of practical conflict decisive solutions are possible, one must “underdescribe or misdescribe” the reality of what they require. (49) But more than this failure to properly address our incumbent obligations, by avoiding tragedy we also fail to attend to the lessons it teaches. For “there is a kind of knowing that works by suffering” in acknowledging difficult realities, and without this knowledge we cannot understand “the way human life is.” (45) To thus do away with certain commitments because of their conflict with others, is not to be morally purer at all but in fact to be morally limited – goodness requires that we engage with the world, not that we stifle response to it. The only thing bearing a likeness as such to a ‘solution’ to practical conflict, is not to find ways to avoid the conflict but to be fully immersed in its troubles. By fully and clearly acknowledging the fact that wrongdoing is sometimes inescapable, we are forced to take on an extra dimension of moral experience and meaning. Only by willing to undergo this suffering can we seriously take ourselves morally.

To accept Nussbaum’s position it consequently seems that one must already accept life as tragic, for she explicitly says in presenting her position that dilemmas reveal life as it is. If one thus rejects the possibility of dilemmas and moral suffering as “constituent” in life (45), this must be because of one’s failure to properly discern one’s moral commitments. For recognizing what is truly required in a case of practical conflict enlightens one to “a possibility for human life in general.” (50)

What this amounts to however is the circular claim that we should accept dilemmas because life is dilemmatic: accepting dilemmas is merely a matter of being honest about moral suffering. But obviously those we have looked at who deny

dilemmas would question this inference's soundness, for they still experience the difficulty of conflict without believing it tragic.¹³ To thus call attention to the insight of suffering as the "practical perception" of tragedy (45), is not to use suffering as inductive of dilemmas but as rather their affirmation: suffering only indicates tragedy to those who think suffering tragic.

Nussbaum's claim then that rejecting dilemmas is an exercise in "self-deception" can only be accepted by those not self-deceived. This is because the wisdom warned of being neglected through the denial of tragic choice, can in no way be acceptable to those who do not already possess it: they do not have access to the wisdom because they are self-deceived, but the reason that they are self-deceived is because they reject its claims. By pointing then to the moral dimensions of this wisdom in support of dilemmas, one either works at cross purposes with deniers, or wastes one's efforts appealing to those who have no need of convincing. Either way the point is that the evidence presented is biased, since its persuasiveness depends upon one's already held moral inclinations.

What we are thus faced with in Nussbaum's analysis is the presentation of a particular worldview meant to convince us of its morality. And although Nussbaum recognizes the history of response to the possibility of moral dilemmas, her presentation of her own position presumes it objectively true.¹⁴ So although she has a certain recognition of different claims from different standpoints, she is not willing to follow this through and see the evidence she presents as only convincing within her chosen

¹³ Indeed, both Agamemnon and Eteocles struggle until they make a decision.

¹⁴ She would not otherwise accuse her critics of being victims of self-deception.

perspective. That different claims are seen and justified because of others already accepted, should indicate to Nussbaum the particularity of her position. The fact it does not is thus suggestion she is unaware of her partiality, and further that she is unaware of the logic of different worldviews.

To see how awareness of one's partiality affects one's moral thinking, we turn lastly to Christopher Gowans.

Christopher Gowans

It is Gowans' criticism of the argument for moral dilemmas that it has relied too heavily on the description of moral experience and not done enough to explain it. He thus takes it as his task to provide this explanation, by developing "an understanding of normative value that focuses on the idea of moral responsibilities to persons." (199) By doing this he believes he can make sense of the experiences that imply moral dilemmas, and thus advance the argument in their favour beyond its current design.

It is evident from the outline of this method that Gowans' approach is 'experientialist'. Rather than evaluate moral claims by reference to abstract first principles, moral claims are subjected only to the data of moral experience: "there is no standard external to moral experience that dictates what moral practice [should] look like." (204) First principles are thus misplaced in answering moral questions, because the only principles appropriate to morality are those phenomenologically derived. By thus attending to experience as the source of moral value, it is Gowans' belief he can defend "moral distress" as a reasonable response to moral conflict.

Moral distress is the “feeling of moral pain at having done something morally wrong,” but it does not have to refer to the violation of the conclusions of moral deliberation. (207) What this means is that moral distress can be appropriate to right decision, because the outcome of right decision is sometimes immoral action. The reason this is so is that moral value – by which the morality of action is determined – is not just defined as what is required by correct deliberation. Because our responsibilities to fulfill moral value are independent of practical ends, it is possible for them to be in conflict and thus for wrongdoing to be inescapable.

To better explain what all of this means Gowans considers our actual moral responsibilities. They primarily regard other people, he says, and paradigmatically arise from our intimate relationships, for in entering into association with others we recognize their intrinsic value. Now the intrinsic value of persons is generally recognized by most moral theorists, but Gowans elaborates to make the claim that this value is also irreplaceable. His point is not just that people are valuable in a way that is non-instrumental, but that this value “cannot be fully replaced by the value of another person.” (209) This is because the source of one’s worth is the particular life that one leads, and so although all people are intrinsically valuable the value of each is unique.

The reason this matters is that we cannot understand irreplaceable value *a priori*. Since we only know what is unique about people by encountering them through experience, determining *a priori* how to treat people morally is to treat all people the

same.¹⁵ Kant's kingdom of ends consequently, despite intrinsically valuing people, reduces them all to a moral standard (autonomy) that belies their particularity. The problem with this is that we value autonomy but it is not just because people are autonomous that we value them: when we mourn the loss of an intimate we mourn their friendship not their autonomy. Since Kant cannot capture this irreplaceable value in his reduction of value to autonomy, he is wrong in thinking he can determine moral rightness independent of all experience. Moral responsibility must attend to particularity and so only arises from experience.

Given then that our moral responsibilities “originate in responses to the intrinsic and irreplaceable value of the particular persons with whom we are connected” (212), we can see why Gowans claims that inescapable wrongdoing is possible. Since our responsibilities are to individuals themselves and not to some abstracted moral ‘right’, separate responses to different individuals can conflict without either defusing. For it is not the case that our responsibilities must conform to a standard of action,¹⁶ and so those responsibilities we do not enact persist as unfulfilled. Moral distress then in the face of conflict is not only understandable, it is morally necessary as affirmation of the value of those persons we have to neglect. Acting for the best may not be responsive to the value of each person concerned, and because this is fundamentally our moral concern acting best may involve doing wrong.

¹⁵ The question may arise here as to our duties to non-intimates since we are not in a position to know what is unique about those with whom we are unfamiliar. Gowans says in such cases that we respond not to what is irreplaceably valuable, but rather to the *fact* of it. Although we have obligations to those we are unfamiliar with, they differ from those to whom we know.

¹⁶ I.e. actually putting into practice.

In contrast however to the other philosophers of this chapter and indeed to all those of the previous one, Gowans is explicitly aware of the partiality of his own position. Speaking of his critics as those who display “rationalist tendencies” in moral philosophy (205), he readily admits that the argument he presents “will not convince [his] rationalist opponents.” (199) But he nevertheless advances his argument because he is not concerned to convince them, and because he is not entirely certain they can be convinced of his position at all. His audience is rather limited to those who already believe in dilemmas, since his intention is merely to provide these allies with a “response to rationalist counter-arguments.” (199) Indeed, it is Gowans’ suspicion the dilemmas debate is probably not resolvable, at least in the sense of finding an answer all parties can happily agree upon. Since the different parties have different commitments to the norms of moral reasoning, Gowans suggests the debate may have stalled on “fundamental differences in moral sensibility.” (199) His claims as such are made to defend rather than to persuade of his position.

What we thus see in Gowans’ position is awareness of the limits of theory, and an appropriate restraint in being aware that his position is based on a paradigm. But despite his restraint in making his claims because of fundamental difference, Gowans does not fully explore these differences by considering them meta-ethically. For while he does consider how the tendencies of empiricists and rationalists divide on the issue, there is no consideration of the deeper ethos that determines each of these standpoints. Questions are left unanswered as to the substance of this divide, an omission Gowans acknowledges by saying he will not “resolve the issue at this deeper level.” (199)

Gowans as such is aware of worldviews but does not go on to investigate them any deeper. He is thus in a sense similar to the other philosophers previously studied in this chapter, in that he does not truly illuminate what is really at stake in the question of moral dilemmas. He goes one step further than the others of course by admitting the persuasiveness of his claims as limited; and by further suggesting some reason for this he goes one step further again. But by failing to investigate more deeply the clash of worldviews he is aware of, he is not any closer to advancing the state of the debate about moral dilemmas.¹⁷

Now Gowans does of course make the concession that this is not his intention, but there seems to be some sort of dissonance between this and his claim to advance the case for dilemmas. For since he recognizes his audience as those who already believe in dilemmas, there is nothing to really gain in him offering counter-arguments to those who reject them. Not only will these not be convincing to critics whose worldview is different from his own, neither is it likely they are needed at all as retort to these critics' objections; for if the reason one believes in dilemmas is because of one's sensibility, it is doubtful the disagreement of others will affect this orientation. The only benefit that appears to come from the argument Gowans provides, is thus clarification to the already-converted of the insights of moral experience. But to suggest this as a "compelling response to rationalist counter-arguments," is to mislead those who do not understand the stalemate he suspects of the debate. For it makes them think of it as offering a response

¹⁷ As will become apparent later on, his failure is in not understanding the contingency of worldviews, and thus in not recognizing other worldviews as being able to realize moral possibility he precludes. See the next two chapters for elaboration of this idea.

to the objections that are raised by their critics, whereas all that it actually serves to do is further to convince themselves.

Summary

What we thus see defenders of moral dilemmas doing is challenging the norms that govern traditional moral thinking to make room for what they claim is the genuine fact of inescapable moral wrongdoing. Since each is in a position of challenging the tradition as opposed to merely appealing to it (as with deniers), there is a certain awareness that the norms they criticize influence thought about what is morally possible. We see this for instance in Williams criticizing the epistemic model of moral reasoning; in Marcus challenging the accepted standard of moral consistency; in Nussbaum's reference to the insight of moral suffering; and in Gowans' claim regarding the importance of irreplaceable value. Each takes to task what they believe to be omissions or confusions in the moral facts, and by suggesting norms alternative to deniers' show how these omissions or confusions have misled moral thinking. But what is missing in this awareness (though less obviously so in Gowans and Nussbaum) is the reflection that their own proposals as norms of moral thinking are similarly open to question. For in each case the justification they offer for the alternative that they propose, is that the alternative provides for the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas. But since this provision is exactly what is rejected by those whose position they criticize, defenders of dilemmas seem oblivious that their norms and 'facts' mutually determine each other.

What this means is that defenders' criticisms of deniers of moral dilemmas fail in fact to engage in the norms that determine their opponents' worldview, for their criticisms are made from without their relationship of mutually determined facts and values. Their suggested replacement norms are thus foreign interventions in a world constructed to their exclusion; and so to expect that these replacements will cause deniers to change their position is to misunderstand the logic of what is involved in having a moral worldview. The suggestion of these criticisms is that moral dilemmas are rejected because of mistaken norms; but what defenders do not consider is that norms can derive from having already rejected dilemmas. The point is that despite appearances defenders are not as aware of worldviews as otherwise might be thought. They recognize the norms of deniers but do not consider them in their own terms, and so when they point out faults with them they do so prejudicially.

The norms that defenders of moral dilemmas propose are amorphous to say the least, but can perhaps be generally characterized as embodying the following presumption: In a robust sense moral value and responsibility are not restricted to the requirements of moral deliberation, and so each can be considered extra-practicable in the sense that neither are limited to what we can or actually do. Moral obligation then is not just the result of having reached a decision, because obligations exist prior to decision and are what decision is based upon. Obligations thus can conflict because moral value is not unitary, no obligation being ever attenuated by the claim that is made by another.

Now this norm of course is complex and its influence is extensive, and so it cannot be fairly expected to be fully understood from this summary. But the following

chapter will elaborate its role, and from this elaboration will become clear a particular moral worldview. In order to be able to do this, however, what a moral worldview is must be clarified. This will allow us to understand how different claims lead to different positions, and how critique of different claims has to consider their context of position. It will also allow us to put into relief the moral worldview of deniers, since what they think can be partially explained in contrast to what they do not. Being thus able to talk about moral worldviews and the claims about dilemmas made within them, we will finally be in a position to consider the nature and viability of the debate about dilemmas.

Chapter 3: Moral Worldviews

The critique of the debate in the last two chapters has given indication of the manner in which the differing claims that comprise the debate are the contrary expressions of conflicting worldviews. For in arguing for or arguing against the possibility of moral dilemmas, both defenders and deniers each appeal to evidence the other rejects as mistaken. When it comes to each side then evaluating the arguments as made and put forth by the other, the criteria by which their soundness is judged is based on a contrary standard. As the premises that inform each argument are unacceptable in the eyes of the other, so are the conclusions inferred from those premises rejected on similar grounds.

Thus as the debate consists of disagreement over the possibility of moral dilemmas, it consists as well of a deeper divergence over conceptions of moral reality. For if one's critics reject as spurious the evidence that supports one's position, their rejection is necessarily much more manifold than the denial of a particular claim. Not only is one's position rejected and the evidence one invokes to support it, but so also the reasons for which one thinks that evidence convincing. To the extent that this evidence and that which supports it are central to one's moral reality, the entirety of one's moral worldview is disputed by one's critics' assessments.

To better understand what is meant by this and just what it implies for the dilemmas debate, it will be useful to clarify just what is involved in having a moral worldview. As this is determined it will be possible to elaborate the worldviews of

deniers and defenders, and thus to properly situate their claims both in terms of themselves and each other. As this is done there will accordingly be reason to question the debate's ambitions, for as a clash of worldviews there cannot be expected verdicts of their truth and falsity. Suggested instead will be an alternative end more provisional than such bivalent judgment, one that proposes understanding through recognizing different worldviews and different moral commitments.

What is a Moral Worldview?

A moral worldview is an organized structure through which the world is conceptualized; it is the assembly of the data of one's moral experiences into a synthesized understanding. Its function as such is to provide (as it can) orientation towards the world, and to provide context to one's every experience by means of one's every other.

What this means is that a moral worldview is a scheme of interpretation. It is a way of understanding and experiencing the world given the way that one already does so. The point is that when one approaches the world one does not do so impartially, since one rather approaches it with certain expectations that are born from one's past experiences. These past experiences give rise to expectations because of the way we conceive them, for it is only by conceiving their interrelations that we are able to make any sense of them. To put this differently we can only explain our experiences in terms of each other, for in isolation they have no context by which they can be understood. We do not thus possess a medley of experiences that are meaningful individually, for only

when they are fitted together do they become for us something significant. When we explain then our experiences we are not just concerned that they be altogether consistent, for their coherence as well is essential to them having meaning they are devoid of alone.

The expectations we have of the world are thus caused by this manifold of experience, in the sense that how we anticipate finding the world is consonant with how we already understand it. These expectations are epistemic as well as they are psychological, since our expectations affect our experiences as we interpret our experiences in terms of them. We justify¹ new experiences, that is, in terms of those from our past, by focusing on the facets by which the new are complementary of the old. The result of this is that new experiences are incorporated into the manifold, since not only do they have context in the manifold they now constitute it themselves. Both old and new thereby express the same conceptual unity, as each becomes a frame of reference by which the other is to be understood.

Now what is important about this manifold is that its content is not common to everyone. Different people have different experiences and thus different conceptual unities; and even those with similar experiences can have differing world understandings, since the way those experiences are made to cohere can differ from person to person.² To

¹ Both understand and rationalize.

² The objection may be raised here that personal or distinct worldviews are impossible because in order for worldviews to be meaningful they must be expressed through public concepts. This objection is an application of Wittgenstein's private language argument. However, not only can it be claimed that experiences need not be fully expressible or publicly meaningful – that concepts need not entirely be adequate to experiences in order for us to experience them; it can also be claimed that whilst concepts are public they can nevertheless afford individual meaning. This is because people understand common concepts by means of their participation in unique sets of language games (and thus other concepts) which allow them to have and describe in particular situations experiences quite different from others'. In Wittgensteinian terms a worldview can thus be thought of as the frame of reference that links one's

give an analogy, two biologists over several years may examine the same set of specimens, and despite agreeing on the quantitative data find it evidence of different conclusions. The one may see the data as support of her belief in evolutionary theory, whilst the other might see the data as supporting creationism and the argument from design. Their antecedent world conceptions make them interpret the data conversely, and that data in turn corroborates the conceptions by means of which it is construed.³

Why, however, people see the world as they do they probably are not all that mindful, despite the fact they are likely deeply committed to their particular way of seeing it. Indeed, the very fact they interpret at all is likely to be of surprise to them, since the manner in which they do so probably strikes them as simply self-evident. But not only is it rare that a moral worldview is even somewhat abstractly articulated (it is after all “more often simply lived”⁴), it is questionable also the extent to which its full expression would even be possible. A moral worldview is not after all the result of conscious decision making but is due instead to “a multitude of factors [that] combine to develop...within us.”⁵ Tracing these factors is thus not just a matter of heeding what we deliberate, for just as important as what we deliberate is the logic by which we do so. Since though this logic is formatively present in our every experience and perception, any

language games by informing and giving context to each particular game, and which explains how shared public concepts can be held with different nuance by different people.

³ It can also be that the actual data people see differs according to perspective, as when different aspects of the world manifest given one’s worldview and what one deems relevant. Consider for example a sailor’s attention, versus that of an uninterested holiday-maker, to the direction of the wind off the ocean; or, more significantly, a musician’s sensitivity to the harmony of a symphony the subtleties of which a naïf cannot appreciate when even his attention is directed to them.

⁴ Walters, 77.

⁵ Markham, 2. These factors include such things as cultural values, personal experiences, temperamental biases, etc.

attempt to express our worldview will require its own invocation. A full explanation is consequently necessarily circular, and cannot be fully accessible to those who do not partake in the factors that comprise it. The world those factors create can only be known by the dynamic they weave, and so those not within that world are excluded from fully understanding it.

This does not thereby mean however that by being in a world one understands one's worldview as an interpretative scheme. One can quite easily navigate one's world without realizing the fact of its contingency, nor that the world would be differently depicted were one's worldview in any way different. This is because worldviews belong so intimately to the people who hold them, that it is difficult for them to be thought as contingent and not as straightforward description – the way after all the world appears is generally taken for the world as it is. What this means is people often do not realize their worldviews as portrayals, and so do not tend to dwell on the ways in which those portrayals are constructed. It furthermore means they do not tend to recognize contrary conceptions of the world, and do not consider how different worldviews can make different experiences possible. Now this is not to make the suggestion that their particular worldviews are deficient, for to say such a thing would require it to be held that a comprehensive worldview is possible.⁶ Rather it implies that any worldview enlightens

⁶ Deficiency after all could only be judged if there was a standard by which to make judgment. To say that a worldview is deficient because it sees some things rather than others, is to ignore the fact that some such things are mutually exclusive. Worldviews cannot be evaluated on the grounds of their correspondence with the world, since there is never an extra-worldview perspective by which to determine correspondence. This idea is elaborated below.

as well as conceals, and that as one is not aware of concealment one is neither aware of one's enlightenment.

This lack of appreciation results from not recognizing other worldviews, and thus from not seeing one's own worldview as the organizing structure it is.⁷ It results from a lack of "reflective scrutiny"⁸ regarding the way worldviews function, through failure to attend to the internal factors that both enable and constrain one's own outlook.

Concomitant with recognizing other worldviews though comes reflection on the nature of disagreement, since realizing different people hold different worldviews makes one aware of their possible conflict. This gives rise to distinction made between disagreement and arguing cross-purposes, since it gives one occasion to identify conditions that are necessary to people disagreeing.

As Renford Bambrough contends in his paper "Conflict and the Scope of Reason", in order for two people to disagree on an issue they must share "an extensive background of agreement." (83) This is because the issue they disagree on must be understood the same by each party, else the claim cannot be otherwise made that one asserts what the other denies. But since the meaning of a propositional belief is informed by its context of meaning, in order for there to be disagreement between people they must share an interpretative ground – the world must be interpreted similarly in order for the belief to be understood the same way.⁹ The denier's worldview and that of the asserter

⁷ To anticipate the third section of this chapter, worldviews that involve this lack of appreciation are characterized as 'closed'.

⁸ Walters, 84.

⁹ It may be helpful here to think of Wittgenstein's "if a lion could talk, we could not understand him." (*PI*, 223^c) Both Bambrough and Wittgenstein seem to make the same point that "we have to understand

must significantly thus coincide, so that through similar networks of belief and understanding they can commonly make sense of the contention. Those parts of their worldviews that do not coincide make them evaluate the proposition in question differently, and so it is made to cohere with the worldview of one but not the worldview of the other.

If on the contrary there is no consensus as to the substance of the issue being argued, then it cannot be claimed that the parties are arguing because they are in disagreement. The conflict instead can better be characterized as the parties arguing at cross-purposes, since “the content of the belief that one of them accepts [is not identified] with the content of the belief that the other rejects.”¹⁰ The parties mean something different when they make reference to their beliefs, and so even though they may use the same language they cannot be in disagreement.

Common sets of belief are thus the condition for inter-worldview dialogue, for when belief sets are not in common their conflicts cannot be resolved. Any conflict between them is argued to no avail, since parties argue past each other without engaging the other’s position. This implies it cannot be claimed that not sharing a belief set is wrong, for there is no objective standard by which to determine a ‘proper’ worldview. Such a standard would require that beliefs be judged by their world correspondence, but there is never a way of seeing the world free from all presuppositions. All worldviews

somebody before we can disagree or agree with him” (Bambrough, 81), and that this requires familiarity with the language games by which he makes sense of the world.

¹⁰ Bambrough, 84.

are always tempered by a personal and cultural heritage, and so we never have access to an absolute standard by which to adjudicate their conflict.

Because then “the modalities of truth and falsity have no role...in representing such conflicts,”¹¹ it is mistaken to say that any “worldview is sounder than [is] another.”¹² Apart from basic syllogistic error¹³ worldviews are equally sound, for considered within their respective contexts their premises are collectively justified. Judgment of soundness can only take place on standards a worldview accepts, and so appraising its claims from outside its context is unfair critique. What this means though if we are to avoid total relativism is that worldviews must be evaluated otherwise; if soundness cannot be a means of appraisal then some such other has to be found. Any such standard though could not be definitive because it could not be applied without bias, since as was claimed earlier worldviews cannot be fully understood by those who do not hold them. The standard could thus yield only tentative conclusions about the comparative worth of worldviews, but at least would provide a theoretical standard even if never a final valuation.

Any such standard would thus have to apply internally to the worldview evaluated – it would have to in other words evaluate the worldview in terms of that worldview’s own merits. What this precludes is the standard applying to any worldview claims in particular, since if it applies across worldviews it cannot be limited to specified content. All that remains to be evaluated of a worldview though if not its content must be its form,

¹¹ Wolgast, 114.

¹² Walters, 78.

¹³ Presuming common standards of logical inference.

and the suggestion as such is that worldviews are evaluated in terms of their organizing structure.

What is important then to evaluating a worldview are not its particular ideas, but the way in which and the extent to which those ideas are interrelated. For as ideas are interrelated they are experienced with greater intensity, and greater intensity of experience gives depth to the richness one finds in one's life.¹⁴ Now all worldviews are by definition comprised of interrelations, since it is after all only through interrelations that ideas can have any meaning. But the different sets of interrelations that make up different worldviews can differ isomorphically by the degree to which they cohere. Whereas one view's ideas might all be supported directly by its every which one, another's ideas might each be supported only directly by just a few others. The rest of course would still be supportive but only discursively so, as they would variously support those same few others but not directly the originals in question. Each worldview is thus somewhat coherent as their ideas altogether support each other, but is more coherent as each of its beliefs directly invokes every other.

Degree of coherence is a function as such of how readily each element of a worldview could evoke the rest of the system, and is significant to the richness of life because greater coherence affords greater insight. By increasing complexity of relations of ideas those ideas become multi-faceted, and the more multi-faceted an idea becomes the more ways there are of understanding it. As this is achieved with all one's ideas it

¹⁴ Note that the more ideas a worldview has the more interrelated they can be. This suggests that the broader a worldview's ambit, the greater its potential richness.

elaborates one's world conception, and so translates into an increasingly involved way by which one interprets the world. This has the effect of variously acquainting one with the possibilities for human experience, as it provides one with a miscellany of ways by which to make sense of the world.

What this means is "a worldview should be judged by its capacity to explain [the possibilities of] human experience."¹⁵ The more of life's possibilities it opens the richer it is as a worldview, and it is by this standard that worldviews can be judged to be better or worse than each other. Such judgment must always remain provisional however because it is always external, since one can never fully know another's worldview and the life possibilities it offers.¹⁶ Finally, it cannot be expected that the judgment that a worldview is not as rich as another, is likely to be accepted by the person who holds it since they probably will not understand it. If after all they know only their own worldview they will not understand its exclusions, and so will not understand how another worldview could offer more or different possibilities. (They are likely in fact to not recognize other worldviews nor know what is meant by 'richness'.)

Having given this overview of what a worldview is we are better now situated to understand the debate about the possibility of moral dilemmas. The debate is one

¹⁵ Markham, 3.

¹⁶ It should be noted that a richer worldview does not necessarily offer the same possibilities as a poorer one but just more. Remember after all that worldviews enlighten the world as well as conceal it ("a perspective will open some choices and close others" – Wolgast, 111), and so although a poorer worldview does not offer as many possibilities, it may nonetheless offer different possibilities than another that happens to be richer. This also means there can be no such thing as a comprehensive worldview, since some possibilities are mutually exclusive. (Moral purity and moral tragedy, which will be seen in the next section, serve as an example.)

between different worldviews and differing world conceptions, and so there cannot be expected resolution in the manner the literature seems to suppose. A more sensible method would see each position as resulting from different presumptions, and urge instead of the abandonment of presumptions the awareness of those which are different.

The Dilemmas Debate Revisited

The analysis of the debate in the first two chapters characterized its two sides as divided over the issue of whether or not moral obligations have to be practicable. It was suggested that deniers of dilemmas limit obligation to the conclusions of moral deliberation, whereas defenders believe moral value and responsibility are not limited to what is required all-things-considered. This divide results in each side rejecting the other side's position as untenable, as either not thought through critically enough or not sensitive to what situations demand. But what this suggests is the debate is not so much a disagreement as an argument cross-purposes, since it seems there is not the requisite context shared for there to be disagreement: there is no consensus as to what is required in order to resolve the debate, and each side appeals to different evidence the other will not recognize as relevant.

The suggestion is thus that what one thinks of practicability is a norm that structures worldviews, that one's thoughts on this issue determine the manner in which one interprets the world. The world is thus seen and experienced commensurately with what this norm dictates is possible, and those experiences in turn are taken to substantiate what one thinks of practicability. But more than this our analysis of worldviews suggests

that these experiences corroborate other of one's norms since one thinks what one does of practicability in part because of other presumptions. One's position on practicability is just one element in one's scheme of interpretation, and the position one takes on it will be functionally related to one's positions on other divisive issues.

What this means is that the divergence of deniers and defenders with regards to the issue of practicability is part and parcel of a deeper divergence between more general philosophical methodologies. As a group deniers approach moral thinking with a consortium of related ideas, that differs collectively from those of defenders as they approach moral thinking themselves. These each result in a depiction of moral reality that configures what is thought morally possible, and which determines and constrains the manner in which each party considers the other.

In our task then to understand how deniers and defenders truly differ from each other we have to consider their consortia of ideas and not just their take on practicability. For whilst practicability is a divisive issue it cannot be considered alone, for it is merely one of a number of associated positions that depend on each other for support. Since furthermore these positions are relevant to our inquiry in terms of their association, the best way by which to understand the divergence is by determining a 'theme' of each consortium. A theme is a way of relating ideas by means of a primary presumption, in order to bring together certain elements of those ideas to form a general understanding. It results as such from a heuristic inquiry to posit what associates ideas, in the hopes that what it suggests as their theme will suitably render their moral reality. The advantage to this method is we can understand positions without having to identify all their

presumptions, since the theme is a characterization of those presumptions and they should be deducible from it. This consequently means that deniers and defenders will be typecast by way of their theme, but though the theme may not always completely be adequate to any particular individual, it indicates nonetheless what I consider to be the fundamental schism that separates worldviews.

What I propose is that the theme of the divergence between deniers and defenders of moral dilemmas is their conflicting attitudes as to whether or not moral purity is a life possibility. By this I mean they conflict over whether moral perfection is an attainable ideal, in the sense of being able to live one's life without ever having to commit moral wrong. Deniers believe this exists as a possibility whilst defenders believe it does not, and this I claim broadly encapsulates the differences between their worldviews. Other such differences as the role claimed for reason and the practicability of moral obligation are all captured in this general position and can be seen as developing out of it.¹⁷

Important to understanding moral purity as an ideal though is seeing it in opposition to the anti-ideal that defenders maintain of moral tragedy. This is because it is important to emphasize that these ideals are mutually exclusive: those who think moral purity is possible reject the possibility of moral tragedy, whilst those who think moral tragedy is possible reject the possibility of moral purity. It is not then possible to believe in both the possibility of purity and tragedy, since purity and tragedy concern not what actually happens in a life but rather what can be called guarantees. For whereas deniers

¹⁷ It should be noted that commitments to purity or tragedy are not epistemically foundational. Worldviews are coherentist and so ideas are developed and justified in terms of each other. The themes of purity and tragedy as such are not the only way of understanding these worldviews, but do provide a useful heuristic by which to make them accessible.

believe in the guarantee that it is possible to live life without wrongdoing, this same possibility is not guaranteed the person who believes in dilemmas. Wrongdoing for the defender is not always something he considers himself capable of avoiding, even when that wrongdoing cannot be traced to his own previous transgressions: his avoidance of wrongdoing is a matter of contingency as much as it is one of prudence, for it concerns not just what one is able to control but also that which one is not.¹⁸

What this suggests then is that the issue of purity and tragedy relates to the question of moral autonomy. It suggests that deniers and defenders diverge by how they believe moral integrity is determined. For whereas deniers believe it (theoretically) within their control to always (and only) do what is right, defenders believe themselves morally vulnerable to contingencies they have no command over. Deniers thus understand their moral status¹⁹ as fully determined by themselves; they do not think themselves morally subject to anything that affects them externally. Any moral guilt is thus the result of their own moral failings or incompetence, since nothing else can be considered responsible for their commission of any wrongdoing. What this hence intimates is deniers see the moral self as a haven secure from the world. Whereas everything else about one can be attributed in part to the tides of fortune, the moral self is

¹⁸ Note this allows for the possibility that a defender of dilemmas can believe she has lived a life free of all moral wrongdoing. Moral tragedy refers after all to the absence of moral guarantee; it does not suggest that every life faces inescapable wrongdoing. Although most defenders believe wrongdoing is unavoidable in a fully lived life (for most of them because the plurality of goods in life inevitably conflict – see Nussbaum for instance, FG p. 5 ff., esp. 7), some may believe that with incredible fortune one can avoid conflicting obligations (this is the task Marcus sets us.) Note however the difference between this and being able to evade dilemmas solely through guile – there is great difference between a defender of this sort and a denier of moral dilemmas.

¹⁹ By ‘moral status’ is meant one’s either being morally tainted through some (any) wrongdoing, or not. To control one’s moral status is to be in the position of being fully causally responsible for one’s wrongdoing.

impervious to the world and is the bastion of personal identity. The moral self is one's true self since it is solely one's own self-creation, both in the sense that nothing else determines it and it is the only thing one fully determines.

Defenders thus differ in the sense that they see themselves morally continuous with the world – there is nothing that is part of them that exists independently of what the world can have effect on. The moral self does not exist consequently as something transcending the world, since the world can conspire to create situations in which control of our moral destiny escapes us. We are susceptible morally to the vicissitudes of life as much as we are susceptible to them otherwise, and we cannot as such depend on the moral self as preserve of an internal goodness.²⁰

That these basic presumptions about autonomy and identity underlie the worldviews of deniers and defenders can be seen by reviewing the actual positions considered in the opening two chapters. The general approaches taken by each side and the particular positions that are claimed, express the themes of purity and tragedy I claim differentiate worldviews. As this is demonstrated the case will be established that the dilemmas debate is irresolvable, since the debate will have been shown to not be a disagreement but rather an argument at cross-purposes.

In order for deniers to control their moral status as something that is theirs to determine, it must be the case that their moral evaluatum is fully within their control.

²⁰ It might be claimed against this position that goodness may be preserved if one responds to moral tragedy appropriately, by feeling regret or making reparations for instance. But this is not to avoid moral wrongdoing but rather to try to make up for it. Regret or reparations would not be necessary after all if wrongdoing had not occurred.

This is played out by deniers believing it is how they use their moral faculties that is relevant to wrongdoing. Their moral faculties belong only to them and it is only up to them how they use them,²¹ and it must be the case that proper use of these faculties can determine and accomplish right courses of action. This is because if right action were something impossible for them to determine, who and what they morally are would not be of their own making; they would be held responsible for not performing those actions which are morally required, and the moral self would be thereby (partially) forfeited to external world forces. Right actions as such must be discernible by one's faculties and must be singularly right, in the sense that in their being right they cannot also be partially wrong. If actions could be both right and wrong as in a case of inescapable wrongdoing (wherein an action both is right and wrong as the least or equal wrong of all wrong options), then once again one's moral status would not be one's own to determine.

This general scheme is most manifestly seen in the work of R.M. Hare. As was seen earlier, Hare believes there are singularly right answers to all moral situations that can be determined by critical thinking. These are those actions that maximize goodness and minimize harm as determined on a contractarian model. To the extent then we are unable to determine these actions it is because we are insufficiently critical: we either depend on intuitive thinking or we are not adequately rationally reflective. This is because of the "human weaknesses" we have in contrast to the archangel, our limitations of thought and knowledge and our partiality to self. But since we are able to overcome

²¹ This means not only that these faculties are inherent but that they function independently of the world; for although it is true that they apply to the world, how they operate is not conditional on it.

these weaknesses through successful critical thinking, our failure in determining morally right action cannot be considered inevitable. What this thus means is any wrongdoing is due to moral incompetence, since we have the capacity to determine right action but fail in the exercise of our faculties.

The result of this is that we are wholly morally appraisable by the success of our critical thinking. Our moral faculties are fundamentally capable of determining what morality requires, since critical thinking has *in potentia* the answers to all moral questions. Though a particular person may currently not be able to answer a particular question, that answer is embryonic within them given their capacity for critical thought.²² The determination of one's moral destiny is essentially then an individual matter, since who and what one morally is, ultimately is due to oneself. Right answers exist to which we have access through properly critically thinking, and so it cannot be we can be morally responsible for something we could not have avoided. One's moral integrity is not as such affected by anything external to oneself, and so it is that the moral self can be an entity independent in the world.

A similar state of affairs can be seen in both the positions of Hill and McConnell. Like Hare each believes there exists a right answer to every moral question that confronts us, one that is rationally determinable and singularly right since rationality does not tolerate inconsistency. By claiming this each of them promises it is possible to live one's life morally purely, since there exists the possibility right from the beginning of never

²² Recall in the section on Hare's position how "as critical thinking is more and more successful conflict is gradually eliminated." (p. 16)

committing moral wrong. Actually doing this may of course be highly unlikely but likelihood is not what is important. What is rather important is the logical possibility and its significance for moral identity. For since it entails one is morally culpable for solely one's moral decisions, it also entails one's moral status is determined entirely self-sufficiently. The moral self can consequently be seen as something discrete in the world, something that necessarily responds to the world but not something that is made in its image.

McConnell and Hill do differ however over the issue of induced dilemmas. Whereas McConnell believes it is possible through transgression to be faced with inescapable wrongdoing, Hill believes there is always available a morally permissible action. Thus whereas for McConnell one can be morally admonished for breaking one of two incompatible promises, for Hill in such cases moral principles can guide one to a choice that does not incur further wrongdoing (even if the recommended action under any other circumstance would morally be deemed unacceptable). What this indicates are the different extents to which the two define morality through reason. For whilst it is true that both of them believe right answers are determinable by reason, Hill believes moral and rational action are identified regardless of situation, whereas McConnell thinks moral action is that which is rational optimally speaking.

What this distinction helps to reveal is a further dimension of moral self-determination. This is because one of the aspects that characterizes reason is its inviolability to contingency: its canons are thought true independent of the world and to exist as an absolute standard, and its conclusions as such are considered dependable and

to be universally verifiable. What this means is that as morality is rationally understood it is taken to be inviolable also: the dependability of rationality is transferred to morality, and so the integrity of one's moral conclusions is thought impervious to happenstance. Hill's identification as such of moral and rational action, means that even if in the past one has made an irrational decision, one's rational decisions subsequent to that moment are nonetheless morally inviolable. For McConnell in contrast those subsequent decisions can lack inviolability, since the irrational decision has upset what is optimal and the morality of those choices can be compromised.

Now whereas this transfer of inviolability from reason to morality applies also to Hare, it does not also apply to Ross since Ross is an intuitionist. Ross nonetheless claims though there objectively exist singularly right answers to all moral problems, since morally right actions are those that achieve greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness over wrongness. Now although it is true that actual duties are not self-evident as those *prima facie*, with experience and judgment Ross says that we are better able to know what is morally obligatory. He acknowledges that we cannot always be certain which actions in fact are required, but believes over time we become more authoritative in determining our actual duties. What this means is our moral status is a function of how good is our judgment: our failure in determining right action is due to incompetence in the use of our faculties. This is because it is possible with sufficient experience and insight to avoid wrongdoing, even if those levels of sufficiency are such that they are rarely if ever achieved. So long as we have the theoretic ability to determine right and wrong action (which is necessary if ever we are to hold others accountable even considering actions

retrospectively), our moral self is in our control and we ultimately are morally self-governing. The basic moral beliefs we thus have which Ross says must inform moral theory, are informed by the fundamental conviction that the moral self is morally autonomous.

The theme of moral purity helps also to explain the true function of *prima facie* duties. A number of questions were raised about them earlier and moral purity can elaborate their answers. It was questioned for instance why one's duty to keep a promise should be contingent on one's duty not to hurt someone. Why, it was asked, if a promise is overridden by another *prima facie* duty should the moral situation be as if that promise had never been made? And how, if *prima facie* duties entail no actual obligation, can it be that our actual obligations are those that have greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness over *prima facie* wrongness? This is related to a third question, which is if there is a *prima facie* duty to maximize intrinsic goodness and to minimize intrinsic badness, how can the intrinsic badness of an action that informs a *prima facie* duty against that course of action be discharged by the judgment that on the whole that action ought nevertheless be pursued? To each of these questions the answer was given that *prima facie* duties have to operate in this way if moral conflict is to be avoided. Avoiding moral conflict is so important to Ross that he would rather face these internal difficulties – to which he does not really give any answer – than admit the possibility of conflict. As he says, “loyalty to the facts is worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplicity.”

Now whereas before this “loyalty to the facts” might have seemed rather a feeble rationalization, we are now in a better position to see what may be the facts to which Ross is so loyal. The reason I suggest that Ross is so adamant about the ‘fact’ of the impossibility of conflict, is because of a deeper perhaps unrecognized commitment to the ontological possibility of moral purity. This I suggest is the true motivation behind his conception of *prima facie* duties, for it allows him to avoid conflicting obligations which can result in moral remainders. Moral remainders upset moral self-determination by limiting moral autonomy, since they do not allow one to always determine whether one does right or wrong. Moral integrity is thus made susceptible to factors external to oneself, and rejection of this is what I suggest inspires Ross’s position.

What thus is revealed of each of these positions is an underlying commitment to moral purity.²³ In each it can be seen that the worldview is structured by what this commitment makes possible. This commitment of course need not be recognized by adherents in order to be effective, for it stands instead as a characterization of the deep motivations of deniers. What we thus see in each of these positions is the basic conviction of our moral autonomy. The external world can never affect us by compromising our moral integrity, since what we are morally is solely a matter of how we have determined ourselves. Our moral self is taken to be that which we primordially are, since everything else about us is susceptible to externalities. What we know and value for instance can be claimed to be world-contingent, since we know what we know

²³ Thomson is not discussed because her rejection of dilemmas is by assertion rather than argument. Her commitment to moral purity can be seen however in her frank admission that she cannot see how moral dilemmas could be possible.

and value what we value because of particular histories. Had those histories been different at all, so would our knowledge and values. But what we are morally is not so contingent according to what deniers insinuate, since moral purity is an attainable possibility that cuts through historical lines. Actual decisions differ of course from one person's history to another, but since right answers exist ubiquitously a pure life is a possibility for everyone. (Were one's history different for instance one would merely have to determine different right answers.) One's moral status is thus world independent since it is not affected by histories, for although different people may face different decisions right- and wrongdoing is up to discretion.

The questions that were raised then of each of the deniers as to why rational consistency is presumed a requirement in the resolution of moral problems, can now be answered in terms of the logical requirements of the ideal of moral purity. Quite simply, only by maintaining the requirement of consistency can the ideal of moral purity be possible. Without rational consistency there can be no assurance there are singularly right answers to all moral problems, and so it could be that doing right action requires also that one do wrong. This would then undermine our ability to be in control of our moral integrity since ultimately it would not always be up to us as to whether or not we do wrong.

This requirement of consistency has furthermore been implemented into systems of deontic logic, as can be seen in the logic's joint mandate of the principles of agglomeration and *ought implies can*, as well as the interpretation of principle (PC) that

totalizes permissibility and obligation.²⁴ It should not then be surprising that appeals to deontic logic reject moral dilemmas as impossible, since deontic logic was formulated by people whose views are structured by purity. The logic as it stands is thus only convincing to the degree that one shares this presumption, and so it is that defenders claim dilemmas in spite of the accepted logic to the contrary.

What remains now to be seen is how moral tragedy or the rejection of moral purity is evident in the particular positions of defenders. This essentially revolves around how they dismiss the requirement of deniers of singularly right answers to all moral problems. For singularly right answers are a necessary condition for the possibility of moral purity,²⁵ and rejection of this condition is tantamount to embracing the contrary theme of moral tragedy. First though a review of what is involved in the conception of moral tragedy.

As has been seen, whereas deniers believe the moral self must be transcendent in order for purity to be possible, defenders on the contrary believe the moral self to be ontologically continuous with the world. There is nothing they say that is part of them that is also apart from the world, and so they are morally susceptible to contingencies they do not have any control over. Defenders do not thus require the guarantee of rational consistency in their answers to moral problems, since their conception of moral identity precludes the logical possibility of purity. To put this in other words, being

²⁴ Refer back to McConnell.

²⁵ This along with a means of determining them makes for a sufficient set.

morally continuous with the world means purity is not guaranteed, and so there does not have to be as with deniers requirement of rational consistency. Defenders might be tempted by consistency since they may think it makes moral life easier,²⁶ but they are unable to countenance it since they do not think morally they are ontologically discrete in the world. Because then defenders have no reason to believe in singularly right answers to moral problems, nor do they have any reason to believe best actions are exempted from wrongdoing. For without guarantee of singularly right answers moral remainders cannot be precluded, and so it can be that overall best actions can nonetheless involve doing wrong.

For defenders as such one's moral status is not to be thought fully within one's control, since sometimes the obstacles to performing right action do not just impede one internally (as weakness of will or thought, for instance). Instead it can be so that external factors undermine one's moral integrity, since sometimes one can be faced with situations in which no available action is faultless. What this entails is one's moral identity is partially defined by the world, that what one is morally is due to the world and not just one's moral decisions. The defender accordingly does not conceive the moral self as in any way transcendent, and as such is dismissive of the notion one's moral self is one's true self unadulterated by the world. Thus unlike the denier who believes there can be moral integrity regardless of one's personal history, the defender believes particular

²⁶ Note that not all defenders would be so inclined: Marcus might be but Nussbaum would not since it would undermine a true source of knowledge. Note also that deniers would disagree that consistency makes the moral life easier. McConnell for instance is adamant about this when he responds to E.J. Lemmon by saying "some of the difficult aspects of the moral life can be accounted for only if we assume that there are no genuine moral dilemmas." (170)

histories can be integral in determining an individual's moral status. For whereas one person may morally be compromised by a situation they have no control over (consider for instance Agamemnon), another may not be faced with that situation and may thereby preserve their integrity.

One's moral integrity is not just a matter then of how proficient are one's moral capacities, for it also involves an element of luck in avoiding inescapable wrongdoing.²⁷ Even however when one avoids such wrongdoing this is not just due to oneself, for external forces are also responsible for one's not being faced with dilemma. The moral self is as a result fundamentally vulnerable to the world, and though it may be somewhat protected through prudent avoidance of wrongdoing,²⁸ this prudence can only be limitedly effective in anticipating the happenings of the world.

We see this borne out in Williams, for instance, since his rejection of the epistemic model of moral conflict can be construed as rejection of the possibility of moral purity. This is because on the epistemic model moral conflicts can only be tentative, since with enough information and insight all but one of those obligations in conflict will be discredited. Furthermore, just as epistemic beliefs cannot be partially both right and wrong, neither on the epistemic model can moral actions be both right and wrong. What this means is that according to the epistemic model morally right actions must be

²⁷ The role of moral luck in moral evaluation is a prominent question in contemporary meta-ethics. The question is essentially whether moral status is a matter solely of moral desert. Discussion of the question began in earnest following papers on the topic by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, both entitled *Moral Luck* and published in 1976.

²⁸ Note that this is one of the primary tasks with which Marcus charges us morally. Through the lens of moral tragedy, however, she can be seen by mitigating our vulnerability to contingency to be trying to secure our moral autonomy. See the next paragraph but one in order to put this in context.

singularly right: there can only be one right course of action in a moral situation and that action cannot also be wrong. By thus rejecting the epistemic model and patterning moral obligation instead on desire, Williams is rejecting singularly right answers which are logically necessary to moral purity. For on the desire model there is no guarantee that obligations will not come in conflict, and so is opened the possibility of being required to do actions that involve doing wrong. By favouring the desire model Williams dismisses one's moral destiny as solely one's own to determine, since he accepts the possibility that one's moral status can be determined by other than oneself. One can find oneself in situations wherein wrong action cannot be avoided, and so it is that the moral self cannot be transcendent of the world.

We see something similar to this in Marcus' rejection of a games model standard of consistency. This is the standard that requires that moral rules apply without conflict in all actual or possible cases – essentially the standard of rational consistency embraced by all five deniers. But Marcus says this standard is inappropriate since all that is important is consistency amongst rules; there need only be consistency in some possible world, there need not be consistency in every possible world. Contingent conflict of moral rules does not thus count as inconsistency for Marcus and bears no theoretical concern. She thereby rules out moral purity as a possibility and assumes instead moral tragedy, since the new standard of consistency she suggests cannot logically guarantee the avoidance of all wrongdoing. In some if not most worlds ('histories') moral rules will conflict and moral remainders will be inescapable, and so it will be that moral wrongdoing will not always be one's own to decide. It may of course be that in other

actual worlds wrongdoing may never occur, but this will take place not just through prudence but through a combination of this and good fortune. Although Marcus then ultimately charges us with the task of avoiding contingent moral conflict, the success of this is never assured since the world is never fully foreseeable. We are always vulnerable to the circumstances of the world and so never have full moral autonomy, and no matter how much we may try to secure this by trying to avoid moral conflict, we ultimately are in continuity with the world and subject to its devices.

Moral tragedy as a theme is also formative of Gowans' position. Gowans suggests that moral responsibility is due to intrinsic and irreplaceable value, and that we as such have moral obligations to individuals in their particularity. There can be however no guarantee that our obligations will not come into conflict, and no reason he says why when they do any one should be effaced by any other. But what this results in is an explicit rejection of a necessary condition of moral purity: there can be no guarantee of singularly right answers to whatever moral problems may arise. Our ability to perform right actions and not to commit any wrong, is consequently dependent on other factors than our capacities and our intentions. Our moral status is not as such dependably ours to determine, since we are morally vulnerable to situations we may find ourselves in and not as such morally transcendent.

In Nussbaum's case the presumptions of tragedy are not held as implicitly as in others, for she recognizes that inconsistency concerns "a structural feature of human life." (GA 117) She also suggests that the experience of suffering entails a personal enlightenment, and when referencing Pindar says the dilemma of our existence is "the

thorough intermingling of what is ours and what belongs to the world, of ambition and vulnerability, of making and being made.” (FG 2) She thus is aware of how questions of moral autonomy and identity are fundamental to tragedy, and consequently finds tragic answers to these questions in her manner of interpreting Aeschylus.²⁹ For whereas other interpreters look to make the conflicts of Agamemnon and Eteocles reconcilable, Nussbaum reads the Chorus of each play as claiming the conflicts are insoluble. Her reading of each play is consequently revealing of her rejection of moral purity, since she accepts the possibility of situations in which wrongdoing cannot be avoided. She rejects the notion of singularly right answers and thereby asserts moral tragedy.

The difference thus between Nussbaum and the others is that whereas with the others the presumptions of tragedy are implicit in their work, Nussbaum is aware how the position she takes is informed by and affects other commitments. She still of course faces the problems of the previous chapter regarding not recognizing her own partiality, for she still does not acknowledge her position as a worldview that others have reason to reject. Her appeal for instance to the enlightenment of suffering as reason to embrace her position, could well be countered by another appealing to the experience of moral invulnerability.³⁰ She does not fully recognize that different commitments make different experiences possible, and so does not seem to appreciate that proof in philosophy is always relative to the conditions of the possibility of inquiry.

²⁹ Refer back to the section on Nussbaum in chapter 2.

³⁰ Consider for instance the experiences of mystics who claim to be morally transcendent.

Having considered the themes of purity and tragedy as seen in the worldviews of deniers and defenders, it now seems clear the dilemmas debate concerns much more than what the literature gives voice to. Each position is after all more than just a position on the possibility of dilemmas: it is a position also on autonomy and identity and what is morally possible in life. To question another's response to dilemmas thus requires that one engage these commitments, and that one engage them in such a way that appreciates their interconnectedness. One cannot as such discredit another by simply rejecting their logic or phenomenology (as is supposed in the literature), since the logic they use and the experiences they have are due to other of their philosophical commitments. Criticism can only take place within the context of justification, and one cannot as such criticize a part in isolation from the whole it belongs to.

What this entails is that deniers and defenders have different frames of reference by which they determine the possibility of moral dilemmas – each appeals to contrary commitments for evidence for or against them. There thus is absent from the dilemmas debate “an extensive background of agreement,” and there lacks as such consensus as to what is required to settle the dispute. Without this consensus there can be no expectation the dispute is capable of resolution, and so it is that deniers and defenders are ultimately arguing cross-purposes.

If resolution of the question of moral dilemmas is thus not a viable goal, since each worldview “within its own context is just as good as the next,”³¹ it seems that the best course of action for each party is to try to understand why this is so. This would

³¹ Walters, 79.

involve recognition of other worldviews that differ on this issue from one's own, and trying through this to better understand why one holds the position one does. One would then be left with the final persuasion of "*getting [others] to see, [of] showing one's opponent another picture with things differently related and with different emphases.*"³²

The next section considers how viable is this project for each of deniers and defenders, by means of a distinction that characterizes worldviews in terms of being open or closed.

Open and Closed Worldviews³³

The difference between open and closed worldviews is in how they accommodate dissension. Each are ways of understanding the world through a coherent weaving of ideas and experience, but those that are thought to be totalizing of the world are closed as opposed to open. An open worldview is thus a worldview that is recognized as being an interpretation of the world, and is not presumed as the only way by which there can be world comprehension. Instead it allows for different worldviews and the different insights and experiences they offer, since it sees the world as fundamentally irreducible and resistant to singular formulations. It thus tries but does not expect to entirely be comprehensive, and as such is open to inter-worldview dialogue in the hopes of enriching its ambit.

³² Wolgast, 110 (emphasis in original).

³³ The distinction between open and closed worldviews is taken from Ian S. Markham. See his "World Perspectives and Arguments" for an analysis of the 'faith' and 'reason' relationship in which he employs this distinction.

A closed worldview on the contrary is considered to be completely adequate to the world. It is presumed to have captured everything of relevance and to be sufficient to every experience. It offers definite answers to questions or at least definite avenues of inquiry, and nothing about it is tentative at all since there is nothing that escapes its capacities. A closed worldview does not as such tolerate any opposition, since there is nothing that an alternative worldview could add to what it already provides. It is not as such reflective of itself as solely an interpretation, and so is oblivious to the manner in which its positions are a coherentist construction.

By being so oblivious though and not recognizing worldviews, a closed worldview has to be able to dismiss dissension in terms of itself. It has to in other words within its frame of reference provide an explanation for claims that oppose it. This involves not just the rejection of claims that oppose it as wrong, but the rejection of those claims in such a way that its own position is corroborated. As an example of this consider the totalizing worldview of a dogmatic Calvinist. This person believes that human beings are so sinful they can be ‘saved’ only by divine grace. Anybody who disagrees only does so because they are sinful, and when (if) they experience grace they will realize the err of their ways. The Calvinist worldview thus provides rejoinder to any opposing worldview, by means of a mechanism internal to it that reinforces its ubiquitous application.³⁴

When worldviews conflict then there is greatest chance of progress (in terms of furthered understanding) when the worldviews in conflict are both open. Each is willing

³⁴ This example of the dogmatic Calvinist is taken from Walters, 85-86.

to assume that the other has insight and knowledge to share, and inter-worldview dialogue becomes as such a genuine possibility. When on the other hand the worldviews are closed, dialogue becomes impossible. Each dismisses the claims of the other in a way that bolsters their own, and so although each side may listen to the other neither in fact can be heard. When last of all the clash is between an open worldview and a closed worldview, the closed interprets the interest of the open as evidence that conversion is possible, and the open is puzzled by the lack of understanding and willingness of the closed to hear.

Reverting back to the earlier discussion of evaluating different worldviews, open worldviews are more likely to be richer since they are open to more possibilities. There is greater admission of diversity of experience since they see themselves never complete, and are always willing to expand their conception of genuine life possibilities. Although it may be that a closed worldview admits a broad range of experiences, it nonetheless sees their potential myopically since it is ignorant as to why it admits them. It does not see itself as a worldview nor anything else that opposes it, and is thereby limited to what it already accepts and rejects everything else that is extraneous.

When considering the worldviews of deniers and defenders in terms of this distinction of openness, it seems quite apparent the worldviews of deniers are best characterized as closed. Not only do they not recognize other worldviews, they rationalize objections made from other worldviews in terms that validate their own. Consider for example the claim made by Hare regarding intuitive and critical thinking. If someone disagrees with Hare as to the possibility of moral dilemmas, his response is that

they are only operating at the level of intuitive thinking, and should they reflect and become more critical they would realize dilemmas are impossible. By saying this Hare follows the same pattern as the Calvinist in that he cannot acknowledge another worldview that has reason to make claims in opposition to his own. With regard to this issue of moral dilemmas and all it directly involves, his worldview is closed, he is impervious to dissent, and he is unaware of his own view as interpretative.

The same story is told in terms of rational consistency of McConnell and Hill and Thomson. By rejecting the requirements of rational consistency each charges defenders with irrationality. This excuses them from having to consider different worldviews' conception of rationality, since it just is not true that defenders reject reason since they rather just reject its omnicompetence.³⁵ (Defenders after all do believe in reason since moral dilemmas are a conflict of reasons.) By solely understanding rationality as they do though and rejecting any other as irrational, deniers demonstrate the closure of their worldview to anything that might challenge their claims. They consider their own view entirely adequate to understanding the world in its entirety, and so have no reason to accept any other as offering them insights they lack.

Ross, too, is able to make sense of defenders' opposition internally. People who think there are moral dilemmas are confused about *prima facie* duties. They do not realize they have no claim and do not engender obligation. There is nothing thus foreign in the claims of defenders that Ross is unable to make sense of, and so he is able to explain their objections in terms that support his position.

³⁵ Mooney, 74.

Defenders similarly have closed worldviews in that they consider their views comprehensive. They do not believe contrary claims are viable nor think that they offer real insight. But unlike deniers they have greater potential to be open to other worldviews, since they know how norms can structure positions and are thus situated to see worldviews as interpretative. They do not yet see positions in context nor norms as justified by worldviews, but more likely than deniers can make the connection that what they know does not exhaust what is possible.

We see this for instance when Williams and Marcus see epistemic and consistency norms structuring the position of those who deny moral dilemmas. They have the opportunity to discover that these norms are held because of other philosophical commitments, but critique them out of context and subsequently rationalize deniers' objections without considering their perspective. They do not consider the norms they critique to be defensible on a different worldview, but rather simply reject them as wrong and in need of being replaced. There is nothing as such that deniers can offer that Williams and Marcus see value in accepting since they see what they know as already adequate to satisfactorily understanding the world.

In the same sort of way Nussbaum is positioned to see her worldview as non-inclusive. She recognizes the structure of her own worldview and would thus seem able to understand the structures of others'. But despite this she does not seem to appreciate worldviews as the interpretative schemes that they are, since she does not think that deniers have any legitimate experiences to share. She thus is closed to seeing her view as

only partially revealing of the world, and to the viability of the insights of deniers' given the different norms that inform them.

Gowans' position is similar to Nussbaum's in that he too sees worldviews as structured. It further is similar because he does not consider that others can enrich his understanding. Although he thus has the potential to be open since he recognizes other worldviews, he sees these other worldviews as mistaken and not as unto themselves viable. What this means is he is closed to other worldviews offering him insight into moral possibility, since he rejects as inappropriate their commitment to norms of moral reasoning that differ from his own. This results in him rather than considering different worldviews as differently enlightening, pitting his position against the position of others on threat of its total dismissal. He cannot accept worldviews contrary to his own as offering sound interpretations, since he does not consider that different worldviews can create genuinely different moral possibilities.³⁶

This all suggests that although the future of the debate must be in the sharing of worldviews not the arguing of them, the prospects of this are not all that promising considering the debate's current tenor. Deniers especially do not seem prepared to recognize worldviews of defenders, since they do not even recognize their own worldviews as coherentist interpretations of the world. Without there being

³⁶ To explain what might be thought a tension between this claim and a claim made in chapter two (p. 56): even though it was said Gowans thinks his claims are unlikely to convince his "rationalist opponents," he does not think their persuasiveness is limited because of these other claims' viability. He recognizes they have support in terms of normative commitments, but unlike on an open worldview thinks these commitments are ultimately indefensible. (He does not, in other words, accept the contingency of his own position. See chapter four for the development of this idea.)

acknowledgement of this there can be no possibility of recognizing other interpretations, and so the project of inter-worldview dialogue is disrupted before it begins. Defenders on the other hand are better positioned to understand what is actually involved in the debate, but do not take the opportunity of their position to learn from other worldviews. Although their ability to articulate their claims depends on them engaging the norms of deniers, they do not take the further step of considering those norms' justification. This results in them critiquing those norms from without their context of meaning, and just like deniers closing themselves to enrichment of their world understanding.

Conclusion

In thus considering the debate about whether or not moral dilemmas are possible, in the final analysis the conclusion is reached that the debate must remain inconclusive. This is not however because we do not know what conditions would constitute an answer, but rather because the question is unanswerable when not directed to particular persons. The possibility of dilemmas is not after all a function of the nature of the world, but a function of how we relate to the world and how we understand ourselves morally. This is the reason deniers and defenders can be faced with same situations, and determine for what they are morally responsible so differently from one another: their moral conceptions of the world and themselves make them experience moral conflict conversely, and so it can be that dilemmas are possible for defenders but not for deniers.

What this entails is the claim made occasionally that deniers are logicians and defenders are phenomenologists and that this is the real difference between them,¹ is a misrepresentation of the more complex positions the two parties in actual fact hold. For it is not so much that deniers accept logic and defenders accept phenomenology, as that deniers and defenders accept different logics and different phenomenologies. In a moral conflict it is not thus the case that deniers forego their experience, for the experience they attend to is just qualitatively different from the experience that is had by defenders. Similarly so defenders of dilemmas do not ignore logical claims, for they appeal to a logic that supports their experiences in the same way the logic of defenders does this.

¹ Consider for instance Jurrian de Haan, "The Definition of Moral Dilemmas: A Logical Problem", John Holbo, "Moral Dilemmas and the Logic of Obligation", and Christopher Gowans.

Any suggestion the situation is otherwise merely reveals conceptual bias, presumptions as to what is an acceptable logic and what an acceptable phenomenology.

What emerges from the analysis of the last three chapters is thus the suggestion that whether or not one thinks moral dilemmas are possible is ultimately an existential issue. This is because one's position on this matter is the expression of meta-ethical commitments in moral logic and moral epistemology, and as such is symptomatic of what one believes to be true of moral existence. Not only though is one's position existential in the sense of being personally definitive, it further is so in the sense that it lacks foundational justification. One's justification of the position one holds is based upon circular reasoning, since the evidence appealed to is only acceptable to those who accept what concludes from it.² Fully understanding one's position requires thus recognizing its fundamental groundlessness, and consequently realizing what one thinks of moral existence is effectively based on contingency. (With a different cultural and personal heritage one's meta-ethical commitments could have been different.)

With this as the case though the question arises as to how one should maintain one's position. If after all one has an open worldview and realizes the possibility of both purity and tragedy, how can one continue to live one's life defined by the one or the other?³ How in other words can one realize the contingency of one's position and yet nonetheless support it?

² As in appeals to classically formulated deontic logic, for instance.

³ Note that it could be claimed by compatibilists that this is a false dichotomy, since the compatibilist believes that actions can be free even when not solely determined by oneself. In other words, the compatibilist might hold the ideal of moral purity and yet not require that the moral self be transcendent.

The issue these questions raise is the threat of nihilism that is corollary to contingency – realizing the lack of ultimate foundations may make one question foundations entirely. But to have such reaction is to misunderstand one's actual position on dilemmas, for although one's position cannot be comprehensive this does not mean it lacks any basis. Worldviews after all are always interpretative and reveal different life possibilities, and so no matter how limited they may be they provide nonetheless certain insights. Just then because one's position is not absolute does not mean it should not be held, for the position one holds on moral dilemmas affords experiences its rejection could not countenance.⁴ What is thus more appropriate than rejecting one's position on dilemmas because of its contingency, is fully embracing the partiality of one's position as one's means of making sense of the world. One should try as one can to make room for the possibility that others may make sense of it differently, but should not be concerned by one's incapability to see the world in the way they do. Accepting as possible others' worldly experiences is necessary to mature moral outlook, but not necessarily accepting their experiences as genuinely possible for oneself.

This position is not considered in this project since I do not find compatibilism convincing: it seems to equivocate on the notion of cause when meant internally versus externally.

⁴ Remember that deniers and defenders actually experience situations of conflict differently. It is not just what the world presents us with but what we take to it that determines our experience.

Bibliography

Bambrough, Renford. "Conflict and the Scope of Reason." Ratio. 1978; 20, 77-91.

De Haan, Jurrian. "The Definition of Moral Dilemmas: A Logical Problem." Ethical Theory and Moral Practice. 2001; 4, 267-284.

Donagan, Alan. The Theory of Morality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Gowans, Christopher W. "Moral Theory, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Responsibility," in Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory, H. E. Mason, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1996.

Hare, R. M. Moral Thinking. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

Hill, Thomas E. "Moral Dilemmas, Gaps, and Residues: A Kantian Perspective," in Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory, H. E. Mason, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1996.

Holbo, John. "Moral Dilemmas and the Logic of Obligation." American Philosophical Quarterly. 2002; 39, 259-274.

Lemmon, E.J. "Deontic Logic and the Logic of Imperatives." Logique et Analyse. 1965; 8: 39-71.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Moral Dilemmas." Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. 1990; 50, 367-382.

Marcus, Ruth Barcan. "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," in Moral Dilemmas, Christopher W. Gowans, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Markham, Ian S. "World Perspectives and Arguments: Disagreements about Disagreements." Heythrop Journal. 1989; 30: 1-12.

McConnell, Terrance C. "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," in Moral Dilemmas, Christopher W. Gowans, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

McDonald, Julie. "The Presumption in Favor of Requirement Conflicts." Journal of Social Philosophy. 1995; 26, 49-58.

McDowell, John. "Might There be External Reasons?" in World, Mind, and Ethics, J.E.J. Altham, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Mooney, Edward F. Knights of Faith and Resignation. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Nussbaum, Martha C. The Fragility of Goodness. New York: Cambridge University Press: 2001.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Comment," in Goodness and Advice, Judith Jarvis Thomson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Ross, W. D. The Right and the Good. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930.

Searle, John. "*Prima Facie* Obligations," in Philosophical Subjects, Zak van Straaten, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. Goodness and Advice. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Walters, Kerry S. "On World Views, Commitment and Critical Thinking." Informal Logic. 1989; 11: 75-89.

Williams, Bernard. "Ethical Consistency," in Moral Dilemmas, Christopher W. Gowans, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Williams, Bernard. "Internal and External Reasons," in Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches, S. Darwall, A. Gibbard, P. Railton, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001.

Wolgast, Elizabeth. "Moral Pluralism." Journal of Social Philosophy. 1990; 21: 108-116.