The Possibility of Moral Paradox

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In the article, “Ethical Consistency,” Bernard Williams suggests that there are not true moral dilemmas and that studying the problem of moral dilemmas proves that cognitivism is false. As the story of Agamemnon shows, Williams is not correct in either of his claims. In this essay, I argue that Williams’s viewpoint does not mean that cognitivism is false and that it is indeed possible to experience moral dilemmas in some cases.

I.

A moral dilemma is a conflict between two different moral obligations. For example, in the play, *Agamemnon*, the character of Agamemnon pledges to aid the other kings in rescuing Menelaus’ wife, Helen. Helen has been kidnapped by the Trojan Paris and taken to Troy. As Agamemnon sets sail for Troy to rescue her, Zeus appears pleased with the effort but may become angered if Agamemnon fails to aid in the war. However, the god Artemis disapproves of the war and places a storm in Agamemnon’s path. The only way for Agamemnon to escape the storm is by sacrificing his daughter. Artemis will then calm the seas and allow Agamemnon to sail to Troy. Agamemnon previously made a promise that obligated his army to fight in the war. If he fails to keep his promise, enemies may capture his city and the gods may seek their wrath against his people. As king, Agamemnon has an obligation to protect his city. However, as a father, he has an obligation to protect his daughter from harm. In this situation, Agamemnon must choose between his obligation to his city and his obligation to his daughter. The conflict between Agamemnon’s moral obligations is a moral dilemma.

Williams notes that moral obligations involved in conflicts are not “intrinsically inconsistent” or do not directly contradict each other. Agamemnon does not have a direct moral obligation to both kill his daughter and not kill his daughter. Williams claims that “…there could be no conceivable world in which anyone could act in accordance with both [obligations].” According to Williams, it would be irrational to hold such a viewpoint. Rather, the conflict emerges from a third claim, some empirical condition about the world that renders fulfilling both obligations impossible. Williams states his theory as follows: “…it seems that I ought to do \(a\) and that I ought to do \(b\), but I cannot do both \(a\) and \(b\).” Agamemnon has obligations to protect his daughter and his people. Fulfilling both obligations appears to be impossible.

Thus, in a moral dilemma, a person is forced to choose one obligation over another and to elect the best course of action. Williams notes that when a person chooses one obligation over another, he often feels some regret that he is not able to fulfill the other obligation. Williams states: “…I am convinced that in the choice I made I acted for the best; I can be convinced of this, yet have these regrets, ineffectual or possibly effective, for what I did not do.” Williams believes that when someone experiences this type of…

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 172.
regret, he will often try to compensate for it. For example, I may choose to purchase a gift for a friend if I have broken a promise to him, even if I had moral justification for breaking the promise.

Williams uses the notion of regret to suggest that moral judgments are not, as cognitivists believe, the same as beliefs. The feeling of regret implies that there are secondary moral obligations. When a person chooses one moral obligation over another, the non-chosen obligation does not just disappear. Agamemnon chooses to sacrifice his daughter in order to protect his city. However, the choice does not imply that his obligation to his daughter does not exist. Agamemnon may experience regret about his sacrifice, and the regret implies that there is an obligation that Agamemnon is unable to fulfill. Williams calls the feeling of regret a “remainder.” Agamemnon’s obligation to his daughter still exists even if he is unable to fulfill it.

Williams notes that beliefs do not operate in the same manner. If someone is presented with a conflict between beliefs, he must choose one over another. Once one belief is chosen, the other is abandoned. For example, someone might be confronted with two premises: (1) only men run for president and (2) Hilary Clinton ran for president. If a person has knowledge that Hilary Clinton is a woman, then he will have to abandon either premise (1) or (2) in order to have a non-contradictory belief system. Williams notes that “the rejected belief cannot substantially survive this point, because to decide that a belief is untrue is to abandon…that belief.” Once a belief is abandoned, the person does not feel regret for having done so. Williams states that a person may wish the abandoned belief to be true; for example, a misogynist may want only men to run for president. However, the person does not experience regret in the same manner as when failing to fulfill a moral obligation. Williams states: “…the regret that can attach to an abandoned belief is never sufficiently explained just by the fact that the man did have the belief…” People may simply have a desire that their abandoned beliefs continue to be true, but this does not imply that people genuinely regret that the rejected belief still holds true. Alternately, when people experience regret about failure to fulfill a moral obligation, the feeling of regret implies that the moral obligation still exists.

However, Williams must do more work to explain why someone can have non-contradictory beliefs yet can have contradictory moral judgments or obligations. He accomplishes this by separating judgments from actions. Williams notes that, in moral dilemmas, two moral obligations do not directly contradict each other, but rather oppose each other in a particular situation. As such, one can hold both judgments (obligations) as true prima facie (without considering anything else) without having the two conflict. In Agamemnon’s case, we can hold that someone has a prima facie obligation to protect a child and a prima facie obligation to protect a city without the dilemma presenting a contradiction. A conflict only occurs when a particular situation entails that both obligations cannot be fulfilled. In these types of cases, one cannot act on both judgments simultaneously. This does not mean, however, that both judgments and obligations are not valid.

Williams draws a line between moral judgments and actions guiding the judgments. He limits the scope of a moral framework to prima facie obligations and suggests that, in particular situations, the
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certain obligations are weighed against other moral obligations and non-moral considerations. Through a
process of deliberation, a person is able to judge what he ought to do in a particular situation. To
Williams, “ought” is a deliberative action guiding moral obligation and its “role is not tied to morality.”9
When a person determines what he ought to do in a situation, his evaluative judgment is not a moral
judgment. Moral dilemmas, then, may not be possible because conflicts do not occur between premises
themselves, and deliberative decisions guide actions in cases where premises conflict. In summary,
Williams’s argument implies two things: cognitivism is false and it is impossible to have true moral
dilemmas. In the following sections, I will argue that Williams is incorrect in both of these claims.

II.
The theory of cognitivism maintains that moral judgments are like judgments of belief. According to
Bernard Williams, the theory is not true. Williams notes that moral conflicts are resolvable with a
remainder, and suggests that in moral conflicts external factors require a moral agent to only act on one
moral obligation. However, the obligation is not erased. Rather, external factors dictate that it cannot be
fulfilled. An individual, therefore, may feel an apologetic sentiment in not being able to fulfill a duty.
Again, Williams notes that judgments about beliefs do not have remainders. A conflict of belief is
resolved by eliminating one of the premises involved in the contradiction and the moral agent does not
regret eliminating the premises. However, there is a disanalogy in Williams’s reasoning. There may be
instances in which moral judgments, like judgments of belief, do not have remainders, and there may
instances in which judgments of belief have remainders. It seems that remainders should not be linked
purely with regret.

In explaining judgments of belief, Williams says that a third external premise directly undermines the
first two premises. In regard to moral judgments, the third external premise fails to directly undermine
the first two premises. Regarding judgments of belief, Williams notes that “…a man might believe that a
certain person was a Minister who took office in October 1964 and also that that person was a member of
the Conservative Party.”10 Williams then adds the third external premise: “…further
information…reveals…that no such Minister is a Conservative…”11 The third external premise directly
undermines the previous two and, therefore, requires that one of the original premises be abandoned. An
analogous moral case would be similar. Consider the following: A child growing up in Nazi Germany is
reared to believe that (1) he ought to treat Jewish people unkindly, and (2) he ought not to treat nice
people unkindly. However, since all the Jewish people have been eliminated, the child has never met one.
When the child finally does meet a Jew, the child comes to realize that (3) Jewish people are nice. In this
type of contradiction, the external premise directly undermines one of the previous two premises.
Therefore, the moral agent must abandon one of the claims. Elimination of certain moral judgments, then,
is, possible and necessary in certain situations.

However, Williams does not provide this type of example. Instead, he suggests that in regard to moral
judgments, undermining contradictions can be avoided by separating judgments from actions. In

9 Ibid., 185.
10 Ibid., 166.
11 Ibid., 166–167.
Agamemnon’s case, he can both believe that he ought to protect his daughter and that he ought to protect his kingdom without having to abandon either belief because of the fact that he cannot act on both obligations. Whether Williams is justified in this argument will be addressed later. For now, it is worth noting that if one is able to separate moral judgments from action, there does not seem to be any reason why one should also not separate judgments of belief from action. There are, indeed, situations in which someone can hold two epistemic beliefs, yet only act upon one belief. A judge may believe that two men are guilty yet only incarcerate one of them because there is only one cell in the prison. This does not mean that the judge believes that the man he elects not to imprison is not guilty. While the judge may desire to imprison both criminals, this desire does not influence his belief system. Regardless of whether he wants to imprison both men, he will still have the belief that both are guilty and be unable to act upon the belief. Furthermore, it turns out he cannot act on both the belief that (1) man A is guilty and (2) man B is guilty. Even though he believes both men are guilty, he can only act to imprison one man. When we separate judgment from action, judgments of belief also have a remainder, and this remainder does not have anything to do with desires.

While a person may be more likely to feel an apologetic sentiment when he fails to fulfill a moral obligation than when he cannot act on an epistemic belief, it seems as if emotion does not point to a greater discrepancy between moral judgments and judgments of belief. Particular cases can call for elimination of both types of judgments and other cases do not entail elimination at all. At best, it seems that an apologetic sentiment is merely an emotional reaction that a moral agent sometimes experiences when he is unable to fulfill a moral obligation or act on a moral judgment.

III.

Bernard Williams suggests that there is no such thing as a true moral dilemma. However, he fails to account for cases like Agamemnon’s. In a true moral dilemma, deliberation, whether moral or non-moral, may not be possible. When faced with a choice between protecting his daughter and saving his kingdom, Agamemnon does not seem to be able to make a calculative decision about which choice is best. Rather, he falls into a type of psychosis. The play describes Agamemnon’s emotional state:

And as he strapped himself to the yoke of Necessity,
his storm-swept psyche veered on an impious course,
impure, unholy, unsanctified.
At that very moment he changed and his altered mind would dare do anything.
Such shameless thoughts make mere men bold,
maddening mind and reducing them to ruin.
And so he dared to sacrifice his daughter.12

The play indicates that Agamemnon does not calmly weigh the moral and non-moral advantages of performing one action over another. Instead, Agamemnon is fundamentally unable to make a decision. He is completely unsure about which action ought to be taken and yet he knows some decision must be

12 Aeschylus, 11.
reached. The tension between his inability to choose and the fact that he must drives him to a state of madness. Ultimately, it seems that it is this madness that points out the true difficulty of moral dilemmas.

It can be argued that Agamemnon is incorrect in acting out of passion. Perhaps he ought to have properly deliberated his options. However, it seems that the nature of the conflict renders calm deliberation impossible. If sacrificing his daughter is the only way to fulfill the promise to fight in the war, then Agamemnon’s moral obligations directly conflict. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to judge if Agamemnon ought to sacrifice his daughter or not. He is faced with a web of concerns, including family obligations, the interests of his wife, and his personal attachment to his daughter. He also struggles with his obligation to fulfill his promise, the well-being of his kingdom, and his moral duties as king as well as his duties to the gods. It becomes impossible for Agamemnon to decide which course of action he ought to pursue. It is not possible to weigh one set of obligations against the other, and it seems that he does not choose to not deliberate, but that, fundamentally, he cannot deliberate.

The point is not that Agamemnon needs to learn better ways of weighing judgments and obligations but that there are some situations in which there is not a “better” answer in either a moral or non-moral sense. If Agamemnon’s case is not convincing, there are other cases to which we can appeal. For example, consider a case in which a woman only has time to save one of her identical twin children from a burning building. The woman obviously has a moral obligation to both her children, and it does not seem as if it is any better or worse to save Twin A over Twin B or vice versa. Even those who appeal to pure utilitarian calculations (i.e., the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people) for determining which action is better will find it difficult to claim that saving one twin is better than saving the other. In this case, it seems that either action is equally good or equally bad.

These situations point out a key difference between a moral conflict and a moral dilemma. In a moral conflict, two moral judgments seem to conflict in a particular situation, and a person may be uncertain of which moral judgment to act on. However, the person can appeal to certain action-guiding principles in order to determine the best course. Then a person can act on the moral judgment he determines is better. In the case of a moral dilemma, a person also has two moral judgments that seem to conflict in certain epistemic situations. However, in a moral dilemma there is not a better course of action. In tragic cases, both options seem equally horrible. In another light, moral dilemmas can be considered a type of moral paradox. A person has two moral premises that yield contradictory conclusions when a third condition is added. Because one cannot appeal to any action-guiding principles, one cannot resolve the contradiction by rejecting one principle (by not acting on it) and accepting another (by acting on it). The moral agent cannot reject either judgment in guiding his action. He cannot choose which is better or worse. Yet, because actions must occur within a period of time and even not acting is action, a choice must be made.

This understanding of moral dilemmas allows us to make sense of Agamemnon’s madness. He is trapped in a moral paradox and must either protect his daughter or sacrifice her. Both options are equally horrible, and he cannot decide which is the lesser of two evils. Yet Agamemnon must make a decision and choose a course of action. He cannot delay his decision because if he waits, he is protecting his daughter. Ultimately, the impossibility of his choice and the inevitability of choosing drive Agamemnon to a state of madness. Any choice Agamemnon makes seems arbitrary at best.

The type of dilemma presented in *Agamemnon* implies that there are some moral conflicts that cannot be resolved through deliberation. Ultimately, this causes us to question whether or not Williams is correct.
in claiming that true moral dilemmas are impossible because we can separate moral judgments from actions. After all, one of the main principles of morality is “ought implies can.” The reasons and validity of this principle are too complex to unpack here. For purposes of this paper, it is enough to note that Williams himself accepts this principle for use in his analysis. It seems that conflicts of moral obligation are problematic in any moral framework. Williams notes: “…from the fact that I cannot do both a and b it follows contrapositively that it is not the case that I ought to do both a and b.”

When someone is faced with a situation with conflicting moral obligations, he is trapped in a paradox and cannot abandon either obligation, nor can he somehow perform both.

Williams attempts to resolve the paradox by noting that it requires a second principle in order to work. He calls this the “principle of agglomeration.” The principle suggests that “I ought to do a” and “I ought to do b” together imply that “I ought to do a and b.” In his analysis, Williams rejects the principle and suggests that an individual can have an obligation to do a and an obligation to do b, but not an obligation to do both a and b. Provided that the individual can do either a or b in a given situation, the ought implies that the principle will not trap the individual in a paradox. In Agamemnon’s case, he is able to fulfill the obligation to protect his daughter or fulfill the obligation to protect his kingdom. Since he can do either of these things, it follows that he has a moral obligation to do each of them. The fact that he cannot do both is not problematic because Agamemnon does not have a moral obligation to do both. Rather, he has a moral obligation to do each of them separately. According to Williams’s viewpoint, when individuals such as Agamemnon have two conflicting moral obligations and no way of deciding between them, both choices are equally right.

However, it does not seem as if Williams is justified in rejecting the principle of agglomeration. He admits that he does not have some “knock-down disproof of the agglomeration principle.” Furthermore, the reasons he provides for rejection are not convincing. Williams uses an example of marriage: “…marrying Susan and marrying Joan may be things each of which Tom wants to do, but he certainly does not want to do both.” This example only works because it assumes a basic logical relationship between the premises, “Tom wants to marry Susan” and “Tom wants to marry Joan.” The two claims oppose each other and can be better characterized by claiming, “Tom wants to marry Susan or Tom wants to marry Joan.” It is logically impossible to derive that “Tom wants to marry Susan and Tom wants to marry Joan.” Therefore, Williams does not offer a convincing reason for rejecting the principle of agglomeration.

Since the principle of agglomeration cannot be rejected, it seems that when moral obligations conflict, the outcome will be that individuals are trapped in moral paradoxes. This implies that even minor cases of moral conflict are moral paradoxes. For example, a woman faces a situation in which she cannot both save a child from a burning building and fulfill her other obligation to be at work on time. Since she cannot do both, the “ought implies can” principle and the principle of agglomeration imply that she ought not to do either. This seems completely absurd.

13 Williams, 181.
14 Ibid., 180.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 181.
17 Ibid., 182.
We can, however, resolve this concern by allowing moral frameworks to include action guiding judgments. We can recognize that we have *prima facie* moral obligations requiring deliberative moral judgments (what is best, all things considered). Deliberative judgments are action-guiding moral judgments and we should apply the principle of “ought implies can” and the principle of agglomeration to them, thereby eliminating cases such as the absurdity above.

Even if we follow this argument, it seems that true moral dilemmas are still possible. We are still faced with cases, such as Agamemnon’s, in which an individual is confronted with two conflicting moral obligations and no way of deciding between the two. In these situations, we cannot appeal to action-guiding moral principles any more than we can appeal to non-moral deliberation, and we are trapped in a moral paradox. However, this type of dilemma does not undermine the entirety of a moral framework. Rather, the dilemmas point out the limits of a moral framework. Sometimes, moral dilemmas beckon us to do theoretical research to determine new action-guiding principles to solve paradoxes. Sometimes, as in cases of racism, moral dilemmas suggest that certain premises in a moral framework are questionable and ought to be rejected.

REFERENCES
