HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Limits of Logic in Ethical Decision-Making
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Description	SOCREAL 2007: International Workshop on Philosophy and Ethics of Social Reality. Sapporo, Japan, 2007-03-09/10. Session 3: Obligation and Rationality
Citation	SOCREAL 2007: Proceedings of the International Workshop on Philosophy and Ethics of Social Reality, Sapporo, Japan, 2007 / editor Tomoyuki Yamada
Issue Date	2007
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/29944
Type	conference paper
File Information	melley.pdf

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Limits of Logic in Ethical Decision-Making
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SOCREAL
Organized by Professor Yamada
10 March 2007
Conference Hall
Hokkaido University
Graduate Program in Applied Ethics
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Sapporo, Japan

Moral discussion using any common language suffers from ambiguities and vagueness of expression, imprecision of idiomatic expressions and the thousand thousand vagaries any common language subjects its topics of analysis. Common language, by nature metaphoric, impedes as much as facilitates communication. The expression "Words fail" comes to mind, when trying to articulate oneself, particularly about moral decision-making, since so many variables and hidden (oops, metaphor!) assumptions are lurking (oops, metaphor!) beneath the surface (oops, yet another metaphor!) of expression. One should also add the potential for laziness of linguistic execution, even within the inherent limitations of normal language. British novelist and essayist George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language," rails against what he saw as a reciprocal correlation between lazy use of language and a degeneration of thought resulting from the lazy use of language. For these reasons, one appreciates immensely the discipline and rigor with which formal language must subject its object of investigation. Enter, meta-language and formalization where common language fails us.

My intent is not to denigrate any attempts to create discrete languages, meta-languages, hierarchies (e.g. organizational) to analyze more precisely moral relationships (e.g. obligation, commitment, promise-keeping), moral concepts (e.g. moral agent, choice, consequence). It is certainly of interest 'to see how far one can go' with formal and meta-linguistic techniques. To be sure, more secure concepts, fewer ambiguities and vague expressions can only help. One can even speak of beauty in formal language, measured by its level of precision, its economy of expression, simplicity or even its elegance. The lure of abstraction is so great that is useful to remember Plato's thinly veiled message in his allegory of the cave. The mind, after struggling hard to rise above the common and rough world of sensible and social reality, may want to linger and inhabit its mansions of thought, beautiful and pleasing as they are. Plato, as we know, has those liberated from the dross of existence, those who have been forced free of the familiar to return to the rough and imperfect world people actually inhabit. We should heed his advice, however implicit it may be in meta-ethical discussions.

The value of an artificial or meta-ethical language is contingent partly upon its applicability to this rough world of ours. Here, in the shadows hide vast and varied repositories of emotions, sub-conscious drives, shifting power structures, cultural expressions and practices, historical elements. An artificial or meta-ethical language can extract essential connections between concepts from the mountains of detail, can categorize and list all possible choices of a moral agent in a given situation, devoid of the detritus of historical traditions and of lived time within messy social contexts.

Logical analysis of moral decision-making provides some but not all of the most decisive elements that guide a person to the needed steps along the corridors of moral decision-making. Logic as method can show the steps, but not why one should at that moment, under these conditions, act. Premises added or premises deleted will lead to different conclusions. Enter premise a, b, and c, x is derived; delete a, b, and c and replace with d, e, and f, another conclusion, y, is derived. Combine them in one of several ways, yet other conclusions follow. *This is to say that formal logical method (discrete symbolic formalization, creation of meta-language) can be ably manipulated to provide a desired and predictable result. Conclusion x is desired; conclusion y is not. This view makes logic a hand-maiden to the will, at least when it comes to moral questions.*

Albert Camus noted that "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" (The Myth of Sisyphus). Let's follow his lead, then, and use it as a place to start. Considering whether and under which conditions one would like to remain alive is both a perennial question with a long history of answers as well as a topical question, given all the novel ways a human being can be kept alive and supplemented. A simplified argument follows:

If I can no longer attend to myself, then I am debilitated.
If I am debilitated, then I am no longer want to live.
Therefore, if I can no longer attend to myself, then I no longer want to live.

$\sim A \supset D$
$\underline{D \supset \sim L}$
$\sim A \supset \sim L$

The logic is clear; the hypothetical syllogism admits of an easy test of validity. An analysis of the premises admits less. The first premise seems less prone to error. Of course, definitions of 'attend to myself' and 'debilitated' need to be defined. The second premise is much more likely to strain, while trying to establish the link between not being able to attend to oneself and no longer wanting to live. That is, statements such as these can only be verified by the person herself or himself. There is no universal truth to such statements; they are personalized, reflective, phrased with one person in mind. Camus overcomes all negations of life with a supreme sense of scorn. Sometimes, insufficient scorn may be available for the moment.

One could just as well phrase a similar argument, slightly altered, to produce the desired result:

If I can no longer attend to myself, I am debilitated
If I am debilitated, then I still want to live, provided I can hire someone to care for me and provided I can enjoy at least part of the day.
Therefore, if I can no longer attend to myself, I still want to live, provided that I can hire someone to care for me.

Translated to notation, the argument takes the same hypothetical syllogistic form:

$\sim A \supset D$
$\underline{D \supset [L \supset (C \bullet E)]}$
$\sim A \supset [L \supset (C \bullet E)]$

In effect, we produce the argument whose conclusion appeals most to us. Logic by itself can recommend or convince, but only along certain official corridors of thought. To continue the metaphor, we can envision many doors, if you will, off these corridors; each door opened identifies variables, which when linked, will lead to several logically acceptable conclusions, when closed yet other conclusions. However, why one opens these doors in the first place is not always a matter of logic, but of preference or other motivations.

These doors could also represent more detail. For instance, C = 'provided I can hire someone to care for me.' What level of care? Private nurse, 24/7? Care at home by a close relative? What will she be allowed to do? Will she be able to drink a coffee and smoke a cigarette on the balcony? Will she be able to tend to flowers? Will she be able to watch and listen to the birds? What is her definition of "acceptable"

Let us consider the example of suicide further. Suicide as an established category must be defined. Many lead lives that at first appeal to the same established category as traditional notions of suicide would yield, such as bungee cord jumpers, mountain-climbers, cigarette-smokers, drivers on the Autobahn. Though many of us engage in risky behaviors, even debilitating over the long-term, as those described, they typically are not added to the list of suicides, though that would need extended argument in another paper to show why they could or could not be included. In deciding to live or die, one may open the door to statistical evidence for illumination. According to the World Health Organization, in 2000, a person committed suicide every 40 seconds or 2,160 per day or 788,400 for the year. For the same year, it was the third leading cause of death between the ages of 15-44, regardless of sex. Generally, over 90 percent of suicides occur during times of depression, resulting from loss of job, of love, or of honor (WHO).

Despite recent disturbing increases among the young and the growing understanding of correlations between drug use and depression with the choice of suicide, one finds of course that most never commit suicide. One therefore should not commit suicide, since most do not and find good reasons to continue on till the last.

Most people do not commit suicide.
Therefore, I will not commit suicide.

Though the conclusion is admirable, the evidence is very weak, since what many people do is no reliable indication of how one ought to act. Even if the statistical argument is too weak, one may open other doors in the corridor of thought that introduce other variables, either in the form of principles or more evidence which leads them to the sought-after conclusion. Here is an example:

Most people do not commit suicide.
Most find either that life is appealing or that life must be lived to its end.
If life is appealing, then I should persist. And if life must be lived to its end, then I must persist.
Therefore, I should continue to live or I must continue to live.

Translated to notation, the argument takes this form:

$\sim S$
$A \vee M$
$\underline{(A \supset P) \bullet (M \supset P)}$
$P \vee P$

The constructive dilemma is clearly visible and easy to test for validity. The initial premise – that most people do not commit suicide - does not come into play, other than as a general statement surrounding the argument. Escaping through the proverbial horns of a dilemma, we could add another component to the disjunctive statement. Or, by taking the argument by the horns, we could disprove one of the conjuncts.

Despite the clarity of the argument, we have to contend with the effects of actual suicides. There have been spates of celebrity suicides, one of most recent hitting the Korean pop music scene with the suicide deaths of Eun-joo (March 2005), Lee, and Yuni (21 January 2007), and most recently, Jeong Da-Bin (10 February 2007) (Jackson, BBC). There is fear of copy-cat cases (Park, Chan-Kyong). Some young Korean women now apparently feel that if these celebrities were not strong enough to withstand the vagaries of career or cruelty from others, despite their beauty and talent, how could they?

Tests for validity and soundness help us see the problem more transparently, help us appreciate the relationships of variables. Yet there is a hidden foundation beneath the smooth workings of inference.

Premise
Premise <----------Unstated assumptions

Conclusion

These unstated assumptions are non-rational in nature; they may comprise multiple human emotions, social expectations, even chance. A poet's observation, such as e.e. cummings, gives resonance to this thought when he says "love is a deeper season than reason;…" (100 selected poems, #83) The poet's reference claims that an emotion, at least one, is ultimately more vital than reason. He does not exclude reasoning altogether, but suggests that reasoning is not as profound a justification for action as love, that at least logic abstracted from our rough social reality, cannot adequately capture or express moral issues.

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy illustrates cummings' point about the limits of reason, however transparent. Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Illych" chronicles the physical decline and ultimate transformation of a middle-class St. Petersburg court attorney by the same name, as he experiences a protracted terminal illness. At one point, as the poor fellow is still able to reflect and in turn reject the course of his ailments, Illych speaks to himself:

> The syllogism he had learnt from Kiezewetter's Logic: 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,' had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself.

The logic is impeccable and simple. Rephrased, the argument would be

If Caius is a man, then Caius is mortal.
Caius is a man.
Therefore, Caius is mortal.

Where propositional logic fails to represent the famous syllogism, predicate logic can:

1. $(x)(Cx \supset Mx)$
2. $\underline{Cx}$
3. Mx

There is no way out for poor Caius, nor for anyone else, for that matter. Yet Ivan Ilych revolts against this corridor of logic and the door its premises must open:

> That Caius, man in the abstract, was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a mamma and a papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse, afterward with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, and youth. What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside at a session as he did? 'Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. (The Death of Ivan Ilych, 496)

There is no doubt that Ilych's wishes and delusions to be precluded from the inimicable conclusion will fail. Brute finalities confront all wishes and win in the end. We can see, however, the profusion of detail, the profundity of memories from one man's life contrasted sharply with a simple valid argument. This intensely personal approach cannot be achieved through abstraction. In fact, abstraction is transparent precisely because the ruddy details have been removed, leaving the corridor of reasoning uncluttered. Sans memory, sans feelings, sans the collective weight of a person's lived life, How many thousand thousand doors must be opened in the corridors of reasoning to illuminate or darken the decision-making process of how to act or be? Somehow, after months of denial, after having lost all his fair-weather friends, having alienated his beautiful and healthy wife, Ivan Ilych, found his answer at the touch of his young son's hand and tears, in the last moments of his life.

Suddenly, he knew what he must do. This illumination, this sudden insight, had less to do with logic than with love. So too is it with some of our moral acts and orientations. As we walk down the corridors of reasoning, we must keep in mind that that decision process as to which doors we open to illuminate the dark are often hidden in impenetrable recesses, beyond the reach of reason.

Logic as vehicle to decision-making will take us where we want to go, dependent on our desire to do so, our willingness to act. It takes an act of will, however, to be logical. The frugal or elegant houses of thought we build to extract the essentials from the non-essentials can take on a life of their own, almost forfeiting Plato's advice to return to the rough world of social reality. Literature

gives other insight into human reality, but it too fails for the very reasons that logic succeeds.

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