



## Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts

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## COMMENTS AND CRITICISM

## MORAL REALISM, MORAL CONFLICT, AND COMPOUND ACTS

**T**ORBJÖRN TÄNNSJÖ argues that moral conflict can be generated by just one principle, together with one future moral dereliction.\* For example, Tännsjö claims, act utilitarianism (AU) yields both the following prescriptions:

- (1) I ought not to invite a certain friend for dinner.
- (2) I ought to invite this friend for dinner and settle my dispute with him.

AU yields both prescriptions in a case where it would maximize utility for me to invite-my-friend-and-settle-our-dispute—but where it is sadly true that, if I do invite my friend, I will not settle the dispute but will quarrel with him instead. Tännsjö argues that conflicts such as that between (1) and (2) can be countenanced because they do not undermine moral realism. Moral realism can be interpreted as holding that normative properties are properties possessed by concrete actions. In general there is no reason to expect that a property of a concrete whole should be possessed by each part of it; we do not expect the leg of a table to have a three-foot diameter just because it is a part of a whole (the table itself) that has a three-foot diameter. Similarly we should not expect the concrete act of inviting my friend to dinner to be obligatory just because it is part of a larger concrete act (inviting-my-friend-to-dinner-and-settling-our-dispute) that is obligatory. Thus moral realism can survive, even in the presence of conflicting properties possessed by different concrete acts.

Tännsjö defends his acceptance of this form of moral conflict by avowing a radical split between a moral principle's role as a theoretic-

\* "Moral Conflicts and Moral Realism," this JOURNAL, LXXXII, 3 (March 1985): 113-117.

<sup>1</sup> Tännsjö actually employs the terms 'rational method of deliberation' and 'criteria of rightness' (114/5). He describes himself as following Eugene Bales here [see "Act Utilitarianism: Account of Right-making Characteristics or Decision-making Procedure?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, VIII, 3 (July 1971): 257-265]. But this is somewhat misleading. Bales is interested in AU's capacity to guide the decisions of decision-makers who lack adequate information, whereas Tännsjö is interested only in cases where decision-making problems arise from the structure of the moral theory, not from the inadequacies of the decision-maker. I have therefore substituted my own term in place of that used by Tännsjö. Although in the text I argue that a principle's decision-guiding suitability places constraints on its suitability as a criterion of rightness, I believe there are limitations to these constraints.

cal criterion of rightness, and any role it might serve as a decision-making guide.<sup>1</sup> He admits that AU, because it generates incompatible prescriptions in this kind of case, cannot serve as a decision-making guide, but avers that this does not affect its adequacy as a criterion of rightness.

But permitting such a radical split between these two roles of a moral principle is misguided, and so too is Tännsjö's proposal. A principle's capacity to serve as a decision-making guide affects its acceptability as a theoretical account of rightness. Since Tännsjö's version of AU cannot be used for making decisions, it cannot be used as a criterion of rightness either.

We can begin to see the strong link between decision-making guides and criteria of rightness by asking what sorts of entities can possess the property of rightness. Can natural events, such as rainstorms or late frosts, be right? No: we say that such events and states can be *good*, but not that they can be *right*. The reason for this is that such entities are not voluntary—they are not the objects of effective *choice*. Goodness can apply to entities that are not controlled by choices, but rightness is reserved for entities, namely acts, that are controllable by choosing agents. Thus, despite Tännsjö's attempt to separate a criterion of rightness from questions of decision-making, it is actually built into the concept of rightness that it applies only to entities about which decisions can be made. Indeed, we can press the matter further and note that not even all acts can be properly said to be right. Although my act of returning your lost wallet is right, and your act of thanking me is right, the compound act of my-returning-your-wallet-and-your-thanking-me cannot be right. It cannot be right because there is no single agent who could decide to do this act. Thus rightness may be possessed only by entities that are controllable by a possible *single* choice.<sup>2</sup>

But why do we need a normative property in addition to goodness? Why is there a special normative property, rightness, reserved for just those entities which can be chosen? The obvious answer is that the criterion of rightness provides the kind of evaluation of choos-

<sup>2</sup> It might be thought that the alleged compound act mentioned in this paragraph is not a genuine act, because it is not an event (or sequence of events) involving a single body. But we can see that even compound acts involving a single body may not be the proper objects of moral assessment. Imagine a compound act comprising the separate acts of two persons who successively inhabit the same body (e.g., Locke's prince-and-cobbler case) or comprising the separate simultaneous acts of one body animated by 2 persons (e.g., a split-brain case). We would not say that such compound acts are right or wrong, because no single choice can govern them.

able events which can form the basis for *guiding* choices with respect to those events. It is precisely because we need some standard of evaluation to serve this function that we have criteria of rightness in addition to criteria of goodness. Although criteria of goodness may have structural features that disable them for this job, criteria of rightness must be free of such disabilities.

Applying this idea to Tännsjö's dinner case shows us, somewhat surprisingly, that a criterion of rightness should not directly evaluate all actions that are objects of agents' possible single choices. A principle that offers too generous a range of evaluations generates conflicting prescriptions and so robs itself of the capacity to guide choices. Thus a principle that tells the agent *both* that he ought not to invite his friend for dinner *and* that he ought to invite-the-friend-and-settle-their-dispute, delivers evaluations that cannot guide the agent's choice because they cannot both be followed. Tännsjö is mistaken to accept a criterion of rightness which delivers incompatible evaluations. Such a criterion cannot do the very job it was needed to do, namely provide a basis for making decisions.

Why is Tännsjö willing to accept such a principle, and such a split between the criterial and decision-guiding functions of a moral principle? He gives two reasons. First, he claims, we must accept the two prescriptions generated by AU in the above case if we are to adapt our actions to our future moral mistakes, as he believes we must. This thought leads him to accept the prescription not to invite his friend to dinner (given that he would only quarrel further). But we can adapt our actions to future derelictions without accepting a moral principle that delivers incompatible prescriptions. I have described and argued for such a principle in a previous paper.<sup>3</sup> The basic proposal is that moral principles, such as AU, are to be applied *only* to *maximal conjunctive acts*. A maximal conjunctive act is, roughly, the most extensive compound act of which it is true that if the agent wanted to perform that compound act, he would. How does this proposal apply in cases such as the one Tännsjö describes? The description of the case suggests that although the agent could perform the compound act of inviting-and-then-quarreling, and also not-inviting-and-not-settling-the-dispute, he *could not* perform the compound act of inviting-and-then-not-quarreling. No matter how

<sup>3</sup> "Doing the Best One Can", in Alvin I. Goldman and Jaegwon Kim, *Values and Morals* (Boston: Reidel, 1978), pp. 185–214. This paper was published under the name of "Holly S. Goldman." Tännsjö cites the paper, but seems to have misunderstood its implications for cases such as the case he describes.

strongly he set himself (now) to invite the friend and then not quarrel with him, in fact, when the time came, he would start a quarrel. Since the compound act of inviting-and-then-not-quarreling is not an act the agent can perform, it is not available for assessment by AU. Comparing the utilities of the remaining available compound acts results in a prescription to not-invite-and-not-settle. This prescription obviously is fully adapted to the agent's future moral derelictions, just as Tännsjö wants our prescriptions to be. But, since the sub-act of (say) inviting the friend for dinner is only a proper part of the most extensive compound act that the agent can perform at this time, it is not available for direct assessment by AU. Hence it cannot be prescribed, and no incompatible prescriptions can be generated.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth pointing out that there is an alternative interpretation of Tännsjö's example. Perhaps the agent *could* bring it about that he invites-the-friend-and-does-not-quarrel, even though it is also true that if he invited the friend, he would then quarrel. How could this be so? It might be true that his inviting the friend would lead to a quarrel—but only because he now would not commit himself strongly enough not to quarrel with the friend once they are together. But the agent *could* make a strong enough commitment now to avoid the quarrel. In this version of the case, the principle I advocate recommends inviting-and-not-quarreling, since this is the best possible maximal conjunctive act for the agent. This recommendation seems right: agents should not be released from their duties merely because of their *current* lack of moral motivation. *Future* failures of motivation are another matter, because they are not under the agent's current control.

<sup>4</sup> In assessing this proposal it is helpful to keep in mind the traditional distinction between *objective* and *subjective* rightness. An act is objectively right (according to utilitarianism) if it would actually maximize utility. Thus not-inviting-and-not-settling-the-dispute is the objectively right act. An act is subjectively right (according to utilitarianism) if the agent believes that it can be performed and would maximize utility. But of course agents may be mistaken. If I (falsely) believe I can settle the dispute with my friend and that doing so would maximize utility, then it would be *subjectively* wrong for me to not-invite-my-friend-and-not-settle-our-dispute—even though this act is *objectively* right.

An act that is subjectively right or wrong possesses its moral status in virtue of the agent's mental state, namely, his or her beliefs about the act's empirical properties. Nonetheless, subjective rightness and wrongness are properties possessed by concrete actions; moral realism can countenance such properties as easily as it can countenance objective rightness or wrongness. *Being feared by Michele* is no less real a property of, say, a lion than *being behind a tree* is; by the same token, *being subjectively wrong* is no less real a property of an act than *being objectively wrong* is.

Thus we can adapt morality's recommendations to future moral derelictions, and still avoid conflicting prescriptions, if we restrict the application of our moral principle to maximal conjunctive acts defined in the way I have suggested. Tännsjö's first reason for accepting principles that generate conflicting prescriptions thus collapses under examination. What about his second reason? The second reason put forward by Tännsjö is that moral realism requires *each* concrete action to be right or wrong: it is inconsistent with realism that some acts, e.g., sub-acts such as inviting the friend to dinner, have no moral status. On my proposal, such sub-acts do not always have any moral status.<sup>5</sup> But I fail to see that this is damaging to moral realism. Moral realism will be confirmed so long as *some* acts have moral properties. And we can affirm this without abandoning the important role that moral principles must play as guides for making choices. The existence of moral conflict need not be accepted.

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#### MORE ON MORAL DILEMMAS

**L**YLE V. ANDERSON'S "Moral Dilemmas, Deliberation, and Choice,"\* is a paper that moves in many directions and attempts to cover much ground. But, sorting through these intricacies, one can see that Anderson sets for himself two major tasks: one is to reject some of the principal claims made by Ruth Barcan Marcus in her recent work on moral dilemmas;<sup>†</sup> the other, to

<sup>5</sup> Some do. For example, suppose that *A-and-B* is a maximal act for an agent which is recommended by his principle at  $t_1$ , the time of *A*. He performs *A*, and now is at  $t_2$ , the time at which *B* could be performed. If *B* is not part of any larger compound act within the agent's control, then the moral principle applies to *B* by itself. But *A* is never evaluated by the principle. We might choose to designate *A* as right insofar as it is a part of a compound that is right, but not insofar as the principle directly applies to *A*.

\* This JOURNAL, LXXXII, 3 (March 1985): 139–162. References to this paper will be given parenthetically.

<sup>†</sup> "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," this JOURNAL, LXXVII, 3 (March 1980): 121–136. References to this paper will be given parenthetically. Both the pagination and the context will make it clear whether the reference is to Anderson or to Marcus.