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## *Deontic Logic and The Priority of Moral Theory*

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The development of deontic logic reflects a desire to capture the common ground, the underlying structure, of our moral discourse.<sup>1</sup> It has been driven by a "principle of deontic neutrality" which holds that deontic logic ought to be neutral between competing moral theories, and which promises a neutral battleground for moral debate.

Despite this promise, I shall argue, no neutral battleground is to be found. So little is non-controversial in our deontic concepts that the principle cannot be satisfied; we can build a deontic logic only by accepting axioms and rules of inference that are incompatible with reasonable moral positions. Deontic logic cannot hover above the maelstrom of moral argumentation. As a result, if we demand neutrality we must abandon deontic logic. Conversely, if we embrace deontic logic, we must allow our "logic" substantive (and controversial) theorems.

This does not mean that deontic logic has no role to play in moral theory. On the contrary, among those who have agreed on a general account of obligation, the implicit deontic logic they share will help to clarify disputes between particular theories. Indeed, even for those who don't share a general account, attention to the other's deontic logic may sharpen the issues at stake between the various approaches. Yet it does mean that there is no single deontic logic capable of serving as an impartial backdrop for moral theorizing. The noble desire for neutrality must remain unsated.

The principle of deontic neutrality has played a primary role in arguments designed to attack that part of deontic logic which rules out the possibility of moral dilemmas. However, the principle's demands are not so parochial; it will be satisfied only if deontic logic is compatible with all tenable moral positions (and not just those which acknowledge the possibility of moral dilemmas). The question raised by the principle is whether deontic logic can stand

free of substantive moral consequences. I argue that it cannot. In what follows I subject the axioms and rules of deontic logic to the principle's test. Because our deontic concepts are controversial through and through, almost nothing survives—though commonly used for surgical strikes, the principle of deontic neutrality is better suited for devastation bombing.

### I. MORAL DILEMMAS AND CONSISTENCY

Deontic logic's neutrality has been most clearly challenged in the debate surrounding moral dilemmas. The view that there are no moral dilemmas has been so widely accepted, and is thought so fundamental, that it has been treated as a theorem of deontic logic. Recently, however, this standard view, as well as its privileged place in deontic logic, have come under strenuous attack.

According to the standard view, we can never face conflicting obligations. Apparent dilemmas are attributed either to an inability to discern our true obligation or to the severity of the sacrifices the situation demands.

Critics of the standard view fall into two groups. Some charge that the standard view is inadequate to moral experience: it cannot explain the propriety of guilt feelings when we act in dilemmas, and it fails to acknowledge the lingering claim of over-ridden obligations. Moral predicaments, they argue, must be traced to the conflicting demands of morality; neither ignorance nor sacrifice, but morality itself, accounts for our dilemmas. This first group of critics, then, rejects the standard view as false.

Other critics attack not the veracity of the standard view, but the legitimacy of making the standard view a truth of deontic logic. These critics limit themselves to arguing that deontic logic must accommodate the logical possibility of dilemmas (regardless of whether dilemmas really ever arise). They advocate a tolerant deontic logic; their position is motivated by the principle of deontic neutrality combined with the recognition that dilemma-allowing theories are logically tenable. This second group of critics, then, chafes at enshrining the standard view of moral dilemmas as a truth of deontic logic.

Theories which allow dilemmas have suffered at the hands of the ungrounded assumption that a theory which allows conflicting obligations is, simply in virtue of that fact, inconsistent. This assumption has haunted even those not rightfully its target. For instance, critics of W. D. Ross argued that the principles of Ross' theory would quite easily give rise to conflicting obligations. This, Ross' critics thought, would be patently inconsistent.

Nonetheless, Ross carefully defended himself against the charge of inconsistency, while agreeing that *if* his theory generated conflicting obligations, it would be inconsistent.<sup>2</sup> Ross accomplished this by arguing that the principles which form his theory concern *prima facie* but not actual obligations. The principles say that "an act, in so far as it is the fulfilling of a promise, *tends* to be right" and that "an act, in so far as it is the act which seems likely to produce the most good, *tends* to be right," etc. By speaking of tendencies, morally relevant considerations, and *prima facie* obligations, rather than actual obligations, Ross' theory avoids having conflicting (actual) obligations as a consequence. Only conflicting *prima facie* obligations are generated; and these, Ross emphasized, are not obligations at all.<sup>3</sup>

Though Ross countered his critics' attacks, he embraced their mistaken assumption that theories which do allow actual obligations to conflict are inconsistent. Almost single-handedly, this assumption is responsible for moral theorists taking it for granted that there can be no moral dilemmas. The plausibility of the assumption rests on the belief that having an obligation to do something is inconsistent with having an obligation to refrain from doing that same thing. To put things symbolically, the view is that  $O(A/C)$  and  $O(\sim A/C)$  must be formally inconsistent.<sup>4</sup> (Where " $O(A/C)$ " is read "it ought to be the case that A, given C").<sup>5</sup>

Yet the claims need not be inconsistent. Since the negation is found within a modal context no direct contradiction arises [ $O(A/C)$  &  $O(\sim A/C)$ ], like [ $\Diamond(A) \& \Diamond(\sim A)$ ], may be logically reconciled.<sup>6</sup> Practical conflict is not always logical inconsistency.

Problems with consistency do arise, though, when additional plausible assumptions are added. For instance, accepting conflicting obligations

1.  $O(A/C) \& O(\sim A/C)$

will lead to an out-right contradiction if one assumes both that "ought" implies "can"

2. if  $O(A/C)$  then  $\Diamond(A/C)$

and a "principle of deontic distribution" that holds that if one has an obligation to do one thing and an obligation to do another, then one has an obligation to do both (and vice versa):

3.  $O(A/C) \& O(B/C)$  if and only if  $O((A \& B)/C)$ .

The inconsistency can be shown as follows: Since one can't do both  $A$  and  $\sim A$  in  $C$ ,  $\sim \Diamond((A \& \sim A)/C)$ . By contraposition and 2,

$\sim O[(A \ \& \ \sim A)/C]$ . Yet this leads to  $\sim [O(A/C) \ \& \ O(\sim A/C)]$  by contraposition using 3, which is simply the denial of 1. So theories which allow moral dilemmas cannot accept both 2 and 3 without being inconsistent. Thus dilemma-allowing theories face *problems with possibility*.

In addition, if one holds that all obligatory acts are permitted

4. if  $O(A/C)$  then  $P(A/C)$

(where " $P(A/C)$ " is to be read "it is permitted that A, given C"), and that an act is permitted if and only if we don't have an obligation to refrain from doing it

5.  $P(A/C)$  if and only if  $\sim O(\sim A/C)$

then allowing 1 (that is, allowing conflicting obligations) will once again lead to a contradiction. For, if 1 then  $O(A/C)$ , and from this and 4 we can derive  $P(A/C)$ . Yet  $P(A/C)$  leads, by 5, to  $\sim O(\sim A/C)$ , which contradicts our assumption that *both*  $O(A/C)$  and  $O(\sim A/C)$  were true. So moral theories which allow dilemmas cannot accept both 4 and 5 without being inconsistent. Thus dilemma-allowing theories will also face *problems with permission*.

Consequently, two sets of auxiliary principles are each incompatible with the possibility of moral dilemmas. Both sets are built into standard versions of deontic logic. Nonetheless, as long as a moral theory rejects either 2 or 3 (to avoid problems with possibility) *and* either 4 or 5 (to avoid problems with permission), it can allow the possibility of dilemmas without inconsistency. Moral dilemmas do not ineluctably lead to logical absurdity, for believers can embrace a non-standard deontic logic which sidesteps both the problems with possibility and the problems with permission.<sup>7</sup>

Ross (and his critics) were therefore wrong in thinking theories which allow conflicting obligations must be inconsistent. Even so, the intuition behind the assumption hits on something important: any theory which does allow actual obligations to conflict will be inconsistent *given* traditional views concerning the connection between obligation, permission, and possibility.

## II. THE PRINCIPLE OF DEONTIC NEUTRALITY

Recognizing the threat of inconsistency, defenders of dilemmas insist that we acknowledge the logical possibility of moral dilemmas and adjust deontic logic accordingly.<sup>8</sup> Without these adjustments, they argue, deontic logic will be in the unacceptable position of ruling out certain tenable moral theories—those which allow dilemmas—as logical nonsense. Incompatibility with the possibility

of moral dilemmas reveals that standard versions of deontic logic reflect a substantive ethical doctrine. We can purify deontic logic of ethical commitment only by abandoning those axioms and rules of inference which cannot be accepted by all tenable moral theories. This purification process alone will allow a fundamental deontic logic which captures the uncontroversial core of moral reasoning.<sup>9</sup>

Two attractive assumptions are at work in this argument. The first is that principles which are, singly or collectively, incompatible with tenable ethical doctrines themselves reflect an ethical doctrine. The second is that deontic logic should not reflect ethical doctrines. It is these two assumptions, taken together, which beget the principle of deontic neutrality's demand that deontic logic rule out no tenable moral theory.

Clearly, if theories that allow dilemmas are tenable, then the principle of deontic neutrality would have us reject any system of deontic logic which ruled out dilemmas. Given the principle of deontic neutrality, the attack on standard deontic logic will therefore turn on the tenability of those positions that permit dilemmas. To bolster their argument, those who believe in moral dilemmas exhibit (purported) examples. The dilemmas faced by Antigone and Agamemnon are often cited, as is Sartre's case of a young man who must choose between fighting a good cause and comforting a lonely parent. Of course the examples are open to different interpretations, yet the challenge is to show that it is logically untenable to locate the tragedy of these situations in the relentless pull of conflicting obligations. The apparent intelligibility of these cases *as examples of moral dilemmas* shifts the burden of the argument on to those who treat moral dilemmas as logically impossible. With the appearances on their side, defenders of dilemmas turn to rebutting various arguments one might give for thinking theories which allow dilemmas are untenable.

These arguments are of two kinds. The first center on the logical problems with possibility and permission.<sup>10</sup> To handle problems with possibility, defenders of dilemmas commonly reject the principle of deontic distribution. They maintain that the principle's plausibility depends upon equivocating between having an obligation to do A and also an obligation to do B, on the one hand, and having an obligation to do both A and B, on the other.<sup>11</sup> To handle problems with permission, defenders of dilemmas may reject the principle that all things obligatory are permissible, on the grounds that this principle is simply a disguised denial of moral dilemmas. As such it cannot serve as an independent argument for denying the possibility of moral dilemmas.<sup>12</sup>

The second set of attacks revolves around the patently moral concepts of guilt, responsibility, and regret. Robert Stalnaker, for instance, objects as follows to theories which allow moral dilemmas. If there were dilemmas, then we could (at least sometimes) justifiably attribute guilt without reference to an agent's character or actions. An agent in a dilemma would be guilty regardless of what is done. Yet this is absurd so Stalnaker's objections goes; judgments of guilt can only be justified by reference to character and action.<sup>13</sup> As van Fraassen points out, though, Stalnaker's position is incompatible with the doctrine of original sin—a doctrine that might be false but which is not gibberish. Therefore the absurdity to which Stalnaker points must be ethical and not logical. Extending the same defense to all objections which turn on the concepts of guilt, responsibility, or regret, defenders of dilemmas dismiss the objections on the grounds that they all reflect substantive ethical positions rather than the purely metaethical considerations which should underlie deontic logic. From the point of view of the principle of deontic neutrality, these objections illicitly import ethics into the foundations of deontic logic.<sup>14</sup>

Implicit in these arguments is a simple, and reasonable, standard of logical tenability: a moral theory is logically tenable if and only if (i) it is consistent (given suitable adjustments to standard deontic logic), and (ii) all objections to it are grounded either in (some presupposed version of) deontic logic or in a substantive ethical position. The objections that turn on the problems of possibility and permission, as well as those centering on guilt, responsibility, and regret, violate the second criterion—they either beg the question or reflect moral, rather than purely logical, considerations.

Plainly, this standard of tenability is very lenient. Its conditions can be met even by theories which provide preposterous accounts of morality. A theory which is logically tenable (in this sense) might allow that random murders are sometimes salutary, or that the only thing valuable is the exercise of power. In some other sense, of course, these positions are surely untenable. Their untenability rests, however, not in logical confusion or conceptual nonsense but in getting the facts hopelessly wrong, and substantive untenability is not the sort relevant to the principle of deontic neutrality.

Some reject these criteria of logical tenability on the grounds that the four standard principles (which generate the problems with possibility and permission) are so fundamental, and so obvious, that their incompatibility with theories which allow dilemmas constitutes (they think) sufficient reason for holding such theories logically untenable.<sup>15</sup> These people mistakenly assume standard deontic logic

and reject moral theories incompatible with it claiming that such theories are *logically* untenable; they are 'finding' logical absurdity where there is at bottom only ethical disagreement. Proponents of theories which allow dilemmas are not committed to holding with

8.  $[O(A/C) \ \& \ O(\sim A/C)]$

and

9.  $\sim [O(A/C) \ \& \ O(\sim A/C)]$ .

That, of course, would be logically untenable. Rather, they are rejecting 9 in light of what they take to be real dilemmas. As long as they do reject 9 and construct a consistent logic in its absence, their position should not be rejected on logical grounds. One would have to presupposes some deontic logic in order to reject their position as logically absurd; but the principles of deontic logic are just what are contested. Though the deontic logics which underlie dilemma-allowing theories are incompatible with standard deontic logic, they may be internally consistent. They may meet the logical requirements of non-deontic logic and there is no other (non-question-begging) standpoint from which to judge their logical acceptability.

On the one hand, then, there are those who grant the logical tenability of theories which allow dilemmas and wish to amend deontic logic accordingly. On the other hand, there are those who (in light of standard versions of deontic logic) wish to reject dilemma-allowing theories as logically untenable. Though defenders of dilemmas and their opponents are at logger-heads, they share a common methodological doctrine. They assume that if dilemma-allowing moral theories were tenable, then deontic logic would have to be amended, because they assume that deontic logic must be compatible with all tenable moral positions. The principle of deontic neutrality forms the common axis around which their debate revolves.

Neither defenders of dilemmas nor their opponents, however, should accept the principle of deontic neutrality. The principle is just too powerful: no deontic logic can withstand its test.

To see this, begin with the assumption that some particular dilemma-allowing theory is logically tenable.<sup>16</sup> Straight away the principle of deontic neutrality demands that deontic logic accommodate theories which permit dilemmas. Accommodation begins with the rejection of two standard principles of deontic logic:

3.  $O(A/C) \ \& \ O(B/C)$  if and only if  $O((A \ \& \ B)/C)$

4. if  $O(A/C)$ , then  $P(A/C)$

Dumping these two principles eliminates both the problems with possibility and the problems with permission. Other problems re-

main, though, and the principle of deontic neutrality demands additional changes to standard deontic logic.

The traditional semantics for deontic logic includes the following truth-definition (or its equivalent): if  $H(A)$  is the set of outcomes in which  $A$  is true, and we have some measure of the moral value of states of affairs,<sup>17</sup> then

$O(A/C)$  is true when and only when the expected moral value of some outcome belonging to  $H(A)$  is greater than the expected moral value of any outcome in  $H(\sim A)$ .

This semantics allows only two possibilities: either (i)  $O(A/C)$  is true and  $O(\sim A/C)$  is false (when the outcome with the highest expected value is a member of  $H(A)$ ) or (ii) neither  $O(A/C)$  nor  $O(\sim A/C)$  is true (when the values of the outcomes in  $H(A)$  and  $H(\sim A)$  balance out).  $O(A/C)$  and  $O(\sim A/C)$ , then, cannot both be true at the same time. Thus the standard semantics rules out dilemmas. (Which is not surprising, of course, since standard deontic logic rules them out.)

If deontic logic is to accommodate dilemma-allowing theories (as the principle of deontic neutrality demands), then the semantics must be changed so as to allow the truth of both  $O(A/C)$  and  $O(\sim A/C)$ . To meet this need van Fraassen has advocated a revised semantics. It contains the following truth-definition:

$O(A/B)$  is true exactly if there is some imperative  $I$  in force, which is itself conditional upon  $B$ , such that  $A$  is true in all the outcomes in which  $B$  is true and which fulfill  $I$ .<sup>18</sup>

Roughly, the idea is this: we ought to bring about  $A$ , if  $A$  is necessary for the fulfillment of some imperative which is in force.<sup>19</sup>

Along with this new truth-definition van Fraassen offered the following axiom schemata and rules:

- AC1: Axiom schemata for propositional logic
- AC2:  $\vdash O(A/C) \rightarrow O((A \& C)/C)$
- RC1: if  $\vdash A$  and  $\vdash A \rightarrow B$  then  $\vdash B$
- RC2: if  $\vdash A \rightarrow B$  then  $\vdash O(A/C) \rightarrow O(B/C)$
- RC3: if  $\vdash B \leftrightarrow C$  then  $\vdash O(A/B) \leftrightarrow O(A/C)$ <sup>20</sup>

This revised system would be equivalent to standard deontic logic if assumptions sufficient to rule out moral dilemmas were added.<sup>21</sup> Thus this system has a claim to being more fundamental than standard versions of deontic logic; it seems to lay bare the uncontroversial assumptions, the logical structure, which forms the core of our moral discourse.

Though the revised system is compatible with standard versions

of deontic logic, it is a good deal weaker. To some, of course, this weakness will be a fault, as the revised system won't generate as theorems all that they take to be obvious logical truths.

Nonetheless, the revised system shows that deontic logic can be amended to accommodate both those who allow and those who deny the possibility of moral dilemmas. The availability of such a trimmed-down system establishes that the demand for neutrality is not immediately frustrated by disagreements concerning dilemmas.

### III. IN SEARCH OF NEUTRALITY

The principle of deontic neutrality, though, demands that each axiom and rule of deontic logic be compatible with *all* logically tenable moral theories. It will be satisfied only if deontic logic can be trimmed of all of its substantive consequences. In testing a proposed deontic logic, then, we must ensure that it has no consequence incompatible with some tenable moral theory. In the process, we must consider how the logic fares when supplemented with those already abandoned principles which are embraced as conceptual truths by a logically tenable theory. For instance, Kant argued that "... a conflict of duties and obligations is inconceivable" on the grounds that "... the concepts of duty and obligation as such express the objective practical necessity of certain actions, and two conflicting rules cannot both be necessary at the same time: if it is our duty to act according to one of these rules, then to act according to the opposite one is not our duty and is even contrary to duty."<sup>22</sup> Thus (assuming Kant's position is tenable) a tenable moral theory may reject the logical possibility of moral dilemmas. So, for the sake of neutrality, the axioms and rules which compose the revised deontic logic must be compatible with such a theory, even though  $\sim [O(A/C) \& O(\sim A/C)]$  has already been abandoned as a *theorem*. Only what remains after the application of this stringent test will meet the demands of the principle of deontic neutrality. With this test in hand, I turn the principle loose on deontic logic.<sup>23</sup>

To begin, the revised system of deontic logic assumes that "... any single imperative with possible antecedent can be in force *only if it is possible that it be fulfilled*" (my italics). In other words, the revised system is committed (as van Fraassen recognizes) to "ought" implying "can."<sup>24</sup> While this commitment might very well be reasonable, and while it is a commitment shared by standard versions of deontic logic, it has been rejected by some moral theorists. In fact, many people have taken the possibility of moral dilemmas (which they assume) as proving that sometimes we may have actual obligations which are impossible to satisfy.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the princi-

ple that "ought" implies "can" (at least under some interpretations) runs head-on into the ethical doctrines of those religions, such as Calvinism, which are committed to predestination. Since these doctrines are certainly as tenable as the doctrine of original sin, the principle of deontic neutrality demands abandoning the assumption that what is obligatory is possible. Only then can deontic logic accommodate those theories which hold that there are obligations which cannot be fulfilled.

Another principle which is embraced by standard versions of deontic logic (and by van Fraassen's revised system) holds that "the necessary consequences of what ought to be ought to be." On its most conservative reading, this principle is limited to "the *logical* consequences of what ought to be ought to be":

RC2: if  $\vdash A \rightarrow B$  then  $\vdash O(A/C) \rightarrow O(B/C)$ .

On the face of it, this seems uncontroversial. Even so, RC2 fails the test of neutrality. For it commits one to the controversial view that, if there are any obligations at all, then any action whatsoever satisfies some obligation. If Ralph has an obligation to repay a loan, then according to RC2, he also has an obligation either to repay the loan or to shoot his creditor. Symbolically:

$$\begin{array}{l} O(A/C) \\ \vdash A \rightarrow (A \vee B) \\ \vdash (O(A/C) \rightarrow O((A \vee B)/C)) \\ O((A \vee B)/C) \end{array}$$

This disjunctive obligation could be met by a successful assassination. Since this argument works for every  $B$ , anyone who has any obligation, paradoxically, has a disjunctive obligation (with whatever disjuncts you please) that will be fulfilled if any of the disjuncts are met.<sup>26</sup>

Arguments in support of RC2 are usually not elaborate; for instance, all van Fraassen says in its defense is that "... we can hardly expect to bring about what ought to be without bringing about its necessary consequences."<sup>27</sup> Yet the fact that we can't help but bring about the necessary consequences of our action does not mean we have an *obligation* to bring them about. Of course, fulfilling an obligation to do  $A$  would automatically fulfill any obligation we might have to bring about  $A$ 's consequences. Still, this does not show that we do have an obligation to bring about  $A$ 's consequences. By repaying our loans we fulfill our obligation to meet our debts. At the same time, we would fulfill an obligation either to pay our debts or kill our creditors, if we had such an obligation; that we have such an obligation does not follow.

To avoid RC2's controversial consequences one might insist that disjunctive obligations (obligations with the form  $O((A \vee B)/C)$ ) cannot always be met by satisfying either disjunct. This move could save RC2 in light of our intuitions by disallowing the shooting as a way of satisfying the disjunctive obligation either to repay the loan or to shoot the creditor. Since disjunctive obligations can sometimes be met by satisfying any disjunct, though, defenders of RC2 must offer an account of when satisfying any disjunct will meet the obligation and when it won't. Only then will RC2 plausibly be deemed uncontroversial, and so acceptable to the principle of deontic neutrality.

Defenders of RC2 could argue that disjunctive obligations can be satisfied by, and only by, satisfying permissible disjuncts. The inference from  $O(A/C)$  to  $O((A \vee B)/C)$ , they would say, is perfectly legitimate. It only appears troublesome when doing  $B$  (given  $C$ ) is forbidden. In these cases, though  $O((A \vee B)/C)$  is true, the only permissible way to satisfy the obligation is by bringing about  $A$ . Once this is recognized, the apparent unacceptability of  $O((A \vee B)/C)$  disintegrates. If we distinguish between those disjunctive obligations that have some forbidden disjuncts and those that don't, so the argument goes, we can explain when satisfying either disjunct meets the obligation and when it doesn't.<sup>28</sup>

Though tempting, this defense of RC2 doesn't remove the problem:  $O((A \vee B)/C)$  cannot legitimately be inferred from  $O(A/C)$  even when  $B$  is perfectly permissible. Ralph may have an obligation to pay back his loan and still not have an obligation either to pay back his loan or to go to the movies. Going to the movies, even if not forbidden, may anyhow fail to fulfill any obligation at all. Yet if Ralph really had an obligation either to pay back his loan or to go to the movies, then his going to the movies would have at least satisfied this disjunctive obligation.

In the face of this persistent problem, one might maintain that disjunctive obligations which can be satisfied only by meeting one disjunct are those in which that disjunct is already (independently) obligatory. Now the claim here can't be simply that no matter how we satisfy the disjunctive obligation we must be sure to also satisfy the independent obligation; that would still leave Ralph's going to the movies as an action which fulfills an obligation. The claim has to be that disjunctive obligations which could be satisfied by performing some action already obligatory can *only* be satisfied by performing that action. This too is surely wrong, though. Suppose that, in addition to promising to take his son either to the zoo or to the store, Ralph promises his wife that he will stop by the store. Ralph

could then meet two of his obligations by taking his son to the store. In spite of this, Ralph's son wants to go the zoo and Ralph takes him. In doing so Ralph meets one of his obligations (the one to his son) even if he neglects to go to the store. He simply meets fewer obligations than he should. Thus while Ralph meets his disjunctive obligation to his son he does so without satisfying his independent obligation to his wife. Clearly, when one disjunctive obligation overlaps with other obligations it is possible to comply with the disjunctive obligation without maximizing "obligation satisfaction."<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, defenders of the view that "the logical consequences of what ought to be ought to be" (RC2) are faced with the following options: (i) they might allow that every action satisfies some obligation; or (ii) they might argue that no one can reasonably hold that a disjunctive obligation may ever be met by satisfying any of its disjuncts; or (iii) they might, under pressure, abandon RC2. The first option is plainly unacceptable (Ralph would meet none of his obligations by shooting his creditor, although he may well get rid of an obligation). The second option is nearly as implausible as the first. For it seems perfectly clear that (at least usually) we *can* meet disjunctive obligations by satisfying any of the disjuncts. Ralph meets his obligation to his son by taking him to the zoo, even though Ralph could just as well meet the obligation by taking his son to the store. Abandoning RC2, if we are after neutrality, is the only defensible course.<sup>30</sup>

Despite there already being grounds for rejecting RC2, given the principle of deontic neutrality, still another problem is worth considering. This one arises because some tenable theories do accept the principle of deontic distribution (3.  $O(A/C) \& O(B/C)$  if and only if  $O((A \& B)/C)$ ). Given deontic distribution, RC2 leads to the absurd conclusion that if a dilemma arises *everything* becomes obligatory. For suppose we ought to do A and we ought to do  $\sim A$  in the same situation, C. Then  $O(A/C)$  and  $O(\sim A/C)$  are both true. By the principle of deontic distribution, so is  $O((A \& \sim A)/C)$ . However, since  $\neg(A \& \sim A) \rightarrow B$ , (for *any* B)<sup>31</sup>, RC2 gives us  $O(B/C)$  regardless of what B is. In other words: those who find themselves in a dilemma ought to do everything.

This final problem with RC2 can be undercut by rejecting the principle of deontic distribution (which holds that if we have a moral obligation to do A and a moral obligation to do B, then we have a moral obligation to do both). The plausibility of the principle of deontic distribution rests, its detractors say, on an equivocation.<sup>32</sup> To support that charge, van Fraassen suggests we consider an agent

... subject to incompatible obligations due to his several allegiances to heaven and earth (sons and lovers, party and fatherland, choose what you will). He appears before the tribunal of heaven (respectively, of earth) and, pointing to his several allegiances, defends his shortcomings by the statement that he cannot be expected to do the impossible. Whereupon the heavenly judge joints out, with irrefutable logic, that the agent is held guilty *not* of failing to do the impossible, but of failing to honor his allegiance to the cause of heaven. His defense before the earthly tribunal fares no better . . .<sup>33</sup>

The accused's defense apparently equivocates between having two obligations, one to do A and the other to do B, and having a single obligation to do both A and B. One may have the two obligations without having the joint obligation. This seems a clear counter-example to the principle of deontic distribution. If so, then RC2 can be extricated from the third problem. Yet I think the example is misleading: the principle of deontic distribution can be defended (and a different equivocation can be brought to light) by enriching the symbolic notation. To show this, I add subscripts to the formal apparatus to reflect the grounds of various obligations. I shall represent the agent's obligation arising from his earthly allegiances using  $O_E$  and his obligations arising from his heavenly allegiances using  $O_H$ .<sup>34</sup>

One of two things might be true: either (i) both heavenly obligations and earthly obligations are sub-species of moral obligation ( $O_M$ ), in which case the agent has both a moral obligation to do A, given C, and a moral obligation to do B, given C ( $O_M(A/C)$  and  $O_M(B/C)$ ); or (ii) at least one of the obligations involved is not a moral obligation. If (i), then while it is true that neither the tribunal of heaven nor that of earth is demanding the impossible, *morality* is. When our agent's case is appealed to the higher court of morality the presiding judge can not escape the charge of demanding the impossible. Here  $O_M((A \& B)/C)$  is true and follows from  $O_M(A/C) \& O_M(B/C)$ . If (ii), then the two obligations involved are not of the same order, so it is not surprising that neither can be distributed. The tribunals of heaven and earth could deny charges of demanding the impossible: neither  $O_H((A \& B)/C)$  nor  $O_E((A \& B)/C)$  follow from  $O_H(A/C) \& O_E(B/C)$ . As long as the kinds of obligation involved are different, however, the principle of deontic distribution remains unchallenged. A counter-example to the principle will work only if the deontic operators are univocal. A case must be found in which

$$6. O_*(A/C) \& O_*(B/C) \& \sim O_*((A \& B)/C)$$

is true (where the subscript \* is the same throughout.)

To get such a case we could construct a new kind of obligation:  $O_{(H \vee E)}$ . One would have an obligation of this sort, we might stipulate, whenever one had either an obligation deriving from heaven or one imposed on earth. For instance, if  $O_H(A/C)$  and  $O_E(B/C)$  are both true, then so are  $O_{(H \vee E)}(A/C)$  and  $O_{(H \vee E)}(B/C)$ . The equivocation between kinds of obligations is thus eliminated, but so is the force of the counter-example. For  $O_{(H \vee E)}((A \& B)/C)$  also seems to be true. While A and B comes to be  $(H \vee E)$  obligatory by different paths the person in question still appears to have an  $(H \vee E)$  obligation to perform both.

The case against deontic distribution itself rests on equivocating between different kinds of obligations. Once the equivocation is removed so too are apparent counter-examples to the principle.<sup>35</sup>

The principle of deontic neutrality demands that we reject any part of a proposed deontic logic which is incompatible with some tenable moral theory. A single sin is all it takes to be dismissed from deontic logic: RC2 sins several times over. All the arguments raise serious doubts about RC2 independently of the principle of deontic neutrality. Still, the ultimate credibility of RC2 is not really at issue here. What is significant is RC2's incompatibility with tenable (thought perhaps false) moral positions. This alone is sufficient to call the principle of deontic neutrality into action; RC2 must be jettisoned.

We are left with a deontic logic containing only

- AC1: the axiom schemata for propositional logic,
- RC1:  $\vdash A$  and  $\vdash A \rightarrow B$  then  $\vdash B$ ,
- AC2:  $\vdash O(A/C) \supset O((A \& C)/C)$ ,

and

- RC3: if  $\vdash B \leftrightarrow C$  then  $\vdash O(A/B) \leftrightarrow O(A/C)$ .

Even AC2, though, won't satisfy the principle of deontic neutrality. When it is accepted along with the principle of deontic distribution

- 3.  $O(A/C) \& O(B/C)$  if and only if  $O((A \& B)/C)$

AC2 yields the controversial theorem:

- 7.  $\vdash O(A/C) \rightarrow O(C/C)$

which says that if it ought to be that A given C, then it also ought to be that C given C; or, in other words, that everything that is, should be. Only those with a Leibnizian optimism could find this deontic fatalism plausible.

Since it is a consequence of several deontic logics, though, some people have tried to make it palatable. They defend it by emphasizing the role ethical judgments play in deliberation. If Ralph has already shot his creditor and comes looking for moral advice, they point out, there is little point in telling him he ought not shoot his creditor—it is too late. It is also no help to tell him he should never have taken out the loan or that he should have been saving money all along. All of this is useless advice. Ralph needs to know what he ought to do now that he has shot someone. What is or has become impossible to do cannot be what we ought to do (so it seems). Though Ralph had an obligation not to shoot his creditor, once the deed is done *that* obligation dissolves.

These observations, however, at most justify holding that we have no obligation to bring it about that what is, isn't; they don't show that what is ought to be. From here, of course, it may seem only a small step to saying that  $O(C/C)$  is true. At least  $O(C/C)$  is harmless, one is inclined to say, since there will be no obligations incompatible with it. The step is innocuous, though, only as long as we are talking about what one *ought to do*, and only if we assume that we ought to do only what can be done. Yet this is just what defenders of dilemmas deny; according to them we may sometimes have an obligation to do A and an obligation to refrain from doing A. Thus, defending AC2 in this way begs the question against those who believe there are dilemmas. If our deontic logic is to be neutral, then AC2 must also be set aside.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Consistent enforcement of the principle of deontic neutrality effectively leaves us without a deontic logic. The principle requires us to abandon each axiom and rule constitutive of deontic logic. In the name of neutrality, the principle asks us to abandon the view that "ought" implies "can," as well as importation of implication into deontic contexts (RC2), and deontic fatalism (AC2); each of these may be rejected by a (logically) tenable moral theory. All that remains of deontic logic, once it is trimmed so as not to offend the principle of deontic neutrality, is propositional logic, modus ponens, and the claim that anything which is obligatory under certain circumstances is obligatory under all logically equivalent circumstances. The push for neutrality leaves deontic logic hopelessly emaciated.

Our failure to arrive at a deontic logic compatible with all tenable moral theories merely reflects the fact that our deontic concepts are



controversial through and through. Of course, things needn't have been this way. Our concept of obligation could have been sufficiently settled so as to limit tenable moral theories to a common logical structure. It has simply turned out that the concept of obligation admits of logically incompatible conceptions.<sup>36</sup> The concept of obligation is itself just too thin to support anything resembling a deontic logic, and the various conceptions of obligation are so diverse that the accounts they offer of obligation are incompatible. Yet only these conceptions offer a structure rich enough to support a "logic of obligation." Since they are incompatible, though, there is no deontic logic (however minimal) which they share. We are therefore left with several, internally consistent, but mutually incompatible, accounts of obligation. There is no uncontroversial core for the principle of deontic neutrality to uncover.

In principle, judicious use of some stricter standard of tenability might allow us to distill a minimal deontic logic compatible with all moral theories which are tenable (according to the stricter standard). The challenge is to find such a standard which does not beg any substantive issues. I think none exists. If none does, then we ought to acknowledge that the logical commitments and conceptual connections of our own theory may differ from those of competing theories.

Both defenders of dilemmas and their opponents should recognize that deontic logic (if we are to have one at all) must rule out moral theories which are nonetheless perfectly tenable; both ought to reject the principle of deontic neutrality. Their debate should center not, as it has, on the logical tenability of dilemma-allowing theories, but on whether these theories offer the most reasonable accounts of obligation. This, though, is a question of moral theory. It cannot be settled in the rarefied atmosphere of deontic logic. Our fundamental commitments in moral theory will determine the logical structure of our moral reasoning, and no single deontic logic is compatible with every tenable moral theory: the disagreements run too deep.

In adopting a deontic logic we must choose between competing logics which go with competing conceptions of obligation. Since whichever we choose will be incompatible with some moral theory or other, our choice will reflect substantive ethical commitments. Hence moral arguments, and moral theory, will dictate our choice. The defense we offer of our deontic logic must, in the end, be that it offers the best logical account of the best theory of obligation. Our moral theory must determine our deontic logic; not the other way around. In deciding which deontic logic to adopt, substantive ethical arguments are not only relevant, they are indispensable.<sup>37</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>SEE, FOR INSTANCE, Føllesdal and Hilpinen (1971), p. 1.  
<sup>2</sup>He argued that Kant's theory is open to just this criticism. See Ross (1954), p. 24; and Ross (1939), p. 89.  
<sup>3</sup>See Ross (1930), p. 20.  
<sup>4</sup>The dyadic symbolism I use here was originally introduced to accommodate paradoxes raised by contrary-to-duty imperatives. I adopt the symbolism, however, not because it solves any paradoxes, but because it highlights the fact that obligations arise in a context. See Tomberlin (1981) for a careful examination of the contrary-to-duty paradox.  
<sup>5</sup>A lot may be said for relativizing ought claims to people and for reading "O(A/C)" as "so and so ought to perform A, given C." For the purposes of this paper, though, I ignore the relativization to people, allow 'A' to range over states of affairs (rather than actions), and talk of what ought to be rather than of what ought to be done. None of this, I think, affects the arguments of the paper.  
<sup>6</sup>Of course the reconciliation requires loosening the analogy between obligation and necessity so often emphasized. Moral dilemmas need not have the form: (i) O(A/C) & O(¬A/C). For we face a dilemma anytime we have incompatible obligations, so anytime we face a situation in which our obligations have the form: (ii) O(A/C) & O(B/C) & ¬(A & B)/C. Dilemmas with the form of (i) closely resemble outright contradictions, thus they are probably at the root of Ross' assumption. Williams (1941, p. 179), for instance, argues that they "already wear the form of logical inconsistency". In any case, as long as one accepts a standard principle of deontic logic—the necessary consequences of what is obligatory are obligatory—one can derive (i) from (ii).  
<sup>7</sup>See McConnell (1978 and 1976) for interesting discussions of the relation between moral dilemmas and inconsistency.  
<sup>8</sup>See van Fraassen (1973), p. 8, Williams (1973), Marcus (1980), Lemmon (1962), Trigg (1971).

<sup>9</sup>We may, of course, add different axioms and rules of inference to this core logic in order to develop special-interest logics which more completely capture the logical structure of particular moral theories.

<sup>10</sup>See Conce (1982) for a defense of the view that the problems with possibility and permission render the view that there are dilemmas incomprehensible.

<sup>11</sup>The argument can be found in van Fraassen (1973), Williams (1973) and Marcus (1980). In contrast, Trigg (1971) and Lemmon (1962) handle problems with possibility by rejecting the principle that ought implies can.

<sup>12</sup>Notably, though problems with possibility receive regular attention, few defenders of dilemmas have paid attention to problems with permission. van Fraassen is one of the few to do so explicitly. See van Fraassen (1973).

<sup>13</sup>Advocates of dilemma-allowing theories might respond by arguing that when we are judging people who face dilemmas we still base our judgments on their behavior—we just know ahead of time that their action (whatever it turns out to be) will be wrong. Stalnaker's argument appears on p. 14 of van Fraassen's paper (1973).

<sup>14</sup>Others have rejected dilemma-allowing theories as untenable on metaphysical grounds. Such theories are untenable (they say) because committed to a fundamentally fragmented, and so unsystematic, morality. Yet not all dilemma-allowing theories are fragmented. A theory which has only the single directive to "always keep your promise," would presumably satisfy metaphysical prohibitions against fragmentation. Still, it would permit dilemmas. One might find that nothing one can do is permitted; all available actions may involve the breaking of a promise. So even if metaphysical objections to a fragmented moral theory are compelling, they will not support a wholesale rejection of all dilemma-allowing theories as untenable.

<sup>15</sup>See Ross (1939; 1954 and 1930), Conce (1982).

<sup>16</sup>Note that the following arguments assume only the *logical tenability* of dilemma-allowing theories. This assumption is perfectly compatible with the view that the best moral theory will leave no room for moral dilemmas.

<sup>17</sup>I purposely gloss over the problems surrounding the notion of a measure of moral value.

<sup>18</sup>van Fraassen (1973), p. 17.

<sup>19</sup>van Fraassen goes on to offer a more complicated truth-definition, but the changes he makes need not be included here.

<sup>20</sup>— is used for material implication, ' ↔ ' for the biconditional, and ' ⊃ ' to indicate theoremhood.

<sup>21</sup>van Fraassen (1973), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup>Kant (1971), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup>I concentrate on van Fraassen's revised system in what follows; however, analogous arguments will apply to any deontic logic.

<sup>24</sup>van Fraassen (1973), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup>See for example, Lemmon (1962).

<sup>26</sup>This has come to be called "Ross' Paradox," see Ross (1941).

<sup>27</sup>van Fraassen (1973), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup>Castaneda (1974), al-Hibri (1978), and Hansson (1971) each take this course.

<sup>29</sup>Though it is much more plausible to say that when obligations overlap in this way we ought to perform the action which will satisfy as many of the most important obligations as possible.

<sup>30</sup>See Castaneda (1975) for one theoretically attractive system which rejects RC2. It is worth noting that Ross' Paradox is open to at least two interpretations. On one reading of the paradox, what is supposedly troubling is that from a single obligation we can generate disjunctive obligations which may in turn be satisfied any way we please. The conundrums arising from this reading can be quite decisively resolved by noting that alternative ways of satisfying disjunctive obligations are not always equally good—to think otherwise is to ignore that obligations exist within a complex deontic environment. On another reading of the paradox (the one I advance) what is troubling is the proliferation of obligation-satisfying actions. That every action I might perform satisfies some obligation (even if not the important one) is paradoxical; some actions (say, the killing of innocent babies for entertainment) satisfy no obligations whatsoever.

<sup>31</sup>This is true as long as we stick to standard propositional logic.

<sup>32</sup>See Williams (1973), Marcus (1984), and van Fraassen (1973).

<sup>33</sup>van Fraassen (1973), p. 13.

<sup>34</sup>Of course nothing hinges on the grounds that happen to be invoked in van Fraassen's example. This strategy of indexing obligations is a well-established tradition in moral theory: for instance, it supports the now common practice of distinguishing moral "oughts" from prudential "oughts." Castaneda (1974) uses the strategy to good effect.

<sup>35</sup>Perhaps the most compelling thing about RC2 is its intimate connection with all possible world semantics for deontic logic. Roughly, such a semantics says that an act is obligatory (or that a state of affairs ought to be) if and only if the act is performed (or the state of affairs obtains) in all the relevant possible worlds. Since we are considering only *possible* worlds, however, if A is true then all of A's logical consequences are too. As a result, if A is obligatory because it is true in the appropriate possible worlds, then all of A's logical consequences will be obligatory for the same reason. RC2 is just a reflection of this property of possible world semantics. In light of the problems faced by RC2, the intimate connection seems more a serious obstacle for a possible worlds approach to deontic logic than a compelling argument for RC2. In any case, RC2's problems more than justify thinking of it as a principle which one might reasonably abandon.

<sup>36</sup>Here I am invoking Rawls' distinction between a particular concept and the various conceptions of which it admits. Rawls uses it to distinguish the concept of justice, which is defined by the role its principles play in evaluating social structures, from the various conceptions of justice (including justice as fairness) which offer more or less specific accounts of the principles. (See Rawls [13], p. 9.)

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