

PETER VALLENTYNE

TWO TYPES OF MORAL DILEMMAS

ABSTRACT. In recent years the question of whether moral dilemmas are conceptually possible has received a fair amount of attention. In arguing for or against the conceptual possibility of moral dilemmas authors have been almost exclusively concerned with *obligation dilemmas*, i.e., situations in which *more than one* action is *obligatory*. Almost no one has been concerned with *prohibition dilemmas*, i.e., situations in which *no* feasible actions is *permissible*. I argue that the two types of dilemmas are distinct, and that a much stronger case can be made against the conceptual possibility of obligation dilemmas than against the conceptual possibility of prohibition dilemmas.

1. INTRODUCTION

A moral dilemma arises when an agent is in a choice situation in which he/she cannot satisfy the dictates of morality. Suppose, for example, that breaking a promise is absolutely forbidden, i.e., under no circumstances is it permissible to break a promise. Suppose that this morning I promised my wife that I would phone her exactly at 5:00, but that (due to a lapse in memory) I later promised a friend that I would phone him exactly at 5:00. Here I am just before five o'clock, and I have only one phone in front of me. I can phone my wife or I can phone my friend, but I can't phone both at exactly 5:00. Since promise-breaking is absolutely forbidden, and I have promised to phone each at exactly 5:00, no matter what I do I will fail to satisfy the dictates of morality. I am, it seems, in a moral dilemma.

In this example I find myself in a dilemma because of my previous actions (making two promises which it is often impossible to jointly satisfy). Dilemmas can (at least apparently) arise without being due to an agent's previous actions. Suppose, for example, that it is forbidden to kill one's parents and forbidden to allow them to die. A dilemma would arise in a situation in which unless one kills one's mother, she will kill one's father. In such a situation it would be forbidden to kill one's mother, but also forbidden to do anything else (since that would allow one's father to die).

In recent years the problem of moral dilemmas has received the attention of a number of philosophers. Some authors¹ argue that moral

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dilemmas are not conceptually possible (i.e., that they are incoherent, given the nature of the concepts involved) because they are ruled out by certain valid principles of deontic logic. Other authors² insist that moral dilemmas are conceptually possible, and argue that therefore the principles of deontic logic that rule them out must be rejected.

In arguing for or against the conceptual possibility of moral dilemmas authors have been almost exclusively concerned with *obligation dilemmas*, i.e., situations in which *more than one* action is *obligatory*. Almost no one has been explicitly concerned with *prohibition dilemmas*, i.e., situations in which *no* feasible action is *permissible*.³ I shall argue that the two types of dilemmas are distinct, and that a much stronger case can be made against the conceptual possibility of obligation dilemmas than against the conceptual possibility of prohibition dilemmas.

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF PROHIBITION DILEMMAS FOR ACTION TOKENS

Talk about actions is ambiguous as to whether it concerns action tokens or action types. Action tokens are particulars, they are performed by a particular agent, at a particular time (or interval of time), can be performed at most once, and are not the sort of things that are instantiated. Action types (such as "a going to the store") are universals in that in general they can be instantiated by a number of different action tokens.⁴

Let us start by focussing our attention on the deontic status of action tokens. Later we shall consider the deontic status of action types.

Token prohibition dilemmas are choice situations in which no feasible action token is permissible. The choice situations described at the beginning of this paper are, at least apparently, examples of token prohibition dilemmas. In the first example, every feasible action token is a promise-breaking, and therefore forbidden. In the second example, each feasible action token is either a killing or an allowing to die of one of one's parents, and is therefore forbidden.

The question, then, is whether token prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible. My claim is that there is nothing in the logic of the deontic concepts that rules them out. That this is so can be seen by reconsidering the first example of a moral dilemma, and taking the

relevant normative system to be – not that of morality, but rather – that of the rules of a particular club. Because it is conceptually possible that promise-breaking be absolutely forbidden according to a club's rules, and that someone make conflicting promises, club rule prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible. The fact that situations can arise in which no feasible action token is judged permissible is an unattractive feature of the absolute prohibition against promise-breaking. On careful reflection we might not choose such a rule to govern our behavior. Still, there is nothing inconsistent about it. It does not issue contradictory directives. It does not, for example, hold that in the above choice situation some action token is both permissible and not permissible (it holds that no action is permissible). It merely holds that no feasible action is permissible in the given choice situation. Thus, since the above choice situation is conceptually possible, it is conceptually possible for there to be token prohibition dilemmas, at least for club rules.

Now, this does *not* show that *moral* token prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible. It may be that there is something about morality (as opposed, e.g., to club rules) that rules out their possibility. It may be, for example, that there is something about morality that rules out the conceptual possibility of promise-breaking being absolutely forbidden. The logic of deontic concepts does not, however, rule out this possibility, and so the burden of proof is on those who wish to argue against the conceptual possibility of *moral* token prohibition dilemmas.

One argument against the conceptual possibility of moral token prohibition dilemmas might go as follows. An action token is morally permissible just in case it is a best (most reasonable) feasible action from a certain (e.g., fully informed, impartial, benevolent) point of view. (Different moral theories will give different accounts of what it is that makes an action a best action.) Action tokens that are not best actions are forbidden. Because, in any given choice situation there will be at least some feasible action tokens that are best, there will be at least some actions that are permissible. Token prohibition dilemmas, it seems, cannot arise on this account.

One problem with this account is that if it is to rule out token prohibition dilemmas, it must be assumed that action tokens of a given choice situation are always comparable in the sense that for any two actions, at least one of them is at least as good as the other. For if

some action tokens are incomparable, there is no guarantee that there is at least one *best* action (i.e., action that is *at least as good* as any alternative). It might be that there are only *maximally good* actions (i.e., that are *not less good* than any alternative) incomparable to each other. If this were to be so, then in some choice situations no action token would be permissible on the above account. Of course, it might be replied that the proper account of morality is rather that an action token is morally permissible just in case it is a *maximally good* action from the specified point of view. On this account to be permissible actions need only be such that no alternative action token is better. They need not be at least as good as any alternative. Because there will always be at least one maximally good action, this account does rule out token prohibition dilemmas. But what needs to be argued is why this and not the previous account is the correct one.

Of course, there are all sorts of other accounts of morality which do not rule out moral prohibition dilemmas. To mention but one more, still in vein similar to the above, it might be suggested that an action token is morally permissible just in case there are all things considered *good* reasons from the specified point of view for performing it. This account does not rule out token prohibition because it does not rule out the possibility of there being some choice situations in which there are no action tokens for which all things considered there are good reasons to perform them. There might be some choice situations in which there are good reasons, all things considered, *against* performing each of the feasible action tokens. Such situations would be token prohibition dilemmas.

The general point here is that although *some* conceptions of morality rule out the possibility of token prohibition dilemmas, many do not. Because the nature of morality is a highly contested issue, it is no simple matter to determine whether moral token prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible. What is clear, however, is that the matter cannot be settled simply by appealing to the logic of deontic concepts. It is rather the nature of morality that is relevant.

Because it will be relevant below, let us note that it is conceptually possible for there to be choice situations in which *no action – feasible or not –* is permissible. For consider a club that has a rule that prohibits men from sitting when a woman is in the club room. Suppose, that the members realize that the rule is sexist, and decide not only to repeal it, but – to break the members' old habits – to pass

a new rule prohibiting men from being in any position other than a sitting position when a woman is in the club room. Suppose further that they pass the new rule, but forget to repeal the old one. Then, when a man is in the presence of a woman in the club room every action – feasible or not – is prohibited, since every action either puts or keeps the man in a sitting position, or puts or keeps him in some other position. Again, these rules do not issue contradictory directives (e.g., that some action is permissible and that it is not). It merely prohibits everything in that choice situation. So the logic of deontic concepts do not rule out even this strong form of prohibition dilemma.

Token prohibition dilemmas, then, are conceptually possible for at least some normative system (e.g., club rules). There may be something special about morality that makes moral token prohibition dilemmas conceptually impossible, but so far we have been given no compelling reason to believe that this is so.

3. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF OBLIGATION DILEMMAS FOR ACTION TOKENS

A *token obligation dilemma* is a choice situation in which more than one action token is obligatory. I shall argue that token obligation dilemmas are not conceptually possible.

First, however, I need to distinguish obligations from what I shall call ‘quasi-obligations’. An action token is *obligatory* just in case it is permissible and no alternative to it is permissible (i.e., it is permissible to perform it, and wrong to omit it). An action token is *quasi-obligatory* just in case no alternative to it is permissible (i.e., it is wrong to omit it). Unlike obligation, quasi-obligation does not entail permissibility. Quasi-obligatory actions are obligatory only if they are permissible.

A *token quasi-obligation dilemma* is a choice situation in which more than one action token is quasi-obligatory. I shall argue that token quasi-obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible (at least for some normative systems), but that token obligation dilemmas are not.

The distinction between obligation and quasi-obligation collapses, if one assumes that in every choice situation there is at least one permissible action. For if there is at least one permissible action, and some action is quasi-obligatory (such that no alternative is permissible), then the quasi-obligatory action must be permissible (since

some action is permissible). Consequently, the quasi-obligatory action is obligatory. We have seen, however, the logic of the deontic concepts does *not* guarantee that there is always at least one permissible action, and so the distinction between quasi-obligation and obligation is genuine.

Given that it has been generally assumed that there is always at least one permissible action, the distinction between obligation and quasi-obligation has not been clearly made. I shall argue below that the above definition of obligation best explicates our intuitive notion of obligation, but even if this claim is rejected, the distinction between the two sorts of obligation-like dilemmas remains important. For the argument that I shall give below will establish that obligation-like dilemmas are not conceptually possible for the strong concept of obligation (what I call 'obligation'), but that they are possible for the weak concept of obligation (what I call 'quasi-obligation'). Many defenders of "obligation" dilemmas, I suggest, are defenders of quasi-obligation dilemmas, not of obligation dilemmas (in my stipulated sense).

That token quasi-obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible follows immediately from the conceptual possibility of token prohibition dilemmas, for the two are equivalent whenever there are at least two feasible actions. For, assuming there are at least two feasible actions, any choice situation in which all actions are prohibited is a choice situation in which each action is quasi-obligatory (since all its alternatives are prohibited), and vice versa. Since token prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible, for at least some normative systems, so are token quasi-obligation dilemmas. Again, there may be something about morality that rules out the possibility of such dilemmas for morality, but so far no compelling reason has been given.

Token obligation dilemmas, however, are not conceptually possible. For if the agent has an obligation to perform an action token, ac1, and an obligation to perform an alternative, ac2, then, by the first obligation, ac1 is permissible and no alternative to ac1 is permissible, and so ac2 is *not* permissible.⁵ But by the second obligation ac2 *is* permissible, which yields a contradiction. Since the assumption that token obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible yields a contradiction, this shows that they are not conceptually possible.

Agents can, of course, have conflicting *prime facie* obligations. Clearly, situations can arise in which relative to some *subset* of the

relevant moral considerations one action is obligatory, and relative to some *other* subset of the relevant moral considerations another action is obligatory. That is not the issue here. We are concerned with obligations in the sense of that which *all things considered* the agent ought to do. There can be no token obligation dilemmas in that sense.

This impossibility result follows immediately from the definition of obligation as “permissible and no alternative action is permissible”. It might be objected that our intuitive notion of obligation is not captured by this definition, and so the impossibility result is irrelevant to the issue at hand. There are two relevant possibilities here: either it is denied that obligatory actions must be permissible, or it is denied that they must be such that no alternative action is permissible. Let us consider these separately.

Can an action be obligatory but not permissible? Not if our intuitive deontic classification scheme has a structure parallel to that of our classification scheme for possibility and necessity. The category of the possible has the two mutually exclusive and exhaustive subcategories of the *contingent* and the *necessary*. All necessary things are possible things. Our category of the permissible has the two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories of the *optional* and the *obligatory*. An action is *optional* just in case it is permissible to perform it and also permissible to perform some alternative. An action is *obligatory* just in case it is permissible to perform it but not permissible to perform any alternative. To deny that obligatory actions must be permissible is to deny that the optional and the obligatory are two mutually exclusive and exhaustive subcategories of the permissible, and that is not plausible.

This point can be made in the following slightly different manner. To say that an action is obligatory is to say that all things considered the agent ought to perform that action. How could it possibly be true that an agent ought to perform some action that is not permissible? If it is not permissible, surely it's not the case that the agent ought to perform it.

So the first line of attack fails. What about the second line of attack, which denies that obligatory action tokens must be such that no alternative action token is permissible? The most plausible (although not the only logically possible) defense of this denial seems to be the following. On my definition of obligation (permissible and no alternative action is permissible) obligation is a comparative matter in that whether or not an action is obligatory depends on the permissibility of

the actions that are its alternatives. But that, it might be claimed, is wrong. Obligation is a non-comparative matter. Obligations attach “directly”, so to speak, to actions and not merely “derivatively” in those cases where it contingently turns out that no other action is permissible. Those actions that are obligatory are so, it might be claimed, independently of the moral status of their alternatives.

The problem with this line of attack is that of making sense of the claim that obligations attach “directly” to actions. Consider, for example, the injunction “Always keep your promises!”. Does obligation as judged by this principle attach directly to an action merely because it is a promise-keeping! I think not. To see this, suppose that I have promised my wife to phone her exactly at 5:00, and that just before 5:00 there are two phones in front of me. I can phone here on the black phone, or I can phone here on the red phone. Are each of these action tokens obligatory merely because they are ways of keeping of promise? Surely not! The injunction “Always keep your promises!” does not mean that *every* action token that fulfills a promise is *obligatory*. It only means that any action token which violates a promise is *forbidden*. Often there will be many ways of fulfilling a promise, and to think that each of them is obligatory is absurd. The injunction “Always keep your promises!” does not “directly” attach obligations to any particular actions. It only attaches obligations contingently in those cases where there is only one action token that fulfills the promise.

This is, of course, but one example, but the general idea should be clear. Moral injunctions do not directly determine which actions tokens are obligatory. They only determine which actions tokens are permissible. An individual action is obligatory just in case it is the only permissible action token in the choice situation.

Stated somewhat differently the argument is this: An action token is obligatory only if it is wrong to omit it. To omit an action token is to perform one of its alternatives. So, an action token is obligatory only if all its alternatives are forbidden.

Thus, the second line of attack against my argument that token obligation dilemmas are not conceptually possible also fails. What about the examples of moral dilemmas with which I began the paper? Are those not examples of token obligation dilemmas? They are not. In those examples no action token was permissible, and therefore no action token was obligatory. The examples are examples of prohibition

dilemmas, and of quasi-obligation dilemmas (since all the alternatives to each token are prohibited).

So token obligation dilemmas are not conceptually possible for any normative system, whereas token quasi-obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible at least for some systems. The importance of this result remains even if one denies that the given definition of obligation captures our intuitive notion. Whatever they are called, strong obligation-like dilemmas (what I call 'obligation dilemmas') are not possible, whereas weak obligation-like dilemmas (what I call 'quasi-obligation dilemmas') are not.

With respect to tokens, then, both prohibition and quasi-obligation dilemmas (which are equivalent whenever there are at least two feasible actions) are conceptually possible, but obligation dilemmas are not.

4. THE POSSIBILITY OF PROHIBITION DILEMMAS FOR ACTION TYPES

So far we have been considering the possibility of dilemmas for action tokens. Most of the discussion that has taken place in the literature has concerned action types, so let us turn our attention to that issue.

A *type prohibition dilemma* is a choice situation in which no feasible action type is permissible. Because the logic of deontic concepts does not guarantee that in any choice situation some feasible action is permissible, it follows that it does not rule out the conceptual possibility of type prohibition dilemmas. For, since an action type is feasible just in case some action token of that type is feasible, and an action type is permissible just in case some action token of that type is permissible, it follows immediately that type prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible just in case token prohibition dilemmas are. Since the latter are conceptually possible, so are the former. Furthermore, since strong token prohibition dilemmas (i.e., situations in which *no* token – feasible or not – is permissible) are conceptually possible, so are strong type prohibition dilemmas (i.e., situations in which not action type – feasible or not – is permissible).

This has important implications for deontic logic. For a principle of standard deontic is $P(p) \vee P(\neg p)$, which just says that (in any given choice situation) some action is permissible. As we have seen, if we were devising a normative system, we would try to make it satisfy this

principle, but the examples of this paper illustrate that the notion of permissibility does not guarantee the truth of this principle. So we must give up this part of standard deontic logic.⁶

Thus, type prohibition dilemmas are conceptually possible with respect to club rules (e.g. if they forbid promise-breaking). Whether or not they are conceptually possible for the moral case depends on whether there is something about the concept of morality that rules them out. As for the case of action tokens, no cogent argument has yet been given to rule them out.

5. OBLIGATION DILEMMAS FOR ACTION TYPES

A *type obligation (quasi-obligation) dilemma* is a choice situation in which there are two action types, each of which is obligatory (quasi-obligatory), the conjunction of which is not feasible. I shall argue that quasi-obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible, at least for some normative systems, but that – with an important qualification – obligation dilemmas are not.

Here and below the following assumptions will be used concerning action types. (1) An action type is *feasible* for a given agent in a given choice situation if and only if some action token of that type is feasible for that agent in that choice situation.⁷ (2) An action type is *permissible (forbidden)* for a given choice situation if and only if some (no) action token of that type is permissible in that choice situation. (3) An action type is *obligatory* for a given choice situation if and only if it is permissible and its negation is not.⁸ (4) An action type is *quasi-obligatory* for a given choice situation if and only if its negation is not permissible. (As for action tokens obligation implies quasi-obligation, but not vice versa.)

The arguments provided above for the claim that my stipulated definition of obligation captures our intuitive notion of obligation also apply here, and so I shall not repeat them. Again, anyone unconvinced by these arguments can simply substitute ‘obligation in the strong sense’ for what I call ‘quasi-obligation’.

Type obligation dilemmas are situations in which more than one action type is obligatory, but the conjunction of the actions types is not feasible. A *strong* type obligation dilemma is a choice situation in which the obligatory action types are *conceptually incompatible* (such as “phoning Toronto” and “not phoning Toronto”). A *weak* type obligation dilemma is a choice situation in which the obligatory action

types are conceptually compatible, and merely incompatible given the circumstances (such as “keeping my promises” and “not phoning Toronto”, when I have promised to phone Toronto). Let us consider each case separately.

5.1. *The Impossibility of Strong Type Obligation Dilemmas*

Consider first the case where there are two obligatory action types, one of which is the negation of the other. Such dilemmas are not conceptually possible, since if a given action type, t , is obligatory, it is permissible, and its negation, $\sim t$, is not. So, $\sim t$ cannot also be obligatory, for if it were, $\sim t$ would be permissible, which is a contradiction. So, strong obligation dilemmas where both t and $\sim t$ (for some t) are obligatory are not possible. The argument here is exactly parallel to that against the possibility of obligation dilemmas for action token.

But what about the case where both t and s obligatory, and t and s are conceptually incompatible, but s is not identical with $\sim t$ (e.g., suppose s is equivalent to $\sim t \& r$, for some r). The standard argument, which I shall endorse, against the possibility of such obligation dilemmas is this, where ‘Pos’ and ‘Nec’ designates conceptual possibility and necessity, respectively:

- A1. $\text{Ob}(t) \& \text{Ob}(r) \& \sim \text{Pos}(t \& r)$
- A2. $\sim \text{Pos}(t \& r) \rightarrow \text{Nec}(t \rightarrow \sim r)$
- A3. $[\text{Ob}(t) \& \text{Nec}(t \rightarrow \sim r)] \rightarrow \text{Ob}(\sim r)$
- A4. $\text{Ob}(r) \rightarrow P(r) \& \sim P(\sim r)$

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- A5. $P(\tilde{r}) \& \sim P(\tilde{r})$

A1–A4 lead to a contradiction as follows: From A1–A3 (focussing on $\text{Ob}(t)$) we get $\text{Ob}(\sim r)$. Applying A4 to $\text{Ob}(\sim r)$ (substituting ‘ $\sim r$ ’ for ‘ r ’ in A4) we get $P(\sim r)$. But from A1 and A4 (focussing on $\text{Ob}(r)$) we get $\sim P(\sim r)$, which give us the contradiction. So one of the premisses must be given up.

A1 is the supposition that a strong obligation dilemma obtains, and must, I shall argue be rejected. A2 is acceptable, since it is the standard principle of modal logic that says if $t \& r$ is not conceptual possible, then it is conceptually necessary that if t holds, then $\sim r$ holds. A3 is demonstrably acceptable by the following argument: If t is obligatory, then some token of type t is permissible and no token of type $\sim t$ is permissible. But if being of type t conceptually entails being

of type $\sim r$, then it follows that some token of type $\sim r$ is permissible, and no token of type r (i.e., $\sim \sim r$) is permissible. It follows, that is, that $\sim r$ is obligatory. So A3 is acceptable. Finally, A4 follows immediately from the definition of obligation. Consequently, it is A1, the supposition that a strong type obligation obtains, that must be rejected. Strong type obligation dilemmas are not possible.

Strong quasi-obligation dilemmas, on the other hand, are conceptually possible. Note first that the above argument does not apply to quasi-obligation, since the counterpart of A4 is false for quasi-obligation. Quasi-obligation does not imply permissibility. Second, the possibility of type quasi-obligation dilemmas, at least for some normative systems, follows immediately from the possibility of strong token prohibition dilemmas. In such situations no token is permissible, and consequently every action type, t , is quasi-obligatory (i.e., such that no token of type $\sim t$ is permissible). In particular, both t and $\sim t$ will be quasi-obligatory. So, once again, we see that quasi-obligatory dilemmas are conceptually possible for some normative systems. Whether *moral* quasi-obligation dilemmas are possible depends on whether moral prohibition dilemmas are possible, and the logic of deontic concepts does not settle that issue.

6. THE QUALIFIED IMPOSSIBILITY OF WEAK TYPE OBLIGATIO DILEMMAS

So far we have been considering the possibility of two conceptually incompatible action types being obligatory. A more interesting case is that where two *conceptually compatible* action types are obligatory, but are *empirically incompatible* given the laws of nature and the circumstances. Let us now consider the case of such weak type obligation dilemmas.

The usual argument against the conceptual possibility of type obligation dilemmas takes the following form, where 'Feas(t)' designates that type t is feasible (i.e., some token of that type is empirically possible for the agent in the circumstances):

- B1: Ob(t_1) & Ob(t_2) \sim Feas(t_1 & t_2)
- B2: [Ob(t_1) & Ob(t_2)] \rightarrow Ob(t_1 & t_2)
- B3: Ob(t_1 & t_2) \rightarrow Feas(t_1 & t_2)

- B4: Feas(t_1 & t_2) & \sim Feas(t_1 & t_2)

B1 is simply the supposition that a weak type obligation dilemma obtains. B2 follows from the principle of deontic distribution, an axiom of standard deontic logic, according to which the conjunction of two obligatory action types is also obligatory. B3 follows from the principle that ought implies can. B4 is a contradiction derivable directly from B1–B3.

Since the conjunction of B1–B3 yields a contradiction, one of the three premisses must be given up. Opponents of the conceptual possibility of obligation dilemmas take B2 and B3 to be unobjectionable, and therefore conclude that B1 – the supposition that an obligation dilemma arises – is demonstrably false. The crucial part of their argument is therefore the claim that B2 and B3 are unobjectionable. Let us examine them.

To see that B2 is unobjectionable, it suffices to remember how the deontic status of action types is related to that of action tokens. An action type is permissible just in case some action token of that type is permissible. An action type is obligatory just in case that type is permissible and its negation is not. Thus, if t_1 is obligatory, some action token of type t_1 is permissible, and no action token of type $\sim t_1$ is. Likewise, if t_2 is obligatory, some action token of type t_2 is permissible, and no action token of type $\sim t_2$ is. So, if both t_1 and t_2 are obligatory, then no action token of type $\sim(t_1 \& t_2)$ is permissible. Furthermore, from that, the fact that some token of type t_1 is permissible, and the fact that some token of type t_2 is permissible, it follows that some action of type $t_1 \& t_2$ is permissible. Therefore, action type $t_1 \& t_2$ is permissible and action type $\sim(t_1 \& t_2)$ is not; that is, action type $t_1 \& t_2$ is obligatory. Thus, if t_1 and t_2 are each obligatory, then so is their conjunction. So B2 is okay.

The situation with B3 is much more complicated. The truth of B3 depends crucially on the point of view that the deontic concepts represent. Here we are concerned with the realistic point of view, that is, with what the agent may or ought to do *given* the circumstances of a given choice situation (as opposed to what ideally may or ought to be the case). Some might claim that there are at least two different realistic points of view. From the *nomic* point of view an action is permissible in a given choice situation just in case it would not violate the moral law given the circumstances – whether or nor it is feasible. From this point of view neither “may” nor “ought” implies “can”. From the *deliberative* point of view an action is permissible just in case *it is feasible* and would not violate the moral law given the circum-

stances. From this point of view “may” and “ought” do imply “can”.

Which of these two points of view corresponds to the intuitive realistic point of view? One argument in favor of the deliberative viewpoint is that it does not seem appropriate to say ‘You may [or ought] to do X [e.g., stop an oncoming train with your bare hands]’ when it is not feasible for you to do X. If it is permissible or obligatory it must, it seems, be feasible.

The problem with this argument, it might be suggested, is that it overlooks the possibility that the feasibility of an action may merely be a *conversational implicature* of the speech act of claiming that the action is permissible – as opposed to part of the *content* of the claim itself. It overlooks, that is, the possibility that the feasibility of the action is merely something that must be supposed to be true, if the speech act is to be appropriate (e.g., relevant) – not something that is literally said.⁹

This general point raised by this objection is a good one. It is unclear, however, that it will work in the present case. It assumes that appropriate sense can be made of the notion of permissibility from the nomic viewpoint. But what exactly might it mean to say that in a given choice situation an infeasible action does (or does not) violate the moral law?

This notion should not be confused with that of counterfactual permissibility, according to which an action is counterfactually permissible just in case *if* it were feasible, then it *would* (or might) be permissible. This is of no help here, because from the realistic viewpoint we are concerned with permissibility *given* the circumstances. That an action is permissible in some *other* choice situation – no matter how similar it is to the given one – is of no relevance to its permissibility in the given choice situation. The problem is that in general the permissibility of a given action depends on the exact circumstance of the choice situation, and that determines which actions are feasible. Therefore there does not seem to be any basis for claiming that certain infeasible actions do or do not violate the moral laws, and so it is far from clear that appropriate sense can be made of the nomic viewpoint.

The issue is, of course, rather complex. Although I am skeptical about the prospects of adequately explicating the notion of the nomic point of view, I cannot here defend that skepticism. The best we can here conclude is therefore B3 is true from the deliberative viewpoint but not from the nomic viewpoint.

Where, then, does this leave us with respect to the argument [B1–B4] that type obligation dilemmas are not conceptually possible? Because B1–B3 lead to a contradiction, and for the deliberative viewpoint, B2 and B3 are conceptually true, we can conclude that B1 – the supposition that a type obligation dilemma arises – must be conceptually false from the deliberative viewpoint. For the nomic viewpoint – assuming appropriate sense can be made of that viewpoint – B3 is not a conceptual truth, and so the above argument does not show that type obligation dilemmas are not conceptually possible from the nomic viewpoint.¹⁰

Note that the examples with which we started (where promise-breaking, and the killing or allowing to die of one of one's parents are respectively forbidden) are *not* examples of type obligation dilemmas from the deliberative viewpoint. In these examples no feasible action token is permissible. Thus, since from the deliberative viewpoint an action type is permissible just in case some feasible action token of that type is permissible, no action type is permissible, nor, a fortiori, obligatory. Consequently, there are from the deliberative viewpoint no conflicting obligatory action types.

They are, however, cases of type quasi-obligation dilemmas. Keeping my promise to my wife is quasi-obligatory (since not keeping my promise to her is forbidden), as is keeping my promise to my friend. But since neither of these actions types is permissible, neither of them is obligatory. The quasi-obligation counterpart of argument B1–B4 is unsuccessful, because B3, the principle that ought implies can, is not true of quasi-obligation – even from the deliberate viewpoint. To see this consider a situation in which a token prohibition dilemma arises (i.e., where no feasible action token is permissible). In such a situation the action type “moving at less than or equal to the speed of light” is not permissible (since no token of that type – or any other feasible type – is permissible). Consequently, the type “not moving at less than or equal to the speed of light”, i.e., “moving at faster than the speed of light”, is quasi-obligatory. Given (we may assume) that it is not feasible for an agent to move at faster than the speed of light, this shows that something can be quasi-obligatory, but not feasible – even from the deliberative viewpoint.

To sum up: *Strong* type obligation dilemmas (where two conceptually incompatible action types are each obligatory), are not possible. Nor are *weak* type obligation dilemmas (where two conceptually compatible, but empirically incompatible, action types are each obli-

gatory) from the *deliberative* viewpoint. *Weak* type obligation dilemmas may, however, be conceptually possible from the *nommic* viewpoint (if sense can be made of that viewpoint). Strong and weak *quasi-obligation* dilemmas are conceptually possible – for at least some normative systems – from both the nomic and the deliberative viewpoint.

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, except for the case of weak type obligation dilemmas from the nomic viewpoint, obligation dilemmas – token or type, strong or weak – are not conceptually possible for any normative system. Prohibition dilemmas and quasi-obligation dilemmas (which are effectively equivalent), on the other hand, are not ruled out by the logic of deontic concepts, and so for at least some normative systems (e.g., club rules) they are conceptually possible. There may be something about morality that rules them out for the moral case, but so far no compelling argument has been given to this effect.

The key move in my argument was to establish that it is conceptually possible for at least some normative systems for *no* action token to be permissible in a given choice situation. Having established that, we saw that the notions of obligation and quasi-obligation come apart in exactly such situations. Because this has not been generally recognized, proponents of “obligation” dilemmas have not adequately distinguished between the two sorts of “obligation” dilemmas. Distinguishing between the two allows us to see that two principles that proponents of dilemmas often reject – “ought implies may”, and “ought implies can” – are true (from the deliberative viewpoint, at least) of obligation, but not of quasi-obligation. Most proponents of moral dilemmas are best understood, I suggest, as proponents of quasi-obligation dilemmas. But – assuming there is more than one feasible action – quasi-obligation dilemmas arise when and only when prohibition dilemmas arise. So the case for the possibility of moral dilemmas ultimately rests on the possibility of moral prohibition dilemmas.

Given that (except perhaps from the nomic viewpoint) obligation dilemmas are not possible for any normative system, far too much attention has been focussed on moral obligation dilemmas. The key question for morality is whether *prohibition* (or, if you like, quasi-obligation) dilemmas are possible. Unlike the case for moral obligation

dilemmas, the conceptual possibility of more prohibition dilemmas cannot be settled simply by appealing to the logic of deontic concepts.¹¹ The issue is much broader: it concerns the very nature of morality.¹²

NOTES

¹ For example: Terrance McConnell, 1976, 'Moral Dilemmas and Requiring the Impossible', *Philosophical Studies* 29, 409–413; Terrance McConnell, 1978, 'Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 1978, 8, 269–287; Earl Connee, 1982, 'Against Moral Dilemmas', *Philosophical Review* 91, 87–97.

² For example: E. J. Lemmon, 1962, 'Moral Dilemmas', *Philosophical Review* 71, 139–158; Bernard Williams, 1965, 'Ethical Consistency', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 39, pp. 103–24 (reprinted in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*); Roger Trigg, 1971, 'Moral Conflict', *Mind* 80, 42–55; Bas van Fraassen, 1973, 'Values and the Heart's Command', *Journal of Philosophy* 70, 5–19; and Ruth Barcan Marcus, 1980, 'Moral Dilemmas and Consistency', *Journal of Philosophy* 77, 121–136.

³ Two notable exceptions: Patricia S. Greenspan, 1983, 'Moral Dilemmas and Guilt', *Philosophical Studies* 43, 117–125, and G. H. von Wright, *An Essay in Deontic Logic and the General Theory of Action* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 78–81.

⁴ I remain neutral on the exact nature of act tokens. I assume only that, whatever their nature, act tokens can be distinguished from act types.

⁵ Two action tokens are alternatives only if they have the same agent, the same time of performance, and are incompatible. Note also that because action tokens are particulars, it does not make sense to apply logical operations (negation, conjunction, etc.) to them (just as it does not make sense to apply, for example, negation to a particular chair). For further discussion of these matters, see Lars Bergström, 1976, 'On the Formulation and Application of Utilitarianism', *Nous* 10, 121–144; J. Howard Sobel, 1971, 'Value, Alternatives, and Utilitarianism', *Nous* 5, 373–384; and J. Howard Sobel, 1972, 'The Need for Coercion', in *Coercion*, edited by J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: Aldine-Atherton, 1972); 148–147, esp. sec. 1.1.

⁶ In Peter Vallentyne, 1987, 'Prohibition Dilemmas and Deontic Logic', *Logique et Analyse* 117–118, 113–121, I discuss in detail the implications of revising deontic logic so as not to rule out prohibition dilemmas.

⁷ An action *token* is feasible in a given choice situation just in case, given the actual circumstances and laws of nature, it could be performed by the agent.

⁸ Note that an action type can be obligatory without any token of that type being obligatory; namely, when more than one token of that type is permissible, but no token not of that type is. Thus, the fact that there cannot be token obligation dilemmas does not entail anything about the possibility of type obligation dilemmas.

⁹ After writing the first draft of this paper, it was pointed out to me that Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 1984, "'Ought' Conversationally Implies 'Can'", *The Philosophical*

Review 93, 249–261, has argued just this point. For the reasons that follow in the text, I remain neutral on the question of whether ‘ought’ implies ‘can’.

¹⁰ Note that my earlier arguments with respect to the possibility of dilemmas for action tokens applies for both the deliberate and the nomic viewpoint. There can be no obligation dilemmas for action tokens because there cannot be more than one action token that is obligatory – whatever the viewpoint. Likewise, the logic of deontic concepts does not rule out prohibition dilemmas for action tokens because they do not guarantee that at least one feasible action token is permissible – whatever the viewpoint. Note, however, that from the nomic viewpoint there can be obligation dilemmas of a different sort than defined. From the nomic point of view it is conceptually possible that a choice situation arises in which an obligatory action is not feasible. This might be called ‘an infeasible obligation dilemma’. The obligation dilemmas defined in the text would be better called ‘conflicting obligation dilemmas’. From the nomic viewpoint infeasible obligation dilemmas are conceptually possible for both action tokens and action types.

¹¹ Geoff Sayre McCord, 1986, ‘Deontic Logic and the Priority of Moral Theory’, *Nous* 20, 179–97, argues that the possibility of moral dilemmas cannot be ruled out by deontic logic, on the ground that there are no neutral principles of deontic logic (they all reflect, he claims, substantive conceptions of morality). My position is thus intermediate between Sayre McCord’s and the more usual one: some principles of deontic logic are neutral and do rule out certain types of moral dilemmas (e.g., obligation dilemmas), but other principles (e.g., $Pp \vee P^*p$) are not so neutral, and so cannot be used to rule out other types of moral dilemmas (e.g., prohibition dilemmas).

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Department of Philosophy
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA 23284
U.S.A.