Articles

Is It Impossible to Be Moral?

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ABSTRACT: Recent work in moral theory includes an intriguing new argument that the vagueness of moral properties, together with two well-known and well-received metaethical principles, entails the incredible conclusion that it is impossible to be moral. I show that the argument equivocates between "it is true that A and B are morally indistinguishable" and "it is not false that A and B are morally indistinguishable." As expected the argument is interesting but unsound. It is therefore not impossible to be moral.

RÉSUMÉ : Les travaux récents en théorie morale comprennent un nouvel argument intrigant voulant que le caractère vague des propriétés morales, joint à deux principes métaéthiques bien connus et généralement admis, entraîne une conclusion incroyable, soit qu'il est impossible d'être moral. Je montre que cet argument entretient l'équivoque entre «il est vrai que A et B sont moralement impossibles à distinguer» et «il n'est pas faux que A et B soient moralement impossibles à distinguer». Comme on s'y attendait, l'argument est intéressant mais mal fondé. Il n'est donc pas impossible d'être moral.

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1. Introduction

J. M. Goodenough once advised moral philosophers to leave the problems of vagueness to the logicians and avoid a slew of unfortunate errors.[1] That advice might have been better heeded. Recent work in moral theory includes an intriguing new argument that the vagueness of moral properties, together with two well-known and well-received metaethical principles, entails the incredible conclusion that it is *impossible* to be moral. Call that argument the *Impossibility Proof*.[2]

The metaethical principles in the proof include the *Principle of Equality* (PE) and the *Principle of Differential Treatment* (PDT). Most moral philosophers agree that there are versions of these principles that incorporate *a priori* constraints on moral deliberation. The basic versions of PE and PDT in the Impossibility Proof state that, for any individuals A and B,

PE If A and B are the same in every morally relevant respect, then A and B must receive the same moral treatment.

PDT If A and B differ in some morally relevant respect, then A and B must receive different moral treatment.

There are noteworthy exceptions to each of these basic principles, but there is no question that some version of the Principle of Equality and the Principle of Differential Treatment is fundamental to our reasoning about the proper treatment of others. Consider, for instance, moral deliberations in distributive justice. If A and B are the same in every way relevant to the distribution of some good then—on any criterion of moral relevance from need or merit or effort to individual choice—the distribution of goods to A and B must be the same.[3] And if A and B differ in some way relevant to the distribution of some good then the distribution of goods to A and B must reflect that moral difference.

The Impossibility Proof shows that the Principle of Equality and the Principle of Differential Treatment, together with the fact that moral properties are vague, entail that it is impossible to be moral. So, either it is impossible to be moral or one or more of these fundamental principles is false.[4] But neither of these conclusions is credible.

In §2 I present the proof that it is impossible to be moral. In §3 I show that the proof fails to distinguish two ways in which moral agents might be morally indistinguishable.[5] The assertion that agent B is morally indistinguishable from agent A might express the proposition that it is *true* that there is no moral difference between B and A. Consider for instance the vague moral property of *being virtuous* and assume that B and A are otherwise the same in every morally relevant respect. If it is true that B and A are morally indistinguishable then it must be true both that B is virtuous and that A is virtuous.

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But the assertion that B is morally indistinguishable from A might also express the proposition that it is *not false* that there is no moral difference between B and A.[6] Consider again the property of being virtuous and assume that B and A are otherwise the same in every morally relevant respect. If it is not false that B and A are morally indistinguishable, then it *might* be true that B is virtuous and that A is virtuous. But it might also be true that B is virtuous and that A is borderline virtuous. A is borderline virtuous if and only if it is not true that A is virtuous and it is not false that A is virtuous. If so, then, although it is not true that B and A are morally indistinguishable, it is also *not false* that B and A are morally indistinguishable.[7]

I show that the Principle of Equality properly applies to moral agents B and A only if it is true that there is no moral difference between them. Once we have clarified that distinction, the Impossibility Proof offers us no reason to abandon either the Principle of Equality or the Principle of Differential Treatment. In §4 I show how sorites arguments might be misused in defence of the Impossibility Proof and conclude that the advice of J. M. Goodenough ought to have been better received.

2. The *Impossibility Proof*

Stephen Schwartz offers the following informal version of the Impossibility Proof where the vague property R might be any moral property or characteristic.

> *The Principle of Equality*, the *Principle of Differential Treatment* and the [vagueness of moral characteristics] are sufficient to generate contradictions. Consider the following simple model: It is morally required to treat items indistinguishable with respect to morally relevant characteristic R similarly. It is morally required to treat items distinguishable with respect to morally relevant characteristic R differently. Now we have the situation that A is indistinguishable from B in respect to R, B is indistinguishable from C, but A is distinguishable from C. Thus it is morally required to treat A and C similarly because A and B must be treated similarly and B and C must be treated similarly, but it is also morally required to treat A and C differently. This situation will arise wherever A and C are required to be treated differently and R is a vague characteristic, but this is just the situation with all morally relevant characteristics. Thus it is impossible to be moral.[8]

Among the most familiar vague properties in moral theory is the property of *being a person*. It is well known that the property of being a person supervenes on a series of natural properties that human beings and others possess in varying degrees. Those properties include rationality, language ability, self-consciousness, a sense of the future, memory, an emotional life, imagination, purposiveness, and so on. Normal adult human beings

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are paradigmatic persons. Normal human embryos are paradigmatic non-persons. Between the normal human embryo and the normal adult human there are countless beings concerning which it is neither true nor false that they are persons.[9] We can suppose without loss of generality then that the morally relevant characteristic R in the proof is the property of being a person. The argument in the Impossibility Proof makes the following assumptions.

(1)	A is a person.	Assumption
(2)	C is a non-person.	Assumption
(3)	B is indistinguishable from A with respect to the properties relevant to being a person.	Assumption
(4)	B is indistinguishable from C with respect to the properties relevant to being a non-person.	Assumption

Among the initial conclusions in the proof are (5) and (6), both of which are inferred from assumptions (1) to (4) and the Principle of Equality.

(5)	B and A must receive the same moral treatment.	From (1), (3) and PE
(6)	B and C must receive the same moral treatment.	From (2), (4) and PE

Perhaps the most controversial conclusion in the proof follows from premises (5) and (6) and the transitivity of "same moral treatment." There is good reason to deny that "same moral treatment" is a transitive relation. But suppose we assume—to concede as much as possible to the Impossibility Proof—that the relation is transitive.[10] We now derive (7) from (5), (6), and the transitivity of "same moral treatment":

(7)	A and C must receive the same moral treatment.	From (5), (6) and Transitivity

Once we arrive at (7) there is one simple step to complete the proof. It is uncontroversial that C is distinguishable from A with respect to the properties relevant to being a person. And so we arrive at the conclusion in (8):

(8)	A and C must receive different moral treatment.	From (1), (2) and PDT

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It is obvious that we cannot fulfill the requirements in both (7) and (8). And since so many moral properties are vague—including such properties as being virtuous, being blameworthy, being responsible, being fair, being just, and so on—the problem presented in the Impossibility Proof is quite pervasive.[11] Thus we arrive at the conclusion that it is impossible to be moral. More precisely, it is impossible to be moral unless we are prepared to reject at least one fundamental moral principle, PE or PDT. That concludes the Impossibility Proof.

3. Why It Is *Not* Impossible to Be Moral

The conclusion that it is impossible to be moral is one we can avoid. And we can do so without abandoning either the Principle of Equality or the Principle of Differential Treatment. The central problem in the Impossibility Proof is the subtle equivocation in initial assumptions (3) and (4). Suppose that (3') is the correct reading of (3).

(3') B is indistinguishable from A with respect to the properties relevant to being a person and *it is true that B is in the range of determinate persons.*

Since B is in the range of *determinate persons* we know that B is not among the borderline persons. The borderline persons are those beings concerning which it is not false that they are persons and also not true that they are persons. There is no question then that (3') together with PE entails (5) above that B and A must receive the same moral treatment. But if (3') is the correct reading of (3), then (4') cannot be the correct reading of (4).

(4') B is indistinguishable from C with respect to the properties relevant to being a non-person and *it is true that B is in the range of determinate non-persons.*

Whatever else is true, it is contradictory to assume that B is a person and that B is a non-person. Unless we are prepared to embrace the idea that some contradictions are true, we cannot assume both (3') and (4'). Assuming (3'), we can derive (5), but we are unable to derive (6).

Of course we might begin the proof with the assumption that (4') is the correct reading of (4). And we might argue that since B is in the range of *determinate non-persons*, we know that B is not among the borderline non-persons. The borderline non-persons are those beings concerning which it is neither true nor false that they are non-persons.[12] There is no question then that (4') together with PE entails (6) above that B and C must receive the same moral treatment. But, again, if (4') is the correct reading of (4), then (3') cannot be the correct reading of (3). Whatever else is true, it is contradictory to assume that B is both a person and a non-person. So, if

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(4') is correct then (3') is not. Assuming (4'), we can derive (6) but we cannot derive (5).

Is there is a consistent reading of (3) and (4)? The closest we can get to (3') in the Impossibility Proof is the similar proposition in (3").

(3") B is indistinguishable from A with respect to the properties relevant to being a person and *it is not false that B is in the range of determinate persons.*

And the closest we can get to (4') in the proof is the similar proposition in (4").

(4") B is indistinguishable from C with respect to the properties relevant to being a non-person and *it is not false that B is in the range of determinate non-persons.*

The propositions in (3") and (4") are consistent, but they are both true only if it is not true that B is in the range of determinate persons and not true that B is in the range of determinate non-persons. For, if we suppose that B is a determinate person, then B is not a borderline non-person. And so (4") is false. But if we suppose that B is a determinate non-person, then B is not a borderline person. And so (3") is false.

Let us suppose then that (3") and (4") are both true and reconsider the Impossibility Proof. Premise (1) in the proof ensures that A is in the range of determinate persons. But premise (3") offers no guarantee that B is also in the range of determinate persons. And, given our assumptions, we know it is not true that B is in the range of determinate persons. So, there is a morally relevant difference between B and A. Since it is not true that B is a person, PE does not require that we treat B in the same way that we treat persons. B is a borderline person and so, at best, B is a *near*-person. There is a requirement to treat persons and near-persons equally only if there is a moral principle of *near*-equality, but it is certainly no requirement of reason and justice that moral near-equals be treated equally. If Smith works almost as efficiently as Jones, and they differ in no other morally relevant respect, it is hardly a requirement of reason and justice that Smith receive the same payment as Jones.[13] It follows that (3") and PE together do not entail (5) and that B and A must receive the same moral treatment.

But now consider C. Premise (2) ensures that C is in the range of determinate non-persons. But premise (4") offers no guarantee that B is in the range of determinate non-persons. And, given our assumptions, we know it is not true that B is a determinate non-person. So, there is a morally relevant difference between B and C. B is a borderline non-person and so, at best, B is a near-non-person. There is a requirement to treat non-persons and near-non-persons equally only if, again, there is a moral principle of

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near-equality. But, again, it is certainly no requirement of reason and justice that moral near-equals be treated equally. It follows that (4") and PE together do not entail (6) and that B and C must receive the same moral treatment.

We have therefore arrived at the central mistake in the Impossibility Proof. The proof confuses (3') and (4') with (3") and (4").[14] The propositions (3") and (4") are logically consistent, but they are unhelpful in deriving (5) and (6). In order to derive (5) and (6), it must be assumed that both (3') and (4') are true. But (3') and (4') together entail the contradiction that B is a person and B is a non-person, an impossibility. Thus, we have reason to believe that it is impossible to be moral only if we have reason to believe that a contradiction is true, and we have no reason to reject either the Principle of Equality or the Principle of Differential Treatment.

4. Inadvisable Sorites

Moral philosophers have recently used sorites arguments to defend the position that personal identity does not consist in physical continuity or psychological continuity or any combination of them.[15] But, however well received these arguments have been, it should be obvious that sorites arguments cannot establish that (3') and (4') are both true.

There is no doubt that A in the Impossibility Proof is in the range of determinate persons. It is equally certain that some A_1, who differ slightly from A in rationality, language ability, self-consciousness, sense of the future, memory, imagination, or purposiveness, is also in the range of determinate persons.

Of course there is also no doubt that C in the Impossibility Proof is in the range of determinate non-persons. And, certainly, some C_1, who differ slightly from C in rationality, language ability, self-consciousness, sense of the future, memory, imagination, or purposiveness, is also in the range of determinate non-persons.

We found in §3 that it is *possible* that B is morally indistinguishable from A and also that B is morally indistinguishable from C if and only if it is not false (and not true) that B is in the range of determinate persons and it is not false (and not true) that B is in the range of determinate non-persons. B is morally indistinguishable from both A and C, in short, when B is on the borderline between determinate persons and determinate non-persons.

It is, of course, impossible that B should be both in the range of determinate persons and in the range of determinate non-persons, but this contradiction is precisely the conclusion of some inadvisable sorites arguments designed to support the Impossibility Proof. These sorites are designed to establish that it is true that B is morally indistinguishable from A and true that B is morally indistinguishable from C; and, therefore, true that the moral treatment of B and A must be the same and the moral treatment of B and C must be the same.

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Here are two parallel sorites arguments that lead to the impossible conclusion that (3') and (4') are both true.

(1) A is in the range of determinate persons.	(1') C is in the range of determinate non-persons.
(2) If A is in the range of determinate persons, then so is A_1.	(2') If C is in the range of determinate non-persons, then so is C_1.
.	.
.	.
.	.
(N) If A_i is in the range of determinate persons, then so is B.	(N') If C_i is in the range of determinate non-persons, then so is B.
∴ B is in the range of determinate persons.	∴ B is in the range of determinate non-persons.

But, of course, it cannot happen that two sound arguments entail logically inconsistent conclusions. Since (3') and (4') are logically inconsistent, we know that these sorites arguments cannot both be sound. So, at least one of these arguments contains a false premise or is invalid.

Naturally we should be prepared for a defender of the Impossibility Proof to take the extreme position that these sorites after all *do* establish that a contradiction is true. And, certainly, if a contradiction is true then it does follow that it is impossible to be moral. However, it is worth noting that even this extreme position cannot rescue the Impossibility Proof. Since everything follows from a contradiction, we are led to the additional conclusion that it is *not* impossible to be moral. And that is just what we set out to establish.

The far more interesting responses to sorites arguments provide alternative accounts of the specific problem exhibited in these arguments. Among the common responses to these arguments, we find some that deny that sorites arguments are valid, some that deny that the conclusions of these arguments are true, and others that deny that sorites predicates are coherent.[16] The Impossibility Proof nicely underscores the fact that much of our moral deliberation involves vague properties and that we should be especially cautious in the application of various logics of vagueness. It is perhaps also true that moral philosophers should come to some decision

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about the specific problem exhibited in these sorites arguments. But this question is entirely beyond the scope of our present discussion. We do know that at least one of these arguments is unsound and that is enough to establish that sorites arguments cannot rescue the Impossibility Proof.[17]

Notes

1 Citing several unanticipated implications of sorites reasoning in the work of Derek Parfit, Goodenough observes that "[p]erhaps it is better to leave the sorites to the logicians after all." See J. M. Goodenough's "Parfit and the Sorites Paradox," *Philosophical Studies*, 83 (1994): 113-20.

2 See Stephen P. Schwartz, "Why It Is Impossible to Be Moral," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999): 351-60. Schwartz's version of the proof appeals to the vagueness of moral properties, but the argument can also be formulated with the assumption that moral predicates are vague. So, no metaphysical commitment to vague properties is necessary to the Impossibility Proof.

3 The principle of utility might constitute an exception to this claim. Suppose a simple version of the principle of utility is offered as a principle of justice rather than (or in addition to) a principle of beneficence. Simple utilitarian principles permit an unequal distribution of goods in the absence of morally relevant reasons in cases where the specific distribution of goods makes no difference to overall utility.

4 In personal communication, Schwartz has advanced various versions of the Impossibility Proof. The most serious problem the proof presents for moral reasoning is the rejection of PE or PDT.

5 One further clarification. The claim that B and A are morally indistinguishable, as it is used in the Impossibility Proof, is the metaphysical claim that there is no moral difference between B and A. It is not the weaker epistemic claim that we can discern no moral difference between B and A.

6 Let us underscore the difference between (i) and (iii) below. Given the vagueness of moral properties, propositions (i) and (ii) are consistent, but (iii) and (ii) are not.

(i) It is not false that A and B are morally indistinguishable.
(ii) It is not true that A and B are morally indistinguishable.
(iii) It is true that A and B are morally indistinguishable.

7 Colour properties offer good examples of vague properties and it might be useful to consider a non-moral example. Suppose the question were whether A and B differ with respect to colour (specifically the colour red). The proposition that A and B are indistinguishable with respect to colour might express the proposition that it is *true* that there is no colour difference between A and B. That is so just in case it is true that A is red and it is true that B is red. But suppose the colour of B falls in that part of the spectrum that is on the borderline between red and non-red. In this case it is not true that B is red, but it is also not false that B is red. We might still wish to say that A and B are indistinguishable with respect to colour. But we would then be expressing the prop-

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osition that it is *not false* that there is no colour difference between A and B. It is true that A is red and it is not false that B is red. If there were an aesthetic principle analogous to the Principle of Equality (which required that if A and B are the same in every aesthetically relevant respect, then A and B must be in the same aesthetic category), then the principle would properly apply to A and B only if it is *true* that A and B are the same in every aesthetically relevant respect (including colour).

8 Schwartz, "Why It Is Impossible to Be Moral," pp. 353ff. He assumes in the proof that moral properties observe what he calls the"'non-transitivity of similarity." This is the observation that moral properties are vague. But, as noted above, the entire discussion could be couched in terms of vague moral predicates instead.

9 This is equivalent to denying bivalence for "x is a person" which is a typical approach to the logic of vagueness. But there are differences in these logics worth noting. The "gap" view in the logic of vagueness states that there are some propositions that lack a truth-value—they are not true, false, or any other value. The degree approach includes (at least) three truth-values: True, False, and Indeterminate. The now discarded "glut" approach states that some propositions are both true and false—there is, in short, a glut of truth-values for some propositions. The glut approach is the result of confusing underdetermination with overdetermination and is a non-starter for those of us unprepared to countenance true contradictions. I also note that, as is generally required of vague predicates, there is also a higher-order vagueness for "being a person." Between those beings that are in the range of neither persons nor non-persons and those beings that are in the range of persons there are countless beings concerning which it is neither true nor false that they are neither persons nor non-persons. Effectively it is undetermined whether it is undetermined whether they are persons.

10 I have argued elsewhere that the Principle of Equality and the Principle of Differential Treatment together entail that the relation "same moral treatment" is intransitive. See Michael J. Almeida and Mark H. Bernstein, "Is It Impossible to Relieve Suffering?" (*Philosophia*, forthcoming).

11 Schwartz makes the stronger claim that *all* moral properties are vague. See "Why It Is Impossible to Be Moral," pp. 353ff.

12 Whatever is on the borderline of being a person is equally on the borderline of being a non-person. It is this symmetry that prevents us from including the borderline persons in the range of determinate non-persons and *vice versa*. See R. Keefe and P. Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 6ff.

13 It is a different question altogether whether the theoretical difference we are discussing makes a practical difference here. It is likely that persons and near-persons will—as a matter of practical convenience—be treated in the same way. But that practical point is consistent with the theoretical position that

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there is no moral requirement to treat persons and near-persons in precisely the same way.

14 In his "Vagueness, Truth, and Logic," Kit Fine observed very early a similar mistake in reasoning with vague predicates: "Some have thought that a vague sentence is both true and false and *that a vague predicate is both true and false of some object*. However, this is part of the general confusion of under- and over-determinacy. A vague sentence can be made more precise; and this operation should preserve truth-value. But a vague sentence can be made either true or false and therefore the original sentence can be neither" (in Keefe and Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader*, p. 121; my emphasis). The confusion of (3") and (4") with (3') and (4') is the result of assuming that "being a person" is both true and false of B.

15 See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), esp. Part 3, chap. 11. For a compelling series of objections to Parfit's use of the sorites argument, see Goodenough's "Parfit and the Sorites Paradox," pp. 113-20.

16 For examples of each of these responses, see Keefe and Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader*.

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