

How to Challenge Common-Sense Morality

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Bennett's Argument

- 1) "[Few]" bears R to "[doing]"; "[most]" bears R to "[allowing]".
 - 2) *Ceteris paribus*, [few] is no worse than [most].
 - 3) If (1) and (2), then *ceteris paribus*, [doing] is no worse than [allowing].
- C) [Doing] is no worse than [allowing].

[Doing]: S does harm to V.

[Allowing]: S allows V to be harmed.

[Few]: S does A. V is harmed. Of all of the ways in which S could have moved her body, few are such that, had she moved her body in one of these ways, V would have been harmed when and how he was.

[Most]: S does A. V is harmed. Of all of the ways in which S could have moved her body, most are such that, had she moved her body in one of these ways, V would have been harmed when and how he was.

What's R? Bennett gives several examples (just in *The Act Itself*):

- "analysis" which "aids understanding"
- connection must be "analytic *enough*" "to illuminate" and "help us understand our thoughts at a deeper level"
- one term "picks out what's *guiding* our application of" the other
- "I am not interested in the exact meaning of any word", but rather "just those aspects of its meaning that are pertinent to the matter at hand"; it's okay if "omitted aspects" don't "matter for fundamental moral theory"

Bennett's Argument as an Exemplar of a Way of Doing Moral Philosophy

In Bennett's own words, his "analytic approach":

- "take[s] warm, familiar aspects of the human condition and look[s] at them coldly and with the eye of a stranger";
- aims at "understanding" of what allegedly morally significant distinctions "come down to";
- insists that we "articulately know what we are doing when we" make such distinctions, know not only "where to draw the line", but also "why"

More broadly, approaches like Bennett's work as follows:

There are ways in which common-sense morality conceptualizes the world — e.g. in terms of doing/allowing, promises, consent, war, property, threats, purposes and functions, etc.

There are "cold", "eye-of-a-stranger" ways of conceptualizing the world that are themselves alien to common-sense morality, but which bear some tight representational relation to the common-sense conceptualizations.

We then train our evaluative focus on the world as conceptualized in these latter ways, and on the basis thereof, reconsider the canons of common-sense morality.

Ways of Objecting to Bennett's Argument

Deny 1

-Use a counterexample to attempt to show that the purported analysis (or whatever R is) fails — e.g. a case in which [few] obtains, but A is an instance of lying still. (The "metallic dust" example.)

-Argue on broader theoretical grounds that the purported analysis fails — e.g.:

-Quine on analytic/synthetic distinction

-"If '[doing]/[allowing]' seems to pick out something morally relevant, and '[few]/[most]' doesn't, then how can they have the same content?"

Deny 2

-On independent grounds — see, e.g., Fiona Woollard's recent book on this topic.

-On grounds that (C) is false, assuming (1) and (3) for argument's sake. ("One person's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*.")

Deny 3

-Not plausible if R is a strict analysis, but if we weaken R to deal with counterexamples, say, then it may be more plausible. (A Scylla and Charybdis.)

Two Tasks

#1 — Get an R that verifies premises (1) and (3)

#2 — Show why it's a "ponens" and not a "tollens"

Bennett's Thoughts on How to Accomplish Task #2

Bennett seems to regard evaluative claims that include only these "cold", "eye-of-a-stranger" conceptualizations as enjoying a kind of methodological *priority* over the claims of common-sense morality.

-And over evaluative claims that include purported analyses of "[doing]/[allowing]" and the like in less "cold" terms — e.g. Alan Donagan: agent *does* harm only if she "intervenes in the *course of nature*"; Frances Kamm, Judith Jarvis Thomson: distinction between introducing a "new threat" and redirecting an "existing threat"

What's special, then, about these "cold" conceptualizations?

-"Analysis...can help us look critically at" our moral practices, "so that we can at least consider whether" certain factors "should influence us as they do".

- Without analysis, "even when we are *sure* about *where* to draw the line we are not *clear* about *why*; we do not articulately know what we are doing"
- The analytic approach can help us "understand our own thoughts at a deeper level".

Taken at face value, he seems to think we should prioritize them in moral theory b/c they afford more knowledge of our own practices. Sometimes, it even reads like he's gesturing towards a causal "debunking" argument. But I'm not confident that they do, or that this justifies prioritizing them in moral theory.

Bennett's Thoughts on How to Accomplish Task #1

In re: the "metallic dust" example:

"An intuition that goes against my analysis is not a rival to it."

Wants to reject intuition as "drifting away" from a "grounded making/allowing distinction"

In re: general worries about analysis:

Again: "analytic *enough*" — he's more concerned with establishing an R such that one *relatum* helps us understand why we use the other *relatum* as we do.

My Own Proposal Re: a "Low Road" to Accomplishing Tasks 1 and 2

The wrongness of *doing* some harm is entirely explained by, and is entirely a function of, facts about the severity of the harm, as well as facts about "difference-making" — i.e. about the harm's occurrence (or not) in the actual world as well as in other possible worlds.

Any "difference-making" fact is either:

- (a) shared by an otherwise equivalent *allowing* of harm, so as to explain its wrongness in like manner and *via* the same function; or else:
- (b) morally irrelevant.

An example of an (a)-type "difference-making" fact: S does A. V is harmed. There are ways S could have moved her body such that V would not have been harmed when and how she was.

An example of a (b)-type "difference-making" fact: [Few] or [Few*]

My Own Proposal Re: a "High Road" to Accomplishing Tasks 1 and 2

Suppose that "[few]" has the same representational content as "[doing]", and "[most]" has the same representational content as "[allowing]".

If so, then if [few] is no worse than [most], then [doing] is no worse than [allowing].

Prima facie [few] is no worse than [most], but *prima facie* [doing] is worse than [allowing]. So non-representational aspects of these thoughts must be "doing the work" somehow — either:

- (a) making us fail to think that "[Few] is worse than [most]", even though it is worse. (I.e. *Inhibiting* the apprehension of a genuine moral difference)
- (b) making us think "[Doing] is worse than [allowing]", even though it isn't worse. (I.e. *Seducing* us into believing in a moral difference that isn't there.)

So, then, is it more plausible to believe that inhibition is going on, or that seduction is?

A key principle: Fully grasping the representational content of several representations at some time suffices to give an otherwise competent thinker the ability to execute any truth-preserving inference from one to another at that time.

So someone who wants to insist that inhibition is occurring must argue either that the thinker is not otherwise competent, or else does not fully grasp the contents of the relevant representations — i.e. "[few]/[most]".

She cannot claim that a thinker is not competent, though, who is disposed to execute what she regards as the right inference from "[doing]/[allowing]" (which has the same representational content as "[few]/[most]" to moral conclusions. She must think it's a "problem with the grasp of the representation".

But that's implausible as well.

- Argument 1: Doesn't fall into traditional categories: Incomplete grasp b/c of syntactic complexity; can't conceptualize non-conceptual content ("seeing as", gestalts); diachronic problems
- Argument 2: Incomplete grasp has *general* effects on ability to execute right inferences; we don't see that here.

A story according to which seduction is occurring: The thinker fully grasps the representational content of both "[few]/[most]" and "[doing]/[allowing]". But the latter has "extra" inferential role — inferential role that is not grounded in anything re: representation; we can make sense of this by saying that ethical conclusions, reached in this context, are not representational. (There are other stories, too, to be sure.)

What to say about "metallic dust" counterexample? Bring in "normal actions" and "normal circumstances":

[Few*]: S does normal act A. V is harmed. S could have acted otherwise such that V would not have been harmed when and how he was. In normal circumstances, when a person does normal act A and someone is harmed, few of the other ways in which she could have moved her body are such that, had she moved her body in one of those ways, then that someone would have been harmed when and how they were.

Unlike Bennett, I do not require priority in the order of understanding or what-have-you.