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Moral dilemmas in contemporary virtue ethics

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MORAL DILEMMAS IN CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Arts

in

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by
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Abstract

A simple definition of a moral dilemma is a situation where an agent ought to do two different things but can only do one. Though this definition may seem straightforward enough, it has created a stir over the last fifty years. Bernard Williams first used the concept of moral dilemmas to call the adequacy of the major ethical theories into question, challenging the possibility of consistent ethical systems. More recently, virtue ethicists, like Rosalind Hursthouse, have used moral dilemmas to challenge the two dominant schools of moral philosophy: deontology and utilitarianism. These attacks have been instrumental in setting up virtue ethics as an alternative to the other two schools. But, is virtue ethics really able to account for moral dilemmas in its theory? This will be the focus of this thesis. The first two chapters of this thesis are expository. They try to clearly present some of the major ideas of Williams and Hursthouse. After establishing some of the key concepts in contemporary virtue ethics and elaborating on the structure and problem of the concept of moral dilemmas, the remaining four chapters critically examine the strength of Williams' and Hursthouse's arguments in favor of the existence of moral dilemmas. Partly drawing upon the work of Terrence McConnell, I attempt to argue that both philosophers' theories face tremendous odds and are unable to offer a satisfactory account of moral dilemmas.

Introduction

A simple definition of a moral dilemma is a situation where an agent ought to do two different things but can only do one, and there are no overriding reasons for doing one thing over the other. Though this definition may seem straightforward enough, it has created a stir in contemporary moral philosophy over the last fifty years. Bernard Williams first used the concept of moral dilemmas to call the adequacy of the major ethical theories into question, challenging the possibility of consistent ethical systems. After Williams, his ideas of ethical inconsistency and the concept of moral dilemmas have become a rallying cry for the revival of virtue ethics as a dominant ethical school. More recently, virtue ethicists, like Rosalind Hursthouse, have used these concepts to challenge the two dominant schools of moral philosophy: deontology and utilitarianism. She demands that its rival schools account for moral dilemmas and inconsistency before passing judgment on virtue ethics. These attacks have been instrumental in setting up virtue ethics as an equal alternative to the other two schools. But, is virtue ethics really able to account for moral dilemmas in its theory? This will be the focus of this thesis.

The first two chapters of this thesis will be expository. They will try to clearly present some of the major ideas of Bernard Williams and Rosalind Hursthouse. Chapter One will examine two influential essays by Williams: "Ethical Consistency," and "Conflicts of Values". In these essays, Williams argues that moral conflict challenges the consistency of ethical systems. The aim of this chapter will be to examine this important argument. Some of the major concepts explored in this chapter will be: the special character of moral conflicts, the concept of remainder, ethical inconsistency, and the incommensurability of values.

Chapter Two will examine the concept of the 'virtuous agent' as Hursthouse introduces it in her book, *On Virtue Ethics*. According to Hursthouse, the virtuous agent is the exemplar for right action, which through his virtuous character and moral wisdom can be relied on to act well in moral situations. The extent to which the virtuous agent can be relied on as the measure of right action and his relation to moral dilemmas will be the focus of this chapter. Some of the major concepts explored in this chapter will be: the concept of the virtuous agent, resolvable dilemmas, irresolvable and tragic dilemmas, and moral wisdom.

After establishing some of the key concepts in contemporary virtue ethics and elaborating on the structure and problem of the concept of moral dilemmas, the remaining four chapters will critically examine the strength of the arguments from Williams and Hursthouse in favor of the existence of moral dilemmas. I will attempt to argue that both philosophers' theories face tremendous odds and are unable to offer a satisfactory account of moral dilemmas that is compatible with their own respective theories.

The attack will consist of three phases. The first phase of the attack will involve demarcating genuine moral dilemmas, as an exact designation, from loosely defined moral dilemmas. In Chapter Three, I attempt to define what a genuine moral dilemma is by demanding four clarifications. The first clarification involves distinguishing resolvable moral dilemmas from irresolvable moral dilemmas, in which I argue that resolvable moral dilemmas lack the character of genuine moral dilemmas. The second clarification involves distinguishing moral dilemmas from moral conflicts. I will argue that the interchangeability of these two terms is unwarranted and that moral dilemmas possess a level of seriousness that moral conflicts do not. The third clarification involves determining the conditions necessary for a moral dilemma to be

irresolvable, in which I explore the faults of both symmetrical and asymmetrical dilemmas. The final clarification explores whether genuine moral dilemmas must be incommensurable.

After extracting a clear definition of what a genuine moral dilemma is, the second phase of the argument sets out to discredit moral dilemmas by attacking the core concept of Hursthouse's theory. In Chapter Four, I argue that the existence of virtuous agents in Hursthouse's theory makes moral dilemmas impossible. Because the virtuous agent is primary over the act, any action performed by a virtuous agent will be the right act. In this chapter, I explore the implications of this claim for moral dilemmas, and argue that the existence of moral dilemmas and virtuous agents are incompatible with each other in Hursthouse's theory.

Though the existence of virtuous agents is shown to be incompatible with the concept of moral dilemmas, an argument from virtue ethics can still be made from the stance of ethical inconsistency. The final phase of the argument will attack the foundation on which the concept of the virtuous agent is built by disproving the grounds of Williams' argument for ethical inconsistency. Chapter Five will present a competing argument from Terrence McConnell's essay, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," and attempt to show that Williams' argument for ethical inconsistency is insufficient proof for the existence of moral dilemmas.

The final chapter will attempt to sum up the argument, showing that virtue ethics is unable to offer a satisfactory account of the existence of moral dilemmas.

Chapter 1

Ethical Consistency and Moral Conflict

In his essay, "Ethical Consistency," Bernard Williams explores moral conflict and its relation to consistency in moral philosophy. His investigation leads him to the conclusion that moral conflict represents an inherent inconsistency that cannot be accommodated or corrected by moral theories. This chapter will examine Williams' argument. The first section will analyze the relation between conflicts of beliefs, desires, and morality and attempt to explain why moral conflict is different from a conflict of beliefs or desires. Section Two will examine the relation between moral conflict and ethical consistency. Finally, Section Three will draw on Williams' essay, "Conflicts of Values," and take on a particular type of moral conflict, a conflict of values.

I. Moral Conflict

Williams starts his investigation of moral conflict by first examining the differences between conflicts of beliefs and conflicts of desires. A conflict of beliefs involves an agent holding two beliefs that are inconsistent with one another due to empirical demands, where both beliefs cannot be true at the same time. For instance, the belief that Barack Obama is the President of the United States and that Barack Obama is thirty years old is inconsistent in the fact that in order to be President of the United States a citizen must be at least thirty-five years old. Either Barack Obama is thirty years old and not the President of the United States or Barack Obama is the President of the United States and not thirty years old. A conflict of beliefs is different from an actual inconsistency of beliefs. This is the case because an agent who becomes

aware of the conflict could adjust his beliefs to resolve the conflict. Or if further factual information is added, such as, that the age requirement to be the President of the United States is thirty-five years, the conflicting belief of the agent, 'Barack Obama is thirty years old', could be abandoned.

The source of the conflict of beliefs is the agent's ignorance of the relevant facts. Once this ignorance is cleared up, and the agent readjusts his beliefs, there is no more conflict. If the agent, when given the new information, is unable to recognize the conflict in his beliefs, or is unable to adjust his beliefs in light of the new information, an actual inconsistency of beliefs will occur. This inconsistency will reflect irrationality on the part of the agent, due to an inability of the agent to put the facts together. For instance, when an agent is given the empirical fact, (that the age requirement to be President of the United States is thirty-five years), and continues to believe that Barack Obama is the President of the United States and that Barack Obama is thirty years old, that agent holds inconsistent beliefs and is irrational.

A conflict of desires involves two different desires that cannot be satisfied at the same time, or a case where, in order for one desire to be satisfied another desire necessarily cannot be satisfied. Williams says,

What is normally called conflict of *desires* has, in many central cases, a feature analogous to what I have been calling conflict of beliefs: that the clash between the desires arises from some contingent matter of fact. This is a matter of fact that makes it impossible for both the desires to be satisfied; but we can consistently imagine a state of affairs in which they can both be satisfied. (Williams 167)

An example of a conflict of desires would be the case of an agent who both wanted to smoke cigarettes and be healthy. Such a conflict is not logically inconsistent, but rather presents itself as a conflict to the agent when the contingent fact that smoking is unhealthy is added to the desires. If smoking were not unhealthy, a conflict of desires would not exist, and the agent could both smoke and be healthy without either desire interfering with the other.

There are important differences between a conflict of beliefs and a conflict of desires. In the case of a conflict of beliefs, the discovery of the conflict by the agent should cause him to readjust his beliefs. But in the case of a conflict of desires, the agent may not be able to readjust his desires in the same way. Williams says, "If I discover that two of my beliefs conflict, at least one of them, by that very fact, will tend to be weakened; but the discovery that two desires conflict has no tendency, in itself, to weaken either of them" (Williams 169). When an agent becomes aware that he has conflicting beliefs, it is apparent that one of his beliefs is true and the other is false. This fact makes it more likely that the agent will abandon one of the conflicting beliefs. This is the case because; an agent that decides a belief is untrue is unlikely to hold onto that belief.

A conflict of desires will not resolve itself in the same way as a conflict of beliefs.¹ When one desire is foregone in favor of another desire, the unrealized desire will not be abandoned in the same way as a conflict of beliefs. The rejected desire will continue to persist in the agent. Whereas a belief will disappear once it is rejected, a desire will continue to try to fulfill itself through some other object of the same sort, or may reappear in the form of regret. Williams explains,

¹ This is the case because desires cannot be true or false. So, a conflicting desire cannot be abandoned as untrue. For a detailed discussion of this claim see Williams' essay, "Consistency and Realism".

A rejected desire, however, can, if not survive the point of decision, at least reappear on the other side of on one or another guise. It may reappear, for instance, as a general desire for something of the same sort as the object rejected in the decision... If there are no substitutes, the opportunity for satisfying the desire having irrevocably gone, it may reappear in the form of *regret* for what was missed. (Williams 170)

A moral conflict involves two conflicting *ought* obligations. These *ought* obligations are based on an obligation to do a particular thing, such as, I ought to pay my bills or I ought to tell the truth. When two *ought* obligations are unable to be carried out at the same time or one *ought* obligation makes the other obligation impossible a moral conflict occurs. A moral conflict also occurs when an agent both ought and ought not to do a certain thing. This is restated by Williams as, "One is that in which it seems that I ought to do each of two things, but I cannot do both. The other is that in which something which (it seems) I ought to do in respect of certain of its features also has other features in respect of which (it seems) I ought not to do it" (Williams 171).

A famous dilemma from Plato can be used to elaborate on the second type of moral conflict mentioned by Williams, where an agent both ought and ought not to do a certain thing. In *The Republic*, Socrates responds to Cephalous' claim that 'justice' is telling the truth and paying one's debts by giving an example of a friend who, while not in his right mind, seeks to reclaim a borrowed axe that Socrates has lent him.² In this circumstance neither telling the truth nor repaying one's debt takes precedence over withholding the axe from the friend. Socrates concludes that to give over the axe would be unjust. In this dilemma, there is an apparent obligation to repay the debt; the agent in this situation ought to return the axe. But there is also

² Plato, *The Republic*, 331c

an obligation not to let harm happen to the friend. It is likely that returning the axe to the friend will result in harm. So, the agent in the circumstance ought not to return the axe. In Socrates' dilemma he is faced with two conflicting obligations. He ought to give his friend back the axe he borrowed, but he also ought not to give his friend the axe because his friend is not in his right mind. Either decision that Socrates makes will involve him doing something he ought not to do or not doing something he ought to. But, the features of this particular situation, (protecting a person from harm is more important than returning a borrowed axe, and the fact that the axe can be returned at a later time when the friend is in his right mind), make the *ought not* obligation have priority over the *ought* obligation.

A more complicated dilemma from Sartre can be used to represent the first type of moral conflict mentioned by Williams, where an agent is faced with two things he ought to do but can only do one. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, Sartre gives an example of a student of his that is in a state of conflict.³ The student wants to avenge his brother that was killed in a German offensive during 1940 by joining the Free French Forces, though it will result in him abandoning his elderly mother who relies on her son for support and consolation. The student is faced with two obligations that are both of substantial weight. In the first case, the student feels obligated to avenge his brother. Not only obligated to take revenge, the student also believes that the Nazis are an evil force in the world, and helping to defeat them would bring about a great good. So there are reasons he ought to join the Free French Forces. In the second case, the student's mother is old and very dependent on her son to give meaning to her life. She would be seriously distraught if her son left. So, the student also has reasons that he ought to stay home with his mother. But the student cannot do both. He either can join the Free French Forces or he can stay home with his mother. Either choice will force the student to have to abandon the other. In the

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 35

end, the solution to the dilemma remains unclear, and Sartre tells the student he must decide for himself what to do.⁴

Moral conflicts are more like conflicts of desires than conflicts of beliefs. Williams says,

The discovery that my factual beliefs conflict *eo ipso* tends to weaken one or more of the beliefs; not so, with desires; not so, I think, with one's conflicting convictions about what one ought to do. This comes out in the fact that conflicts of *ought's*, like conflicts of desires, can readily have the character of a struggle, whereas conflicts of beliefs scarcely can, unless the man not only believes these things, but wants to believe them. (Williams 172)

When beliefs come into conflict with one another an agent seeks to eliminate one of the conflicting beliefs. As was previously stated, when beliefs conflict it is apparent that one belief is true and the other is false. This apparent conflict forces the agent to readjust his beliefs and abandon one of the conflicting beliefs. Desires are different from beliefs in that, an agent does not actively seek to eliminate one of the conflicting desires, but wishes that both desires be fulfilled. An agent does not wish that one of the conflicting desires will disappear like he does with a false belief. He instead wishes for a way in which both desires can be actualized. When a decision is made and one of the conflicting desires is made impossible by the completion of a conflicting desire, an agent does not abandon the wish that the unfulfilled desire be actualized.

Like a conflict of desires, a moral conflict does not result in the agent actively seeking to eliminate one of the conflicting *ought* obligations. The agent wishes that both obligations could be fulfilled, "I do not think in terms of banishing error. I think, if constructively at all, in terms of

⁴ Though there is no resolution offered by Sartre, the contingent features of the situation may show that one *ought* obligation is favorable over the other. For instance, if the student finds out that his mother may die if he left, or that if he left, he will not be guaranteed a chance to fight in the Free French Forces and instead may be assigned to perform some menial task, the *ought* obligation to stay home with his mother would be strengthened and may override the competing *ought* obligation to leave.

acting for the best, and this is a frame of mind that *acknowledges* the presence of both the two *ought's*" (Williams 172). The agent does not wish that the conflict in his moral decision will go away. He rather wishes that the world was different, or that his moral views were different. He wishes for a scenario where a change in the situation would allow both obligations to be carried out or that there were some unapparent solution that he has not thought of that will bring about both of the obligations he ought to do. When a decision has to be made, and the agent must reject one of the obligations, the desire that the rejected obligation be carried out does not disappear. It changes form, and may reappear as regret or as a similar object in which to seek the fulfillment of the lost obligation. Williams explains further,

If I eventually choose for one side of the conflict rather than the other, this is possible ground of regret—as with desires, although the regret, naturally, is a different sort of regret. As with desires, if the occasion is irreparably past, there may be room for nothing but regret. But it is also possible (again like desires) that the moral impulse that had to be abandoned in the choice may find a new object, and I may try, for instance, to 'make up' to the people involved for the claim that was neglected. (Williams 172)

An agent treats his moral views in terms of 'acting for the best'. It is the obligation to act for the best that causes a sense of failure in the agent if his obligation to act for the best is not carried out. If an agent did not seek to make the best decision in a moral situation, there would be little need for regret, for any decision he ought to make would suffice as a carried out obligation. But because an agent acts for the best, and some obligations are better or more important than others, a sense of failure will accompany the agent when he feels he did not act in the best possible way. But the very fact that the agent acts for the best does not shield him from failure. In a moral conflict, even if the agent acts for the best, it is still not the best possible action. This

is the case because the best outcome would involve both obligations being carried out, though this is impossible in the case of moral conflict. Williams says, "These states of mind do not depend, it seems to me, on whether I am convinced that in the choice I made I acted for the best; I am convinced of this, yet have these regrets, ineffectual or possibly effective, for what I did not do" (Williams 172).

Acting for the best will not shield an agent from regret, even if the agent is convinced he made the best possible decision under the circumstances. This is a point best made by the story of Agamemnon.⁵ According to the story, Agamemnon is ordered by Zeus to lead an expedition to Troy. During the expedition, Agamemnon and his fleet are besieged by a violent storm. The prophet warns Agamemnon that the only way to stop the storm is to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. In this dilemma, Agamemnon ought to carry out the will of Zeus and protect the expedition, while he also ought not kill his daughter. Either decision will result in Agamemnon doing something he ought not to do or not doing something he ought to do. Agamemnon ultimately decides to kill his daughter to save the expedition. In many ways this was the right thing to do. Agamemnon had a duty to his crew as a commander. He was on an expedition that he thought was just, and one that was commanded by the god Zeus. He also was well aware that the storm would destroy his fleet, killing everyone, including his daughter. So, it can be claimed that Agamemnon acted for the best and made the best possible decision under the circumstances. But even though he acted for the best, Agamemnon was filled with guilt and regret for killing his daughter, knowing that even though he acted for the best, he did not make the best decision possible. This is the case because, the best decision possible was one in which both the expedition was saved and Agamemnon did not have to kill his daughter.

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. 34

Regret is not simply a consequence of making the wrong decision. It is also, in the case of moral conflict, a consequence of making the right decision. This is the case because, as previously stated, an abandoned obligation will not disappear entirely but will change form and express itself as something else. The guilt that Agamemnon feels for killing his daughter is the expression of the obligation not chosen. Guilt is the expression of Agamemnon's obligation not to kill his daughter. Saving the expedition, which he was obligated to do, did not eliminate the other obligation that Agamemnon ought not do. Even though he acted for the best, it was not the best possible outcome because he killed his daughter, something he ought not do.

Though closer to a conflict of desire than a conflict of belief, moral conflict differs from both in a substantial way. Williams explains, "I think that morality emerges as different from both belief and desire. It is not an option in the moral case that possible conflict should be avoided by way of skepticism, ignorance, or the pursuit of *ataraxia* – in general, by indifference" (Williams 178). In the case of a conflict of beliefs an agent can adopt a stance of skepticism or ignorance, where he limits his beliefs or refuses to learn the relevant fact. By taking either stance, an agent may be able to shield himself from a conflict. A conflict of desires can also be avoided if an agent actively seeks to limit or avoid desire altogether, such as in the case of monks of some religions.⁶ A conflict of desires cannot occur if the agent has no desires to act upon.

Moral conflict cannot be ignored or avoided by an agent. Unlike beliefs or desires, the agent cannot choose to avoid moral conflicts by means of skepticism, ignorance, or indifference. Williams says, "Moral conflicts do not share with conflicts of desire (nor yet with conflicts of belief) the feature that there is general freedom to adopt a policy to try to eliminate their occurrence" (Williams 179). Williams gives two reasons to support this claim. The first reason is that an agent cannot change his overall moral outlook or adjust his moral thoughts in the same

⁶ Buddhist monks in particular tend to try to avoid the pursuit of desires.

way that he can with his beliefs. An agent's moral outlook cannot be restructured to eliminate conflicting moral demands from occurring. The second reason that Williams gives involves the fact that an agent may in many cases be in a situation that was not of his own fault, or he did not have control over, such as the case of Agamemnon. Agamemnon did not choose to be in the situation, and was unable to take any steps to avoid it. In both cases, an agent is unable to avoid or be indifferent to the moral conflict. It would be unreasonable to demand that an agent restructure his moral outlook every time a conflict occurred. It would also be unreasonable to demand that an agent never get into a moral situation, knowing well that many moral conflicts are the result of events outside the agent's control. So, unlike beliefs or desires that can be ignored, morality demands action on the part of the agent.

II. Ethical Inconsistency

In a moral conflict a rejected *ought* obligation cannot be avoided or completely abandoned. This was a point previously mentioned and elaborated on. The importance of this point deserves serious attention. Williams argues that many ethical theories fail to give proper consideration to the persistence of the rejected *ought*, "It seems to me a fundamental criticism of many ethical theories that their accounts of moral conflict and its resolution do not do justice to the facts of regret and related considerations: basically because they eliminate from the scene the *ought* that is not acted upon" (Williams 175). A rejected *ought* changes form and may appear as regret. This feature of the rejected *ought* gives credence to its persistence and ineliminability. The fact that an *ought* obligation remains after a decision is made in a moral conflict, and is not abandoned, suggests its worth as an alternative; something the agent ought to have done instead.

A rejected *ought* is not the wrong choice abandoned in favor of the right choice, but rather a possible alternative to the choice made.

Accepting the conclusion that two *oughts* are present in a moral conflict, and that either *ought* cannot be ignored or completely eliminated, forces ethical theories to admit to an inconsistency. Williams asks, "If we accept these conclusions, what consequences follow for logic of moral thought? How, in particular, is moral conflict related to logical inconsistency?" (Williams 179). As previously stated, a moral conflict occurs when two *ought* obligations conflict. If an agent ought to do one thing and also ought to do another thing, but cannot do both, a form of inconsistency appears. This is the case because an agent that is obligated to do two things, but can only do one by not doing the other, faces a denial of the thing he should do by the completion of a thing he ought not do. If it is the case that an agent ought to do *a* and also ought to do *b*, an obligation to do both would be required even though it is impossible by the structure of the conflict.

Williams explains the structure of the inconsistency by adding the premise that *ought* implies *can*. If an agent ought to do a certain thing, then it is also the case that he can do a certain thing. So, if an agent has two obligations that he ought to do, then it is his obligation to do both, because an *ought* obligation implies that he can do both. But in a moral conflict an agent is obligated to do two things, but cannot do both. Therefore an agent in a moral conflict can carry out two obligations, while at the same time it is impossible that he can carry out both by the structure of the conflict. Williams explains this argument much better, "How do these ... acquire the form of logical inconsistency? The most natural account is that which invokes two further premises or rules: that *ought* implies *can*, and that 'I ought to do *a*' and 'I ought to do *b*' together imply 'I ought to do *a* and *b*' (which I shall call the *agglomeration principle*)" (Williams 180). By

the premises *ought* implies *can* and the *agglomeration principle*, an agent in a moral conflict ought and can fulfill two obligations, while at the same time it is impossible that an agent can fulfill both obligations. So, according to Williams, an agent in a moral conflict both can and cannot fulfill the same obligations.

The logical form of the *agglomeration principle* is stated by Williams as:

- (i) I ought to do *a*
- (ii) I ought to do *b*
- (iii) I cannot do *a* and *b*.
- From (i) and (ii), by agglomeration
- (iv) I ought to do *a* and *b*;
- from (iii) by '*ought* implies *can*' used contrapositively,
- (v) It is not the case that I ought to do *a* and *b*.
- (Williams 180)

From the form of the argument, (v) is proved by the preceding premises. Therefore an agent ought not to do *a* and *b*. But in order for (v) to be true either (i) or (ii) must be false. This is the case because, as previously explained, *a* and *b* cannot be carried out at the same time. By doing *a*, *b* becomes impossible or by doing *b*, *a* becomes impossible. A contradiction is created because, by (iv), an agent ought to do *a* and *b*, but by (v) an agent ought not to do *a* and *b*. Therefore, by the structure of a moral conflict an agent ought to and can do *a* and *b* while at the same time he cannot do *a* and *b*, because (i) and (ii) are impossible. So, (i) and (ii) must be removed leading to (v). An inconsistency is then created because an agent's obligations are negated by the structure on which it is built.

A major cause of the inconsistency created stems from *ought* implies *can*, "It seems that the main weight of the problem descends onto *ought* implies *can* and its application to these cases" (Williams 181). The relation of an obligation to the possibility of doing that obligation is

not completely clear. An obligation to do both *a* and *b* does not necessarily entail that an agent wants to do or can do *a* and *b* at the same time. Williams explains, "This is surely sound, but it does not dispose of the logical problems: for no agent, conscious of the situation of conflict, in fact thinks that he ought to do *both* of the things. What he thinks is he ought to do *each* of them; and this is properly paralleled at the level of 'can' by the fact that while he cannot do both of the things, it is true of each of the things, taken separately, that he can do it"(Williams 181). The necessity that an agent ought to do *a* and *b* by the *agglomeration principle* is problematic when coupled with *ought* implies *can*. But when reexamined in a different way, an agent can be expected to be able to do *a* and *b*, if each obligation is taken separately rather than at the same time.

A distinction must be made between 'each' and 'both' in regards to the *agglomeration principle*, "Now there are certainly many characteristics of actions in the general field of evaluation for which agglomeration does not hold, and for which what holds for each action taken separately does not hold for both taken together: thus it may be *desirable*, or *advisable*, or *sensible*, or *prudent*, to do *a*, and again desirable or advisable etc. to do *b*, but not desirable etc. to do both *a* and *b*" (Williams 181). In a particular moral conflict an agent may want to fulfill both obligations. But the fact that an agent wants to fulfill both obligations in no way suggests that an agent rationally thinks he can fulfill both at the same time or wants to. An agent rather wants to fulfill 'each' of the obligations rather than 'both'. Each obligation is sought to be fulfilled on its own terms, as a possible thing the agent ought to do. In a moral conflict, competing obligations are not expected to be fulfilled in accord with one another. Rather each obligation is a worthy alternative to the other. A man does not necessarily want both obligations fulfilled at once but wants each obligation fulfilled on its own terms.

The *agglomeration principle* can be better examined through less formal language.

Williams presents a revised version of his argument:

- (i) If I do *b*, I will not be able to do *a*,
 - (ii) If I do *a*, I will not be able to do *b*.
 - ...
 - (iii) If I will not be able to do *a*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *a*,
 - (iv) If I will not be able to do *b*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *b*.
 - ...
 - (v) If I do *b*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *a*,
 - (vi) If I do *a*, it will not be the case that I ought to do *b*.
- (Williams 182)

The conclusion from the argument demonstrates a case where the doing of either *a* or *b* will result in the other obligation no longer being something an agent ought to do. The fulfillment of *a* results in *b* no longer being obligatory. Or the fulfillment of *b* results in *a* no longer being obligatory. What this amounts to is a situation with no definite right solution. The doing of *a* or *b* will result in the other no longer being obligatory. So, either decision would be right if chosen by the agent. But Williams warns that this interpretation does not lead to either *ought* being eliminated by the other. It rather is an attempt to further show the inconsistency inherent in the *agglomeration principle*. Williams explains his warning:

It seems to me impossible, then, to rest content with a logical picture which makes it a necessary consequence of conflict that one *ought* must be totally rejected in the sense that one becomes convinced that it did not actually apply. The condition of moving away from such a picture appears to be, at least within the limits of the argument imposed by a rather crude use of *ought* implies *can*, the rejection of the agglomeration principle. (Williams 184)

Ethical theories need not eliminate one of the competing *oughts* in a moral conflict, "As I have tried to argue throughout, it is surely falsifying of moral thought to represent its logic as demanding that in a conflict situation one of the conflicting *ought's* must be totally rejected" (Williams 183). Though one *ought* is not acted on, this is not the same as being rejected. An *ought* not acted on is a worthy alternative. Two choices will present the agent with different alternatives in acting for the best. The choice of one over another does not discredit the other as not applying as the right thing to do. Both possible acts apply to the situation, and are considered by the agent equally as something that can be applied. The consideration of the different choices in a conflict shows an important aspect of the agent's moral decision-making. An agent is able to think about a conflict and seek advice on how to proceed.

The fact that agents seek advice from others when in a moral conflict can shed some light on the limits of the *agglomeration principle*. In the case of an actual, real conflict, where an agent seeks advice on what to do in a particular situation, another person who gives moral advice to an agent will not simply advise doing 'both' *a* and *b*. Telling the agent to do both *a* and *b*, knowing that he cannot, would not count as sound advice. The agent does not seek advice on how he can bring about two competing *oughts* in a moral conflict. Rather, the agent will seek moral advice from another on whether to do *a* or *b*? Though it is reasonably expected that moral advice will consist of reasons for doing *a* or *b*, rather than reasons for doing both *a* and *b*, different advisers will give different advice. In response to a moral conflict, advice towards *a* or *b* will not resolve the reasons for doing either. If advice is sought in more than one other person, one might well suggest *a* and the other *b*. What must be clear is that neither doing *a* nor *b* will

eliminate the other as an obligation. Doing *a* or doing *b* may both be sound advice, and both may be an attempt to act for the best.

In the case of moral conflict both decision *a* and *b* may be the right choice to make. But the making of either choice will not eliminate the other. When making a decision in a moral conflict an agent chooses one of the options as an equal alternative to the other. He does not abandon the other option by choosing *a* over *b*. The agent rather acts on one of the options, knowing the other option is also a suitable alternative. The rejected action will remain as something he ought to have done, and will still be reflected on by the agent as something he would have done under different circumstances or if the situation were repeated again in similar circumstances, "That he cannot most naturally say this in the imagined case does not mean that he cannot think of the rejected action as something which, in a different sense, he ought to have done; that is to say, as something which he was not wrong at the time in thinking that he ought to do it" (Williams 185). As was previously stated, both decision *a* and decision *b* would both result in the right thing to do for an agent in a moral conflict. If both decision *a* and *b* are equal alternatives for the agent, and both something the agent should do, an inherent inconsistency is created. But Williams wants to argue that inconsistency does not render ethics impossible. In the case of moral conflict there is a set of inconsistent alternatives that are both right.

Ethics does not need to be consistent. In the case of moral conflict it was shown that decisions are necessarily made off of inconsistent foundations. A single solution to every situation is not always attainable in every situation. Certain situations have more than one alternative, which are equally right in application to the situation. The choosing of one alternative over another by an agent does not eliminate the competing obligation, forcing a consistency to occur by the elimination of the competing obligation. Rather, an inconsistency

continues to remain. The decision made was only a choice between alternatives. The act of choosing one over the other simply is the decision made under the circumstances. The other alternative could have been made under different circumstances and been equally right. According to Williams, the inconsistent nature of competing right decisions best explains the puzzling nature of regret in an agent who acted for the best, "This distinction may also clear up what may seem troubling on my approach, that a man who has had a moral conflict, has acted (as he supposes) for the best, yet has the sorts of regrets that I have discussed about the rejected course of action, would not most naturally express himself with that course of action by saying 'I ought to have done the other'" (Williams 185).

An agent can make a plurality of right decisions in a moral conflict. The applicable features of the situation will demand a choice between alternatives to be made by the agent. But one alternative will not trump the other. Each moral conflict will simply force a choice to be made by the agent, though the right choice will remain contingent. A moral decision in a moral conflict can only be made at the demand of a particular situation.

III. The Incommensurability of Values

In his essay, "Conflicts of Values," Williams turns his attention away from a general discussion of moral conflict and focuses on a particular type of moral conflict, a conflict of values. Williams seeks to examine the idea that values such as liberty and equality are not reducible to each other and are able to conflict with each other. He attempts to unravel the social and historical forces that make values irreducible and the source of conflict resulting from this lack of cohesion. The discussion of value pluralism has raised many unresolved and problematic

issues in social and moral thought. But Williams decides to focus on a particular aspect of the discussion.

Williams is mainly concerned with value pluralism involving action. When examining value conflict involving action, a discussion of obligations will necessarily emerge. A call to action will transform the discussion from what values are better, or how can they be compared to each other, to a discussion of 'What should I do?' and how do particular values relate to the thing I should do? Williams says, "It is worth taking first, if briefly, the type of one-person conflict of obligations. This is the area of conflict of values which is most directly linked to reasons for actions" (Williams, "Conflicts of Values" 73). A particular value will generate an obligation when set into action. For instance a value involving liberty will involve an obligation to promote freedom, and the value of equality will involve an obligation to help others achieve a fair share of rights. A general discussion of the worth of liberty or equality will not yield much fruit when pitted against each other. Different cultures and social perspectives will offer very little flexibility in lowering the worth of one value compared to another. Some will argue that liberty is valued above all else. Others will argue that equality holds the same position. Or put another way, neither liberty nor equality can be compared to one another in any reasonable way. But, when the agent is called into action; when the agent must either perform an obligation involving liberty or equality, but cannot carry out both, such as in the case of a conflict; the general indecisiveness allowed from social thought is put to the test.⁷

Though the previous values presented suggest an obligation to promote their worth, the actual application of the values is somewhat vague. Williams says, "Values such as liberty, equality, and expressions of justice other than equality, can certainly conflict as ideals or

⁷ Sometimes an increase in liberty will result in a decrease of equality, or an increase in equality will result in a decrease in liberty. This is the case because different individuals have greater or lesser natural talent than others and may deserve more or less of a fair share depending on their worth.

objectives, though their connection with immediately presented courses of action may often be problematic, while, in the other direction, a choice between presented courses of action may in some cases be only indeterminately guided or shaped by appeal to these values" ("Conflicts of Values" 76). An agent will rarely or only indirectly shape his decision to act in a certain way by values like liberty or equality. When presented with a conflict of what he ought to do, an agent will not necessarily resort to thinking about the worth of liberty or equality. Rather he will make a decision based on the situation at hand. He will think of what action he ought to do, or what action was for the best rather than what action promotes liberty or equality.

Values involving virtues will also have a similar quality. Williams says, "Still further from particular choices of actions or policy are evaluations of admirable human characteristics or virtues such as courage, gentleness, honesty, independence of spirit and so forth. We know, too, that no social institution or form of society can express, embody or encourage all of the equally" ("Conflicts of Values" 76). Like the cases of liberty and equality, virtues cannot be compared or reduced to each other. The worth of honesty or charity is not willing to be lowered at the expense of the other virtue. Some people will value honesty above all else; others will value charity in the same way. Any attempt at comparing the virtues in question will yield very little. Because of this, Williams claims, like in the case of other values, virtues, as an ideal will have only an indirect impact on the agent when making a decision in a particular situation.⁸

Williams suggests that values not only lack a measure of comparison against each other but also are incapable of being applied to a particular situation in any reasonable way if a conflict arises. Therefore, not only do values come into conflict with one another, the conflict generated

⁸ Williams may be mistaken here. It can be argued that each virtue carries an obligation. Honesty carries the obligation to tell the truth. Charity carries the obligation to help others. When an agent is faced with a moral conflict where he must either tell the truth or help another, the virtues involved are not indirectly acting on the agent's decision, rather the virtues are directly influencing the agent. An agent tells the truth because he wants to be honest, not for the sake of telling the truth in a particular situation.

is also irresolvable. Williams makes four interrelated arguments in support of the claim that values are incommensurable. The first argument involves a lack of a common currency on which values are to be compared. The second argument involves the lack of an independent value on which to compare other values. The third argument makes a case for irresolvability based on the lack of an independent value for which other values can be compared. And the fourth argument concludes that values are irresolvable based on the preceding arguments.

Williams' four arguments are stated as:

1. There is no one currency in terms of which each conflict of values can be resolved.
2. It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value, independent of any of the conflicting values, which can be appealed to in order to resolve that conflict.
3. It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value which can be appealed to (independent or not) in order rationally to resolve that conflict.
4. No conflict of values can ever rationally be resolved. ("Conflicts of Values" 77)

The first argument involves a lack of a common currency for which to compare values. For instance, when comparing liberty or equality, there is no set amount of liberty that will be equivalent to a similar amount of equality. A similar case can be made in regards to the virtues. There is no set amount of honesty that can be compared to charity to determine either virtue's worth. No particular amounts of either value can be measured against each other. Because values cannot be compared, no outside value can be applied to measure and resolve a conflict.

This leads to Williams' second argument. Because no value can be compared and there is no way to measure any value against another, there cannot be any value, even if different from the values in conflict, that is capable of resolving a conflict of values.

The third argument proceeds from the previous two. Because individual values cannot appeal to other values to judge their worth, any third value would also be incapable of being compared to the other two. Williams says, "It must surely be contingent whether there is some third value which can be relevantly brought in to decide some particular conflict... If the deciding value were not intimately related to those involved in the conflict, we would have a decision, and a reason for it, but not one that supported any genuine commensurability of the values originally involved" ("Conflicts of Values" 79). An independent value outside of the conflict will not offer a resolution. The conflicting values will continue to be incommensurable. Any independent value will remain incapable of being compared to either of the other two values that are in conflict. Therefore a conflict of two values cannot be resolved by a third value.

The fourth argument culminates from the other three. If there is no common currency of values, no way to compare any value, related or independent of other values, and no way to resolve a conflict of values from an outside value, then a conflict of values cannot be rationally resolved.

Because values are incommensurable, attempts at systematizing them in any rational way is somewhat of a futile measure. Williams says, "A Utopian theorist of ideology, and a pluralist skeptic about Utopia, can however agree on at least one thing, that the enterprise of trying to reduce our conflicts, and to legislate to remove moral uncertainty, by constructing a philosophical *ethical theory* (in the sense of systematizing moral belief) is a misguided one" ("Conflicts of Values" 80). A rational attempt to remove conflict will not work because the nature of moral conflict involves irrationality. In regards to values, there should be no attempt to systematize or reduce conflict between them because from what had been previously said, a conflict of values cannot be rationally resolved.

Moral conflict represents an irrational situation in which an agent may find himself. In these situations an agent is incapable of acting rationally because, by the structure of the conflict, this is not possible. Though conflict results in an irrational component to a moral theory, this does not in any way, according to Williams, represent a pathological state of that theory; something that needs to be resolved for the theory to work. Inconsistency and incommensurability can work within a moral theory. Williams suggests a more personal and social basis for dealing with moral conflict. He talks about the need for a social rather than systematic understanding of values and conflict in the following example:

The ethical theorist tends to assimilate conflicts in moral belief to theoretical contradiction, and applies to moral understanding a model of theoretical rationality and adequacy. This is wrong in more than one way. If conflict among our values is not necessarily pathological, and if even where the situation is at fault, as with some conflicts of obligation, conflict is not a logical affliction of our thought, it must be a mistake to regard a need to eliminate conflict as a purely rational demand, of the kind that applies to a theoretical system. Rather we should see such needs as they are to reduce conflict and to rationalize our moral thought as having a more social and personal basis. ("Conflicts of Values" 80)

Morality can withstand a conflict of values. Rather than attempting to formalize and systematize values, an 'imperfect rationalization' guided by the social order of public and private life can act as a measure to solve moral conflicts. Williams describes 'imperfect rationalization' as, "The situation in which some distinction, not further reasoned, can ground agreement in private and less impersonal connections, but may not serve, or may not continue to serve, where a public order demands a public answer" ("Conflicts of Values" 81). The social and personal order present in a society can act as a guide for reducing conflict. A general moral sentiment to

particular situations can act in place of moral rules or moral laws. The distinction, that a certain action is wrong, and should not be done, resulting from a reaction to a moral situation has more force than the reasons behind the values or rational structure for why actions of that form have worth. Further reasons outside of an agent's reaction to a particular situation may not be necessary in a moral theory. The human experience is not reducible to ethical rules. Morality cannot be shaped or systematized in any rational way. This is especially true in modern societies containing a pluralism of values.

From what has been discussed, there are particular moral situations where systematized ethical systems are unable to rationally offer any guidance for action. But this does not, according to Williams, make ethics impossible. Rather a personal moral sentiment is able to act in place of universal rules. An agent's reaction to a particular situation, guided by the personal and social order of society is sufficient to provide moral guidance and reduce conflict. This formidable argument by Williams has had a huge impact on moral philosophy. One ethical theory in particular, based on the personal moral sentiment of the agent rather than universal moral rules, is virtue ethics. This theory will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Moral Dilemmas and the Virtuous Agent

In her book, *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse explores moral dilemmas through the standpoint of the virtuous agent. In this chapter, I will explore the complexities of Hursthouse's approach to dealing with moral dilemmas. This chapter will consist of five sections. The first section will briefly introduce Hursthouse's virtuous agent, sketching how he can be the standard of right action, and responds to several criticisms from deontologists and utilitarians against this claim. In Sections Two and Three, I will examine what comprises a resolvable moral dilemma and offer two criticisms of Hursthouse's theory, one involving her treatment of morally right action, and the other her treatment of the 'virtue rules'. Finally, I will respond to the preceding criticisms by appealing to the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent. In Section Four of this chapter, I will examine a special type of irresolvable moral dilemma, the tragic moral dilemma. I will then attempt to show that Hursthouse's stance on tragic moral dilemmas limits the primacy of the virtuous agent and undermines her entire project as a virtue ethicist. Finally, I will offer a defense of Hursthouse against the preceding criticism and attempt to put the virtuous agent's relation to tragic moral dilemmas back into perspective. Section Five will apply Hursthouse's theory by taking on a particular problem in moral philosophy, the abortion moral dilemma. Drawing on Hursthouse's essay, "Virtue Theory and Abortion", I will attempt to offer a virtue guided approach to dealing with this dilemma, as well as elaborate on the ways in which virtue theory transforms the abortion debate.

I. The Virtuous Agent

A major criticism offered by deontologists and utilitarians against virtue ethics is that it offers no guidance for action.⁹ Hursthouse responds to this criticism by offering a version of virtue guided action. Her first premise states:

P.1. An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.
(Hursthouse 28)

Hursthouse claims that virtue ethics has a lot to say about right action. A moral decision procedure stems from the characteristic acts of the virtuous agent. A virtuous agent will always act in the right way. By acting in a way that a virtuous agent would characteristically act a prescription for right action can be offered. The virtuous agent becomes the standard for action guidance. So, in a similar way to which deontologists and utilitarians appeal to the correct moral rule or the best consequences to form a decision procedure for right action, virtue ethicists are able to appeal to the virtuous agent. Specific moral advice can be had by asking the question, 'What would a virtuous agent characteristically do in this particular situation?'

Hursthouse's virtuous agent is the exemplar for right action, which through his virtuous character and moral wisdom can be relied on to act well in moral situations. She defines a virtuous agent as, "A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain traits, namely the virtues" (Hursthouse 29). By acting in accordance with the virtues the virtuous agent acts rightly. And the virtuous agent acts rightly because he acts according to the virtues. Therefore, whatever action the virtuous agent does becomes the right act because the virtuous agent is the one

⁹ See p. 26 in *On Virtue Ethics*.

performing the act. This definition may appear to be circular, but Hursthouse defends that the first premise is dependent on the completion of a second premise, "What I need to emphasize is that the apparent truism, 'An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances', is not figuring as a truism in virtue ethics account of right action. It is figuring as the first premise of that account, a premise that, like the first premises of the other two accounts, awaits filling out in the second premise" (Hursthouse 30).

Before filling out the second premise, an objection should be raised, 'Who are the virtuous agents?' Hursthouse responds to this objection by showing that a similar charge can be made against deontologists and utilitarians. The first utilitarian premise is, "An action is right iff it promotes the best consequence" (Hursthouse 26). Against the utilitarian, the charge can be made, 'What are the best consequence?' The first deontological premise is, "An action is right iff it is in accordance with a correct moral rule or principle" (Hursthouse 26). Against the deontologist, the charge can be made, 'What are the correct moral rules?' In all three schools of normative ethics, the starting premises are all in the same position. To challenge virtue ethics based on its first premise alone is unwarranted and should demand that deontologists and utilitarians reexamine their own first premises before making such an attack.

After proposing the first premise, 'An action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do,' Hursthouse moves on to the second premise of virtue guided action. She states the second premise as:

P.1a. A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely, the virtues.

P.2. A virtue is a character trait that ... (Hursthouse 29)

In answering the question, 'What is a virtuous agent?' Hursthouse shows that the question can be answered by replying, 'Virtuous agents are people who have and exercise a particular list of virtues.' In using the basic Aristotelian list, it can be shown for instance, that a virtuous person is one who has and exercises the particular virtue of courage. He will act in a way that is characteristically courageous. He will face fear without running away. Or a virtuous person is one who has and exercises generosity. He will act in a way that is characteristically generous. He will give to others when he can. Virtuous agents are those people who characteristically display the virtues. In seeking advice on which acts to pursue, guidance can be given by examining the behavior that a virtuous person would characteristically exhibit. Modeling the behavior of the virtuous agent is the correct guide to moral action.

The question still remains, 'How do we know who the virtuous agents are?' Hursthouse presents an objection from a deontologist:

Deontology gives a set of clear prescriptions which are readily applicable. But virtue ethics yields only the prescription, 'Do what the virtuous agent—the one who is just, honest, charitable etc.—would do in these circumstances.' And this gives me no guidance unless I am (and know I am) a virtuous agent myself—in which case I am hardly in need of it. If I am less than fully virtuous, I shall have no idea what a virtuous agent would do, and hence cannot apply the only prescription virtue ethics has given me. (Hursthouse 35)

From the objection, it is pointed out that unless someone is a virtuous agent himself, there is no way of knowing what a virtuous agent is. So the prescription that Hursthouse gives for virtue guided action is useless in giving moral advice. How can a person model his actions off of a virtuous agent if he does not know what a virtuous agent is?

Hursthouse responds to this objection by pointing out that what constitutes a virtuous agent can be shown by finding examples of morally superior people in society,

In response, it is worth pointing out that, if I know I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go ask one, should this be possible. This is far from being a trivial point, for it gives a straightforward explanation of an important aspect of our moral life, namely the fact that we do not act as 'autonomous', utterly self determined agents, but quite often seek moral guidance from people we think are morally better than ourselves. (Hursthouse 35)

There are many examples of people who possess admirable traits to be found in society. What constitutes a virtuous agent can be shown by examining the characteristics morally superior people tend to have. For instance, someone that is admirable and well respected in your community possesses the character traits of honesty, compassion, courage and so on. From Hursthouse's response, particular examples of virtuous people and their characteristics can be known from common experience. Therefore, one can build a model based on the characteristics that these virtuous people possess.

II. Resolvable Dilemmas

Having established what a virtuous agent is, moral dilemmas can now be explored. A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent is faced with two moral choices that conflict with one another. Moral dilemmas fall into three general categories. In the first category, an agent is faced with a case where he ought to do two things, but he can only do one, where the doing of

one action excludes the possibility of doing the other action. In the second category, an agent is faced with a decision that involves one thing he ought to do and another he ought not to do, where the doing of one forbids the other. The third category involves a case where an agent is faced with two things he ought not to do, but is forced to do one of the bad actions. In the third case, the level of wrongness of the act determines whether the dilemma is to be a tragic dilemma, or a dilemma where the agent is permanently marred by the decision. In either case, a moral dilemma is meant to be irresolvable or resolvable only with a remainder.

A resolvable moral dilemma is a moral dilemma where an agent is forced to choose between two conflicting actions, but one action overrides the other and is better or less wrong than the other action. Or there is a conflict in a moral decision procedure and one moral requirement overrides another. A particular example, of a resolvable moral dilemma, is a situation in which while heading to a friend's college graduation ceremony you stop to help a person in trouble, even though it results in you breaking a promise to your friend who was expecting you to be at that ceremony. The virtue of charity requires that you help the stranger in need, but at the same time the virtue of honesty requires that you keep your promise to your friend. In either case, the agent acts wrongly. Either the stranger in need will not be helped, or your friend will be hurt emotionally by you breaking your promise. Either situation carries negative consequences. This particular situation is resolvable though, depending on the circumstances involved. There is a big difference between helping a stranger in need that was in a car wreck and needs medical care, or a stranger in need that has a flat tire. In the first case, the moral requirement of charity overrides honesty. In the second case though, keeping your promise to your friend might be the better decision.

Though the preceding moral dilemma is resolvable, it carries over a remainder. The issue of remainder is extremely significant in virtue ethics. Remainder is the 'moral residue' of guilt, regret, shame, or any negative consequences that are carried over from a decision involving a moral dilemma. The remainder is the expression of the decision that was not chosen, even though it ought to have been. Hursthouse talks about remainder in the following example, "This—the remorse or regret, or the new requirement to apologize or whatever—is called the (moral) 'remainder' or 'residue'" (Hursthouse 44). The remainder will carry even if the agent knows, without a doubt, that he made the right decision.¹⁰ For instance, in the first case where the agent stopped to help the stranger in the car accident, he knows he made the right decision. But at the same time a certain amount of guilt carries over as a remainder. He feels awful for missing this big event in his friend's life. He has to apologize to his friend, and it may take a long time to be forgiven. In the lesser case, where the agent did not help the stranger with the flat tire, the remainder is much smaller, but it is still there. The agent might feel guilt at not helping the stranger. What if no one else stopped to help the stranger? What if the stranger was injured on the road?

In the previous case it is clear what the right decision is. And it is possible to make both the morally right decision and the right moral decision. But in certain hard cases the right decision is less clear. Hursthouse draws a distinction between making the right moral decision and the morally right decision,

Suppose we have a moral dilemma which is resolvable— x is worse than y . Then the decision to do y rather than x is, in the circumstances, the *right* decision. Moreover (supposing that the decision has been made on moral grounds that x is worse than y), it is a moral decision, or one that has been made morally. So it is the

¹⁰ This was an important point made by Williams in Chapter 1. See p. 12.

'morally right decision', or the 'right moral decision', and this is one way in which we use those phrases. (Hursthouse 46)

The right decision is not always the moral decision. The action of a decision can turn out to be right even if the decision was not the morally right decision. Or a moral decision can turn out to have been the wrong decision if the action is not carried out properly or if some outside force thwarts the success of that action. The rightness of a decision is largely determined by whether or not it is properly carried out by the agent. The exchange between decision and action is important in understanding the relationship between right action and morally right action. In the following example, Hursthouse calls the status of right action into question:

The difference can be brought out by considering the claim: 'When morally right decisions come off—when the agent succeeds in doing what she intended to do—we get morally right action.' So we may truly, indeed, trivially, say when using 'morally right decision' in the second way. But if we are using morally right decision in the first way, we cannot say this truly, for it is obviously false. (Hursthouse 46)

What Hursthouse is saying is that, an agent should not be acknowledged as performing the right action if that action is immoral. Just because the action was carried out properly and decision x of the agent turned out to be a better action than decision y, the agent should not receive credit or praise for choosing x over y if neither decision was a moral decision. She uses an example involving a philanderer to better express her point:

The man who has induced two women to bear a child of his by promising marriage, can only marry one, but he may not be in an irresolvable dilemma; it may be worse to abandon A than B, and

let us suppose he makes 'the morally right decision' and marries A, perforce breaking his promise to B and condemning her child to illegitimacy. He merits not praise, but blame, for having created the circumstances that made it necessary for him to abandon B; he should be feeling ashamed of himself, not proud, and so on. (Hursthouse 47)

The agent should not be commended for making a right decision solely on it being right. Or successfully carrying out a right decision is not as important as making a moral decision. Between two immoral decisions, if one is less wrong than the other, the agent should not be praised for determining what act was less wrong. Only right moral decisions are commendable.

It can be claimed that Hursthouse is making a serious mistake in her refusal to allow an agent to receive credit for making the right decision in a situation where there is already an immoral connotation attached. In the case of the philanderer, Hursthouse is condemning his action before he even makes it. No matter what decision the philanderer makes, it is wrong. But is this a justified assessment? The agent who is caught in this bad situation is being punished twice by Hursthouse's determination. He is already condemned in this particular situation. He made the wrong decision that landed him in this particular mess. Now even if he makes the correct decision the second time around he is still condemned.

What if the agent truly did make a mistake? What if he acknowledged his mistake, suffered the remainder of guilt and remorse, and apologized to both girls. He now seeks to make it up; he is ready to make the situation right. He seeks to make the right decision and do the right thing this time around. But according to Hursthouse, no matter what the agent does it is wrong. It seems unjustified for someone to be condemned for doing the wrong thing, but at the same time not to be acknowledged for doing the opposite of the wrong thing. The agent should at least be acknowledged as making the morally right decision the second time around. But Hursthouse

does not even want to allow that, "Consider again the distinctly non-virtuous man who has induced two women to bear a child of his by convincing each that he attends to marry her, under the assumption that it would be worse to abandon A than B... The virtue ethics account refuses to insure him that in marrying A he would be doing a 'morally right act—a good deed'" (Hursthouse 50).

How can Hursthouse not acknowledge a morally right act in this situation? This dilemma is resolvable, either act *a* or act *b* is the morally right decision. If *b* is the wrong act and the agent does *a*, he is making the morally right decision. For Hursthouse to deny this is to undermine her project in distinguishing the difference between morally right decisions and right moral decisions. Essentially, in this assessment, Hursthouse is denying that morally right decisions have any worth. She is giving primacy to right moral decisions.

III. Virtue Rules and Conflict

Another problem that Hursthouse faces in her interpretation of resolvable moral dilemmas involves a conflict in v-rules. The v-rules are the guidelines set by virtue and vice terms that can act as general prescriptions for right action. For instance, the virtue of charity carries the prescription to help others. The virtue of honesty prescribes that I should tell the truth. Courage advises that I face fear without running away. Each term provides action guidance for dealing with particular moral situations. Hursthouse talks about v-rules, "So we can see that virtue ethics not only comes up with rules (the v-rules, couched in terms derived from the virtues and vices) but, further, does not exclude the more familiar deontologists' rules. The theoretical

distinction between the two is that the familiar rules, and their application in particular cases, are given entirely different backings" (Hursthouse 39).

The v-rules are problematic for several reasons. First, in deciding whether to be charitable or to be honest, how can the v-rules offer any guidance? The problem is that there is no genuine way to rank the virtues. This was an important point made by Williams in Chapter One.¹¹ Because values like virtues are incommensurable, and there is no rational way to compare them to one another when they conflict, an agent is unable to resolve a situation involving a conflict of virtues.¹² It is nearly impossible to compare the worth of charity to the worth of honesty. If somehow there were a ranking procedure for the virtues this problem would be solved. But neither Hursthouse nor Williams offers a procedure. Whenever virtues come into conflict with one another the v-rules break down. How can the v-rules be of any value in action guidance if they break down whenever there is any conflict between them? Or what is the worth of Hursthouse's theory if the v-rules are capable of conflicting with each other?

The second problem with the v-rules has to do with application. If everyone can apply the v-rules, the primacy of the virtuous agent is lessened, and a deontological decision procedure would suffice over an agent-based virtue ethics. If there is such a thing as v-rules, why not simply follow the v-rules? If we know what the v-rules are: 'be charitable', 'be honest', 'be generous', 'don't be dishonest;' why do we need the virtuous agent to provide action guidance? Instead of asking, 'What would the virtuous agent do in this situation?' why not just ask, 'What do the v-rules tell me to do?'

A third problem with the v-rules is that they are not specific enough. The v-rules can only be useful if compared to deontological rules. For instance, the v-rule 'be honest' is very vague. It

¹¹ See Chapter 1, Section III.

¹² See p. 23.

only becomes useful when compared to the deontological rule 'don't lie'. In addition to this lack of clarity the v-rules can also be set off course. For instance, if I follow the v-rule, 'be generous', does that entail emptying my wallet every time a beggar asks for money? Or does the v-rule, 'be honest', entail being completely frank with everyone I meet? This vagueness of the v-rules hampers its ability to offer useful guidance for action.

How might Hursthouse respond to the preceding criticisms of the v-rules? Hursthouse might reply by saying that virtue ethics does employ v-rules, but the v-rules are not strongly codified. This is in contrast to strongly codified ethical theories. Hursthouse says,

It used to be quite commonly held that the task of normative ethics was to come up with a set of universal rules or principles which would have two significant features: (a) they would amount to a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case; (b) they would be stated in such terms that any non-virtuous person could understand and apply them correctly. Call this the 'strong codifiability thesis'. (Hursthouse 40)

The first premise claims that a universal decision procedure can be formulated to determine the right act in any possible case. But as was argued by Williams, it is impossible to formulate a systematized decision procedure for every case.¹³ There will be cases where the rules will break down. Because v-rules are able to conflict with one another, and are unable to offer a decision procedure for right action in particular cases where a conflict can occur, it would be unreasonable to hold onto premise (a), at least in the absolute sense required by the 'strong codifiability thesis'.

The second premise claims that universal rules can be grasped and utilized by the virtuous and non-virtuous alike. Williams may allow this second premise. Even if moral rules

¹³ See p. 24.

will not hold in every case, a general moral sentiment could allow non-virtuous agents to grasp ethical concepts and correctly apply them in particular cases. This general moral sentiment, grounded in the social order, may allow an agent to resolve conflict in particular situations.¹⁴ But Hursthouse wants to reject both premises of the 'strong codifiability thesis'. She would answer the first criticism by saying that, there is only a conflict between v-rules if it is assumed that virtue ethics only rejects the first premise of the 'strong codifiability thesis'. But this is not the case. She makes this clear in the following example:

When I originally outlined the strong codifiability thesis, I said that it required (a) that the rules should provide a decision procedure and (b) that they should be applicable by the non-virtuous as well as the virtuous, applicable, that is, without any recourse to moral wisdom. Now it may be that those who accept the necessity of moral wisdom, but think that virtue ethics need to come up with a priority ranking of the virtues, take themselves to have only rejected (b). (Hursthouse 56)

Criticisms against virtue ethics for lacking a proper hierarchy of the virtues fail to take into account the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent. The virtuous agent through his moral wisdom determines the hierarchy of the virtues in a particular situation.

Hursthouse might respond to the second criticism by saying, though the v-rules are present, and available to everyone, it is not the v-rules that offer guidance for action; it is the wisdom of the virtuous agent. The virtuous agent employs a certain amount of 'fine-tuning' to the v-rules. Hursthouse says, "The notion of the virtuous person—the courageous, or honest, or loyal one—is 'primary' in the sense that it is needed to go beyond those and provide the fine-tuning" (Hursthouse 81). Fine-tuning is the proper appraisal of the v-rules. When the v-rules come into

¹⁴ See "Conflicts of Values", p. 81.

conflict with one another the virtuous agent is able to resolve the conflict by evaluating the right way and the right circumstances in which to employ particular rules. And this fine-tuning of the v-rules is largely determined by the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent.

Hursthouse might respond to the third criticism by saying that the claim that virtue ethics is not specific enough is wrong. Virtue ethics is able to offer specific advice,

Now if this is all that is issue, let us by all means say that virtue ethics does *not* reject the idea that ethics is codifiable. It does not need to be supplemented by such principle; it embodies them already—and many more besides. It is a noteworthy feature of our virtue and vice vocabulary that, although our list of generally recognized virtue terms is, I think, quite short, our list of vice terms is remarkably—and usefully—long, far exceeding anything that anyone who thinks in terms of standard deontological rules has ever come up with. (Hursthouse 41)

Couple this long list of virtue and vice rules with the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent and specific action guidance can be offered. Not only are the v-rules in play to offer advice, but the example of the virtuous agent using his moral wisdom to employ fine-tuning in particular situations can offer even more specific advice than the just the v-rules alone. When the virtuous agent is employed along with the v-rules, action guidance can be offered in any particular moral situation.

IV. Irresolvable and Tragic Dilemmas

An irresolvable dilemma is a moral dilemma where two courses of action are both equally wrong, and neither action overrides the other. In this type of moral dilemma the agent is

forced to make a choice between two actions, but there is no reason to choose one action over another action. Hursthouse describes an irresolvable moral dilemma, "I take an irresolvable dilemma to be a situation in which the agent's moral choice lies between x and y and there are no moral grounds for favoring doing x over doing y " (Hursthouse 63). A particular type of irresolvable moral dilemma is a tragic irresolvable dilemma. An example of this type of dilemma would be, a mother who sees two of her children that are drowning, but she can only save one. Which one should she save? Either action would be equally wrong. If she saves the first child she allows the other child to drown. Allowing the other child to drown is a wrong act. On the contrary, if she saves the second child she lets the first child drown. This act would be an equally wrong act. In this situation, no matter what the mother does she will have acted badly. No matter her level of virtue or her moral wisdom, she will be unable to act in a morally right way. She will be scarred for the rest of her life.

In the case of the tragic dilemma, the agent is unable to recover from it. Even if the agent made the right decision under the circumstances, or at least a decision that was somehow decided by the agent to be better than the other, the decision will mar the life of the agent. Hursthouse explains,

However, if a genuinely tragic dilemma is what a virtuous agent emerges from, it will be the case that she emerges having done a terrible thing, the very sort of thing that the callous, dishonest, unjust, or in general vicious agent would characteristically do—killed someone, or let them die, betrayed a trust, violated someone's serious rights. And hence it will not be possible to say she has acted *well*. What follows from this is not the impossibility of virtue but the possibility of some situations from which even a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred. (Hursthouse 74)

From what follows, it is indeed possible for a virtuous agent to commit a wrong act. In an irresolvable tragic dilemma the virtuous agent cannot be counted on for action guidance.

Hursthouse claims that even if the virtuous agent acts in the best possible and moral way in an irresolvable tragic dilemma, the agent will still have acted badly:

But here it seems quite inappropriate to say that each acts well, mirroring the fact (I take it to be a fact) that it is quite inappropriate to say, with respect to tragic irresolvable dilemmas, that both agents do what is right. If anything, the temptation is to say that both do what is *wrong*. So it looks as though I am going to be forced to say that both agents act *badly*. (Hursthouse 72)

In a tragic dilemma, no matter what an agent does he will have made the wrong moral decision. If there are two actions, *a* and *b*, and there are two agents, *x* and *y*, both agents will be unable to perform a morally right act, even if act *a* and *b* were chosen by either agent. In a tragic dilemma, both act *a* and act *b* will be the wrong act. And both agents *x* and *y* will have acted badly no matter what act they choose. As Williams says, "One peculiarity of these [tragic cases] is that the notion of 'acting for the best' may very well lose its content" ("Ethical Consistency" 173). Even if an agent acts for the best, and by all measures attempts to make the morally right decision, he will not be able to. The structure of the dilemma will not allow it. In a tragic dilemma, the agent will be forced to act badly.

In a tragic moral dilemma, the virtuous agent is not a reliable measure for right action. Hursthouse presents a qualified version of her theory of virtue-guided action:

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a decision is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be

called 'right' or 'good'. (And a tragic dilemma is one from which a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred). (Hursthouse 79)

From what has been stated, it can be said that in an irresolvable tragic dilemma a virtuous agent is forced to act badly. It can also be said that because a virtuous agent is forced to act badly, he will not be able to act as an exemplar in this type of situation. If the virtuous agent would act badly, it is not justified to treat the virtuous agent as a model for right action. This assessment shows a serious flaw in Hursthouse's theory.

A crucial point in Hursthouse's theory is that the virtuous agent will always act in the right way; he will never act in a way that is wrong. The virtuous agent acts as an exemplar because of the fact that he will always act in the right way. This is what serves as the model for right action. But in the case of irresolvable tragic dilemmas the virtuous agent is capable of acting badly. How can this be? Somehow the bad act has to be separated from a good agent. Or it has to be said that the virtuous agent is always good but this particular act is bad. Or even though the agent is good, this particular act forces the agent into acting badly. The virtuous agent is good. The act is bad.

By separating the act from the agent Hursthouse is making a major error. By doing this Hursthouse is making the act primary over the agent. But this contradicts her entire project. If the virtuous agent is to be the model for right action, the act cannot have primacy over the agent. The act cannot make the agent bad. On the contrary, the virtuous agent is what makes the act bad or good. The virtuous agent is the measure. Whatever act a virtuous agent does becomes good. The act cannot be bad if the virtuous agent is doing the act. The agent makes the act good not the other way around. To deny this would contradict the whole foundation of Hursthouse's theory.

But in the case of the tragic irresolvable dilemma she does just that. The agent becomes bad because he commits a bad act.

From what follows, if there are irresolvable tragic dilemmas then there cannot be virtuous agents. Hursthouse even says this "We have now worked out an account of this which neither paints a rosy picture of life in which there are no tragic dilemmas, irresolvable or resolvable, nor, in admitting their existence, commits us to saying that there are no virtuous agents. Yes, there are tragic dilemmas, namely situations from which a virtuous agent cannot emerge having acted well" (Hursthouse 77). If there are such things as irresolvable tragic dilemmas, which Hursthouse agrees to, then it should follow that there cannot exist virtuous agent. Or, at the very least, it should follow that the virtuous agent cannot be a reliable measure for right action. If this is the case, Hursthouse's theory breaks down.

How might Hursthouse respond to the preceding criticism? She would respond by saying that the virtuous agent is the model for right action, and that the virtuous agent will always act in the right way. But the terms 'good' and 'bad', as she uses them to refer to the virtuous agent must be clarified, "'Good action' is so called advisedly, and although it is conceptually linked to the morally correct (right) decision and to 'action of the virtuous agent', it is also conceptually linked to 'good life' and *eudaimonia*" (Hursthouse 74). What Hursthouse is saying is that, a good or bad act in terms of a virtuous agent is linked to 'the good life'. It is not the same as the right act. The virtuous agent will always do the right act, but he will not necessarily always do the good act, specifically in an irresolvable tragic moral dilemma.

What forces an agent to have acted badly in a tragic irresolvable dilemma is not that he somehow made the wrong decision or lacked moral wisdom. What makes the act bad is that it hampers the virtuous agent's ability to live a good life. 'Good' is used by Hursthouse to refer to

acts the promote *eudaimonia* or the living of a good life, whereas 'bad' is used to depict acts that somehow prevent the agent from achieving *eudaimonia* or 'the good life'. An irresolvable tragic dilemma always results in a virtuous agent acting badly because, after committing that act he will no longer be able to live a good life. This is the case because, after committing a heinous act the agent will no longer be able to live with himself. His life will be forever scarred by the decision that he made. This is what makes the act bad.

But the fact that a virtuous agent is able to act in such a way as to permanently mar his life does not discredit the virtuous agent as a measure of right action. His action was right, and you should do the same under the circumstances. If the virtuous agent were able to perform a heinous act and somehow go about his life and be happy afterwards, something would be terribly wrong. It is the very fact that the virtuous agent is so virtuous that causes his life to be marred. A vicious individual in the situation might be able to perform the same exact act as a virtuous agent and not have a single afterthought. Hursthouse concludes, "Indeed, it is just because she regards herself, rightly, as having done something terrible and horrible—something that cannot possibly be described as 'acting well'—that her life is marred" (Hursthouse 81).

V. Virtue Ethics and Abortion

How does this approach deal with contemporary moral problems? Drawing from Rosalind Hursthouse's essay, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," how should abortion be approached from a virtue ethicist's viewpoint? Building on her idea of the virtuous agent as a model for right action, from *On Virtue Ethics*, it can be asked, 'What decision would a virtuous agent make in regards to abortion, or a particular case involving abortion?' Would the virtuous agent get an

abortion? To arrive at an answer, certain difficult questions and perspectives must be considered. The abortion moral dilemma involves a conflict of rights between two agents, being, the rights of a woman to make decisions regarding her own body and the right to life of the unborn fetus. What is at issue is whether or not a fetus is a person. If a fetus is a person, then abortion is wrong, because it is murdering a person. If a fetus is not a person then abortion is acceptable, or at least permissible. The problem with this particular dilemma is that, the question of when a human becomes a person is not a moral question; it is an ontological question. Non-moral perspectives influence the decision-making process. So even though the decision is a moral decision, whether or not to get an abortion, it is influenced by the non-moral question, 'When does the human self begin?' and as of now, this ontological question is still unresolved. So a consensus on what the virtuous agent would decide is open because it is not a moral question.

But what would a virtuous agent decide, if put in this difficult situation? The virtuous agent could make more than one decision, each of which would be equally virtuous and right. If the virtuous agent decided that abortion was wrong based on his virtuous character, it would be a right decision. If the virtuous agent decided that abortion was permissible based on his virtuous character his decision would be right as well. But, this situation creates a problem. If a virtuous agent can have a plurality of actions, each of which are virtuous, how can the virtuous agent be used as a guide for right action? Hursthouse raises an important question, "Should those difficult claims be there or can one reach practical conclusions about real moral issues that are in no way determined by premises about such matters" (Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion" 237). If practical moral guidance is to be based off of the question, 'What would the virtuous agent do in this situation?' there cannot be a duality of possible decisions from the virtuous agent. If this is the case, Hursthouse's virtuous agent model becomes unreliable and problematic. So how should

the abortion issue be approached, given that the virtuous agent can make a plurality of right decisions, all equally guided by his virtuous character?

Before exploring the problems inherent in a virtuous agent having a plurality of right decisions it may be useful to examine some of the major issues in the abortion debate from a virtue ethics standpoint. Two major issues previously mentioned are the rights of a woman to her body and the status of the fetus. Talks of rights in the abortion debate tend to commonly break down into justice and legality. But the virtue ethicist is not concerned with the legality or permissibility of the rights of the agent. Rather, the virtue ethicist is concerned with whether the agent is virtuous or vicious in executing those rights. Hursthouse explains,

But, putting all questions about the justice or injustice of laws to one side, and supposing only that women have such a moral right, *nothing* follows from this supposition about the morality of abortion, according to virtue theory, once it is noted that in exercising a moral right I can do something cruel, or callous, or selfish, light-minded, self-righteous, stupid, inconsiderate, disloyal, dishonest –that is, act viciously... So whether women have a moral right to terminate their pregnancies is irrelevant within virtue theory, for it is irrelevant to the question 'In having an abortion in these circumstances, would the agent be acting virtuously or viciously or neither?' ("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 227)

According to the perspective of virtue ethics, the rights of the agent are irrelevant, or at least subordinate to how the rights are carried out. As Hursthouse points out, rights can easily be misused. A woman who treats a pregnancy in a trivial way, not giving it any serious thought, and gets an abortion simply because it is her moral right to do so, is not acting rightly. If her reasons for getting an abortion are selfish or callous or if she has no reasons at all, she is not to be

admired as a champion of women's rights. Rather she should be scorned as someone who is doing something immoral and vicious.

Much debate about the status of the fetus has been centered around biological facts, such as the level of mental and physical development, response and sensitivity to pain, and the viability of the fetus outside of the mother. Such facts have shaped the status of the fetus in relation to his biology, as in, when a fetus reached a certain level of development the status of person could be ascribed; though the exact level of development for ascribing personhood is strongly debated. But Hursthouse wants to argue that talking about the beginning of human life and pregnancy should not simply be viewed as a type of physical condition based on certain biological facts. Hursthouse says, "Now if we are using virtue theory, our first question is not 'What do the familiar biological facts show—what can be derived from them about the status of the fetus?' but 'How do these facts figure in the practical reasoning, actions and passions, thoughts and reactions, of the virtuous and the non-virtuous?' ("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 229). For the virtue ethicist, the biological status of the fetus is less important than the role pregnancy and birth plays as a significant and meaningful part of human life. It is a serious matter, like no other, and not reducible to biological facts.

Pregnancy plays a significant role in human life. Viewing an abortion as an operation, like other operations, and the termination of a pregnancy as a physical change in condition brought on by such an operation is severely misguided. Hursthouse explains,

Pregnancy is not just one among many other physical conditions; and hence that anyone who genuinely believes that an abortion is comparable to a haircut or appendectomy is mistaken. The fact that premature termination of pregnancy is, in some sense, the cutting-off of a new human life, and thereby, like the procreation of a new human life, connects with all our thoughts of human life and death,

parenthood, and family relationships, must make it a serious matter. To disregard this fact about it, to think of abortion as nothing but the killing of something that does not matter, or as nothing but the exercise of some rights one has, or as the incidental means to some desirable state of affairs, is to do something callous and light-minded, the sort of thing that no virtuous and wise person would do. It is to have the wrong attitude not only to fetuses, but generally to human life and death, parenthood, and family relationships. ("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 229)

There are many views about human life that transcend a simple assessment of moral right and wrong. Many of these views are non-moral, but play a significant part in defining the human experience. In Williams' essay, "Morality, The Peculiar Institution," he shows that moral priorities are only one of many other worthwhile priorities. Williams says, "Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that things other than itself are important. It contains motivations that indeed serve these other ends but at the same time are seen from within that life as part of what make it worth living" (Williams, "Morality the Peculiar Institution," 55).¹⁵ Though ethical considerations may be very important to an agent, they are not the only considerations. An agent's decisions do not exist in a 'moral vacuum'. Many other factors are involved.

Hursthouse also claims that agents have non-moral views about life that are extremely important and should not be dismissed,

The discussion also thereby, inevitably, contains claims about what life is like (e.g. my claim that love and friendship do not survive their parties' constantly insisting on their rights; or the claim that to demand perfection of life is to run the risk of missing out on happiness entirely). What is at issue is, should these disputable claims be there, or is our knowledge (or are our false opinions)

¹⁵ More can be said about the relation between moral and non-moral priorities, and whether moral reasons will always trump non-moral reasons; but a lengthy discussion, capable of doing justice to Williams' essay, "Morality, The Peculiar Institution," is avoided in this thesis.

about what life is like irrelevant to our understanding of real moral issues. ("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 237)

Non-moral views about life play a major role in making tough decisions. The previous discussions of the virtuous agent lay him empty outside of moral views. But the fact that decisions regarding real life issues are never empty in the same way, and depend on non-moral factors as well as moral factors should demand that the virtuous agent also have certain non-moral views as well. Non-moral situations such as life perspective, family fulfillment, intellectual projects and goals, and views of life and death, meaning, and the overall individual pursuit of 'the good life' are not trivial factors. Such factors are extremely influential and important, acting as a substantial weight on the agent in his decisions.

From a virtue ethics standpoint, the conditions influencing the decision to get an abortion play a large role in determining the rightness or wrongness of the act. Each agent and their particular situation must be taken into account. For instance, a woman who has good reasons for getting an abortion because of her circumstances, and has treated the matter in a serious and responsible way is not acting viciously or morally wrongly by getting an abortion. In her case, an abortion might be the right thing to do. Hursthouse explains,

Consider, for instance, a woman who has already had several children and fears that to have another will seriously affect her capacity to be a good mother to the ones she has—she does not show a lack of appreciation of the intrinsic value of being a parent by opting for abortion. Nor does a woman who has been a good mother and is approaching the age at which she may be looking forward to being a good grandmother. Nor does a woman who discovers that her pregnancy may well kill her, and opts for abortion and adoption. Nor, necessarily, does a woman who has decided to lead a life centered around some other worthwhile

activity or activities with which motherhood would compete.
("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 233)

In the preceding examples given by Hursthouse, the agents were acting virtuously in choosing to get an abortion. But in many other cases the decision to get an abortion is vicious or morally wrong. For instance, if the decision to get an abortion is the result of the selfish needs of the agent, or for the purpose of following trivial pursuits, the agent is acting morally wrongly. Or if the agent puts little thought into matter, callously aborting the child to avoid the inconvenience of parenthood the agent is being vicious. If selfishness or callousness, or even cowardice; where the agent is afraid to be a parent; influence the decision to get an abortion, it cannot be considered a good act. Hursthouse talks about vicious reasons for getting an abortion, "Some women who choose abortion rather than their first child, and some men who encourage their partners to choose abortion, are not avoiding parenthood for the sake of other worthwhile pursuits, but for the worthless one of 'having a good time,' or for the pursuit of some false vision of the ideals of freedom or self realization" ("Virtue Theory and Abortion" 234).

In the case of abortion, the virtuous agent can have a plurality of actions, each being equally right. The agent who chooses not to get an abortion because she sees the value and importance of human life and the upbringing of a child as something worthwhile is acting virtuously in her decision not to get an abortion. At the same time, an agent who chooses to get an abortion because she already has other children deserving of her attention, or to pursue other worthwhile pursuits is also acting virtuously. In each case, it is not the act itself that determines whether abortion is right or wrong, but rather the agent. It is the attitude of the agent in her particular circumstance, and whether or not the agent acts virtuously or viciously in response to that circumstance which determines the rightness or wrongness of the act. To return to the

original question, 'Would a virtuous agent get an abortion?', the answer is both yes and no. A virtuous agent both would and would not get an abortion. Each right decision whether it is for or against an abortion is determined by the particular circumstances of the virtuous agent. What is significant is that virtue ethics is able to steer the abortion debate away from a discussion of the act to a discussion of the agent. The act-centered focus in the case of the abortion moral dilemma is clouded by unresolved ontological and epistemological claims. By shifting the focus to the agent many of these problems can be resolved, and a simple assessment of whether the agent acted virtuously or viciously would suffice in determining whether the act of abortion is right or wrong.

Chapter 3

Williams and Genuine Moral Dilemmas

According to Williams, a moral dilemma represents a conflict of obligations, where the rejected *ought* expresses itself in the form of a remainder signaling its existence. But Williams' take on moral dilemmas lacks the scope needed to represent what is expected of a real dilemma. The purpose of this chapter is to attempt to show some of the shortcomings of Williams' argument as well as define what a genuine moral dilemma is. In Section One, I attempt to show that the expression of remainder is not adequate proof for the existence of moral dilemmas. Section Two sets out to distinguish the difference between the terms *moral conflict* and *moral dilemma*, arguing that moral conflict as Williams uses it, is not capable of capturing the seriousness expected of a genuine moral dilemma. Section Three explores the conditions necessary for a dilemma to be irresolvable, examining some of the faults in both asymmetrical and symmetrical dilemmas. Finally, Section Four will reassess Williams' claim that values are incommensurable, and attempt to determine whether incommensurability is required in a genuine moral dilemma.

I. Problems with the Concept of Remainder

Williams claims that the appearance of remainder after a decision has been made is evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas. Because a rejected *ought* obligation is not completely rejected after a decision has been made in a moral dilemma, and persists in another form, it lays claim to the fact that the rejected *ought* is present as a type of remainder. Remainder

signals the presence of the rejected *ought*, acting as proof for the survival of the rejected *ought*. Therefore, it is suggested by Williams that a moral dilemma will necessarily have a remainder. Williams says, "Moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without remainder" ("Ethical Consistency" 179). But the connection between a moral dilemma and expressions of remainder is not completely clear. Even if a rejected *ought* remains as something that the agent ought to have done, the actual expressions of the remainder that would signal its existence such as regret, guilt, and so on cannot clearly be linked to the rejected *ought*. It is quite possible that expressions like regret, guilt, and so on can happen without the necessity of a moral dilemma or that a moral dilemma may not express itself in the forms of expression mentioned. Remainder alone does not constitute evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas.

Regret or other forms of residue are not exclusive to moral conflict. An agent can have regret in non-moral situations. For instance, an agent that did get the promotion he was after may experience regret after the fact. There may have been more the agent could have done, or different decisions he could have made that would have made his promotion more likely. The feelings of regret that the agent now has will be an expression of the situation at hand, but will not be the result of inconsistent obligations. An agent can also have regret from eating a large dinner, thinking bad thoughts, missing a solar eclipse, or even for no reason at all, but clearly this is not a result of inconsistency, as Williams defines it. Regret can be the result of almost any activity in life, moral or non-moral. It does not follow that remainder is a special consequence of a moral dilemma signaling its existence. Remainder is not adequate evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas.

It is also wrong to think that regret is a necessary consequence of a moral dilemma. It is completely possible that a moral dilemma can present itself without resulting in any regret or

residue. This is a point well made by Philippa Foot in her essay, "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma":

It is a mistake then to think that the existence of feelings of regret could show anything about a remainder in cases of moral conflict... What we may find is, I think, that there may be a "remainder" in the shape of obligations unfulfilled, and things left undone which is correct to say that we ought to have done. But whether it is always *regrettable* or *distressing* when obligations are unfulfilled or things left undone which ought to be done is more doubtful. (Foot 382)

There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that regret is evidence of a moral dilemma. Regret may very well be present as a result of a moral dilemma, but it is not a sufficient condition for it, or an absolute indication of it. It is quite possible that a moral dilemma will not result in regret or residue of any kind. It is also possible as was demonstrated, that regret or residue will be the product of many other types of situations besides moral dilemmas.

Regret about the situation at hand is also not a direct expression of the rejected *ought*. This is best understood by looking at dilemmas with only evil alternatives. In these situations an agent may have regret for being in such an awful predicament, but this is not the same as a rejected *ought* changing forms and expressing itself as regret. In this situation an agent will have to do something he ought not do, but one choice may be less wrong than the other. So, all things considered, the lesser evil will be the right choice to make. The regret that the agent feels for being in such a situation is a separate type of regret, and not a direct consequence of the rejected greater evil. An agent may experience regret as a reaction to being in a situation involving two evil alternatives, but this is not the same as the regret being a direct consequence of the decision

made. This is a point made by Terrance McConnell in his essay, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics." McConnell explains:

In such circumstances doing the least evil act is surely the most rational thing to do, and one cannot regret having done the most rational thing. But one can regret being in a situation where only bad alternatives are open to one. That is, one can regret having to live in a world where such cases arise. The upshot of this is that the appropriateness of an agent's feeling regret after having acted in an apparently dilemmatic situation is not sufficient to show that the situation was genuinely dilemmatic. (McConnell 5)

Williams and Hursthouse tend to ascribe the status of moral dilemma to situations with a clear, right solution under the guise of resolvable moral dilemmas. This ascribed status is justified by the presence of a remainder. Because remainder is evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas, any conflict that results in a remainder then must be a moral dilemma of some kind. But this is clearly wrong. As was discussed, remainder is not adequate evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas. Regret is not a special feature of a moral dilemma. So, to grant the status of moral dilemma to situations based on the expression of a remainder alone is unwarranted. A state of moral conflict that is resolvable, where it has a clear right answer, should not be treated as a moral dilemma. There really is no dilemma in this situation; an agent knows what the right solution is. The fact that an agent is uncomfortable or has regret in this situation is not the same as being in a moral dilemma. As previously discussed, an agent can have regret about anything. But it would be absurd to claim that my regret for not getting the promotion I wanted was an expression of a real dilemma of any kind.

A genuine moral dilemma must be irresolvable. In trying to establish what a genuine moral dilemma is, it is important to be clear that uneasiness at making a decision is not the same

as being in a real dilemmatic situation. In a resolvable dilemma an agent may have a certain difficulty at accepting the matter at hand, but all things considered, he knows what the right solution is. So the agent is not really in a real dilemma, even though he may be in a tough or distressing situation. The fact that a situation is resolvable must discredit its status as a moral dilemma. As mentioned, if an agent knows the right way to proceed, and the right solution to a moral dilemma, even if uncomfortable or uneasy about making a decision in the situation at hand, his situation is not dilemmatic; he simply needs to make the right decision. But there may be cases where an agent may not necessarily know the solution to a particular dilemma, even if it may be resolvable, all things considered. Should a situation with a correct solution, though the solution is oblivious to the agent, count as dilemmatic?¹⁶

II. Moral Conflict or Moral Dilemma?

Before proceeding further it may be useful to reassess the role of the agent in relation to moral dilemmas. The terms *moral dilemma* and *moral conflict* tend to be used interchangeably. But there are significant differences in the terms. In his book, *Moral Dilemmas*, Daniel Statman points out that the terms *moral conflict* and *moral dilemma* have different connotations. Statman says, "I suggest we distinguish between moral *conflicts*, situations where good reasons exist for two incompatible actions, and moral *dilemmas*, where the nature of the conflict is more serious and the agent consequently feels anguish and is at a loss as to what he or she ought to do" (Statman 7). The terms *conflict* and *dilemma*, though similar, take on different meanings when reference to the agent is taken to be a serious matter. A conflict refers to things that exist outside the agent. For instance, competing obligations represent actions the agent should do. The conflict

¹⁶ I will return to this question later on p. 59.

between the possible actions that ought to be done is not the same as an internal conflict inside the agent. Statman explains, "By the term "conflict" we refer to the clash itself, with no reference to the agent" (Statman 1).

A moral dilemma on the other hand represents an external conflict between obligations as well as an inner conflict inside the agent. Statman says, "Dilemmas, therefore, are not situations where two considerations merely clash, but where this clash weighs heavily on the heart of the agent and threatens him or her. He or she experiences feelings of helplessness and indecisiveness, a sense of being at a loss to know which path of action to follow. Reference to the agent is, thus, essential in characterizing a situation as a moral dilemma" (Statman 1). All moral dilemmas involve conflict but not all moral conflicts involve a dilemma. So, a moral dilemma is a special type of moral conflict, one that really shakes the agent and demands serious consideration. Statman says, "Dilemmas are a particular and a problematic subclass of conflicts" (Statman 7).

The serious and deep concern that characterizes an agent's reaction to a particular moral conflict is crucial in defining it as a genuine moral dilemma. Moral conflict, as Williams defines it, does not have the same character. If the terms *moral dilemma* and *moral conflict* are used interchangeably, a sense of what constitutes a dilemma is watered down and vague. If moral dilemmas are not limited to serious conflicts, it can be said that agents experience moral dilemmas all the time. Any time obligations or values conflict an agent by this designation would be in a moral dilemma. For instance, every time I tell a friend they did a good job at a task when they really did not, or every party I missed to keep a promise would count as a moral dilemma. But cases like the ones mentioned normally are not considered to constitute the character of a

real moral dilemma. A genuine moral dilemma is serious and rare. It involves something much more than missing a party.

A genuine moral dilemma is a serious type of moral conflict that deeply troubles the agent, causing an agent to be at a loss as to what to do, resulting in doubt and uncertainty. An agent in a genuine moral dilemma will really be shaken by the situation. The situation will require the agent to dig deep and think long and hard about what he ought to do. It will never be a situation that can be taken lightly. Statman says, "In my opinion, it would be strange to describe situations as moral dilemmas where the agents are not at all disturbed by the conflict, either because they are not aware of it, or because they are indifferent" (Statman 6). So, the seriousness of the dilemma and the internal struggle that takes place inside the agent is crucial to defining a situation as a genuine moral dilemma rather than a moral conflict. But besides the seriousness of the situation, there is also the character of uncertainty that signifies a genuine moral dilemma. In a genuine moral dilemma an agent will be at a loss as to what he should do.

The element of uncertainty leads back to a question that was previously raised, 'Should an apparent dilemma with a right solution, though the solution is oblivious to the agent, count as dilemmatic?' There is much difficulty in distinguishing merely apparent dilemmas and actual dilemmas. In "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," Ruth Marcus says, "In apparent dilemmas there *is* always a correct choice among the conflicting options... Faced with a dilemma generated by prima facie principles, *uncertainty* is increased as to whether, in choosing x over y , we have in fact done the right thing" (Marcus 124). An agent may think he is in a genuine dilemma when he is only in an apparent dilemma. The uncertainty that is characteristic of moral dilemmas further agitates the agent, for he does not know whether the dilemma he is in is only an apparent moral

dilemma or a genuine moral dilemma.¹⁷ But leaving the complexity of this particular issue aside for now, uncertainty and ignorance of a solution from the agent will not constitute evidence in itself for the existence of a real moral dilemma. Someone may come along and offer a solution to the agent, or after thinking for a long time about the matter the agent may discover a solution for himself. The features of the situation may also change, tipping the scale in favor of one decision over another. An uncertainty to whether a solution exist is not the same as there being no solution. And it may be correct to say that a situation with a right solution, even if oblivious to the agent, is resolvable and not dilemmatic in the genuine sense that is expected of a real moral dilemma. An apparent dilemma must turn out to be irresolvable in order for it to constitute a genuine moral dilemma.

III. Symmetrical Dilemmas

As was discussed, a genuine moral dilemma is not resolvable. This is clear from the fact that a resolvable dilemma will have a particular decision that will outweigh the other. Because one decision will outweigh the other there will be a single right solution to what the agent should do. Therefore this is not a real dilemma. This may lead to the conclusion that irresolvable dilemmas are symmetrical. But the arguments for symmetrical irresolvable dilemmas are faulty. A fairly simple argument that is made in favor of irresolvable symmetrical dilemmas uses the example of Buridan's Ass. In one version of this dilemma, a hungry donkey is positioned exactly between two equal bales of hay.¹⁸ There is no reason for the donkey to choose one bale over the other, so the donkey stays in the same spot unable to move, and ultimately starves to death.

¹⁷ I will return to the problem of distinguishing apparent moral dilemmas from genuine moral dilemmas in Chapter 5.

¹⁸ David Brink, "Moral Conflict and Its Structure," p. 241

Besides the obvious criticism of this argument, that a further choice would have to be made by the donkey whether to move or starve to death; where moving would be a preferable choice; an additional argument can be made against the form of the symmetrical dilemma.

Buridan's ass lacks rationality. If the form of the dilemma were restructured to include a rational human rather than a donkey, the situation would show that there was not a real dilemma of any kind. For instance, if the hungry ass were replaced with a hungry human, and the hay with two exactly equal bowls of rice, the decision in this situation becomes trivial. Because the two bowls of rice are exactly the same, a person facing the decision will not face any serious conflict as to which bowl he should choose. Rationally, a person would just pick either bowl of rice, knowing that because they are exactly the same it really does not matter which bowl he chooses. It would be absurd to claim that a human would go hungry staring at two exactly equal bowls of rice. If two choices are exactly the same, rationally it makes no difference what choice an agent makes. So, two choices that are exactly equal will not pose a dilemma to an agent.

Much of the confusion regarding the status of symmetrical dilemmas involves decisions that are roughly equal rather than exactly equal (like Buridan's ass). To use what may be a trivial example, if the exactly equal bowls of rice were replaced with two very similar though not exactly equal apples, an agent might have reasons for choosing one apple over the other. Something about one apple may just seem more desirable; maybe it is shapelier or a little redder, or even has a longer stem. But it really should not matter; for the most part an apple is an apple. But the example of the apples is supposed to make an important point. In an exactly equal decision, it rationally does not matter what decision an agent makes, either bowl of rice will suffice. So an exactly equal decision would not be dilemmatic. But at the same time, a roughly equal decision is not the same as an exactly equal decision. There really are reasons for choosing

one apple over the other, even if the reasons are minute. So the case of the apples has a single right decision, and is resolvable. Therefore, the roughly equal situation involving the very similar apples is not dilemmatic either.

But it can also be pointed out, justifiably, that moral decisions are starkly different from decisions involving rice or apples. A more complicated argument for symmetrical dilemmas like Sophie's choice can be raised.¹⁹ But even in the case of Sophie's choice, the decision that the mother has to make is one involving roughly equal choices rather than exactly equal choices. And ultimately the mother does have reasons for choosing the older child over the younger. The older child is more likely to survive, and therefore saving the older child is the correct decision to make. So, Sophie's choice is a resolvable dilemma. Roughly equal dilemmas cannot be genuinely dilemmatic, for there will always be one decision that is overall, all things considered, the better choice. This then forces a return to symmetrical dilemmas in order to establish genuine irresolvability. For, any choice in an asymmetrical dilemma will differ in some feature, however small, that will make one option a better choice overall, all things considered. So, an asymmetrical dilemma cannot be a genuine moral dilemma.

In returning to a discussion of symmetrical dilemmas, a more advanced argument from Marcus involving a situation where a doctor must choose which one of two identical twins to save though he can only save one, can be formidably raised.²⁰ In Sophie's choice the mother had reasons for saving one child over the other. The two children were different from each other, possessing different personalities and potentials, and ultimately different probabilities of survival. But in the case of the identical twins this is not so clear. There really is no reason on the surface why the doctor should save one twin over the other. But if this dilemma were removed

¹⁹ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Dilemmas and Incomparability," pp. 323-324

²⁰ Ruth Marcus, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," p. 125

from the hypothetical realm and were forced as a real life case, a doctor in this situation would not come to the same conclusion. Even if on the surface the twins may be the same, the doctor knows that they are not. The doctor knows that each twin has a different potential and will live a different life than the other. Each twin will have its own unique personality that cannot be compared to the other. A doctor in this situation will not see the dilemma as symmetrical. He rather will see the decisions involved in the situation as incomparable to each other. The identical twins dilemma is not a symmetrical dilemma but rather an incommensurable dilemma.

IV. Incommensurable Dilemmas

From what has been discussed so far, a genuine moral dilemma must be irresolvable. It has also been suggested that a genuine moral dilemma cannot be symmetrical or asymmetrical but rather must be incommensurable. How well does incommensurability hold when carefully examined? This question is what I will examine next. Williams suggests that values are incommensurable. Values are unable to be compared to each other in any rational way because there is a lack of a common currency on which to compare them. This was an important point that was discussed at the end of Chapter One.²¹ So to take the claim further, in the case of the identical twins dilemma or even Sophie's choice, the fact that two human beings are being compared to each other results in there being no common currency on which to compare the two choices. Whatever value an appreciation of human life consists in, it cannot be compared to other values. Returning to Sophie's choice, it can be said that the reason the mother had for choosing one child over another was not a legitimate reason, because a human life is incommensurable to another, and therefore not open to comparison.

²¹ See p. 23.

Foot also endorses the idea that moral dilemmas are incommensurable:

What we must ask, therefore, is whether in cases of irresolvable conflict we have to back both the judgment in favor of *a* and the judgment in favor of *b*, although doing *b* involves not doing *a*? Is it not possible that we should rather declare that the two are incommensurable, so that we have nothing to say about the overall merits of *a* and *b*, whether because there is nothing that *we* can say or because there is no truth of the matter and therefore nothing to *be* said. (Foot 395)

Certain situations involving incomparable choices and values, specifically genuine moral dilemmas, are incommensurable. No matter what an agent does or however much an agent thinks about the situation, the simple fact is that the choices in question cannot be compared. The fact that there is no way to compare incommensurable choices lays claim to the fact that an agent will not be able to make the right decision in this situation. There will be no way to know which choice is better, resulting in no reason for doing one thing over another.

This may sound like a strange conclusion, but Foot claims that incommensurable situations are not all too uncommon. She explains, "But incommensurability is not an unfamiliar idea. I think, for instance, of the impossibility of saying in many cases whether one man is happier than another when one lives a quiet and contented life and the other a life that is full of joy and pain" (Foot 396). Foot points out that individual human happiness is an incommensurable value. Happiness for one man cannot be compared to the happiness of another. So far it has been argued that values involving human life are not comparable to each other. For instance, human life as a thing in itself and human happiness was discussed as incomparable values. It would not be too unreasonable to assume that human life holds a special irreducible status. But what about values not held to such a high esteem as life and death?

In reassessing two values previously discussed, it can be said that the incommensurability of the values of equality and liberty may not be as absolute as life and death. Williams even admits to a weakness in the incommensurability regarding these two values. He says,

When it is said that values are incommensurable, it is usually some general values such as liberty and equality that are said to be incommensurable. This seems to imply that there is no way of comparing or rationally adjudicating the claims of these values *wherever* they conflict. But no one could believe this, since obviously there are possible changes by which (say) such a trivial gain in equality was bought by such an enormous sacrifice of liberty that no one who believed in liberty at all could rationally favour it. So either it is false that these values are, as such, incommensurable, or incommensurability is a less discouraging or, again, deep feature than had been supposed. ("Conflicts of Values" 77)

Changes in the quantity or degree of a value like liberty or equality will tip the scales and make one value more preferable than another. A large amount of liberty is preferable over a small amount of equality. So, when compared at different levels of quantity and degree one value possessing the greater share will trump the other based on this feature. So, it is wrong to say that liberty and equality are incommensurable in an absolute sense. These values can be compared and one may be preferable to the other. But general values, especially those possessing an abstract quality like liberty or equality, are less interesting than more specific values like charity or honesty. Would it be justified to discount the incommensurability of particular virtues in the same way as liberty and equality?

As was discussed in Chapter One, assessing the worth of one virtue compared to another is impossible because virtues are irreducible.²² But how strong is this claim? Are virtues really

²² See p. 22.

incommensurable to each other? Most people would agree that it would be worse to be dishonest to ten people rather than be uncharitable to one. Even though each virtue carries an obligation to do a certain thing; such as an agent ought to be honest or an agent ought to be charitable; these obligations are not directly comparable to each other, at least in the abstract sense. But when virtues and the resulting obligations are put in the form of a dilemma, incommensurability becomes less strict. For instance, an agent that is in a moral dilemma requiring him to lie to ten people in order to protect the reputation of another, as an act of charity, will not be faced with an incommensurable situation. Lying to ten people is simply too much, and not worth the charitable act. So these two virtues can be compared. They are not absolutely incommensurable.

Should it then be claimed that virtues are equal to one another rather than incommensurable? Should honesty win out against charity simply because it was in a quantity ten times greater than the other virtue? This is clearly a wrong conclusion to come to. Besides breaking down into a case of Buridan's ass, where it rationally did not matter what choice the agent made and either would suffice, there are cases that clearly show that virtues are not equal. An example would be a clash between honesty and justice. Most people would agree that committing a thousand dishonest acts, such as lying, would be preferable to committing one act of injustice like murder. In this case, the virtue of justice clearly trumps the virtue of honesty. So, virtues are not equal to one another.

When there is a notable difference in degree or quantity, virtues are distinguishable from each other and one virtue will be preferable over another. But as the differences in quantity and degree get smaller between the virtues being compared it becomes more and more difficult to discern which virtue is preferable in the situation. Whether a direct comparison of virtues corresponding in similar quantity and degree will lead to an incommensurable set of decisions

may be clouded in uncertainty. But what must be clear is that the discerning of the worth of conflicting virtues only becomes extremely difficult when the quantities or degrees are very similar, not impossible.

A dilemma may take on a similar quality as a conflict of values. Features of the situation may show that the worth of the two choices are very similar in quantity or degree. To return to the identical twins dilemma, the choices are nearly identical to each other. This feature makes a decision extremely difficult. But the fact that the features of the situation are very similar does not mean that the right choice is impossible. Rather it means that the right choice is just extremely difficult to discern. It is a common feature of nearly similar choices, like the identical twins dilemma, that uncertainty will ensue. But is uncertainty the same as incommensurability? Is it really possible to know whether a moral dilemma is simply extremely difficult to discern rather than incommensurable?²³

²³ I will return to the important topic of moral uncertainty in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4

Hursthouse and the Problematic Virtuous Agent

The concept of the virtuous agent solves the problem of moral dilemmas. The very fact that virtuous agents exist calls the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas into question. This important claim will be the topic of this chapter. Section One will argue that a virtuous agent is able to create a right solution in an irresolvable moral dilemma even when there is none. Section Two will explore whether virtuous agents exist or not? Section Three will examine the mechanism by which a virtuous agent forces a correct solution in an irresolvable dilemma. Finally, Section Four will attempt to disprove Hursthouse's claim that tragic moral dilemmas are genuinely irresolvable.

I. The Primacy of the Virtuous Agent

According to Hursthouse, the virtuous agent is the measure of right action.²⁴ The agent has primacy over the act. This claim has serious implications concerning moral dilemmas. The aim of this section is to analyze some of those implications.

Hursthouse claims that a virtuous agent is capable of finding the right solution in a resolvable dilemma or even a hard case.²⁵ The fact that a virtuous agent can offer guidance on how to deal with a tough moral situation is a useful feature of Hursthouse's theory. But Hursthouse claims more than this. She claims that the virtuous agent makes the act right simply by making a decision. Hursthouse says, "A resolvable dilemma which arises in circumstances in

²⁴ See Chapter 2, Section I.

²⁵ See *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 44.

which a virtuous agent might well find herself will be resolvable by a morally right decision, and what is *done*, such as 'x, after much painful thought, feeling deep regret, and doing such-and-such by way of restitution' will be assessed as morally right" (*On Virtue Ethics* 51). Whatever the virtuous agent chooses to do will be assessed as the right decision. This assessment is not dependent on the possible solutions to the dilemma as the external situation presents them, but rather is assessed as right after the fact, when a virtuous agent makes a decision. The virtuous agent does not simply discover a solution in a conflict; the virtuous agent creates a solution.²⁶ Any possible choice of the virtuous agent creates a solution by the fact that the virtuous agent is the one making the choice.

This conclusion rejects the neutral standpoint, where the rightness of the act can be held as an objective criterion outside of the agent. This is a view shared by John McDowell. In his essay, "Virtue and Reason," McDowell says,

We do not fully understand a virtuous person's actions—we do not see the consistency in them—unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live. And though this is to credit him with an orectic state, it is not to credit him with an externally intelligible overarching desire; for we cannot understand the content of the orectic state from the envisaged external standpoint. It is, rather, to comprehend, essentially from within, the virtuous person's distinctive way of viewing particular situations. (McDowell 159)

According to McDowell and Hursthouse, right action is to be understood from an internal viewpoint rather than an external viewpoint. In assessing the virtuous agent's actions, a neutral criterion based on moral principles will not capture the breadth of the virtuous agent's perspective. External principles will not aptly apply to the virtuous agent's capacity to make the

²⁶ I will explore some of the special characteristics of the virtuous agent in Section III of this chapter.

right decision. Rather the virtuous agent will embody moral principles from inside himself. The right action, as carried out by the virtuous agent, will express those embodied principles and result in the morally right thing to do.

If a virtuous agent can make a plurality of right decisions and both decision *a* and decision *b* can be the right decisions at the same time, there cannot be a case where the virtuous agent acts wrongly. Any decision made is right and dissolves the conflict. A virtuous agent can simply choose either choice, and from a perspective outside of the agent it does not matter if the choice is externally right or wrong, only that the virtuous agent internally decided it was right. If an action is assessed as right by the internal preference of the virtuous agent rather than the external features of the situation, it can be claimed that the action is only right in the sense that is subjectively favored by the virtuous agent, not that it is right overall, as the thing to do. But for Hursthouse's first principle to hold, the virtuous agent's action must be a model on which moral advice can be offered as right overall.²⁷ So, the action performed by the virtuous agent must not only be right to him, his action must also be the right solution to the dilemma. And the fact that he is a virtuous agent should guarantee that he prefers the actual right solution to the dilemma.

It can be claimed that the possible decision of the virtuous agent will match the right solution to a dilemma. In resolvable dilemmas, where a solution exists and can be discovered, this claim seems perfectly reasonable. The virtuous agent makes a right decision representing the actual right solution that is capable of being discovered. But in the case of an irresolvable dilemma Hursthouse's claim becomes problematic. In an irresolvable dilemma there should be no right solution, or at the very least no solution capable of being discovered. But the virtuous agent is not limited to discovering a solution. Any decision the virtuous agent makes becomes the right solution by merit of the agent alone. So, an irresolvable dilemma would not apply to the virtuous

²⁷ See *On Virtue Ethics*, p.49.

agent in the same way as it would to other agents. And by the fact that a virtuous agent creates a solution, and any possible decision made by that agent would be the right decision, it follows that a virtuous agent can never be in an irresolvable dilemma.²⁸

Should this fact alone make irresolvable dilemmas impossible? In many cases an agent will not be able to discover the right solution to a dilemma. And non-virtuous agents are unable to create solutions in the same way that virtuous agents are. So, it can be suggested that for most people irresolvable dilemmas exist. These agents may find themselves in situations where it may be impossible to make a right decision. And every other person capable of providing moral guidance or assistance to the agent in conflict may also be completely incapable of making the right decision. So, it may be perfectly reasonable to assume that, all things considered, the agent in this dilemma is in an irresolvable dilemma. But there is a difference between a dilemma that is irresolvable to a particular agent and the irresolvability of the dilemma overall.

The dilemma may not be irresolvable overall. It may be apparently irresolvable, and rightly so to a particular agent as it appears to him, but the dilemma overall is not because there is someone capable of offering a solution to the agent if somehow the agent were lucky enough to receive his moral advice. If a single virtuous agent exist, somewhere in the world, that virtuous agent is capable of solving the dilemma that plagues the agent previously discussed. By simply appealing to this virtuous agent, if such a thing were possible as Hursthouse claims, a solution would be capable of being created.

Even though a dilemma may be irresolvable to a non-virtuous agent as it appears to him, this is not the same as there being no solution. There may not be a solution available to the agent, but this is not the same as a solution being impossible. So, an agent facing such a dilemma may

²⁸ Hursthouse does claim that a virtuous agent is unable to make the right choice in a tragic irresolvable dilemma. But I will argue against this claim in Section IV of this chapter, and attempt to further the argument that a virtuous agent cannot be in an irresolvable dilemma.

be in an apparent irresolvable dilemma, as the situation dictates, but he is not in a genuine irresolvable dilemma. As previously discussed, in an irresolvable dilemma it is impossible for there to be a right solution.²⁹ But the mere existence of even a single virtuous agent makes a right solution possible, even if hard to come by. If virtuous agents exist, genuine irresolvable moral dilemmas do not.

II. Do Virtuous Agents Exist?

From what was discussed, it may be appropriate to explore whether virtuous agents really exist next. For it was claimed that the mere existence of virtuous agents makes genuine moral dilemmas impossible. If the idea of genuine moral dilemmas is to be salvaged, it may involve disproving the existence of the virtuous agent, welcomed or not. This is the task I shall take on next.

Hursthouse claims that real examples of virtuous agents can be found in society.³⁰ She suggests that it is possible to seek out particular virtuous agents in order to receive moral advice from them. But Hursthouse does very little to support her claim. Who are the virtuous agents that she is referring to? The answer she gives, the admirable people in your community, is not satisfactory. What admirable person is she referring to? Is she referring to the courageous soldier or the charitable philanthropist? Or is she referring to the honest barber? Though my barber may have a few things to teach me about honesty, he may not be the most courageous of people. And the soldier is known to lie from time to time. So, whom should I go to if I am in a dilemma and need advice?

²⁹ See Chapter 2, Section IV.

³⁰ See *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 35.

A simple suggestion might be, to go to the barber when in a dilemma involving honesty and the soldier when in a dilemma involving courage. But this suggestion raises further concerns. Should there be a specialized virtuous agent for each virtue?³¹ Should there be a 'courageous agent' and 'honest agent'? And what if I am in a dilemma involving a conflict between honesty and courage, should I go to both the soldier and the barber? This sets up a 'virtuous council' of sorts, requiring a huge number of specialized virtuous agents in order to solve a single dilemma. In addition to this problem, specialized agents may not always agree with one another. The barber might suggest you tell your friend a terrible truth, but the philanthropist might suggest holding back. Having a large number of specialized virtuous agents from which to draw moral advice would do very little to resolve a dilemma.

As a model for right action, and one capable of offering reliable moral advice, a specialized virtuous agent will not do. Rather, Hursthouse will have to hold a virtuous agent to be virtuous overall. But this raises a further question. What exactly is a fully virtuous agent? It is reasonable to assume that there are certain admirable people in your community that are courageous, generous, or honest; and these people may be pinpointed and sought out. But pinpointing a fully virtuous agent is much more difficult. Even people that may appear to be virtuous overall, for the most part, may not be fully virtuous when carefully examined. Hursthouse says, "All that we can say to ourselves, about these people we love and respect is, 'Well, they are, in general, quite honest, just, generous, temperate ... but they do have this blind spot, namely, ...', or, in the last case, 'Well, they are fundamentally virtuous, you can rely on

³¹ The 'courageous villain' argument can also be raised, where if it were possible to seek specialized moral advice about one virtue, it should follow that the 'courageous villain' will be a reliable source of moral advice regarding courage even if he is not reliable for any other virtue. But I choose not to raise this argument in order to avoid a lengthy discussion of the problematic doctrine of 'the unity of the virtues'.

them totally in a serious crisis, but oh dear, you have to be prepared to put up with them doing such-and-such" (*On Virtue Ethics* 150).

An admirable person, a 'good man', may still have his faults. Even though this person may be virtuous for the most part, he is still not the exemplar that is being sought. What is really being sought is not a 'fully virtuous agent for the most part', but rather a 'perfectly virtuous agent'. Hursthouse admits to this,

I want to defend a bolder thesis, namely that, ideally, it is necessary too. By this I mean the perfectly virtuous agent, when she acts virtuously, from virtue, sets the standard for 'moral motivation', for acting 'because one thinks it is right', 'from duty', etc., a standard against which we assess the extent to which the less than perfectly virtuous do the same. The more an agent's character resembles that of the perfectly virtuous, the more he may be credited with 'moral motivation' when he does what is V for X reasons. (*On Virtue Ethics* 141)

The perfectly virtuous agent is the standard to which less than perfectly agents are to be measured. When Hursthouse claims in her central premise, 'act in a way that the virtuous agent would act', she is clearly referring to the perfectly virtuous agent and not the less than perfectly virtuous agent. If she were not making this claim, talk of the perfectly virtuous agent should be irrelevant because a less than perfectly agent could act as the model for right action. But Hursthouse, as previously mentioned, makes the perfectly virtuous agent the measure not the less than perfectly virtuous agent.

So far it has been shown that agents possessing particular virtues cannot be relied on for moral advice, at least not in the way that Hursthouse requires for her central premise of right action to work. It has also been shown that an agent that is roughly virtuous or only virtuous for

the most part is also unable to act as a model. Only a perfectly virtuous agent can act as a proper exemplar. But who are the perfectly virtuous agents? This is a very difficult question to answer, and Hursthouse provides no indication of a proper example. Rather she gives examples of roughly virtuous agents, and then claims that the perfectly virtuous agent is better.³² But if an example were to be sought out, a concrete example, where would you look? Even if the moral geniuses from fame and antiquity were examined, it would be shown that even they were not without faults. It is hard to find a single example of someone who is perfectly virtuous.

A further issue would involve accessibility. Even if it were possible, that somewhere a perfectly virtuous agent exist, this would not guarantee that he could be approached. Hursthouse claims that a 'real' virtuous agent can be appealed to for moral advice. She says, "If I know that I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one, should this be possible" (*On Virtue Ethics* 35). Hursthouse suggests that it is at least possible that a virtuous agent can be approached and probed for moral advice. But the chances of finding a perfectly virtuous agent and asking him for moral advice are highly unlikely, especially when a single example of one cannot be pinpointed. A further complication would involve authenticity. If some moral genius claimed that he was a virtuous agent, and now offered his advice to all who sought him out, there would be no way to know whether he was a genuinely perfectly virtuous agent or just putting on a good show.

Practical concerns can also be raised. Is it feasible to seek out a virtuous agent when in a moral dilemma? If it were revealed that in some corner of the world a virtuous agent lived in a cave, this would not help with the current dilemma that I am facing. It simply would not be feasible to go see the obscure virtuous agent and then return to the dilemma at hand. There really

³² For a detailed account of Hursthouse's claim see Chapter 7 in *On Virtue Ethics*.

would be no way of knowing what the virtuous agent would do in the situation. Rather, a roughly virtuous agent, someone who you deeply respect and admire, will have to be sought out for moral advice about the current moral dilemma. But how reliable is the moral advice from a roughly virtuous agent?

A person you admire, a 'good man', may help resolve a moral dilemma. Though this roughly virtuous agent is not perfect, he is wiser and morally superior than you, and capable of penetrating the dilemma deeper, finding a solution that may not have occurred to you. This is not a surprising fact. The whole enterprise of seeking moral advice rests on the ability of other morally superior agents to help discover the solution to a tough dilemma. If there were a clear solution, there would be no reason for an agent to seek moral advice. From what was just stated, it may seem appropriate to assume that a roughly virtuous agent will do, and may act as an exemplar in place of the perfectly virtuous agent. But should an ability to discover the solution to a dilemma be the criterion by which virtuous agents are measured? This may hold in a resolvable dilemma, where there is a right solution, though not completely clear. But in a genuine irresolvable dilemma more is required than just identifying the right solution; the virtuous agent must create a solution.³³

In a genuine irresolvable dilemma, a roughly virtuous agent will not be able to adequately offer moral advice. The ability to discover a solution will not apply in an irresolvable dilemma, for there is no right solution capable of being discovered by the external conditions or features of the situation alone. Something more is needed. The perfectly virtuous agent has a special capacity that the non-virtuous agent or the roughly virtuous agent lacks. The perfectly virtuous agent is capable of penetrating the dilemma deeper or forcing a solution where there is none. But

³³ See p. 69.

what are these special qualities that the virtuous agent possesses? This will be the topic of the next section.

III. Moral Wisdom and the Resolvability of Dilemmas

Aristotle ascribes *phronesis*, or practical wisdom to the virtuous agent.³⁴ *Phronesis* is concerned with particulars, specifically how to act in particular situations. Aristotle says, "It is evident that prudence [practical wisdom] is not a science, as it deals with the minor premiss, *i.e. with the particular*, as has been said; for action is always particular" (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a31-34). *Phronesis* is practical. It involves acting in the right way, at the right time, in the right degree, towards the right people or objects. But furthermore, possessing *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, means making the right decision in a particular situation. This is an important concept and useful for the ongoing argument involving moral dilemmas. For, it is practical wisdom that allows a virtuous agent to penetrate a tough situation, sorting out the details, formulating a solution, and acting in the right way in response to it. But how is practical wisdom related to the virtuous agent?³⁵ How does a virtuous agent know how to act in a moral situation? What prompts him to recognize what is required and act in the right way?

McDowell claims that the virtuous agent has a special moral sensitivity that non-virtuous agents lack. He says, "The incontinent or continent person does not fully share the virtuous person's perception of the situation" (McDowell 146). This special moral sensitivity allows a virtuous agent to penetrate a moral situation in a way that non-virtuous agents cannot. The

³⁴ See Book VI in *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

³⁵ The relationship between practical wisdom and virtue, as well as the implications regarding the doctrine of 'the unity of the virtues' is ignored here to avoid a lengthy discussion that would distract from the focus on moral dilemmas.

virtuous agent not only sees deeper into a moral situation but also has a special perspective that allows him to avoid uncertainty, limiting the possibility of making the wrong decision. Before exploring the implications of McDowell's claim for moral dilemmas it may be useful to first detail McDowell's argument.

According to McDowell, the virtuous agent has two very important capacities. The first capacity is the ability to think correctly about moral situations. The virtuous agent has the right knowledge of how to act in regards to virtue. McDowell says, "'Knowledge' implies that he get things right" (McDowell 141). To have knowledge of virtue is to know how to behave. It means thinking and acting in the right way, and knowing the right means and requirements of a situation. This correct way of behaving is brought about by the virtuous agent having a reliable sensitivity to particular situations.

Reliable sensitivity is a perceptual capacity that allows a virtuous agent to know how to behave in a particular situation. A virtuous agent will recognize what behavior is called for in the situation. He will sense the moral requirements, and respond to those requirements in the right way. McDowell gives an example involving kindness:

A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose of behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. This sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity. (McDowell 142)

In the case of kindness, a conceptual understanding of the virtue is not needed for the agent to be kind. The virtuous agent rather responds to situations that require kindness, and

reacts in the right way. McDowell explains, "He need not be articulate enough to possess concepts of the particular virtues... It is enough if he thinks of what he does, when—as we put it—he shows himself to be kind, under some such description as 'the thing to do'" (McDowell 142). The knowledge that the agent possesses is his capacity to recognize a situation involving kindness. His sensitivity to the situation allows him to behave in the right way; he knows what a situation involving kindness requires as well as recognizes when he is in such a situation.

The second capacity that the virtuous agent possesses is the ability to automatically silence other non-moral reasons and avoid being clouded with false judgments. When an agent has sensitivity to a particular moral situation, he is able to recognize that situation and act in the right way required in that situation. But other reasons may present themselves. These other reasons may cloud the agent's judgment and influence the agent to act contrary to his sensitivity. McDowell explains, "This is to allow that someone who fails to act virtuously may, in a way, perceive what a virtuous agent would, so that his failure to do the right thing is not inadvertent; but to insist that his failure occurs only because his appreciation of what he perceives is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise" (McDowell 145). These concerns for opposing reasons may allow an agent's sensitivity to be corrupted by incontinence. But McDowell wants to deny that a virtuous agent faces such weighing of opposing reasons, "The distinction becomes intelligible if we stop assuming that the virtuous person's judgment is a balancing of reasons for and against" (McDowell 146). The virtuous agent does not have the same conflict of reasons as the continent agent.

For the virtuous agent, non-moral reasons are silenced, "The view of a situation in which he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or

overriding any reasons for acting in other ways which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation, but as silencing them" (McDowell 146). Whereas in the continent agent a moral reason will be one alternative amongst other non-moral reasons, a virtuous agent will never be in this dilemma. In the case of conflict, all other reasons will be silenced by moral reasons. A virtuous agent's reasons for actions will be reliable and consistent. His sensitivity will not be subject to the same false judgments as the continent agent.

To conclude, McDowell's argument claims that a virtuous agent will have a special sensitivity that non-virtuous agents lack. This moral sensitivity enables a virtuous agent to probe deeper into a moral situation and see options that may not be available to the non-virtuous or less than virtuous agent. The virtuous agent will also have the ability to silence opposing reasons. When in a conflict, the wrong reasons will not present itself to the virtuous agent; the virtuous agent will only see right solutions in a situation. He will not be capable of acting wrongly in a situation if a right solution is available or capable of being discovered.

Hursthouse shares McDowell's view that the virtuous agent has special capacities that non-virtuous agents lack, such as the practical wisdom to probe a situation for the right solution and the ability of the virtuous agent to block out wrong reasons capable of clouding his judgment. But she also ascribes an additional special ability to the virtuous agent, the ability to fine-tune and change the parameters of a conflict.³⁶

Practical wisdom and moral sensitivity may assist the virtuous agent in solving tough resolvable dilemmas or even apparent irresolvable dilemmas. If a right solution exists, even if clouded by uncertainty, the virtuous agent is able to discover it. But in a genuine irresolvable dilemma there is no right solution capable of being discovered. So practical reason and moral sensitivity will not be able to probe or sense the right solution because there is none. Rather a

³⁶. For a detailed discussion of fine-tuning see Chapter 3 in *On Virtue Ethics*.

special capacity is required that is capable of transforming the situation. Hursthouse refers to this ability as fine-tuning.³⁷ Fine tuning is a special ability made capable by the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent. But moral wisdom as Hursthouse uses it is different from both Aristotle's and McDowell's use of the term. For Hursthouse, moral wisdom not only allows a virtuous agent to act in the right way, but also guarantees that the parameters of the situation will adjust to fit the virtuous agent's action in order to force a right solution if necessary.

Hursthouse introduces moral wisdom and fine-tuning as a way to deal with the problem of conflicting v-rules.³⁸ Though many of the details and problems concerning Hursthouse's v-rules have already been discussed, it may be useful to explore some of the implication that fine-tuning has for incommensurable dilemmas or cases involving incommensurable virtues.

As previously discussed, in most situations the v-rules can provide action guidance for agents seeking moral advice. But in hard cases, where v-rules conflict, the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent is needed to properly evaluate the worth of one virtue compared to another in the situation. Though this may seem unproblematic at first, upon further examination a concern should be raised, 'How is the virtuous agent able to compare incommensurable values?' If values, like virtues, are taken to be incommensurable, as previously discussed, it should follow that an attempt to compare them in any rational way should be impossible.³⁹ So, an explanation of how the virtuous agent compares incommensurable values will need to be provided.

If an incommensurable dilemma is to be genuine, there must not be a right solution and neither value should trump the other. Whether differences in quantity or degree between competing virtues will tip the scales in favor of one virtue over another should be put aside for

³⁷ See p. 39.

³⁸ See Chapter 2, Section III.

³⁹ See Chapter 3, Section IV.

now.⁴⁰ What is being sought is a comparison so close in quantity or degree that a rational comparison is impossible. The form of the genuine incommensurable dilemma should consist of a comparison where the details cannot be sorted out no matter how deeply penetrated. In order for the dilemma to be incommensurable rather than just apparently incommensurable there cannot be a correct solution.

This point deserves further explanation. If incommensurable dilemmas have a discoverable solution, even if extremely difficult to decipher, it is at least possible that the right solution can be attained through deep examination. It is even possible that a non-virtuous agent can stumble on the correct solution by accident. If there really is a discoverable solution the dilemma is not genuinely incommensurable, it is only apparently incommensurable. Practical wisdom and moral sensitivity also is not enough to resolve incommensurable dilemmas. Digging deep into a dilemma and searching for a solution where there is none will not offer any resolution. Blocking out the wrong reasons for actions, and clearing up uncertainty will not lead to a solution either. All that will result is a certainty that the values in question are incommensurable. So, in order to resolve an incommensurable dilemma something more is needed.

Like mentioned before, only the virtuous agent's special ability of fine-tuning can resolve dilemmas of the irresolvable type. The virtuous agent must force a change of worth in the values being compared, making one virtue more preferable in the situation. Only then, when the worth of the virtues have been altered and are no longer incommensurable, will there be a right solution to the dilemma. In her discussion of the hierarchy of virtues Hursthouse says, "Any codification ranking the virtues, like any codification ranking the rules, is bound to come up against cases where we will want to change the rankings" (*On Virtue Ethics* 57). Though virtues are

⁴⁰ See pp. 65-66.

incommensurable and neither virtue trumps the other, the virtuous agent through his moral wisdom and capacity to fine-tune, is able to alter the ranking of the virtues to fit the situation, making one virtue have priority over another. So, the general virtue rules characterizing right action can be transformed and reshaped in a way to fit the needs of the virtuous agent in justifying his choice of one virtue over another as right.

The virtuous agent is able to transform values to justify his actions as the right thing to do: the right solution. In the case of virtues, he changes the rankings, making one virtue have more worth and greater priority over another. By choosing the side of the higher ranked virtue, the virtuous agent acts rightly. This is the case because the higher ranked virtue has greater priority and is more pressing as the thing to do, overriding the lower ranked virtue.

The transforming of values to force a right solution can also be extended passed virtue terms. Vice terms can likewise be reshaped to force a right decision by a virtuous agent. Hursthouse admits to this conclusion:

It seems that the fine tuning we get from our understanding of what a virtuous agent would do works on the vice terms as well as the virtue terms. We do not need an 'exemplar' of cowardice or dishonesty; on the contrary, we fine tune 'cowardly' and 'dishonest' applied to actions as we come to understand that, on occasions, discretion may be the better part of valour and even the courageous flee for their lives, in which cases their fleeing is not cowardly, and that, on occasions, the scrupulously honest may be economical with the truth and deceive others, in which cases their deception is not dishonest. (*On Virtue Ethics* 81)

A virtuous agent employing fine-tuning can transform any action or value to justify his decision as right. Even if the values are shown as the wrong thing to do under the general interpretation of v-rules, as vice terms, the virtuous agent can reshape the action to have it resemble a right act.

Because the virtuous agent is performing the act, the act is not vicious, but rather a special exception of the right act. Even if the virtuous agent does an act that is generally considered to be wrong, the act is forced to be right based on some consideration because the virtuous agent was the one performing the act. For instance, in the example giving by Hursthouse, fleeing for your life and being economical with the truth can be reinterpreted as the right thing to do, rather than acts of cowardice or dishonesty.

From what has been discussed, it was shown that a virtuous agent who possesses moral wisdom and the capacity to fine-tune could not be in an incommensurable or irresolvable dilemma. Even if a right solution were impossible to discover in a dilemma, the virtuous agent, through his special ability of fine-tuning is able to create and force a right solution. This ability makes it impossible for him to be in a genuine incommensurable or irresolvable dilemma as well as an apparent incommensurable or irresolvable dilemma. The virtuous agent is even able to force a right solution when faced with decisions bound up in vice terms. So, a virtuous agent also cannot be in an irresolvable dilemma of the type requiring a decision between two evil acts. The virtuous agent can simply reshape either act and create a solution reinterpreted as the right thing to do. Moral wisdom and fine-tuning makes any dilemma the virtuous agent faces resolvable. What results from this is, for Hursthouse's theory to hold as she presents it, the concept of genuine moral dilemmas must be abandoned. Unless the primacy of the virtuous agent is lessened or the virtuous agent is abandoned as the model for right action, the concept of the virtuous agent will make the existence of genuine moral dilemmas impossible. These

incompatible concepts cannot be reconciled.⁴¹ If virtuous agents exist genuine moral dilemmas cannot.

IV. *Eudaimonia* and Tragic Dilemmas

The special ability of the virtuous agent, the ability to fine-tune dilemmatic situations and adjust the parameters to force a right answer resolves all moral dilemmas, even irresolvable and incommensurable dilemmas. This special quality of the virtuous agent is therefore incompatible with the existence of moral dilemmas. But Hursthouse is not willing to give up on the concept of moral dilemmas. She suggests an exception, a special case: the tragic irresolvable dilemma. Hursthouse claims, "But the possibility of tragic dilemmas shows us that fine tuning does not work across every case. In a tragic dilemma, a virtuous agent does something terrible or horrible... And if the claim that 'character has primacy over action' is supposed to commit one to a reductive definition of terrible or horrible acts in terms of the virtuous agent, then I want to disown that too" (*On Virtue Ethics* 81). The tragic case as Hursthouse presents it is an attempt to keep the primacy of the virtuous agent, as the ultimate measure of what is right, while at the same time salvaging the concept of the moral dilemma. But Hursthouse's attempt to justify the tragic exception is misguided and problematic.

Hursthouse claims that a virtuous agent will always perform the right act, but in a tragic dilemma he will not be able to perform the 'good act', where a 'good act' is meant to be conceptually linked to *eudaimonia*.⁴² The virtuous agent will always force a right decision, even

⁴¹ If Hursthouse or even other virtue ethicists were put on the spot and had to choose between whether to keep the concept of the virtuous agent or the concept of genuine moral dilemmas in their theory, it seems likely that the concept of the virtuous agent would be kept.

⁴² See p. 44.

when the alternatives are vicious, but Hursthouse now wants to override the virtuous agent by demanding that his actions also promote *eudaimonia*. If an act is horrible enough to mar an agent's life, ruining his chances for *eudaimonia*, it cannot be assessed as a 'good act', even if it is right and what the virtuous agent would do in the situation. But why must the virtuous agent's actions be linked to *eudaimonia*? Should not the virtuous agent be the measure, not the resultant flourishing or happiness?

Hursthouse completes her second premise of right action as, "A virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well" (*On Virtue Ethics* 167). Even though the second premise only provides a necessary condition for *eudaimonia*, Hursthouse uses it counterfactually to assess the virtuous agent's actions. Hursthouse makes *eudaimonia* have priority over the virtuous agent. But as previously discussed, the virtuous agent is the measure not the act. He makes the act 'right', 'good', etc., not the other way around. But if the act is able to make the virtuous agent 'bad' then the primacy of the virtuous agent is diminished. If this were the case it would be correct to prescribe the measure of right action as, 'act in a way to promote *eudaimonia*'. Reference to the virtuous agent would no longer be needed. But if the virtuous agent is to be defined as someone who is courageous, generous, honest, and so on, the possessing of the virtues should be what makes the virtuous agent's actions right, not the consequences.⁴³ It is not completely clear why *eudaimonia* is required for a virtuous agent to be virtuous. It seems completely plausible that an agent can be virtuous even if he is not living a good life. Why should conditions other than the agent's virtuous character matter? Hursthouse tends to use the

⁴³ Virtues may also ruin an agent's chances for *eudaimonia*. For instance, an agent who is thrown into jail for refusing to bear false witness against another is destroying his chances for happiness by possessing the virtue of honesty. In this case, virtue and *eudaimonia* are not only different from one another but also directly opposed to one another. I do not present this argument in full in order to avoid the complicated issue of whether or not virtues benefit their possessor.

terms 'possessing the virtues' and *eudaimonia* interchangeably. But the concepts are very different from one another. *Eudaimonia* is much more encompassing and demanding.

It is important to be clear on what *eudaimonia* or 'the good life' entails. It is obvious, that the simple possession of virtues is not all that is involved. If this were the case, a virtuous man locked away in a dungeon would be a *eudaimon*. But clearly, few people would consider this type of person as one who is living 'the good life'. In his essay, "Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent?," Brad Hooker describes moral achievement as one among other types of achievement in life, "Being moral is only one kind of achievement. Achievement is only one of the goods on the list. Thus, even if moral achievement does constitute α benefit to the agent, there may be cases in which moral virtue brings such large losses in terms of other things on the list that the greatest *net* benefit for the agent lies in not being moral. Such cases, I believe, are common" (Hooker 148). The *eudaimon* in the dungeon may have great success in his moral achievement but many other achievements worthwhile in life would be lost. He would lose out on knowledge, pleasure, friendship, the appreciation of beauty, and many other things that make life worth living. These achievements are necessary in order to live 'the good life'.

Virtue is just one type of moral achievement required to live 'the good life'. Even though it is a necessary condition it is not a sufficient condition for flourishing. It is important not to get carried away in ascribing *eudaimonia* to the virtuous agent as a condition for him being the exemplar for right action. If this were the case, not only would the virtuous agent have to be perfectly virtuous but he would also have to have a nice house, a good job, loving family and friends; all the things required of 'the good life'. The virtuous agent in the dungeon would not make the cut. But these embellishments seem ad hoc and completely unnecessary for an agent to be the exemplar for right action. As long as an agent was completely virtuous; possessing all the

virtues; it should follow that he will be able to be the measure of right action. The fact that Hursthouse uses *eudaimonia* as an ad hoc measure to make the virtuous agent act 'bad' even though he was completely virtuous is unwarranted.

The only way that a virtuous agent will be able to perform the wrong act is if he is no longer a virtuous agent. Hursthouse seems to try to suggest that in the special case of tragic dilemmas the virtuous agent is no longer virtuous as he performs a heinous act, or right after he performs a heinous act. But this does not follow. A virtuous agent will fine-tune the act to make it right. Any decision made by the virtuous agent will be the right act simply by merit of the virtuous agent making the decision. Hursthouse claims that a virtuous agent will not be able to fine-tune horrible or heinous acts while in a tragic dilemma. But Hursthouse never explains why. If the virtuous agent is able to fine-tune concepts of cowardice, dishonesty, etc. into virtuous actions, what makes the terms in a tragic dilemma any different? At some level a familiar vice would be involved, such as injustice in the case of murder. Assessing the actions of the virtuous agent through the lens of *eudaimonia* does not explain why fine-tuning would not work in a tragic dilemma. Hursthouse fails to show how a lack of *eudaimonia* restricts fine-tuning, or assesses it as 'bad'. The virtuous agent makes the act right and 'good' by merit of his virtuous character and moral wisdom. Whether the virtuous agent is living 'the good life' or no longer capable of living 'the good life' does not directly affect his ability to act as the exemplar for right action.

It can also be claimed, as alluded to in Section Three, that fine-tuning and moral wisdom alone is able to act as the measure of right action. So, even if there may be a direct conceptual link between virtue and *eudaimonia*, the link between moral wisdom and *eudaimonia* is not the same. An act that diminishes a virtuous agent's ability to flourish will not ascribe the concept of

'bad' onto the moral wisdom of the virtuous agent. A virtuous agent may or may not achieve *eudaimonia*. Either way it is not a necessary condition for him to be a proper virtuous agent: an exemplar for right action. Any act performed by the virtuous agent becomes the right act if the virtuous agent is the one performing the act. This assessment is independent of the consequences, even if the agent's life is marred. To conclude, Hursthouse's conceptual detour does very little to support her claim that irresolvable dilemmas exist.

In addition to what has been discussed, a fairly straightforward argument can be made against Hursthouse. Hursthouse admits that tragic dilemmas are not genuinely irresolvable:

There are, undoubtedly, some things a virtuous agent must die rather than do. This is recognized in common morality, which condemns at least some cases of saving one's own life by betraying or killing others. In such cases it is indeed impossible to 'emerge' with clean hands, but we know what virtuous agents would do, and actually have done, all right—they allow themselves to die or be killed; perhaps even commit suicide. The dilemma is resolvable, though its resolution is exceptionally demanding, and the agent does not 'emerge' from it at all. (*On Virtue Ethics* 72)

In the passage Hursthouse admits that there is a right solution to what the virtuous agent would do in a tragic dilemma. She also admits that tragic dilemmas are resolvable. The fact that an agent may die as the result of his decision may make the dilemma grievous, unfortunate, and even tragic, but it does not make the dilemma irresolvable. Hursthouse does show that the virtuous agent can be in severely distressing and even fatal situations because of his virtue, but this is not the same as proving the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. At best, Hursthouse's argument proves the existence of tragic resolvable dilemmas.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Hursthouse cautiously admits that tragic resolvable dilemmas are really what she is referring to in *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 77.

Chapter 5

Are there Genuine Moral Dilemmas?

In Chapter Four it was shown that genuine moral dilemmas were impossible by the structure of Hursthouse's theory, if her core concept, the virtuous agent, were to be maintained. But Williams' argument for the existence of moral dilemmas does not rely on the virtuous agent in the same way. His argument relies on the fact that moral dilemmas generate a logical inconsistency in ethical theories, resulting from the fact that there are cases that generate contradictory obligations. Williams therefore argues that ethical theories are rendered inconsistent because moral dilemmas exist. The goal of this chapter is to explore a competing claim from Terrance McConnell. McConnell's claim is the opposite of Williams'. He claims that ethical theories are not rendered inconsistent because they must acknowledge the existence of moral dilemmas. In this chapter, I will present McConnell's argument for consistency in ethics and the denial of genuine moral dilemmas. Section One will detail McConnell's argument, examining why moral dilemmas are problematic for ethical theories and should be rejected. Section Two will explore the phenomenon of moral advice and moral doubt, showing that this behavior is appropriate and rational in a moral dilemma. Section Three will conclude by arguing that there is no way for an agent to know whether he is in a genuine moral dilemma or a merely apparent moral dilemma, therefore disallowing adequate evidence for the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. Finally, Section Four will explore an alternative solution to resolve the inconsistency rendered by the existence of moral dilemmas.

I. McConnell's Argument

In his essay, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," McConnell claims that the argument for the existence of moral dilemmas must be reconciled as a conjunction of three theses. These three theses are: (T1) genuine moral dilemmas exists, (T2) 'ought implies can', and (T3) the *agglomeration principle*.⁴⁵ The first thesis supports the view that genuine moral dilemmas exist, meaning that there are situations in which an agent ought to do each of two things, but cannot do both, where there are no overriding moral reasons for acting on one decision over another (McConnell 1). (T1) is represented in deontic logic as:

- (i) OA
- (ii) OB
- (iii) $\sim \Diamond (A \ \& \ B)$ (McConnell 1)

The second thesis supports the view that 'ought implies can', where in order for something to be obligatory it also must be possible. This thesis is represented in deontic logic as:

$$OA \supset \Diamond A \text{ (McConnell 1)}$$

The third thesis, the *agglomeration principle*, supports the view that if an agent ought to do A and he also ought to B then he ought be able to do both A and B. This thesis is represented in deontic logic as:

⁴⁵ Also see Chapter 1, Section II.

$(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset O(A \ \& \ B)$ (McConnell 1)

McConnell shows the logical structure of the conjunction of (T1), (T2), and (T3) in the following example:

(i) OA	premise
(ii) OB	premise
(iii) $\sim \Diamond (A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(iv) $O(A \ \& \ B) \supset \Diamond (A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(v) $(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset O(A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(vi) $O(A \ \& \ B)$	(i), (ii), (v), propositional calculus
(vii) $\sim O(A \ \& \ B)$	(iii), (iv), propositional calculus
(McConnell 2)	

The preceding formulation shows that the three theses are inconsistent (by vi and vii). McConnell explains the inconsistency, "Lines (i), (ii), and (iii) represent thesis (T1). Theses (T2) and (T3) are set out in lines (iv) and (v), respectively. Or, more accurately, lines (iv) and (v) are particular instances of these theses. Since lines (vi) and (vii) are contradictory, we know that the conjunction of the three is inconsistent. So at least one of these theses must be relinquished (McConnell 2). By (T1) an agent ought to do A, and he also ought to do B, but it is not possible to do both A and B. By (T2) it should follow that it will be possible to do A and B if A and B are obligatory. And by (T3) it should be possible to do both A and B if an agent both ought to do A and ought to do B. The three theses then become contradictory when doing both A and B becomes obligatory even though it is impossible to execute both A and B.

Supporting (T1) comes into conflict with the deontic principle of ethical consistency. The principle of ethical consistency or (PC) is stated in logical form as:

(PC) $OA \supset \sim O \sim A$ (McConnell 2)

(PC) essentially claims that the same act cannot be both obligatory and forbidden at the same time (McConnell 2). But in the case previously mentioned, an agent is both obligated and forbidden from doing both A and B. So to accept (T1) would result in the denial of (PC). McConnell explains, "It can be shown that (T1) entails the denial of (PC). So if there are genuine moral dilemmas, then our ethical reasoning is inconsistent in the sense that we are committed to both OA and $O \sim A$, propositions that are contraries according to (PC)" (McConnell 2).

Abandoning (PC) will also result in the denial of two other important principles in deontic logic, the idea that if an action is obligatory then it is permissible, and the idea that permissible is definable by 'not ought not' (McConnell 2). These two principles are represented in deontic logic as:

(a) $OA \supset PA$

(b) $PA \equiv \sim O \sim A$ (McConnell 2)

The thesis that moral dilemmas exist (T1) is therefore problematic and unable to be reconciled with standard deontic logic. McConnell explains,

Again we see that systems of standard deontic logic must rule out the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas. This shows that if (T1) is true, then our moral reasoning is radically different from what it is supposed to be by standard systems of deontic logic. I shall use the phrase 'the problem of moral dilemmas' as an abbreviated way of indicating that thesis (T1) represents a challenge to such basic moral principles as (T2), (T3), (PC), (a), and (b). (McConnell 3)

From what was discussed, the affirmation of (T1) has serious consequences on standard deontic logic. Many of these principles are viewed by supporters as axiomatic, where the denial of any of the principles mentioned would have devastating consequences on the adequacy of moral theories. So, the rejection of (T1) would be the most satisfactory solution to the problems mentioned. If this move were made, the adequacy and consistency of moral theories can be maintained.

In order for an ethical theory to be adequate and consistent it cannot maintain (T1), (T2), and (T3) at the same time. So one of these theses must be abandoned. McConnell proposes three solutions. The first solution (S1) involves abandoning (T1), the thesis that moral dilemmas exist. The second solution (S2) involves abandoning (T2), the thesis that 'ought implies can'. Finally the third solution (S3) involves abandoning the *agglomeration principle*. Each solution will result in one of the three theses being abandoned. McConnell says, "Adopting any one of the three solutions enables us to avoid the inconsistency, but it does so at the expense of forcing us to give up a thesis that at least some have found plausible" (McConnell 2).

McConnell claims that (S1), the rejection of the thesis that moral dilemmas exist, is the most plausible solution to resolve the inconsistency present in the conjunction of the three theses. He says, "I shall argue that the first solution is the most plausible one. If there are good reasons for saying that an adequate moral theory must not allow for genuine moral dilemmas, then the two kinds of ethical inconsistency described earlier will have been escaped" (McConnell 4). Rejecting (T1) not only allows (T2) or (T3) to be kept, but it also allows (PC) to be maintained. Holding onto (T1) will result in multiple principles of standard deontic logic having to be abandoned. But the cost of relinquishing (T1) is small, and would have very little impact on

other accepted principles in deontic logic. Therefore accepting (S1) is the most preferable solution of the three and the least problematic.

Before rejecting (T1) rather than (T2) or (T3), the reasons supporting (T1) should be explored. McConnell gives three reasons commonly used in support of the thesis that moral dilemmas exist. The first reason is that there are examples of situations that appear to be genuine moral dilemmas (McConnell 3). A particular example given by McConnell is the dilemma of Sartre's student.⁴⁶ The student is in what appears to be a genuine moral dilemma. He cannot carry out both obligations at the same time, and there are no reasons for preferring one obligation over the other. So, the prevalence of cases that at least appear to be dilemmatic and are unable to be proven otherwise lends credence to the existence of moral dilemmas.

The second reason given in support of the existence of moral dilemmas involves the likelihood of moral rules conflicting. The complexity of human life will demand that agents take on different roles. Many of these roles will involve particular moral rules, many of which are capable of conflicting with one another. McConnell explains,

If one looks at the complexity of the moral lives of most agents, one can hardly doubt that moral dilemmas will arise. Most people take part in many different roles in society and are members of many different social groups. One incurs different obligations or duties as a friend, citizen, worker, spouse, etc. Given that each of us is involved in a complex network of relationships, it is very likely that some of the ought-claims binding us will conflict and we will find ourselves in moral dilemmas on some occasions. (McConnell 4)

The fact that agents can take on different social roles allows the possibility that the roles will conflict. For instance, an obligation to be a good father may result in having to break an

⁴⁶ For a description of Sartre's dilemma see p. 8.

obligation to a friend in order to care for a sick child. And the obligation to care for a sick child may have to be broken if an agent is forced to go to work. So, the possibility that social roles will conflict seems to be evidence for the existence of moral dilemmas.

The third reason that is commonly given to support the thesis that genuine moral dilemmas exist involves the phenomenon of regret. The expression of regret by an agent will be an indication that he failed to do something he ought to have done. In a moral dilemma this expression will result from the agent choosing either alternative, therefore showing that neither alternative was the right solution. So, no matter what an agent does he will fail to do something he ought to have done. McConnell explains,

In many cases this regret seems quite appropriate and certainly not irrational. Thesis (T1) provides a simple explanation for why a conscientious moral agent experiences this feeling and why it is not irrational... This provides evidence that the situation is genuinely dilemmatic because in many of these cases the agent sees that even if he had acted on the other of the conflicting alternatives he would still feel regret. (McConnell 4)

Because an agent will experience regret no matter what decision he makes in a moral dilemma, there must be no right solution. If there were a right solution it would be irrational to experience regret as a result of either decision. Because an agent experiences regret no matter what choice he makes in a moral dilemma, it should follow that the dilemma in question is genuinely dilemmatic.

The foregoing reasons given are plausible but not adequate evidence to maintain that (T1) is true. McConnell starts by rejecting the third reason first. The supporter of (T1) will want to argue that the expression of regret after a decision has been made in a moral dilemma is proof

that the dilemma was genuinely dilemmatic. But this does not follow. An agent can experience regret for other reasons than failing to fulfill an obligation. McConnell says, "Regret, as is ordinarily understood, is appropriate if some good has been lost, or if some bad, even if unavoidable, has obtained. It is perfectly consistent and quite reasonable to say that an agent has done what he believes he ought, all things considered, to have done and feels regret" (McConnell 5). Regret is not limited to the expression of an obligation that an agent failed to carry out. It can also be argued, as was in Chapter Three, that an agent can experience regret about many things.⁴⁷ So it does not follow that regret will be a specific indicator of a moral dilemma. Therefore the phenomenon of regret after a moral dilemma is not adequate proof for the existence of genuine moral dilemmas.

McConnell argues against the first and second reason commonly used in support of (T1) next. The first reason, that there are prevalent examples of apparent genuine dilemmatic situations, may seem plausible, and the opponent of (T1) may not have a clear solution to a particular dilemma. But the demand for a solution to apparently dilemmatic situations, as a requirement to disprove (T1) is unjustified. McConnell explains,

He [the defender of (T1)] will probably confront him [the defender of (S1)] with these examples and say, 'If there are no genuine moral dilemmas, then what should the agent do in this situation?' But to suppose that the defender of solution (1) must always be able to answer this question is mistaken. It is not incumbent upon the advocate of solution (1) to supply the correct moral answer to every apparent quandary. (McConnell 5)

Failure to provide a solution to an apparent genuine moral dilemma is not evidence for its existence. Just because an opponent of (T1) cannot offer a solution to a particular apparent

⁴⁷ See p. 54.

genuine moral dilemma does not mean that the defender of (T1) has provided evidence for the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. The defender of (T1) must provide the burden of proof for the existence of moral dilemmas, rather than claim as evidence the inability of opponents to offer a solution to a particular apparent moral dilemma.

The second reason commonly used to support (T1), that the complex moral lives of agents will result in conflicting obligations, can also be shown to be insufficient proof for the existence of moral dilemmas. Even if it is admitted by the supporter of (S1) that the complex lives of agents will likely result in obligations conflicting at some point, it can also be claimed that in many cases one obligation will override the other. McConnell gives an example: "One such case is when one's obligation to help an accident victim overrides one's obligation to meet a friend for lunch (as one promised to do)" (McConnell 6). In many cases an obligation to do one thing will be better, overall, as the thing to do. So, dilemmas of this type are not genuinely dilemmatic. McConnell concludes, "Since there are cases where the overriding relationships does hold, the *mere* fact that two ought-claims can or do conflict does not show that there are genuine moral dilemmas" (McConnell 6).

Even though the three arguments in support of (T1) are shown to be faulty and rejected by McConnell, he admits that more is required than simply disproving the arguments commonly used to support (T1). He says,

I have, up to this point, argued for a fairly weak claim: viz., the reasons usually given to support (T1) do not guarantee the truth of that thesis. A defender of (T1), however, might well grant this. He might claim, though, that the burden of proof is still on the advocate of solution (1). The reason for this, he might argue, is that he has shown that there *appear* to be genuine moral dilemmas" (McConnell 6).

According to the first and second reason commonly used to support (T1) there are cases of apparent genuine moral dilemmas that need to be accounted for. Even if the supporter of (S1) is able to show that the existence of apparent genuine moral dilemmas is not adequate evidence to support (T1) this is not the same as proving that genuine moral dilemmas do not exist. In order to show that (T1) is false the supporter of (S1) must show that apparent genuine moral dilemmas really are only apparent rather than genuine. The appearance of what seem to be genuine moral dilemmas is on the side of the defender of (T1) for there are clear cases that seem to be genuinely dilemmatic. Therefore the burden of proof will rest on the supporter of (S1) showing that the appearances are deceptive (McConnell 6). The next section will attempt to argue that moral dilemmas only appear to be genuinely dilemmatic, the appearances are deceptive, and that there are good reasons for believing that (T1) is false.

II. Moral Advice and Moral Doubt

McConnell takes on the challenge of showing that moral dilemmas are only apparent rather than genuine by proposing two arguments. The first argument involves the common tendency of an agent to seek out moral advice, and the second argument involves the phenomenon of moral doubt. McConnell says, "There are two phenomenon that are frequently associated with dilemmatic situations. One is that agents facing apparent quandaries frequently seek *moral advice*... The second phenomenon is that after acting on one or the other of the alternatives, agents in these apparently dilemmatic situations often *experience moral doubt*" (McConnell 6). He continues, "And not only do agents in the situations seek moral advice and

experience moral doubt, but in addition in many of these cases we are ordinarily prepared to say that such behavior is appropriate, reasonable, and maybe even expected" (McConnell 6).

An agent will frequently seek moral advice from others when in a dilemmatic situation. An agent seeks moral advice in a moral dilemma because, all things considered, he does not know what he should do, and there seems to be no solution within his reach. In a moral dilemma an agent will not simply accept that there is no solution, that the dilemma is genuine and irresolvable. Rather he will seek out others hoping to find the hidden right solution. He will seek advice in order to improve his chances of discovering the right solution. It would be absurd for an agent to seek advice as to what to do if he sincerely believed no right solution existed. The fact that an agent seeks moral advice shows that an agent thinks it is at least possible for there to be a right solution to the dilemma.

Supporters of (T1) will have to admit that an agent in a genuine moral dilemma will have acted irrationally by seeking moral advice. If the situation is genuinely dilemmatic there will be two things the agent ought, all things considered, to do. So moral advice from a supporter of (T1) will consist of reasons for doing both A and B. McConnell says, "If the person whom he asks believes that there are genuine moral dilemmas and that the agent is in one, then this person will simply advise the agent that he ought to do each (or both) of the two actions" (McConnell 6). If the situation is genuinely dilemmatic this advice should be sound. But this type of advice will not be satisfactory to the agent.

The agent knows there are two things he should do. And if he also knows that the situation is dilemmatic, he must acknowledge that there is no solution to what he really should do. But the agent will still seek advice on a single right solution, and if he is in a genuine moral dilemma this behavior should be irrational. McConnell explains, "Since (according to them) the

agent already knows what he ought to do, they are committed to saying that such behavior is irrational" (McConnell 6). Supporters of (T1) will then have to claim that an agent who seeks moral advice is not really seeking a single correct solution to a genuine dilemmatic situation, but rather is exhibiting some form of irrational behavior. Supporters of (T1) will have to concede that seeking moral advice in a genuine moral dilemma is a form of irrational behavior.

After making a difficult decision in a moral dilemma an agent may experience moral doubt. He will wonder if he made the right decision, or worry that he made the wrong decision. But if an agent thinks he may have made the wrong decision, he must sincerely believe there was a right solution to make. If there are two things an agent ought to do, and no correct solution, an agent should not worry that he made the wrong decision. If an agent is in a genuine moral dilemma he should acknowledge that there is no single correct solution to make. But agents do have moral doubt and question whether they made the right decision. Moral doubt shows that an agent sincerely believes there really is only one right solution in a moral dilemma.

If an agent is in a genuine moral dilemma, and aware of this fact, it should be irrational for him to have moral doubt. The supporter of (T1) will have to acknowledge that an agent experiencing moral doubt after making a decision in a genuine moral dilemma is behaving inappropriately. McConnell says, "But as long as the agent recognized the force of each of the ought-claims *before* he acted, then it seems the advocate of (T1) cannot take these questions seriously. He will have to explain them as being something other than what they appear to be. He may, for example, say that the agent is involved in some sort of self-deception or act of bad faith, and is merely trying to get someone to persuade him that he did nothing wrong" (McConnell 7). The agent in a genuine moral dilemma cannot, according to supporters of (T1), have sincere moral doubt after a genuine dilemmatic situation. But this runs contrary to common moral

experience. In many cases moral doubt is appropriate. To claim that an agent does not experience moral doubt after a genuine dilemmatic situation, but rather some form of self-deception will force supporters of (T1) to have to claim that moral doubt is irrational.

Proof for the appropriateness of moral doubt can be shown by the past experiences of the agent. An agent will have doubts about whether he made the right decision in the past. Sometimes this results in an agent acknowledging that he has made the wrong decision in the past. Because an agent can acknowledge that he has had moral doubt and has not made the right decision on particular occasions in the past there is no reason to believe a new occasion will be any different. Therefore, the fact that agents can acknowledge mistakes in the past presupposes the existence of a right answer. In order for an agent to acknowledge his mistakes he must believe there was a right and wrong answer in the situation where he made the mistake.

There are good reasons for believing that an agent seeking moral advice and having moral doubt after making a decision in a tough moral situation is not irrational. But an additional argument can be made by the supporter of (T1). Even though it may be rational to seek moral advice or have moral doubt in an apparent moral dilemma, and irrational in a genuine moral dilemma, there is no way for an agent to know which type of dilemma he is in. Therefore, moral advice or moral doubt is appropriate behavior because an agent might very well be in an apparent moral dilemma. McConnell explains, "The defender of (T1) can admit that when one is in an apparent moral dilemma he cannot be sure that the situation is genuinely dilemmatic. Since this is the case, it is quite reasonable for (and perhaps even required of) the agent to seek moral advice" (McConnell 8). The same can be said for moral doubt. There is no way for an agent to know if he is in a genuine moral dilemma, or only an apparent moral dilemma. So the agent might have done something wrong when he could have avoided doing so. Moral doubt can be

explained as appropriate behavior by the supporter of (T1) because an agent will have no way of knowing for sure that he did not do something wrong. If the moral dilemma was only apparent, an agent just might have done something wrong.

A new problem then arises involving how to distinguish genuine moral dilemmas from merely apparent moral dilemmas. Supporters of (T1) want to maintain that genuine moral dilemmas exist, while at the same time admitting that an agent's tendency to seek moral advice and have moral doubt after making a decision has been made in a moral dilemma is appropriate. They maintain that moral advice and moral doubt are expected and appropriate because an agent should take steps to find a right solution just in case he is in an apparent moral dilemma rather than a genuine one. But even if this move is acknowledged, the supporter of (T1) must still explain the criterion for which to distinguish genuine moral dilemmas from merely apparent moral dilemmas.

The fact that supporters of (T1) offer no plausible criterion for distinguishing genuine moral dilemmas from merely apparent moral dilemmas raises additional problems. McConnell says, "If there is no criterion for picking out genuine dilemmas from apparent ones, then one must raise another question. Given that an agent is facing a situation that at least appears to be a dilemma, when will it be rational for him to seek advice and experience moral doubt?" (McConnell 8). A response from the supporter of (T1) might be that it is always appropriate to seek moral advice or have moral doubt. Because it is impossible to know whether the moral dilemma is apparent rather than genuine, it seems reasonable and appropriate to take precautions just in case the dilemma is merely apparent. But this position results in treating every moral dilemma as if it were merely apparent. This stance results in behavior towards moral dilemmas

resembling (S1). McConnell explains, "After all, the advocate of (T1) is recommending that we behave as if solution (1) were correct" (McConnell 8).

If there is no way to distinguish genuine moral dilemmas from merely apparent moral dilemmas, the first reason used in support of (T1) is weakened. It was claimed that there were various examples of what appeared to be genuine moral dilemmas, such as the dilemma of Sartre's student. These examples should be evidence for the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. But the supporter of (T1) must now claim that there is no way to show that particular examples are genuinely dilemmatic; they may very well be merely apparent. The upshot of this is that there is no clear example of a single genuine moral dilemma. McConnell says, "By his own admission [the supporter of (T1)], then, there are no situations that are known to be dilemmatic. That there are genuine dilemmas must, it seems, be accepted on faith" (McConnell 8).

Seeking moral advice and having moral doubt will always be appropriate in a moral dilemma. Because there is no way to distinguish a merely apparent moral dilemma from a genuine moral dilemma, supporters of (T1) will also have to concede to this point. For it is perfectly reasonable and appropriate to treat all dilemmas like they are merely apparent as a precautionary measure. But this fact strongly weakens the reasons for believing that (T1) is true. Therefore there are good reasons for rejecting (T1). McConnell concludes:

The first thesis, then, conflicts (in a fundamental way) with the way that we regard situations of moral conflict. If one defending this thesis says that seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt are always appropriate when one is facing an apparent predicament, then he will be giving up too much to the defender of solution (1). If he says that such behavior is not always appropriate, then he must spell out under what conditions it is inappropriate. And as we have seen, the most natural way of spelling this out commits him to treating some behavior as inappropriate when we would ordinarily regard it as quite

reasonable... Given this, there are good grounds for believing that (T1) is false. (McConnell 9)

III. Rejecting the Thesis that Genuine Moral Dilemmas Exist

It was argued that seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt is completely appropriate and rational in a moral dilemma. Even supporters of (T1) must admit to the appropriateness of the behavior mentioned, though for different reasons. There is no way to distinguish a genuine moral dilemma from a merely apparent dilemma. This fact alone may even generate additional reasons to seek moral advice or experience moral doubt; an agent may wish to know if the dilemma he is in is merely apparent or genuine. So dilemmatic situations will always generate uncertainty in the agent, and can never be identified with absolute certainty as a genuine moral dilemma. Precautionary measures will also be taken by the agent to guarantee that he has not identified the dilemma as genuine when it may be only apparently dilemmatic. So it will always seem appropriate and reasonable for an agent to seek moral advice or have moral doubt in a dilemmatic situation. Because seeking moral advice and experiencing moral doubt would always be appropriate, a particular moral dilemma rationally will never be treated as if it were genuinely dilemmatic.

Because a moral dilemma will never be treated as a genuine moral dilemma there is no plausible evidence to guarantee that the dilemma is a genuine moral dilemma. Therefore, there are good reasons to conclude that genuine moral dilemmas do not exist. Even if this was not the case, and an opponent of (S1) argued that the reasons behind rejecting (T1) were not strong enough, a further argument could be made. Because it is impossible to distinguish a genuine moral dilemma from a merely apparent moral dilemma, there is no proof to show that genuine

moral dilemmas exist. Even if (T1) cannot be proven false, it also cannot be proven true. So to demand that (T1) be forced onto accepted principles of deontic logic is unjustified. An inconsistency cannot be shown because there are no grounds to suppose that (T1) is true. Therefore there is no evidence to prove that genuine moral dilemmas exist.

Williams claimed that the existence of moral dilemmas generates a logical inconsistency in ethical theories, calling the adequacy of those theories into question. But McConnell's argument shows that this claim is unjustified. There is no way to prove that genuine moral dilemmas exist. Because of this fact, the thesis that moral dilemmas exist cannot be justifiably introduced into standard deontic logic. Because the thesis that genuine moral dilemmas exist has no grounding it cannot justifiably create an inconsistency in ethical theories. It is therefore rational to assume that our ethical reasoning is adequate and consistent. McConnell concludes:

What I have tried to do in this paper is to defend an assumption which has been held, but not really argued for, by many ethical theorists: an adequate moral theory must not allow for genuine dilemmas. The most important result of this argument is that it provides a solution to the problem set out in argument (A).⁴⁸ We do have good reasons for giving up the first thesis of the inconsistent triad. And this allows us to retain the most basic principle of deontic logic as well, viz., (PC), (a), and (b). We may conclude, then, at least with respect to the problem of moral dilemmas, that our basic ethical reasoning is not incoherent. (McConnell 10)

IV. Critical Evaluation of McConnell's Argument

McConnell argues that (S1), or the rejection of (T1), is the most plausible solution to resolve the inconsistency between the incompatible triad of: (T1) moral dilemmas, (T2) *ought*

⁴⁸ See p. 92.

implies *can*, and (T3) the *agglomeration principle*. He demonstrates reasons why supporters of (T1) are unable to adequately support the thesis that moral dilemmas exist. But it can be argued that McConnell's support of (T2) and (T3) is equally inadequate. He fails to give any noteworthy reasons why (T2) or (T3) should not be rejected instead of (T1) beyond saying that they are well-established principles of deontic logic. But could it be claimed that (S2) or (S3) are equally valid solutions worthy of consideration? Why not reject *ought* implies *can* or the *agglomeration principle* instead?

Of the two mentioned, the *agglomeration principle* has received the larger share of criticism from supporters of (T1). There are many arguments, supported by good reasons, demonstrating that the *agglomeration principle* is inadequate and should be rejected.⁴⁹ Therefore, it seems only appropriate to entertain the idea that (S3) is a valid solution to resolve the inconsistency of the triad.

It can be argued that the *agglomeration principle* should be reformulated. One particular reformulation takes the form of:

$$(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset (\Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \ \& \ B))^{50}$$

Let us call this revised version (1). This revised version of the *agglomeration principle* can be interpreted as such: if I ought to do A and I ought to do B, then if it is jointly possible to do both A and B, then I ought to do both A and B. For instance, if a mother sees two of her children drowning and she ought to save child A and she also ought to save child B, and it is

⁴⁹ An argument in particular against the *agglomeration principle*, is the one given by Williams in Chapter 1, Section II of this thesis.

⁵⁰ This particular reformulated version of the *agglomeration principle* was suggested by Professor Husain Sarkar in response to this chapter in an unpublished paper entitled, "Moral Dilemmas: An Agnostic View".

jointly possible to save both child *A* and child *B*, then she ought to save both. But if it not possible to save both then she does not have an obligation to save both. If the revised *agglomeration principle* were introduced into the inconsistent triad in lieu of the unrevised version the contradiction may be blocked. For instance, if the revised *agglomeration principle*, $(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset (\Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \ \& \ B))$, was introduced in line (v), line (vi) would have to be rewritten as $\Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \ \& \ B)$. Therefore, (vii) can be derived as before but no contradiction can be derived since (vi), given the revised *agglomeration principle*, can no longer be derived from (i), (ii), (v). The reformulation is shown as:

(i) OA	premise
(ii) OB	premise
(iii) $\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(iv) $O(A \ \& \ B) \supset \Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(v) $(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset (\Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \ \& \ B))$	premise
(vi) $\Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \ \& \ B)$	(i), (ii), (v), propositional calculus
(vii) $\sim O(A \ \& \ B)$	(iii), (iv), propositional calculus

Another reformulation of the *agglomeration principle* comes from Williams. He loosely states his revised version as:

- (i) If I do B, I will not be able to do A;
- (ii) If I do A, I will not be able to do B.
- ...
- (iii) If I will not be able to do A, it will not be the case that I ought to do A;
- (iv) If I will not be able to do B, it will not be the case that I ought to do B.
- ...
- (v) If I do B, it will not be the case that I ought to do A;

(vi) If I do A, it will not be the case that I ought to do B.
(Williams 182)⁵¹

The foregoing formulation by Williams can be roughly interpreted as: the doing of B will result in A no longer being possible, and the doing of A will result in B no longer being possible. So performing the act of B will be an instance of $\sim \Diamond A$. And performing the act of A will be an instance of $\sim \Diamond B$. This is expressed as:

- (i) $B \supset \sim \Diamond A$
- (ii) $A \supset \sim \Diamond B$

Ought implies *can*, informally stated by Williams in (iii) and (iv) can be interpreted as:

- (iii) $\sim \Diamond A \supset \sim OA$
- (iv) $\sim \Diamond B \supset \sim OB$

It then follows in (v) and (vi) by transitivity that doing B will result in $\sim OA$ and doing A will result in $\sim OB$, respectively. So doing either A or B will result in the other no longer being obligatory. This is expressed as:

- (v) $B \supset \sim OA$
- (vi) $A \supset \sim OB$

⁵¹ The original format of Williams' letters in this example was changed from *a* and *b*, to A and B, for purposes of consistency. This formulation was examined in Chapter 1, Section II, in which it was argued that the *agglomeration principle* becomes less problematic if it is expressed in terms of *each* rather than *both*.

Though the foregoing examples are straightforward enough, a further distinction may be derived, even if not explicitly stated by Williams. It seems possible that the *agglomeration principle* can be stated in the form of:

$$(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset (\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \vee B))$$

Let us call this revised version (2). This formulation may be interpreted as: If I ought to do A and I ought to do B, then if it is not jointly possible to do A and B, then I ought to do either A or B. In reusing the previous example, if a mother sees two of her children drowning and it is not possible to save both of her children, then she ought to save either child *A* or child *B*. If this revised formulation of the *agglomeration principle* is adopted into McConnell's triad, line (vi) would have to be rewritten as $\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \vee B)$. In a similar vein as revised version (1), (vii) can be derived as before but a contradiction cannot be derived in (vi) from, (i), (ii), and (v). Revised version (2) is formulated as:

(i) OA	premise
(ii) OB	premise
(iii) $\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(iv) $O(A \ \& \ B) \supset \Diamond(A \ \& \ B)$	premise
(v) $(OA \ \& \ OB) \supset (\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \vee B))$	premise
(vi) $\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \vee B)$	(i), (ii), (v), propositional calculus
(vii) $\sim O(A \ \& \ B)$	(iii), (iv), propositional calculus

What is significant about revised version (2), even if Williams never intended it to be used in the way I am suggesting, is that a solution can be forced by making a decision in favor of one obligation over another without generating an inconsistent obligation. *Ought* implies *can* takes the forms of $(OA \supset \Diamond A)$, and $(OB \supset \Diamond B)$. There is nothing new about this particular expression of *ought* implies *can*. But an obligation can also be shown to express the denial of a particular possibility. The forms $OA \supset \sim \Diamond B$, and $OB \supset \sim \Diamond A$, can be derived from William's informal argument. First it follows that, if an agent does A it is possible to do A, and if an agent does B, it is possible to do B. It would be strange to claim that at the moment an agent does A it is not possible for him to do so. So the doing of A implies that it is possible to do so. Therefore, the doing of A will result in it being possible to do A. It also follows that, by doing A, B is no longer possible, and by doing B, A is no longer possible. So act A will be an instance of $\sim \Diamond B$, and act B will be an instance of $\sim \Diamond A$. If $\sim \Diamond A$ is an instance of performing act B, and $\sim \Diamond B$ is an instance of performing act A, then performing act A will result in B no longer be obligatory and performing act B will result in A no longer being obligatory. Williams' informal argument can now be interpreted as:

- (i). $\Diamond B \supset \sim \Diamond A$
- (ii). $\Diamond A \supset \sim \Diamond B$
- (iii) $\sim \Diamond A \supset \sim OA$
- (iv) $\sim \Diamond B \supset \sim OB$
- (v) $\Diamond B \supset \sim OA$ from (i), (iii), hypothetical syllogism
- (vi) $\Diamond A \supset \sim OB$ from (ii), (iv), hypothetical syllogism
- It then follows:
- (vii) $OA \supset \sim \Diamond B$ from (v), transposition
- (viii) $OB \supset \sim \Diamond A$ from (vi), transposition

If simply performing act A or B will result in the other no longer being obligatory, and the act not acted on becomes overridden without generating an inconsistency, it must then be explained why one obligation should be performed over another. A further principle must then be added to justify the performing of one obligation over another. A particular example of a justifying principle capable of meeting this demand comes from virtue ethics in the form of the virtuous agent. I will not make a crude attempt to put the concept of the virtuous agent in logical form. But it can be claimed, as Hursthouse does, that the virtuous agent justifies his decision to override one obligation over another simply by performing the obligation. If a virtuous agent performs obligation A, it is justified, and obligation B should be overridden. If a virtuous agent performs obligation B, it is justified, and obligation A should be overridden. Simply by performing one obligation, the other is no longer obligatory, therefore justifying the carried out obligation that is still obligatory. Additional examples of justifying principles come from deontology in the form of the categorical imperative, and utilitarianism in the form of utility.

It has been shown that revised version (1) and revised version (2) of the *agglomeration principle* allows (T1) to remain valid in McConnell's triad without generating an inconsistency. It is also been shown that (T1) can be maintained without having to reject *ought* implies *can*, (PC), (a), or (b). But is rejecting the *agglomeration principle* enough to prove that moral dilemmas exist?

It must first be pointed out, that the rejection of the *agglomeration principle* does not prove that major ethical theories are inconsistent. Rather it allows (T1) to be compatible with other well-established principles of deontic logic. It does not necessarily follow that (S3) will result in (PC) having to be abandoned. So, even if (S3) is an attack on (T3), it cannot be used to

attack major ethical theories. There is no proof from (S3) alone to suggest that major ethical theories are inconsistent or inadequate.

It should also be pointed out, at least from revised version (2), that even if (T1) seems to entail a dilemmatic situation; it may not be genuinely dilemmatic. This is the case because, as was shown, performing act A or B will result in the other obligation being overridden. Therefore, there is a single solution to the dilemma that can be attained without generating an inconsistency in either obligation.⁵²

A conflict in $O(A \vee B)$ only becomes dilemmatic in the sense that an uncertainty will arise as to what an agent ought, all things considered, to do when faced with $\sim \Diamond(A \ \& \ B) \supset O(A \vee B)$. This may, I believe, roughly represent the form of an apparent moral dilemma. It is dilemmatic in the sense that there are not clear reasons to show that A is what an agent, ought to do, all things considered, over B, or vice versa. But this is not the same as saying that a single solution is impossible or inconsistent with the structure of the situation. There is a correct solution, even if it is oblivious to a particular agent. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, there is a difference between a dilemma being irresolvable to a particular agent and the irresolvability of the dilemma overall.⁵³

Reformulating the *agglomeration principle* may be something desirable for supporters of (T1) to do. By doing so, it can be shown that dilemmas are compatible with consistent ethical systems. It may even lend credence to the idea that the existence of dilemmatic situations is supported by deontic logic. But at best, this particular reformulation only shows that apparent moral dilemmas exist. It in no way proves that genuine moral dilemmas exist.

⁵² This is the case because a dilemmatic situation where one obligation is capable of overriding another is resolvable and not genuinely dilemmatic. See p. 98.

⁵³ See p. 71.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore whether virtue ethics is able to offer a satisfactory account of moral dilemmas. Support for the claim that virtue ethics is able to account for moral dilemmas in its theory was primarily demonstrated by appealing to the works of Bernard Williams and Rosalind Hursthouse. In Chapters One and Two, I attempted to clearly exposit the works of these two philosophers. Support for the opposite claim, that virtue ethics is not able to offer a satisfactory account of moral dilemmas, was pursued in the remaining chapters. In this conclusion, I will summarize my argument in support of the opposing claim.

I began the critical portion of this thesis by first attempting to clearly define what a genuine moral dilemma is. In Chapter Three, I culled through the different types of moral dilemmas commonly referred to as such in an attempt to demarcate genuine moral dilemmas from non-genuine moral dilemmas. In Section One of this chapter, I argued that resolvable moral dilemmas are not genuinely dilemmatic, and that the existence of remainder was not adequate evidence to define a situation as a genuine moral dilemma.

In Section Two, I attempted to distinguish *moral conflicts* from *moral dilemmas*. I argued that the interchangeability of these two terms was unjustified, and that the term *moral conflict* as Williams uses it, is not capable of capturing the seriousness expected of a genuine moral dilemma.

Section Three explored the conditions necessary for a dilemma to be irresolvable. I argued that neither symmetrical nor asymmetrical dilemmas should be characterized as genuine moral dilemmas.

Section Four reassessed Williams' claim that values are incommensurable. It also explored whether incommensurability is required in a genuine moral dilemma. I attempted to conclude that genuine moral dilemmas should be incommensurable.

After clarifying what a genuine moral dilemma is, I next explored whether Hursthouse is able to account for genuine moral dilemmas in her theory. In Chapter Four, it was argued that the concept of moral dilemmas and the concept of the existence of virtuous agents are incompatible with each other in Hursthouse's theory. In Section One, it was shown that the virtuous agent, simply by acting on a decision, is able to create a right solution in a moral dilemma, even when there is none. It was then claimed that this special characteristic of the virtuous agent disallowed genuine dilemmatic situations.

Section Two explored whether virtuous agents exist. Proof for the existence of virtuous agents was shown to be problematic by Hursthouse's account. It was shown that a single example of a virtuous agent, up to the standards that Hursthouse demands, is unable to be pinpointed. Though I do not explicitly defend the existence or non-existence of virtuous agents, I am able to show that Hursthouse's theory faces a serious challenge either way. If even a single virtuous agent exists, somewhere in the world, it is possible that a solution can be forced on any irresolvable dilemma, therefore disallowing the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. On the other hand, if moral dilemmas exist and virtuous agents do not, the core concept of Hursthouse's theory must be abandoned. It must therefore be demanded that Hursthouse abandon the concept of moral dilemmas or abandon the core principle holding her theory together. Either move will admit to the inadequacy of Hursthouse's theory.

Section Three examined the mechanism by which virtuous agents are able to force a right solution in an irresolvable moral dilemmas. Hursthouse makes the extraordinary claim that the

virtuous agent possesses an additional capacity besides Aristotle's *phronesis* and McDowell's *moral sensitivity*. She claims that the virtuous agent also possesses the capacity to fine-tune dilemmatic situations. Fine-tuning is shown to be capable of changing the parameters of a conflict. After a virtuous agent makes a decision, the decision is forced to be the right solution after the fact. Fine-tuning is shown to have the special capacity to force a right decision in any dilemmatic situation, even transforming the parameters of a dilemma bound up in vice terms.

Section Four addressed a special type of moral dilemma, the tragic moral dilemma. Hursthouse, acknowledging her own theory, admits that the virtuous agent is able to resolve moral dilemmas through fine-tuning simply by making a decision. But she argues that in the special case of tragic irresolvable dilemmas, the virtuous agent is unable to force a right solution, therefore making the situation genuinely dilemmatic. In this section, I argued against this claim. I showed that Hursthouse's argument from *eudaimonia* does not follow. I also showed that Hursthouse is only able to prove the existence of resolvable tragic dilemmas, not irresolvable tragic dilemmas.

The conclusion of this chapter was, that Hursthouse's theory is unable to accommodate both the concept of moral dilemmas and the concept of the existence of virtuous agents. If Hursthouse wants to maintain that moral dilemmas exist, then she must abandon her core concept of the virtuous agent. Either way, Hursthouse is not able to offer an adequate account of moral dilemmas that is compatible with her respective theory.

After showing the inadequacies of Hursthouse's theory, I reexamined William's argument in favor of ethical inconsistency in Chapter Five. In Section One, I proposed a competing argument from Terrance McConnell in favor of ethical consistency. This section detailed

McConnell's argument, examining why moral dilemmas are problematic for ethical theories and should be rejected.

After detailing the complexities of McConnell's argument and the reasons for and against holding (T1), I explored the phenomenon of moral advice and moral doubt in Section Two. It was argued that defenders of (T1) are not able to account for moral advice and moral doubt as something that is rational. Because, according to McConnell, moral advice and moral doubt is normally viewed as rational behavior, the defenders of (T1) must admit that an agent in a genuine moral dilemma is acting irrationally by seeking moral advice or experiencing moral doubt. A counter-argument is presented by McConnell on the behalf of defenders of (T1), claiming that it is always rational to seek moral advice or experience moral doubt because it is not possible to know whether a dilemma is genuine or merely apparent. Therefore every moral dilemma should be treated as if it were an apparent moral dilemma.

In Section Three, I argued that defenders of (T1) are unable to offer any criterion by which to distinguish a genuine moral dilemma from a merely apparent moral dilemma. Defenders of (T1) must then admit that they cannot offer a single example of a genuine moral dilemma. Because of this, it can be argued that supporters of (T1) are not able to offer any plausible evidence to support the idea that genuine moral dilemmas exist. So there are good reasons to believe that (T1) is implausible. Even if it is conceded that (T1) cannot be proven false, it also cannot be proven true. So to demand that (T1) be forced onto accepted principles of deontic logic is unjustified. An inconsistency cannot be shown because there are no grounds to suppose that (T1) is true. Therefore there is no evidence to prove that moral dilemmas exist.

Though I argue in Section Three that (T1) should be rejected, an additional concern can be raised. In Section Four, I examined whether it was only appropriate to entertain (S1), the

solution that involved the rejection of (T1). In an attempt to be fair to the position of the supporters of (T1) I explored an additional solution offered by McConnell, (S3), the solution that involved the rejection of the *agglomeration principle*. In this section, I presented two revised versions of the *agglomeration principle* that are shown to be consistent with other accepted principles of deontic logic. It is concluded that dilemmatic situations need not involve an attack on accepted principles of deontic logic if the *agglomeration principle* is rejected. Therefore, (T1), does not force ethical systems to be inconsistent. But, it is argued that revised version (2), only supports the existence of apparent moral dilemmas, not genuine moral dilemmas. So, even if the rejection of the *agglomeration principle* may be desirable for supporters of (T1), it in no way proves that genuine moral dilemmas exist. It is therefore correct to conclude that both (S1) and (S3) do not support the thesis that genuine moral dilemmas exist.

Williams' and Hursthouse's theories were presented in this thesis to support the idea that virtue ethics is able to offer an adequate account of moral dilemmas. After careful examination, it was shown that neither Williams nor Hursthouse is able to offer a satisfactory account of moral dilemmas that is compatible with their respective theories.

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Vita

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