The Deontic Cycling Problem

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The Deontic Cycling Problem

Abstract:

In his recent article "Deontic Cycling and the Structure of Commonsense Morality," Tim Willenken argues that commonsense ethics allows for rational agents having both ranked reasons (A > B, B > C, and A > C) and cyclical reasons (A < B, B < C, and A > C). His goal is to show that not all plausible views are variations of consequentialism, as consequentialism requires ranked reasons. I argue instances of apparent deontic cycling in commonsense morality are the byproducts of incomplete characterizations of the cases in question.

The Deontic Cycling Problem

In his recent article "Deontic Cycling and the Structure of Commonsense Morality," Tim Willenken contends that "A range of extremely plausible moral principles turn out to generate “deontic cycling”: sets of actions wherein I have stronger reason to do B than A, C than B, and A than C."¹ (545) He continues "Indeed, just about anything recognizable as commonsense morality generates deontic cycling." For Willenken deontic cycling is not the result of a mistake by our moral faculties; rather it represents insight into moral truth. The deontic cycling problem is that the existence of genuine deontic cycles would undermine the goal of normative ethics to offer moral prescriptions applicable to any given situation. Here I argue that instances of that instances of apparent deontic cycling supported by commonsense morality are the byproducts of incomplete characterizations of the cases in question.

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I argue deontic cycling is inconsistent with our commonsense moral beliefs. In the second, I show that Willenken's primary example of apparent deontic cycling fails to be a genuine case. The truth value of the theory Willenken calls "compatibilism" is outside the scope of this paper, as is whether the existence of genuine deontic cycling would be sufficient to prove "compatibilism" false.

I.

The goal of Willenken's paper is to demonstrate the falsity of a position he (oddly) calls "compatibilism", the theory that consequentialism can be rendered consistent with commonsense morality; that commonsense moral beliefs are best understood in consequentialist terms. For example, consequentialists would contend that the wrongness of lying is best understood in terms of its unfavorable consequences. Consequentialist views require that agents be able to rank alternatives by the strength of one's reasons to do them; however Willenken argues that instances of deontic cycling show that moral reasons cannot be ranked.

For the consequentialist, for any three morally inequivalent options, if B is morally preferable to A, and C is morally preferable to B, then C is morally preferable to A. (C > B > A) However, in an instance of deontic cycling, B might be morally preferable to A, C morally preferable to B, but A morally preferable to C! (C > B, B > A, A > C)

Willenken's approach runs into two substantial problems. First, on Willenken's description of compatibilism, the compatibilist has a rather open interpretation of consequentialism. Such a compatibilist would have no difficulty explaining deontic cycling in terms of situationally preferable consequences. For example, a compatibilist might contend that in an AB-situation, B has relatively preferable consequences to A, in a BC-situation, C has relatively preferable consequences to B, and in an AC-situation, A has relatively preferable

consequences to B. The existence or nonexistence of deontic cycling makes no difference to such consequentialists.

Second, even if deontic-cycling were evidence of the falsity of such compatibilist theories, the medicine is worse than the disease. A satisfactory normative ethical theory will be capable of offering a moral prescription in any given situation. The existence of a genuine deontic cycle would mean that in some situations (ABC-situations) there are no moral answers. Willenken argues that deontic cycling is the result of our commonsense moral beliefs; however for the remainder of this section I argue that genuine deontic cycling is radically at odds with our commonsense moral beliefs.

In an effort to demonstrate how deontic cycling is a result of our commonsense moral beliefs, Willenken constructs what he calls a "toy view" containing only two rules: (1) when faced with a choice between saving two boys, save the older boy, and (2) when faced with a choice between saving a boy and a girl, save the healthier of child. When forced to choose between saving (u) saving a healthy young boy or (v) saving an unhealthy older boy, (1) requires him to save the older boy. When forced to choose between (v) saving a very unhealthy older boy, or (w) saving a moderately healthy girl, (2) forces him to save the girl. When forced to choose between (u) saving a very healthy younger boy, or (w) saving a moderately healthy girl, (2) requires he save the younger boy. Willenken asks us to choose between (u), (v), or (w). Here the toy view generates a deontic cycle, and thus there is no answer. A deontic cycle is genuine only if the moral beliefs that generate it are true, but Willenken is under no illusions that the rules of the toy view are true.

If we understand ethics as the branch of philosophy concerned with determining what the right thing to do is in any given situation; the possibility of UVW-situations demonstrate how at odds the idea of deontic cycling is with our commonsense moral beliefs. Willenken's toy view fails as a moral theory. Not only is it inherently arbitrary, but insofar as it fails to offer a prescription for how to deal with UVW-situations, it is incomplete. The toy view illustrates that any theory that generates a deontic cycle fails to offer a prescription for any given situation, and is thus fails to be a satisfactory normative theory. If a set of prima facie plausible, commonsense moral beliefs would generate a deontic cycle, at least one of these beliefs must be false, misinterpreted, or incomplete.

Willenken's acceptance of the possibility of genuine deontic cycling raises another problem; it requires an overly burdensome ontology. One means to judge normative ethical theories is in terms of ontological simplicity; attractive normative ethical theories rely upon one overarching moral principle applicable to any situation. However, a prerequisite for genuine deontic cycling is the existence of multiple, independent moral principles that can lead to deontic cycles.

Suppose that you believe that there are genuine instances of deontic cycling; what must you give up to hold this belief? First, you must give up the idea that ethics is complete, that every action is either morally acceptable or unacceptable; in deontic cycles there simply is no morally acceptable or unacceptable solution. Second, you must give up the notion of a single normative principle, and instead adopt a bloated ontology that allows for the existence of any number of separate, unrelated and irreducible normative principles.

What does the pro-deontic cycling theorist get out of such a bargain? In a sense, the bloated ontology and incomplete nature of normative ethics required for the possibility of genuine deontic cycling is its own reward; this is to say that Willenken's view is prima facie consistent with whatever commonsense moral beliefs individuals might actually hold, regardless
of whether these beliefs lead to deontic cycles or contradictions. If one is committed to a cache of beliefs that generate deontic cycling quagmires, one can rest assured that their beliefs might be true! But this seems like it would be little comfort to those who might find themselves wading into such moral quagmires; in fact, it seems more like a curse than a blessing. If genuine deontic cycling is incoherent, when one enters a situation that appears to generate a deontic cycle, she knows that one or more of her moral beliefs is false, and she can engage in a reflective equilibrium with the goal of purging herself of the false belief or beliefs. However, if genuine deontic cycling were coherent and possible, one might very well find oneself in a situation where there is no right thing to do. Furthermore, if it is possible that some of our moral beliefs are false, there would be no way of determining whether a situation is a genuine instance of deontic cycling, or a faux instance.

Willenken seems to embrace the existence of deontic cycling solely because he believes no possible axiology will make consequentialism consistent with a view that includes genuine instances of deontic cycling, and because of this "compatibilism" is false. The price for this conclusion, though, appears to be a hobbling of ethics that flies in the face of the very commonsense moral beliefs that he uses to support the existence of deontic cycling.

II.

Willenken's primary example of deontic cycling comes from a series of trolley cases, where trolley cases are notorious for generating prima facie inconsistent sets of moral intuitions. The apparently inconsistent moral intuitions generated by these cases, he contends, are actually the result of deontic cycling. Willenken generates his apparent deontic cycle with the following three cases:

Case 1:

There are two empty runaway trolleys, and you have the ability to stop one of these trolleys, but not the other. (Perhaps the switches you need to pull to stop both trains are too far apart to sprint to both in time.) The first trolley is barreling down a track that has five innocent people tied to it, the second is barreling down a track with two innocent people tied to it. You have two choices:

(x) Let five people die.
(y) Let two people die.

According to Willenken, commonsense morality dictates that (y) is preferable to (x), and that you ought to choose (y).

Case 2:

There is a single empty runaway trolley about to kill two people tied to a track. There is one way to stop the trolley before it kills both of these people: You can reposition one of these two people earlier on the track. If you do so, that person will die, but the other of the two will live. You have two choices:

(y) Let two people die.
(z) Kill one person.

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Again, Willenken contends commonsense ethics contends (z) is preferable to (y), and that you ought to choose (z).

Case 3:

There is a single empty trolley traveling down a track with five people tied to it. The trolley is about to go under a bridge, then soon after it will hit the five people. There is only one way to stop the trolley before it kills all five people - you can push a relatively large person off of the bridge, and this person will fall to her death and derail the trolley. You have two choices: (x) Let five people die. (z) Kill one person.

Willenken contends that commonsense ethics dictates (x) is preferable to (z). He contends that commonsense ethics has generated a deontic cycle: (y) > (x), (z) > (y), and (x) > (z). For this to be a genuine deontic cycle, there was a case where you could choose from (x), (y), and (z), our commonsense moral beliefs would fail to be prescriptive. Consider the following case:

Case 4:

There is a single trolley barreling down tracks with five people tied to them. A mad villain, obsessed with proving the existence of deontic cycles, has tied you to a chair in the trolley control room. The villain explains that if you press button (x), all five people on the tracks will die, that if you press button (y), a switch will be turned, and the trolley will run over the first two people, but avoid the last three people. Finally, if you press button (z), a different switch will be turned, which will divert the trolley from its course - however in doing so, it will rip the first of the five people in half, killing her before the trolley has a chance to. You, thus, are confronted with the following choice:

(x) Let five people die. (y) Let two people die. (z) Kill one person.

It strikes me that in this situation our commonsense moral beliefs dictate that we ought to choose (z). But if there is a clear, commonsense moral choice in between (x), (y), and (z), then our commonsense moral beliefs are not generating a deontic cycle. How do we explain this?

Willenken's deontic cycle is created by equivocation between the various options listed in the cases, between (x^1) and (x^3); (y^1) and (y^2); and (z^2) and (z^3). The difference between these options is most apparent in the case of the last set. In case 2, (z^2) involves the killing of a person who would have died either way. James Rachels famously argues that, all else being equal, killing and letting die are morally equivalent, so in case 2 when you choose (z^2) you neither harm nor benefit that person in any substantial way (at worst, you shave a few moments off of his life to save another person).^3 In case 3, (z^3) involves the killing of an innocent person who would not have died unless you pushed him onto the tracks. Even if you hold there is a morally relevant difference between killing and letting die, the killing of the person in case 2 is substantially morally different than the killing of the person in case 3, if for no other reason than the fact that you have no control over whether that person dies in case 2, but have total control over whether the person dies in case 3. Willenken's deontic cycle is an illusion by equivocation - he treats (z^2)

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^4 Oddly, case 3 in and of itself is a fairly effective argument against "compatibilism" and consequentialism, as it is an instance where in a choice between one life and five lives, our commonsense moral beliefs appear to show that one life is more valuable.
and \((z^3)\) as morally equivalent when they are not. Even if each of the other options were morally equivalent between cases, all he has shown is that \((z^3) > (y) > (x) > (z^2)\). But \((x^1)\) and \((x^3)\) are different, where \((x^1)\) is the option to save two people and let five other people die, while \((x^3)\) is the option to let five people die rather than kill an innocent person. In any charitable reading \((x^1)\) and \((x^3)\), \((y^1)\) and \((y^2)\), and \((z^2)\) and \((z^3)\) are not morally equivalent to their counterpart, thus these three cases do not demonstrate even an apparent deontic cycle.

Further complication the issue, Willenken's analysis of the options in each case focus exclusively on the expected outcomes, rather than the agent's intent. However, two distinct actions can have the same expected outcome while being morally inequivalent. Consider the following two cases:

Hostage Case 1:

John, a police officer, is called to the scene where a violent escaped criminal is holding a hostage. John believes that the hostage's life is in danger, and that the criminal might escape to threaten other people, and that the best way to free the hostage is to shoot and kill the criminal. John shoots the criminal, intending to kill the criminal as a means to free the hostage. He succeeds, the criminal is killed by his shot, and the hostage is freed.

Hostage Case 2:

Joan, a police officer, is called to the scene where a violent escaped criminal is holding a hostage. Joan believes that the hostage's life is in danger, and that the criminal might escape to threaten other people, and that the best way to free the hostage is to shoot and kill the criminal. Joan also likes killing people. Joan shoots the criminal, taking this opportunity to satisfy her bloodlust in a way that will look like responsible police work. She succeeds, the criminal is killed by her shot, and the hostage is freed.

In these cases John and Joan both act to kill the criminal, but John is morally praiseworthy for his action, while Joan is not. Of course we are not often privy to the inherently private mental states of others, so when we witness a police officer shooting a hostage in a case like this, we can only judge them with incomplete information. The difference between John and Joan is the moral intention with which they act. It strikes me that a proper analysis of Willenken's cases requires a full account of the intentions with which the agents act. For example, in case (1), the choice isn't between \((x^1)\) - let five people die - and \((y^1)\) - let two people die -, it's a choice between \((w^1)\) let all seven people die, \((x^{1a})\) act to save the two people first, then try to save the five people, \((y^{1a})\) act to save the five people first, then try to save the two people, \((x^{1b})\) act to save the two people first so as to appear virtuous, and pretend to reach the last five, but purposely fail so you get to enjoy watching five people die, so forth and so on. Willenken treats the options in case 1 as if the intentions of the agent in question are morally irrelevant, and the outcome is certain; but neither is the case.

Were one faced with the decision in case 1, it strikes me that the right choice is \((y^{1a})\) - you try your best to save both sets of people, starting with the larger set. It may be impossible to save both sets, but to not try to save both sets is, I think, uncontroversially morally abhorrent. Suppose that you were to watch someone race towards the first track, and throw the level as hard as they could so as to save the five people imperiled by the first trolley, then sit back leisurely as the second trolley runs over two people. I imagine we'd judge such a person morally despicable - if there is even the slightest chance one could save both sets, commonsense morality dictates that you should try.

Conclusion:
The apparent instance of deontic cycling between cases 1-3 is generated by equivocation between unlike expected outcomes. Case 3 represents a genuine moral dilemma - we are committed to the proposition that killing and letting die, all else being equal, are morally equivalent, but that when forced with the choice between killing an innocent man and letting five innocent people die, our commonsense moral intuition seems to commit us to choosing the latter. This case draws our attention to a genuine inconsistency in our commonsense moral beliefs, but Willenken denies this, instead contending that our commonsense moral beliefs are consistent, but incomplete; cobbled together from disparate irreducible moral principle that each capture a different moral truth. This move renders ethics incomplete and bloats our ontological commitments with no discernible benefit. This is not a move worth making.