

Ethical Consistency and the Logic of Ought

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In *Ethical Consistency*, Bernard Williams vindicated the possibility of moral conflicts; he proposed to consistently allow for the presence of such conflicts within the logic of *ought*. In determining the nature of moral conflict, Williams stressed its contingency. In this paper, Williams' characterization of moral conflict is defended. However, Williams' solution for consistently allowing for such conflicts within the logic of *ought* is shown to be too crude. Whereas Williams rejects *all* applications of the agglomeration rule in the logic of *ought*, it is shown that a more sophisticated approach is needed. An alternative solution is presented in which the application of the agglomeration rule is made conditional upon the principle that "*ought* implies *can*."

1. Introduction

In *Ethical Consistency* (Williams, 1965), Bernard Williams discussed the nature of moral conflict and suggested a way to modify the logic of *ought* so that it allows for a consistent treatment of moral conflicts.[1] In this paper, I want to (i) draw attention to Williams' characterization of moral conflict, and (ii) make some suggestions for a more sophisticated logic of *ought* in line with the general ideas presented in *Ethical Consistency*.

I will introduce Williams' delineation of moral conflict in Section 2, and relate it to the importance of consistency in ethics in Section 3. In Section 4, I critically discuss Williams' solution for making the logic of *ought* tolerant with respect to moral conflicts. The problems with this solution lead me to propose and defend a more refined alternative in Section 5. In Section 6 I return to Williams' general characterization of moral conflict, and defend some assumptions that were accepted implicitly throughout the paper.

2. Williams' characterization of moral conflict

Williams takes a *moral conflict* to be a conflict between two moral judgments that someone is disposed to make relevant to deciding what to do. He only focuses on *conflicts of obligations*, i.e. "purely" moral conflicts, and not on, for instance, conflicts between a moral judgment and a non-moral desire or belief. Like most authors writing on moral conflicts, Williams discusses this topic in terms of *ought*, "not because ought necessarily figures in the expression of every moral conflict ... but because it presents the most puzzling problems" (Williams, 1965, p. 108). Williams further

confines his subject to moral conflicts with a contingent basis, thereby excluding from his discussion the possibility that someone holds moral views or principles that are intrinsically inconsistent, i.e. logically incompatible with one another. According to Williams, the basis of moral conflicts is contingent in the sense that it is the world, not logic, that makes it impossible for both conflicting obligations to be satisfied; we can consistently imagine a state of affairs in which they could both be satisfied, but the present factual situation makes it impossible to do so. Williams' concern lies *only* with conflicts that have a contingent basis, with conflict *via* the facts, and not with conflicts between logically incompatible obligations:

I shall further omit any discussion of the possibility (if it exists) that a man should hold moral principles or general moral views which are intrinsically inconsistent with one another, in the sense that there could be no conceivable world in which anyone could act in accordance with both of them; as might be the case, for instance, with a man who thought that he ought not to go in for any blood-sport (as such) and that he ought to go in for foxhunting (as such). I doubt whether there are any interesting questions that are peculiar to this possibility. (Williams, 1965, p. 108)

Whenever two obligations conflict, a situation can always be conceived in which the very same obligations can be consistently satisfied. Moral conflicts between logically incompatible obligations, if they exist at all, are at best uninteresting.

Understood in this way, moral conflicts can take two basic forms: "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, 1965, p. 108).

The two basic forms come to this: "in the first, it seems that I ought to do *a* and that I ought to do *b*, but I cannot do both *a* and *b*; in the second, it seems that I ought to do *c* and that I ought not to do *c*" (Williams, 1965, p.109). I will henceforth refer to these as type 1- and type 2-conflicts. The following examples illustrate the distinction Williams has in mind:

Example 1 (Conflict of type 1). Suppose that Mary promised to friend *X* that she will meet her today at 7pm in front of the local airport. However, Mary also promised to friend *Y* that she will meet him today at 7pm at the gym. Suppose further that there is a considerable distance between the airport and the gym. Then, in view of the consideration that promises should be kept, Mary ought to be at the airport at 7pm to meet *X* and Mary ought to be at the gym at 7pm to meet *Y*, but she cannot fulfill both of these obligations.

Example 2 (Conflict of type 2). Agamemnon is told by a seer that he must sacrifice his daughter to satisfy a goddess who is delaying at Aulis his expedition against Troy. As a commander, Agamemnon ought to sacrifice his daughter in order to further the expedition. However, as a father, Agamemnon ought not to kill his daughter.

Every type 2-conflict has the logical form of an inconsistency of the type "ought-ought not." For instance, in Example 2 Agamemnon both ought to kill his daughter and ought not to kill his daughter. However, this characterization of type 2-conflicts conceals the real roots of the conflict, namely the fact that the conflict arises from a contingent impossibility. According to Williams, the recognition that type 2-conflicts have contingent roots motivates the reconstruction of type 2-conflicts as type 1-conflicts.

In the case of Agamemnon, the roots of the conflict are exposed by acknowledging that the conflict arises from the contingent incompatibility of Agamemnon's duties as a commander, respectively as a parent. Given this acknowledgment, Williams believes we can recast Agamemnon's dilemma as a type 1-conflict: that, "here again there is a double *ought*: the first, to further the expedition, the second, to refrain from the

killing; and that as things are he [Agamemnon] cannot discharge both" (Williams, 1965, p. 119). Seen in this way, the real roots of type 2-conflicts are no longer concealed, and a more realistic picture is offered of how the situation is. As an upshot, moral conflicts need no longer wear the form of an inconsistency of the type "ought-ought not."

3. Morality, consistency, and logic

According to Williams, all moral conflicts are, ultimately, of type 1. Moral conflicts are of the following form:

- (i) It ought to be that *a*,
- (ii) It ought to be that *b*,
- (iii) It cannot be that *a* and *b*.

At first sight, this form provides a consistent characterization of moral conflict. Suppose now that we accept the *agglomeration principle*, according to which "it ought to be that *a*" and "it ought to be that *b*" together imply "it ought to be that *a* and *b*." Then it follows from (i) and (ii) that:

- (iv) It ought to be that *a* and *b*.

If, moreover, we accept that "*ought* implies *can*," then from (iii) it follows that (by "*ought* implies *can*" and contraposition):

- (v) It is not the case that it ought to be that *a* and *b*.

(iv) and (v) are contradictories: they form an inconsistency of the type "ought-not ought." This observation prompts the following questions:

- (a) Should we prevent contradictions from arising in our ethical theories?
- (b) If so, then how exactly should the derivation of (iv) or (v) be blocked?

In the remainder of this section, I will argue that question (a) requires a positive answer. In Section 4, I will critically discuss Williams' answer to question (b).

Morality is firmly tied to consistency. If someone were to issue the inconsistent command to both close and not close the door, we would be at loss as to how to act. If ethics is to provide us with a guide for morality, then it should be free of contradictions. Ethicists should be rational, and rationality seems to presuppose

consistency: "How do you respond to someone who denies the law of non-contradiction? Some logicians suggest hitting the person with a stick. A better idea is to pretend to agree: whenever you assert something, also assert the opposite. Soon your opponent will want to hit you with a stick!" (Gensler, 1996, p. 36). According to Gensler, a tolerable life requires a large degree of consistency, since inconsistency has harmful consequences and is inherently distressing. In assisting us in behaving in a morally consistent way, I agree with Gensler that formal logic can be a very useful tool. Logic can help us clarify, understand, and evaluate: "Logic can help us understand our moral reasoning – how we go from premises to a conclusion. It can force us to clarify and spell out our presuppositions, to understand conflicting points of view, and to identify weak points in our reasoning. Logic is a useful discipline to sharpen our ethical thinking" (Gensler, 1996, p. 38).

The branch of formal logic that studies, amongst others, the normative concept of obligation, is called *deontic logic*. Logicians in this field usually abbreviate a sentence like "it ought to be that *A*" by a formula *OA*, where "*O*" is a logical operator representing obligation. If, moreover, we take " \diamond " to be a logical operator for representing possibility, we can formalize a moral conflict as characterized by Bernard Williams as a formula (*OA* & *OB*) & $\neg\diamond(A$ & *B*). *OA* abbreviates the obligation to do *A*, *OB* abbreviates the obligation to do *B*, and $\neg\diamond(A$ & *B*) abbreviates the impossibility to do both *A* and *B*.

Deontic logic provides us with some extra tools in trying to keep our ethical theories free from contradictions. In the next section, I will use some insights relying on deontic logic in order to point at some problems with Williams' solution for keeping our moral theories free from inconsistencies.

4. Williams' solution

If we want to avoid the derivation of a contradiction from Williams' account of moral conflict in terms of (i)-(iii), then either the application of the agglomeration principle or the application of "ought implies *can*" needs to be rejected or at least restricted. According to Williams, the application of "ought implies *can*" in this derivation is valid, but that of agglomeration is not:

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 that 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, 1965, p. 120, emphasis in original)

Williams' solution for avoiding the derivability of inconsistencies from a moral conflict consists in giving up the agglomeration principle. Although he does not claim to have a knock-down disproof of this principle, he talks of abandoning (Williams, 1965, p. 120), waiving (p. 122), and rejecting (p. 123) agglomeration in order to obtain a more realistic picture of moral thought. Logicians too have proposed giving up the agglomeration principle in order to make deontic logic conflict-tolerant (e.g., van Fraassen, 1973; Goble, 2000; Schotch & Jennings, 1981). However, there are some problems with this approach.

Throughout this section and the next, I will assume that (i)-(iii) adequately captures the structure of moral conflict, and that "ought implies *can*" is a valid principle of moral thought. In section 6, I will come back to these points.

Even if Williams is correct in claiming that "no agent, conscious of the situation of conflict, in fact thinks that he ought to do *both* of the things," I believe that the same agent will reason very differently in case the *ought's* in question do not conflict. Consider, for instance, a slightly modified version of Example 1 above, in which Mary promised to friend *X* that she will meet her today at 10pm in front of the local airport, and promised to friend *Y* that she will meet him today at 7pm at the gym. Suppose further that it is perfectly possible for Mary to meet *Y* at the gym at 7pm and to meet *X* at the airport at 10pm. Then there is nothing that prevents her from concluding that she ought to meet *both* *X* and *Y* today. In this modified version of Example 1, the application of the agglomeration principle is both natural and intuitive.

Not only can we find situations in which the application of the agglomeration principle is intuitive, we can even find situations in which we *need* to apply it in order to adequately capture our everyday moral reasoning. Consider the following example from (Horty, 2003):

Example 3. Suppose that, according to the laws of his country, Smith ought to fight in the army or perform alternative service to his country. Suppose further that, since he is a pacifist, Smith ought not to fight in the army. Then, in the absence of any extra information, we want to conclude that Smith ought to perform alternative service to his country.

In order to see why agglomeration is necessary in Example 3 in order to attain the conclusion, we need to formalize the example in the language of deontic logic.

Let $O(F \vee S)$ abbreviate Smith's obligation to fight in the army (F) or perform alternative service to his country (S), and let $O\neg F$ abbreviate Smith's obligation not to fight in the army. In deontic logic, the agglomeration rule comes down to:

If OA and OB , then $O(A \& B)$

In order to arrive at the conclusion that Smith ought to perform alternative service to his country, we will also need the inheritance rule (" \vdash " denotes theorem-hood in classical logic, " \supset " denotes classical implication):

If $\vdash A \supset B$, then $\vdash OA \supset OB$

In a normal system of deontic logic, the inference from $O(F \vee S)$ and $O\neg F$ to OS would go as follows:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| (1) $O(F \vee S)$ | hypothesis |
| (2) $O\neg F$ | hypothesis |
| (3) $O((F \vee S) \& \neg F)$ | 1,2; agglomeration |
| (4) $\vdash ((F \vee S) \& \neg F) \supset S$ | theorem of classical logic |
| (5) $\vdash O((F \vee S) \& \neg F) \supset OS$ | 4; inheritance |
| (6) OS | 3,5; modus ponens |

The theorem stated at line 4 is an instance of the classically valid disjunctive syllogism rule, which states that if both $(A \text{ or } B)$ and $\neg A$ are true, then so is B .

If now, as Williams suggests, we reject the application of agglomeration at line 3 of the proof, then OS is no longer derivable. Since there is no other way to obtain OS via the theorems and rules of standard deontic logic, this observation can be generalized: Example 3 cannot be accounted for by any system of deontic logic that rejects the agglomeration principle.

In abandoning the agglomeration principle, Williams took care that his account of moral conflict remains consistent. The result, however, is a theory that is too weak to mirror our everyday normative reasoning. It seems, then, that instead of rejecting agglomeration in its entirety, we should somehow distinguish between valid and invalid applications of this rule and throw away only the invalid ones: "Apparently, what is needed is some degree of agglomeration, but not too much; and the problem of formulating a principle allowing for exactly the right amount of agglomeration raises delicate issues that have generally been ignored in the literature, which seems to contain only arguments favoring either wholesale acceptance or wholesale rejection" (Horty, 2003, p. 580).

5. An alternative proposal

What we are aiming for is an account of moral conflict that (a) avoids the derivability of a contradiction from a moral conflict, and (b) allows the application of agglomeration in cases where we would expect it to. In validating both "*ought* implies *can*" and the agglomeration rule we cannot meet demand (a), whereas a logic that simply rejects agglomeration cannot meet demand (b). Hence we will need something more sophisticated.

Consider again the modified version of Example 1 as presented in the previous section. Let OX abbreviate Mary's obligation to meet X at 10pm in front of the airport, and let OY abbreviate Mary's obligation to meet Y at 7pm at the gym. The reason why in this particular case we expect the obligation $O(X \& Y)$ to be derivable is that it is *possible* for Mary to meet Y at the gym at 7pm and to meet X at the airport at 10pm, i.e. $\diamond(X \& Y)$.

We can now generalize this observation: when faced with two obligations, we can distinguish between valid and invalid applications of agglomeration by asking ourselves whether or not it is possible for an agent to fulfill both obligations. If so, then conjoining both obligations is unproblematic. This suggests the following restriction on the principle of agglomeration, which I will call \diamond -agglomeration:

If OA and OB , then $\diamond(A \& B)$ implies $O(A \& B)$

\diamond -agglomeration gives priority to "*ought* implies *can*" over agglomeration whenever we face a moral conflict: whenever it is impossible to do two things each of which you ought to do, the inference to the obligation to do both things is blocked.

In case of a conflict of the form $OA, OB, \neg\diamond(A \& B)$, it is easily seen why \diamond -agglomeration will not allow us to derive $O(A \& B)$: in order to apply \diamond -agglomeration here, we would need $\diamond(A \& B)$, a formula that is explicitly negated in our premise set.

I believe the rule of \diamond -agglomeration to be in the spirit of Bernard Williams' thoughts on the subject. In *Ethical Consistency*, Williams states on more than one occasion that the roots of moral conflicts are *contingent*: conflicting obligations arise through the practical impossibility of their mutual fulfillment. In making agglomeration conditional upon "*ought* implies *can*," Williams' original arguments for rejecting agglomeration remain intact: \diamond -agglomeration does not allow us to

aggregate conflicting obligations. However, the problems faced by Williams' solution are dispensed with. In those circumstances in which the application of agglomeration is natural and unproblematic, \diamond -agglomeration permits the aggregation of non-conflicting obligations.

Usually, deontic logicians take formulas of the form $OA \ \& \ O\neg A$ as the paradigmatic formalization of moral conflicts. If, as Williams informally suggests, we instead take moral conflicts to be formulas of the form $OA \ \& \ OB \ \& \ \neg\diamond(A \ \& \ B)$, and if we replace the agglomeration rule with the \diamond -agglomeration rule, then we obtain a new class of systems of deontic logic that is definitely worth further investigation. In fact, these systems might be able to avoid the problems mentioned in (Goble, 2005) concerning formal restrictions of the agglomeration rule in order to allow for the accommodation of moral conflicts in deontic logic. However, the detailed description of the axioms of such systems is left for future exploration. As with any informal description of a system of formal logic, other problems and technical questions might pop up, none of which need concern us here.



6. A defense of Williams' general strategy

Throughout sections 4 and 5, I have assumed the validity of Williams' characterization of moral conflict and of "ought implies can." In this section, I will defend these assumptions one by one.

6.1. The structure and formalization of moral conflict

At the core of Williams' characterization of moral conflict lies the claim that all such conflicts have a contingent basis. Moral conflicts can arise between incompatible, but not between inherently inconsistent obligations. Given this claim, Williams recasts all type 2-conflicts as type 1-conflicts.

The example used by Williams in order to illustrate this assimilation of conflict-types is that of Agamemnon. There is a sense in which Agamemnon both ought to kill his daughter and ought not to kill his daughter, but this characterization hides the real roots of the conflict. Ultimately, the conflict arises from Agamemnon's incapability of fulfilling his obligations as a commander on the one hand, and as a father on the other.

There is no possible world in which we can imagine Agamemnon to both kill and not kill his

daughter. Both obligations are logically incompatible. However, there are possible worlds in which we can imagine Agamemnon satisfying his duties as a father as well as his duties as a commander. One such possible world could be a world in which no goddess is delaying Agamemnon's expedition.

In general, the reformulation of type 2-conflicts as type 1-conflicts reveals the contingent roots of moral conflicts. But is such a reformulation *always* possible? Can *all* type 2-conflicts be recast as type 1-conflicts? A counter-example against this reformulation would consist of a situation in which someone ought to do A and ought to do $\neg A$, and in which there are no distinguishable moral considerations B and C in view of which she ought to A , respectively $\neg A$.

It seems to me that any such conflict could only arise from a moral guide or theory that itself contains explicit inconsistencies, e.g. when an authority or a body of law tells us to do A and also tells us to do $\neg A$ without specifying any further considerations in view of which these obligations arise. With Williams, I agree that it is highly doubtful that there is anything morally interesting to say about such situations. With Gensler, I agree that morality requires a large degree of consistency.

6.2. "ought implies can"

Suppose that we accept Williams' characterization of moral conflict, and that we want to prevent moral conflicts from causing our theories to contain inconsistencies. Then we still need not agree that the agglomeration rule has to be rejected or at least restricted. Another valid option open to us is to deny that "ought implies can"

In *Ethical Consistency*, Williams is very brief in his discussion of this principle:

Now much could be said about 'ought' implies 'can' ... but I shall forgo any general discussion of it. I shall accept, in fact, one of its main applications to this problem, namely that from the fact that I cannot do both A and B it follows contrapositively that it is not the case that I ought to do both A and B . (Williams, 1965, p. 120)

Let us take a look at two examples against "ought implies can" as found in (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1984). First, consider the sentence "Jones ought to jump over the moon." There is nothing in our everyday discourse that prevents us from uttering this statement. If we accept that "ought implies can," then from Jones' obligation to jump over the moon it follows that Jones *can* jump over the

moon, which is nonsense. Hence, opponents claim, *ought* does not imply *can*.

Second, imagine a situation in which someone can escape having to do something simply by making himself unable to do it. Suppose, for instance, that Adams ought to meet Brown in a given bar at 5 p.m. Moreover, Adams knows that if he does not leave work before 4:30 p.m., he will not be able to meet Brown at 5 p.m. However, at 4:30 p.m. Adams decides to stay at work. Past this moment, Adams can no longer meet Brown at 5 p.m. Hence, by "*ought* implies *can*" and contraposition, he ought no longer meet Brown at 5 p.m.

Should we conclude from these examples that *ought* does not imply *can*? I believe we should not. Reconsider "Jones ought to jump over the moon." Since Jones cannot jump over the moon, it follows, according to Williams, that it is not the case that Jones ought to jump over the moon. Moral thought, like any thought, aims at consistency and coherence. That we can express sentences like "Jones ought to jump over the moon" does not necessarily imply that they bear any *moral* significance, or "that any morally interesting questions are peculiar to their possibility." The *ought*'s uttered in such sentences need not have any moral force. It is my conviction that no rational guide to morality would ever issue an obligation to jump over the moon.

Similarly, an agent who consciously makes herself unable to fulfill a moral obligation is not behaving in the (rational) way that is presupposed by morality. Again, it is doubtful that anything morally relevant can be said about such an agent. People making themselves unable to do what is morally required could be responded to in a fashion remembering of Gensler's response to someone denying all instances of the law of non-contradiction; if, whenever we are facing a moral obligation, we were to consciously place ourselves in a situation in which we are unable to fulfill the obligation, no obligation at all would ever need to be fulfilled, and morality itself would be rendered vacuous.

Of course, this defense of "*ought* implies *can*" is in no way definitive. Many more arguments can be, and

have been, given for and against this principle, and it is not my aim here to discuss all of them. I merely want to illustrate that it makes sense to uphold and defend "*ought* implies *can*" if we accept Williams' ideas on ethical consistency.

7. Conclusion

Williams aimed at drawing a picture of moral thought that is both realistic and free from contradiction. One of the key insights expressed in *Ethical Consistency* is that the nature of moral conflict is contingent. Moral conflicts are not inherently inconsistent; conflicts arise *via* the facts.

However, conjoined with the agglomeration rule and "*ought* implies *can*," moral conflicts as conceived by Williams *do* cause inconsistency. Hence if Williams' account of moral conflict is to remain consistent, one of these rules must be restricted or given up. I have defended Williams' characterization of moral conflict as well as the principle that "*ought* implies *can*." With Williams, I have agreed that the principle of agglomeration is the real culprit here.

Against Williams, however, I have claimed that agglomeration should not be rejected in its entirety. A realistic picture of moral thought requires us to accept the agglomeration rule on the condition that both obligations to be aggregated *can* be jointly fulfilled. The resulting restricted agglomeration rule, called \diamond -agglomeration, leaves intact Williams' original arguments against agglomeration. At the same time, it leaves us with a logic of *ought* that is sufficiently rich in order to account for our everyday normative reasoning. My arguments against the wholesale rejection of agglomeration rely on insights from the field of deontic logic. The concrete technical stipulation of a system of deontic logic that replaces agglomeration with \diamond -agglomeration is an interesting project that is left for future research.

Notes

1. *Ethical Consistency* was first published in 1965, and was later reprinted in (Williams, 1973), (Gowans, 1987), and (Sayre-McCord, 1988). Here, page references to *Ethical Consistency* refer to the original version (Williams, 1965).

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