

Paradoxes—Reading group 2

Last time, we saw that a *paradox* could be defined (following Quine) as follows:

Reasoning from apparently plausible premises, via apparently plausible steps, to a contradictory conclusion.

Faced with a paradox, one must either (i) learn to live with the conclusion; or (ii) call into question the reasoning from the premises to the conclusion; or (iii) question the truth of (at least one of) the premises. Today, we'll look at *moral paradoxes*.

Chapter 2: Moral paradoxes

The central kinds of moral 'paradoxes' which Sainsbury considers are cases in which one's moral commitments pull in competing directions. For example, consider the following case, regarding crime reduction:

Suppose that crimes of a certain category (e.g. car-jacking) are completely eliminated by prescribing an extraordinarily severe penalty (e.g. death). The penalty is so severe that it is 100 percent effective as a deterrent: car-jacking (or whatever crime we consider) never occurs, and so is never punished (so the prescribed severe penalties are never in fact imposed). It seems that we are forced to make conflicting judgments about this imaginary situation:

Good: *A crime has been eliminated. There are no bad side-effects: no car-jackers are executed (which might indeed be unjust), for there are no car-jackers.*

Bad: *A crime has been associated with a punishment of unjust severity. This makes for an unjust society. Even if injustice is a means to a good end (crime reduction) it is still unjust, and should be condemned.*

Both views are apparently reasonable; but as they conflict, it appears we cannot hold both.
(Sainsbury, p. 22)

The concern is that something (in this case: the punishment for car-jacking) cannot be both good *and* bad—in which case, we have a paradox.

How to respond to the above, and so resolve the paradox? Sainsbury begins by pointing out that these examples being hypothetical and idealised doesn't prevent their having moral force, and doesn't excuse us from attempting to find a resolution:

[F]ables and fairy stories, and indeed science fiction stories, are often used to suggest moral points of view, applicable to our daily lives, even though the events related are wholly unfamiliar, and perhaps impossible in practice. (Sainsbury, p. 24)

So, how to resolve moral 'paradoxes' of the kind presented above? In the car-jacking punishment case, one solution is obvious: reject the implicit assumption that things, actions, etc. cannot *simultaneously* be good and bad:

Having a severe penalty is good, in that it reduces crime, and bad, in that it is severe to an unjust degree. No inconsistency; and so no paradox. (Sainsbury, p. 24)

'On-balance' paradoxes

Sainsbury then increases the complexity of the situation:

If we can sustain the conflicting judgments about the Crime Reduction situation as on-balance judgments, we have inconsistency. (Sainsbury, p. 24)

The point is that while something *can* (it seems) be both good and bad, it cannot be both *on-balance good* and *on-balance bad*.¹ So what to do on this reading?

In this case, the paradox can be resolved by adding some more details. For example, one person might say that the factors contributing to 'Good' above are more important than the factors contributing to 'Bad', and thus overall the means of punishment is on-balance good (and *not* on-balance bad).

To close this discussion, Sainsbury makes the interesting point that, if one person had no qualms in affording greater moral weight to 'Good' than to 'Bad', while another person were not as easily able to rank the moral importance of these factors, then "we perhaps ought to

¹Here, read 'on-balance' as 'overall'.

relativize degrees of paradoxicality to persons. For, I suggested, what is less paradoxical for me may be more paradoxical for you" (p. 26). Specifically: the above moral dilemmas would be more paradoxical for the second person than for the first. Naturally, though this does not mean that the person for whom a paradox is more problematic is less wise: they might simply be thinking about it more deeply!

Not being sorry

Later, Sainsbury considers a different case, due to Smilansky:

Before you were born your parents gave birth to a seemingly normal daughter, except that she was born with a severe defect in her heart, which led to her death after only a few weeks ... You were born afterwards. In time, you learned that, had your sister survived, your even having been conceived would have been precluded. (Smilansky 2007, p. 59)

The paradox is the following: you are morally required to feel sorry for your sister's death, but in light of the fact that her death led to your birth, you are not morally required to feel sorry for her death. Contradiction. Here's how Sainsbury puts the issue, in slightly more technical terms:

The argument might then be expressed as follows, using "d" for "your sister died," "b" for "you are born," $S(p)$ and $G(p)$ to express being sorry that p and being glad that p , and PER for "it is morally permissible that," and " \neg " for "not."

1. $PER(G(b))$.
2. *b could not have been the case if d had not been the case.*
3. *If circumstances are related as d and b in (2), then if $PER(G(b))$, $PER(G(d))$.*
[Transfer]
4. $PER(G(d))$. [from 1, 2 and 3]
5. *If $PER(G(d))$ then $PER(\neg S(d))$.* [Exclusion]
6. $PER(\neg S(d))$. [from 4 and 5]

The argument is certainly valid, but both principles ((3)—Transfer and (5)—Exclusion) are open to doubt. (Sainsbury, p. 32)

The ‘Transfer principle’ (i.e., premise (3)) seems particularly suspect. As Sainsbury writes:

The military speak of civilian deaths inevitably caused by the prosecution of certain forms of warfare as “collateral damage.” It is not permissible to be glad that collateral damage occurs, even if it is permissible to be glad that a certain kind of war is waged. This seems to be a clear counterexample to Transfer. (Sainsbury, p. 32)

The general moral is that, even if one thing causally (or logically!) entails another, we don’t have to have the same moral opinions about both.

Moral dilemmas

In the final section of this chapter, Sainsbury turns to the following question: “Could it be that one morally ought to do something morally bad?” (p. 34) Consider the following examples:

1. Having to throw someone off a shipwreck, when the wreck has too many people on it for it to support. (p. 34)
2. *Sophie’s Choice*: Having to kill one of one’s two children, to prevent both from being killed. (p. 34)
3. The well-known case of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571.

The issue with these cases is that we seem to be both obliged to, and obliged *not* to, perform some action. As Sainsbury points out, though: one has to be careful not to confused ‘not obliged to’ with ‘obliged not to’. Calling the action in question A , and letting $O(X)$ symbolise ‘One is obliged to perform action X ’,² one has, in the above three cases,

$$O(A) \wedge O(\neg A).$$

But this is *not* contradictory—only the following would be contradictory:

$$O(A) \wedge \neg O(A).$$

²Introducing such operators is common in e.g. *epistemic* and *deontic* logics, which one can study in the Finals logic paper. For more, see Sider’s *Logic for Philosophy*.

One shouldn't confuse these two—as Sainsbury says, “That the captain is obliged not to throw any passengers overboard does not obviously entail that he is not obliged to throw any overboard” (p. 36). It's only by assuming

$$O(\neg A) \rightarrow \neg O(A)$$

that one could derive the contradictory $O(A) \wedge O(\neg A)$ —but examples such as that above regarding the shipwreck seem to indicate that such an inference is, in general, a good one.