MORAL DILEMMAS AND INCOMPARABILITY

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RECENTLY there has been much debate about moral dilemmas. One important argument for the possibility of moral dilemmas is based on incomparability or incommensurability of some kind. In this paper, I clarify and evaluate such claims then argue for a specific version of incomparability which is more limited than most but is nonetheless sufficient to yield moral dilemmas.

I. WHAT A MORAL DILEMMA IS

Moral dilemmas are usually defined as situations in which an agent morally ought to adopt each of two alternatives but cannot adopt both. This definition has several problems, one of which is that the term “ought” is inspecific.

The term “ought” always indicates something about reasons. The relevant reasons are moral, because the present context is moral. A moral reason to adopt (or not to adopt) an alternative is simply a fact that the alternative has some morally relevant consequence or property, such as that it prevents (or causes) pain, death, or loss of freedom or pleasure, or that it fulfills a promise (or is unfair or a lie).

Moral reasons vary in strength. In different contexts, to say that an agent morally ought (or ought not) to adopt an alternative is to say that there is

(i) a moral reason
(ii) an overriding moral reason, or
(iii) a non-overridden moral reason

for the agent to adopt (or not to adopt) the alternative.

These different specifications make different situations count as moral dilemmas on the above definition. Any situation with moral reasons for incompatible alternatives is a moral conflict. If one moral reason is overriding, the moral conflict is a moral dilemma on specification (i) but not on (ii) or (iii). Some might want to count such resolvable moral conflicts as moral dilemmas if even the best choice leaves some moral residue, such as justified remorse. However, most opponents of the possibility of moral dilemmas do not deny that moral reasons can conflict. I and others want to claim more than this. Thus, our claims about moral dilemmas cannot be captured by specification (i).

On specification (ii), moral dilemmas are possible only if there can be an overriding moral reason for an agent to adopt each incompatible alternative. This is clearly impossible. A reason is overriding only if it is stronger overall than any conflicting reason. A reason can be stronger in one respect while weaker in a different respect, but reasons cannot be stronger overall than each other. Thus, moral dilemmas are impossible if defined by specification (ii). This impossibility is all that is shown by most arguments against moral dilemmas, because they assume specification (ii). However, philosophers who claim that moral dilemmas are possible do not use specification (ii). To ascribe such an absurdity lacks charity when more coherent interpretations are available.

The most accurate of the specifications is (iii). On (iii), a moral dilemma exists only if there are non-overridden moral reasons for an agent to adopt each incompatible alternative. This occurs when moral reasons conflict but neither overrides the other. The possibility of moral dilemmas on specification (iii) is thus more controversial than on specification (i) but not absurd as on specification (ii).

On specification (iii), the relation of overriding is crucial. One moral reason overrides another just in case the former can be ranked higher overall in some morally relevant way. Not every kind of ranking shows that one moral reason is morally stronger or overriding. Someone might rank one moral reason above another simply because the former is in her interest. Such non-moral rankings might be permissible, but they do not resolve the
moral conflict or show that it is not a moral dilemma. In order to do that, a ranking must have the essential characteristics of morality. If morality is impartial or supreme or universalizable or objective, a ranking must be so too in order to resolve a moral conflict. I need not determine which characteristics are essential to morality. Whichever they are, only moral rankings exclude moral dilemmas. Thus, on specification (iii), a moral dilemma exists only if moral reasons conflict but cannot be ranked morally.

This account is still not quite accurate, because not all irresolvable moral conflicts are moral dilemmas. For example, I am in an irresolvable moral conflict if I can help only one of two equally worthy charities. However, this is not a moral dilemma, because I do not owe anything to either charity, even though it would be morally good to help each. The moral reasons in such cases are moral ideals rather than moral requirements. A moral reason to do (or not to do) an act is a moral requirement just in case it is morally wrong to fail to do (or to do) the act without a moral justification or excuse. For example, a moral reason to help a particular charity is not a requirement, because failure to help the charity is not wrong even if there is no justification or excuse. In contrast, the moral reason to keep a promise is a requirement, because failure to keep a promise is morally wrong unless the failure can be morally justified or excused.

A moral requirement can conflict with a moral ideal or with another moral requirement. A conflict of the former kind might be irresolvable, and then it might be called a moral dilemma. However, irresolvable conflicts between two moral requirements are more clearly moral dilemmas, and they are more controversial, so I will restrict my definition to such conflicts.

In sum, moral dilemmas can be defined as situations where there is a moral requirement for an agent to adopt each of two alternatives, and the agent cannot adopt both, but neither moral requirement is overridden in a morally relevant way. Such situations vary from trivial to tragic, but what makes them all dilemmatic is that each alternative violates a moral requirement that is not overridden. This seems to be what most philosophers mean by "moral dilemmas," but, even if not, this is what I will mean by "moral dilemmas."

So defined, moral dilemmas seem to occur, and I think some do occur. However, all actual situations are so complex that what seems to be a moral dilemma might not really be a moral dilemma, because there always might be some overlooked morally relevant way to rank the alternatives. In order to avoid such difficulties, I will argue only that moral dilemmas are possible. I will give examples that seem to be moral dilemmas, but my arguments will not depend on any particular example, so, if my examples are questioned, I can modify or replace them without affecting my arguments that moral dilemmas are possible. Their possibility is easier to establish than their actuality, but it has the same important implications for moral theory.

II. Against Reductions

The possibility of moral dilemmas could be excluded in two ways. One would be to show that, for all possibly conflicting moral requirements, one overrides the other. A second way would be to show that moral requirements are cancelled whenever they cannot be ranked morally.

The latter approach is attempted by hedonistic utilitarians. They try to reduce all moral requirements to pleasure and pain and then to rank all conflicting moral requirements by measuring the quantities of pleasure and pain that are produced by each alternative. These quantities might be equal, but hedonistic utilitarians think that such ties are not moral dilemmas, because they think there is no requirement to choose one alternative if another alternative produces the same amounts of pleasure and pain. Each alternative might produce more pleasure and less pain than adopting neither alternative, but this shows only that there is a disjunctive requirement to choose either one alternative or the other. Thus, such ties would not be moral dilemmas, according to this approach.

This approach is correct in some cases. If each alternative produces the same degrees of the same values and disvalues for the same people, then neither alternative produces any harm or loss of value for anyone, so there are not moral requirements to adopt (or not to adopt) each alternative, and such situations are not moral dilemmas. Such
choices are like choices between practically identical dollar bills.

However, this approach fails in other cases, partly because complete reductions fail. Both hedonists and most non-hedonists agree that both pleasure and pain are morally relevant. However, if the two best alternatives produce equal amounts of pleasure, but the first produces more pain, and no other value is at stake, then the moral requirement not to adopt the first is stronger. This extra strength cannot be reduced to loss of pleasure. Thus, pleasure and pain are not a single standard. Similar considerations show that other values, such as life and freedom, cannot be reduced to either pleasure or pain or to each other. Therefore, no plausible theory can reduce all moral requirements to a single standard.

Because complete reductions fail, incompatible alternatives can produce losses in basically different values. In such cases, there are conflicting moral requirements, even if neither overrides the other. For example, suppose one alternative produces a loss of freedom, and the other produces a loss of pleasure, and neither alternative overrides the other. If the values of freedom and pleasure were mutually reducible, opponents could claim that neither alternative produces a loss in the total of the basic value, and they think this shows that there are not moral requirements to adopt each alternative. However, since freedom and pleasure are not mutually reducible, each alternative does produce a loss of some basic value. But it is wrong to cause such a loss of a basic value, such as pleasure or freedom, without a justification or excuse. Therefore, there is a moral requirement not to adopt each alternative. The same argument applies when each alternative causes a loss of any basic value and when each alternative causes a basically different harm, such as pain and death. Thus, the failure of reductions shows that moral requirements can conflict, even if neither overrides the other.

Even if complete reductions did not fail, there could still be cases where each alternative produces the same totals of the same basic kinds of value or harm, but different people are affected. If one alternative harms one person, but the other alternative harms a different person, then, even if the degree and kind of harm is the same, it would still be wrong to harm anyone without a justification or excuse, so there is a moral requirement not to adopt each alternative. The point might be even clearer if each alternative breaks one promise, but each promise was to a different person. Utilitarians overlook this distinctness of individuals, because they treat people merely as part of the whole. However, the distinctness of individuals could produce moral dilemmas even if complete reductions did work.

Thus, when basically different values and harms are involved, and when different people are affected, conflicting moral requirements are not cancelled, even if neither overrides the other. Therefore, the first approach fails to exclude the possibility of moral dilemmas.

III. Symmetry

The only other way to exclude the possibility of moral dilemmas would be to show that, whenever moral requirements conflict, one overrides the other. However, several kinds of examples prevent such completeness.

The clearest examples are symmetrical. Symmetrical moral dilemmas occur when there is no morally relevant difference between incompatible alternatives or moral requirements. For example, in the recent book and movie “Sophie’s Choice,” Sophie arrives with her two children at a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. A guard tells her that she must choose one of her children to be killed, and the other will be sent to the children’s barracks. She has a moral reason not to choose the first child and a moral reason not to choose the other child, since each choice would be cooperating in her child’s murder. However, if she refuses to choose, both children will be killed, so, even though she physically can refuse to choose, she morally cannot. Thus, Sophie is in a moral conflict. There is no morally relevant difference between the children or between the reasons not to choose each, so neither moral reason overrides the other. Thus, the conflict is irresolvable. And her moral reasons are requirements, because it would be wrong for her to cooperate in her child’s murder if she had no justification or excuse. Therefore, Sophie is in a moral dilemma.

The point is not merely that Sophie does not
know which moral requirement is stronger. She can't know that (because neither is stronger), but my claim is not about knowledge. If there is in fact no morally relevant difference between the alternatives, neither moral requirement in fact overrides the other.

Sophie could create a difference between the alternatives by flipping a coin and promising to abide by the result. However, such a difference would not make one moral requirement morally stronger any more than if she promised to choose the tallest child or her favorite child. And even if she did flip a coin, it would not show that one of the moral requirements was stronger before the flip, so she was in a moral dilemma at least before the flip.

Opponents often respond that there is a disjunctive moral requirement for Sophie to choose either one child or the other, since, if she chooses neither, both will be killed. Granted. However, there are also non-disjunctive moral requirements not to choose each child, because doing so would be cooperating in that child's murder, and that would be wrong if she had no justification or excuse. Admittedly, the same degree and kind of value is lost by each alternative. However, Sophie's choice still makes a difference, because different children are lost. Her choice is not like choosing which dollar bill to give to a cashier, because dollars are interchangeable, but children are not interchangeable, even if they are similar in kind. Thus, there are conflicting moral requirements.

Opponents might respond that, even though these conflicting moral requirements exist, they are overridden by the stronger disjunctive moral requirement to choose one child or the other. However, this disjunctive requirement does not override the non-disjunctive requirements, because it does not conflict with them. Sophie can both avoid condemning a particular child and choose either one child or the other simply by choosing the other child. The point is that a disjunctive requirement to choose one or the other does not solve the dilemma, because it does not tell which child to choose. This leaves no escape from the conclusion that symmetrical moral dilemmas are not so dramatic, as when someone makes two trivial promises but cannot keep both. Moral ideals and non-moral reasons can also be symmetrical. In any symmetrical conflict, neither reason overrides the other, because there is no relevant difference between them. Thus, many kinds of symmetrical conflicts are irresolvable but possible.

IV. Incomparability

The second argument against complete moral rankings presents moral requirements that are incomparable. Moral requirements are comparable only when some comparative judgment of their strengths is true. The only comparative judgments are that one's strength is greater than, less than, or equal to the other's. Thus, moral requirements are incomparable just in case neither is strong than, weaker than, or equal in strength to the other. Conflicts between incomparable moral requirements are moral dilemmas.

Incomparable moral dilemmas differ from symmetrical ones, because incomparable moral requirements are not equal in strength, but symmetrical alternatives do produce equal amounts of value and harm. Some might object that even symmetrical moral requirements are not equal. Others might object that even non-symmetrical moral requirements must be equal if neither is stronger. I will discuss various reasons for denying equality, but such denials are not essential. Whether or not conflicting moral requirements are equal, if neither is stronger than the other, the situation is a moral dilemma. That is more important than the claim that the moral requirements are incomparable rather than equal.

1. Extreme Incomparability

Many arguments for incomparability are too simple and extreme. Their implausibility explains much of the opposition to incomparability. I will begin by criticizing some of these extreme arguments.

One argument for incomparability claims that not all conflicting moral requirements can be reduced to a shared standard of strength, and they
cannot be compared if they cannot be so reduced.9 I presented arguments against complete mutual reducibility. The other premise, that mutual irreducibility implies incomparability, is often supported by analogies. Just as the comparative aesthetic values of paintings cannot be measured by their monetary costs, because the former are not reducible to the latter, so the comparative strengths of moral requirements supposedly cannot be measured by any independent factor to which they are not reducible. A choice between the requirements can still be based on utility or a flip of a coin, but not every basis for choice shows that one moral requirement is stronger. The conflicting moral requirements are still not comparable if the only bases for choice are too foreign to the requirements to count as a way of comparing them, and any basis for choice might seem too foreign without mutual reducibility.

This argument is too simple. If mere mutual irreducibility implied incomparability, then no mutually irreducible moral requirements would ever be comparable. However, some mutually irreducible moral requirements are comparable. Even if the moral requirement to keep a trivial promise cannot be reduced to the same standard as the moral requirement not to kill, the latter is still stronger than the former.10 Thus, mutual irreducibility does not imply incomparability.

A second argument for incomparability is given by Thomas Nagel.11 Nagel distinguishes personal or agent-centered values from impersonal or outcome-centered values. The former include specific obligations, general rights, and commitment to one’s own projects. The latter include utility and perfectionist ends. Nagel claims that these five fundamentally different kinds of value reflect fundamentally different viewpoints on the world, specifically “the point of view of one’s relations to others,…the point of view of one’s life extended through time,…the point of view of everyone at once,…and finally…the detached point of view often described as the view sub specie aeternitatis.”12 This variety of viewpoints is supposed to exclude comparisons because, when values reflect and thus can be appreciated only from different points of view, “one is…unable to bring them together in a single evaluative judgment, even to the extent of finding them evenly balanced.”13 In short, overall comparability requires a shared viewpoint, but there might be none.

The metaphors are striking, but the argument goes too far. If the variety of viewpoints alone implied incomparability, then no values of fundamentally different kinds would ever be comparable. However, some fundamentally different values are comparable. If one alternative produces a little more pleasure but violates many rights, then the former, impersonal value is overridden by the latter, personal value. On the other hand, if an astronomer can gain much important knowledge about an unexpected comet only by breaking a trivial promise, then the former, impersonal value overrides the latter, personal value. Nagel admits the possibility of such comparisons14 but overlooks the implication that mere difference in kind, even if fundamental, cannot explain incomparability.

A third argument claims that conflicting moral requirements are incomparable when they belong to fundamentally different kinds and neither kind generally overrides the other. For example, moral requirements not to kill are generally stronger than moral requirements not to lie, so particular requirements of these kinds seem comparable. In contrast, neither moral duties to family nor moral duties to country are generally stronger than the other, so particular requirements of those kinds are incomparable, according to this argument.

However, lack of ranking among kinds of moral requirements does not imply lack of ranking among particular moral requirements. A particular woman can be smarter than a particular man, even if neither women nor men are generally smarter. Similarly, a particular moral duty to one’s family can be stronger than some moral duties to one’s country and weaker than others even if these kinds of requirements overlap in strength, so neither kind is generally stronger. Thus, this argument, like the previous two, fails to explain incomparability.15

2. Limited Incomparability

Such extreme arguments fail because they imply that no moral requirement of one kind is comparable with any moral requirement of some other kind. However, at least for the mentioned kinds of moral requirements, a very strong requirement of one kind is stronger than and thus comparable with a very weak requirement of the other kind. Consequently, the only plausible view of incomparability admits that some particular requirements of one kind are
comparable with some particular requirements of another kind but still claims that some moral requirements of the first kind are incomparable with some moral requirements of the other kind. This relation between kinds of moral requirements can be called “limited incomparability.”

Intuitionists can claim that such limited incomparability is simply a fact of morality which has and needs no explanation or justification, but most philosophers are not satisfied by such brute appeals to intuition. They want an explanation of how a moral requirement of one kind can be comparable with some but not all moral requirements of another kind.

Any such explanation must specify the conditions under which one moral requirement overrides another. This can be done in several ways. The simplest way is to specify certain properties of moral requirements which make them overriding. Another approach is to say that one moral requirement morally overrides another only if all ideal or non-defective observers or rankers agree that the former is stronger. This latter approach is popular, and it accommodates moral dilemmas, so it deserves attention.

Any ideal or non-defective observer theory begins with a list of defects. This list of defects is supposed to reflect the nature of morality and usually includes certain kinds of ignorance, partiality, irrationality, etc. Different theories give different lists with much overlap. The crucial issue for moral dilemmas is not the exact list but whether non-defective rankers ever disagree in their rankings. The only way to exclude such disagreement is to strengthen the list of defects until any disagreement implies some defect. Such strong lists are often attempted, but they are all either insufficient or implausible in some cases.

In some moral conflicts, all non-defective rankers do agree that one moral requirement is morally stronger than the other. For example, they agree that the moral requirement to keep a solemn promise is stronger than the moral requirement to avoid causing a little pain to someone else. However, in other moral conflicts, non-defective rankers seem to disagree. For example, many people report conflicts where keeping a promise would cause a fair amount of pain to a friend, but rankers disagree about which moral requirement is stronger. In any actual case, it is always possible that one ranker is ignorant or partial in some relevant way. However, there is often no evidence of any relevant defect, because the rankers do not know the people who will be affected, but they do know the amount of pain, its probable effects, the probable effects of breaking the promise, etc. Opponents can then respond only that there must be some relevant defect, even though they do not know what it is, and there seems to be none. Such claims are dubious, because the burden of proof lies on those who claim there is a defect. Furthermore, such claims must be repeated in every possible conflict in order to exclude the possibility of non-defective disagreement. Thus, it is implausible to deny this possibility.

Anyway, why insist on unanimity in all cases? One reason is to gain a complete moral ranking and exclude moral dilemmas, but that begs the question. Another reason is that moral rankings sometimes seem like color perceptions. Many philosophers follow moral sense theories and infer that, just as anyone who fails to make correct color judgments is color blind, so anyone who fails to make correct moral rankings is morally blind. Although this view seems plausible in some examples, other moral rankings seem more like choices of life-style where people can disagree without any defect or mistake. In any case, the claim that non-defective rankers sometimes agree does not show that they must always agree. Thus, it is not only implausible but unnecessary to exclude all disagreement among non-defective rankers of moral requirements.

If non-defective rankers do not agree, but their agreement is necessary for one moral requirement to override another, then neither moral requirement overrides the other, so the conflict is a moral dilemma. However, the moral requirements are not equal in strength if no (or not all) rankers think they are equal. Thus, the moral requirements are incomparable. Other moral requirements of the same kinds can still be comparable, if all non-defective rankers agree about them. Therefore, the incomparability between these kinds is limited.

This argument works only if the conditions of overriding are given in terms of ideal or non-defec-
tive rankers or observers. If that approach is rejected, some property of moral requirements or their rankings must be cited to explain limited incomparability. Such citations also explain why non-defective rankers disagree in some conflicts but not in others. Several such explanations are available. Each is plausible in some cases, and they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are mutually supportive.

First, some moral requirements cannot be assigned a cardinal number of units of strength but at most an ordinal number of its position on a scale. Such ordinal rankings can resolve some moral conflicts. A ranker can know which moral requirement is stronger without knowing how much stronger it is. However, if the first (or forty-first) ranked moral requirement supports one alternative, but both the second and third (or forty-second and forty-third) ranked moral requirement support an incompatible alternative, then an overall ranking cannot be achieved by adding the ordinal numbers. Such combinations of moral requirements might have ordinal ranks of their own. However, it begs the question to insist that all combinations of moral requirements must be ranked because there must be a complete moral ranking. If a combination of moral requirements is not ordinarily ranked above or below a conflicting moral requirement, then neither overrides the other, so the conflict is a moral dilemma. But they are not equal any more than first is equal to second plus third. Thus, they are incomparable.

The inexactness of moral rankings provides perhaps the best explanation of limited incomparability. It would be implausible to claim that every moral requirement has an exact strength. One reason is that some kinds of moral requirements come in many increments or degrees, but other kinds come only in large blocks, and moral requirements of the latter kinds cannot be equated with an exact number of units (say 1234) of moral requirements of the former kinds. Consequently, actual rankings are at best rough, as when one moral requirement is about as strong as a range of strengths of another moral requirement.

Although inexactness is usually admitted, it is rarely seen that such inexactness yields limited incomparability. A simple example is a conflict between pain and death. Suppose a doctor must decide whether to operate on an elderly patient who is incompetent to decide for himself and who has no relatives who could decide for him. He will die without the operation, and the operation is very likely to save his life, so the doctor has a strong moral reason to perform it. On the other hand, even a successful operation will leave the patient in intense but intermittent pain for the few remaining years of his life, so the doctor has a strong moral reason not to perform it. These are the only relevant moral reasons. They are moral requirements, because it would be wrong for the doctor not to save the patient or to cause intense pain without any excuse or justification.

Death is clearly worse than a small amount of pain, so some moral requirements of these kinds are comparable. However, some pain can be so intense, long, and certain that death is not worse in a morally relevant way. But the pain might also not be worse. If neither is worse, neither moral requirement overrides the other.

But they are also not equal in strength. If death were equal to the exact amount of pain that the patient would suffer after the operation (say 1000 units), then a small increase in the amount of pain would tip the scale. But, if the patient would suffer slightly more pain (say 1010 units), it might still be true that neither moral requirement is stronger. Then if death is equal to the smaller amount of pain, the same grounds make it equal to the larger amount. But the different amounts of pain are not equal, since the moral requirement not to cause the greater pain is stronger. Thus, the relation between death and the pain is not transitive. But equality must be transitive. So the moral requirements are not equal but incomparable.

An opponent might respond that death is equal to a range of amounts of pain (say 800-5000). However, even if equality with a range makes sense, it does not imply equality with any particular value in the range, so death still might not be equal to any particular amount of pain within the range. And equality between particular requirements is all that has to be denied for incomparability, since particular moral requirements rather than ranges conflict in moral dilemmas.

Another possible response is that death must
equal an exact amount of pain, even though we do not know the exact equation. However, the only ground for claiming that there must be an exact equation is that death and pain cannot ever be incomparable, but that begs the question. And if no exact equation is true, then we can know every truth but still accept incomparability.

None of this proves that death is incomparable with some amounts of pain. But it is implausible to insist that death must equal an exact amount of pain (say 1234 units), and inexactness can explain how a moral requirement of one kind can be comparable with some but not all moral requirements of another kind. In the absence of counterarguments, I conclude that limited incomparability among moral requirements is possible, so moral dilemmas are possible.

V. APPLICATIONS

This conclusion opens up a new approach to many moral problems. If moral dilemmas were not possible, one could not defend one choice or ranking in a moral conflict without implying that anyone who chooses or ranks otherwise is morally defective or mistaken. However, since moral dilemmas are possible, one need not disparage others who make other choices in order to defend one’s own choice. For example, some preferential treatment programs are necessary to compensate individuals or groups for past discrimination and its present effects, but some of these programs also violate rights of the excluded individuals. With some such programs, the moral requirements on one side are clearly stronger. With other programs, neither moral requirement is morally stronger. In the latter cases, one can recognize the strength of the conflicting moral requirements but still choose between them and rank them on non-moral grounds without implying that others who choose otherwise are morally defective or mistaken. Similar positions can be taken on many other moral problems. For all such problems, the possibility of moral dilemmas opens up the possibility that neither side is morally stronger, so people can disagree without defect or mistake.21

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NOTES

4. I am grateful to Shelly Kagan for this point.
5. One might add that there is a moral requirement to do an act only if ideal observers not only do not approve but disapprove of failure to do the act without justification or excuse or only if such failure is punishable if punishment is not too costly. Cf. B. Gert, The Moral Rules (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), chapter 7. My arguments below do not depend on any particular theory about which reasons count as requirements. In fact, all of my arguments can be extended to reasons that are not requirements and are not even moral.
6. There are other arguments against the possibility of moral dilemmas, but I will not discuss them here, because they do not deal directly with rankings of moral requirements, and they have been refuted elsewhere. Cf. my “ ‘Ought’ Conversationally Implies ‘Can’,” The Philosophical Review, vol. 93 (1984), pp. 260-261.
10. At ibid., p. 77, Williams recognizes such comparisons but not the implications of this recognition.

12. “The Fragmentation of Value,” p. 134. It is not clear which values are supposed to reflect which points of view, especially because Nagel gives different numbers of each.

13. Ibid., p. 128. A few lines later, Nagel denies equality also because “when two choices are very evenly balanced, it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem.” However, a choice can matter, if different people are affected, even if the alternatives produce equal amounts of value and harm.


15. Cf. S. Guttenplan, “Moral Dilemmas and Moral Realism,” Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, vol. 80 (1979-80), p. 72. A similar response applies to the argument that conflicting moral requirements are incomparable when each alternative is ranked higher on a different scale, but neither scale in general is more important. This alone cannot explain incomparability, since some particular moral requirements can be ranked overall, even though each ranks higher on a different scale, and the scales cannot be ranked generally.


18. I am indebted to Bernie Gert for this point.

19. Some ordinals can be added (in a peculiar sense), since, if the first and second ranked moral requirements support one alternative, but the third and fourth ranked moral requirements support an incompatible alternative, then the moral requirements for the first alternative are stronger. Cf. W. D. Ross, The Foundations of Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 180ff. Even more ordinal addition is possible in set theory but only within restrictions which make it inapplicable to ranking combinations of moral requirements.
