

Moral Conflict Resolution and Normative Adjustment

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Abstract

In this paper, I show how a pragmatist stance may address the problem of the resolvability of moral conflicts. Pragmatism challenges skeptical and relativist views by arguing that moral conflict resolution is possible via inquiry and exchange of reasons. From a normative standpoint, pragmatism also differs from utilitarian and deontological views, according to which a specific moral theory is correct in every context. From a pragmatist point of view, both utilitarian and deontological responses can be justified, depending on contextual conditions and reasons, on the people to whom reasons are offered, and on constraints of inclusivity, publicity, empirical accuracy, and coherence. Pragmatism's empiricist method for solving conflicts and making normative adjustments can be seen as a form of reflective equilibrium, where moral beliefs and commitments are adjusted in light of new non-moral knowledge, such as evidence about the reliability of decision processes. Recent empirical research also supports pragmatism's pluralist and flexible approach more than monistic and generalist normative views like deontology and utilitarianism.

Keywords: Moral dilemmas, Pragmatism, Inquiry, Reflective equilibrium, Utilitarianism.

1. Introduction

How much should we actively spend on fighting climate change, global poverty and other moral causes, knowing their costs? Is it right to support Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion? And to sustain Israel's massacre in Gaza? Is it right to prevent or strongly hinder a woman from having an abortion? Is it acceptable for doctors to assist patients to die if they want so?

Practical conflicts may arise in everybody's life: cases in which it is hard to decide because there seem to be obligations in multiple directions, and it appears impossible to fulfill one without violating another. But is it truly possible to have obligations in irresolvable conflict, where any choice results in an error, or where each option is equally acceptable? Or is it rather possible to solve moral problems? If so, can (and should) these problems be solved *through reasoning*?

In this paper, I argue that a pragmatist stance is more convincing than skeptical, ultra-liberal and alternative optimistic views about the resolution of moral conflicts, and show that this conclusion is supported by recent developments in the contemporary empirically-minded discussion about moral decisions and moral change. According to recent models supported by empirical research, even from an antirealist metaethical perspective we can decide which policies are less reliable by recognizing that certain decision-making processes are systematically (or more likely) biased, and through the reception of social feedback about the validity of one's reasons (Greene 2013; 2014; 2017; Sauer 2017). Moral progress occurs by recognizing and correcting biases and unsustainable inconsistencies, by debunking beliefs in light of their genealogy, or by understanding their rejection or non-acceptability by reasonable and informed perspectives, without referring to the existence of independent moral truths.

This method of revising and adjusting one's beliefs and commitments in light of increased knowledge about the underlying cognitive processes has been associated to the idea of reflective equilibrium (RE), a coherentist, empiricist, and fallibilist epistemological method according to which, in cases of conflict, one should abandon or revise beliefs, values, and behaviors in light of new information in search for maximal consistency (between moral beliefs, non-moral beliefs, and background beliefs: Greene 2014; 2017; Sinnott-Armstrong 2006; Brink 2014). If a belief or commitment is produced or influenced by unreliable mechanisms, then we have good reasons to doubt, revise, and perhaps abandon or reject it.¹ For pragmatism, there is no reason to suppose that inquiry in the domain of morality works differently from the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge in other domains (Levi 1992; Kitcher 2021): like progress in science and theoretical knowledge, moral progress is, to a large extent, a matter of solving problems and conflicts through a progressive reduction of errors and correction of defective processes, and subsequent adjustments of one's beliefs and normative commitments.

In Sections 1 and 2 of the paper, I show how an optimistic view about the solution of moral conflicts through reflection differs from skeptical and ultra-liberal positions, and how it can provide clearer decision-making and evaluative criteria compared to alternative models while avoiding the pitfalls of commitments to specific normative theories. In section 3 I show that the pragmatist claim that conflicts can be solved through reflection, particularly by reducing errors in decision-making processes, is supported by recent developments in scientific and philosophical research. However, contrary to influential approaches endorsing this method, a pragmatist stance does not claim that one single normative theory or type of moral reasoning like deontology or utilitarianism is always (or mostly) fallacious or more reliable in complex moral decisions.

2. Can Moral Conflicts Be Solved?

Can we control and guide our decisions and behavior through reflection and inquiry, especially in hard situations of normative conflict? The question is not just whether this is *psychologically* possible,² but also whether conflicts can be *justifiably solved*: is it possible to address them appropriately through reflection?

¹ RE is not necessarily anti-realist: see Brink 1989 for a realist defense. RE has been defended by both consequentialist and deontological perspectives.

² On this point, see Greene *et al.* 2004, Klenk and Sauer 2021.

Debate on these topics has been rich over the XX century, and providing a comprehensive summary of it would not be feasible here. This article will specifically and more modestly focus on (a) whether reflective control over moral decisions and conduct is possible and rational (or preferable); and, if that is the case, (b) what method would be best for making rational decisions in critical situations of apparent moral conflict. Several influential scholars have denied (a). But even among those who accept it, there is still ample debate about how to address and solve moral problems. One possibility is to think that there are fundamental moral truths from which the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of specific conclusions can be derived.³ While many philosophers have defended this solution, moral realism (especially in its non-naturalistic, intuitionist version) is largely problematic and costly to defend. But a discussion of its limitations would require much more space. The present analysis, therefore, is conducted without postulating the existence of a moral reality but still seeking to understand whether moral conflicts can be justifiably analyzable and solvable through reflection.

Moral conflicts are paradigmatically exemplified by moral dilemmas, i.e., situations in front of which an agent A faces two or more conflicting obligations or duties, so that it seems that they ought to make an action and at the same time must refrain from doing it. Whatever choice is made, A seems to be mistaken, and to lose something important, incomparable, that cannot be counterbalanced by the realization of the competing duty. A paradoxical implication of this is that, sometimes, it seems equally acceptable to prefer one alternative or another, hence wrong to blame the agent who prefers one over another (Berlin 1978; Berlin and Lukes 1998). The alternative view claims that moral conflicts can be solved by recognizing the presence of a stronger or overriding duty, implying that the dilemma is solvable, i.e., one of the options is more justified than the other(s). If the available options are equally acceptable, one is not facing a genuine moral dilemma. Let us explore more closely the reasons supporting these positions.

According to a skeptical view, moral dilemmas are constitutively unsolvable and, specifically, moral reflection is incapable of handling them. This view has been paradigmatically defended by Bernard Williams (1973a; 1985). Williams' view on the matter is complex and nuanced, and it is hard to do justice to it in a short space. I will mostly focus my discussion on three main aspects of his moral thought: (i) the specificity of moral experience; (ii) the idea that believing in the resolvability of moral conflicts through reflection implies alienation and flattens the complexity of moral experience; (iii) the centrality of emotions in making normative adjustments and solving moral conflicts.

Williams' intuition is that conflicts and dilemmas are constitutive of moral experience. In these cases, regardless of what is chosen, there is always some degree of error since one duty cannot be fulfilled; the resulting loss of value is signaled by the remorse that people typically feel afterwards. For Williams, remorse is a clear indicator that moral conflicts are psychologically more emotional than rational, unlike conflicts occurring in theoretical or scientific inquiry. In the latter cases, conflicts are rationally detected and adjustments are made based on evidence and consistency between propositions, but no remorse is felt afterwards (if it is, the feeling is unjustified). In contrast, in moral conflicts the motivational force that we feel toward duties is strongly subjectively and emotionally connoted.

³ A foundationalist view in moral epistemology, typically held by intuitionists. For a critical discussion, see Brink 1989.

According to Williams, rationalist approaches misunderstand and devalue this constitutive dimension of moral experience and are wrong in claiming that moral normative adjustments and the resolution of conflicts can work analogously to the advancement of scientific knowledge and understanding. For Williams, moral deliberation has its specificity: it is distinct from inquiry aimed at finding out how things are (objectively) in the world, since what matters is how we experience them in the first-person. Theoretical and scientific inquiry, aimed at describing and explaining phenomena and states of affairs, proceed by detecting and correcting errors and the flawed methodologies that may lead to them. Once we have evidence and reasons for and against certain conclusions and/or decision processes, inconsistencies can be solved by revising or even completely abandoning certain beliefs or methods, without feeling much remorse or suffering. For Williams moral experience does not work that way. Even if they are both “rationally” unsustainable, giving up the belief that the sun revolves around the Earth is different from discarding the conviction that our interests or those of our narrow social group should matter more than anyone else’s indiscriminately. The fact that one feels impulses in multiple directions, and experiences remorse after making a decision in dilemmatic cases indicates that, even in seemingly solvable or resolved cases, the duty that is not respected in favor of another does not cease to matter. As observed by Isaac Levi,

Williams thinks that efforts to iron out conflicts in value commitments reflect an illicit assimilation of practical reasoning to theoretical reasoning. Just as we seek a coherent systematization of our views concerning how things are, those who indulge in ethical theorizing seek a systematic and coherent account of how we ought to live, what we ought to do, and how things ought to be. This theoretical quest for systematicity and coherence in our values tends to reduce our values to a colorless one-dimensional spectrum (Levi 1992: 818).

Williams does not see the attempt to solve moral conflicts as an opportunity for inquiry and improvement. Quite the contrary, he sees it as the forced harmonization of value pluralism, and the flattening of conflicts within a single, rigid, coherent system that cannot but alienate people from their first-personal experience. As Williams observed, we tend to judge positively those who drop non-moral beliefs in light of inconsistencies and conflicting evidence; we typically think that these people have improved or refined their knowledge. Things work differently with morality. Williams notices that we do not tend, and it would be inappropriate, to praise people who claim to have improved after “solving” a moral conflict in which a duty is violated to respect another without feeling remorse (Williams 1973a: Chapt. 12).

Williams defends a Humean moral psychology according to which conflicts can be overcome (e.g., by abandoning a belief when it clashes with another) only when there is an incentive that overrides the costs of ironing it out (Williams 1981: 80-82). For example, changing one’s mind can be reputationally costly, but it can be easier in presence of a strong social pressure asking for it. This thesis has been widely re-proposed in the contemporary debate, with several scholars suggesting that empirical findings in the behavioral and cognitive (neuro)sciences highlight the central role played by emotions in moral judgment and decision-making (Haidt 2001; 2012; Greene *et al.* 2001), and the driving role of feelings of discomfort, avoidance, or admiration in dynamics of emulation, conformity, and pursuit

of coherence guiding normative adjustments and leading to changes in moral beliefs and behaviors (Campbell and Kumar 2012; Algoe and Haidt 2009). For Williams, reasoning alone cannot solve conflicts or guide normative adjustments because, unlike scientific inquiry, moral experience has a strong subjective and emotional valence and this is why, in dilemmatic cases, one perceives a tension between two or more duties, anticipates remorse, and feels it afterwards.

A less “tragic” and more “liberal” formulation of Williams’ claims has been defended among others by Isaiah Berlin (see also Larmore 1987). This view states that it is ultimately wrong to judge others’ choices in dilemmatic conditions, since it would be too arrogant not to consider the complexity and tragic dimension of the decision (Berlin and Lukes 1998).⁴ The intuition underlying this position, as with the skeptical one, is that in these situations there is no clearly correct or optimal decision, as the gains and losses are incommensurable and cannot be balanced; moreover, the choice is made psychologically hard and emotionally painful by the clash between conflicting duties, and by the awareness that they cannot be all respected. But although this position appears reasonable, it is also problematic to defend and to generalize. As noted by Arendt, it risks justifying too much, including the immoral and criminal behaviors of perpetrators and collaborators of morally repugnant acts (Arendt 1963).

Above all, however, one should reflect on whether moral decisions actually work as portrayed by these views, i.e., presenting instances of insoluble conflict, while non-moral knowledge acquisition—such as theoretical or scientific inquiry—does not seem to work like that (conflicts are resolvable, although solutions may be partial, occur gradually, and involve costs). Furthermore, the skeptical and the liberal view appear unable to provide normative and evaluative support whatsoever in front of complex cases. But in front of complex moral situations we may want to refer to reliable tools that are less biased, arbitrary, and more intersubjectively shareable and intelligible than intuition, emotions, heuristics and habits. First, considerable evidence shows that while the latter are often adaptive in most ordinary cases, they systematically misfire in new and complex circumstances (Greene 2013; 2014; 2017; Kahneman 2011; Bina *et al.* 2024). Second, to justify our views and decisions we need a “common ground” that intuitions, emotions, and habits are often unable to provide, precisely because of their being highly subjective and subject to biases.

Moreover, the differences emphasized by Williams to distinguish moral experience-knowledge from general and scientific experience-knowledge, such as the alleged constitutive emotional and social element of the former, is also doubtful because both scientific inquiry and practical deliberation are constitutively value-laden and social enterprises (Sauer 2017; Darwall 2009; Tomasello 2016); they both involve emotions and prosocial dispositions, and both depend on the public justification of one’s convictions (Levi 1992: 833). Finally, as noted by Levi, Williams’ position is problematic because it implies that in a dilemmatic choice between A and B, one has at the same time the duty *to do A* and the duty *not to do A* (as there seems to be also a competing duty to do B).⁵

⁴ Berlin makes the example of a Nazi officer threatening to kill a person if they do not provide information about other Jews. For Berlin, refusing to give the information is as acceptable as collaborating with the enemy, because the chance of dying (for the threatened person and also for the other Jews) is high anyway.

⁵ B can be a number of options greater than one.

To judge that one ought to do A all things considered and that one ought to refrain from doing A all things considered implies that all things considered, one ought to do A and refrain from doing A. This is indeed incoherent (Levi 1992: 824).

It is indeed bizarre and unhelpful to claim that we have the duty to do A and also not to do A at the same time in a choice in which we do not know what to do. All things considered, one option may be better (or less bad) than another; this is what we can and should try to understand through inquiry and experience. We often understand it afterwards, and sometimes we disapprove and revise our own judgements and commitments. The reasons adduced to support hard choices can be publicly discussed and they may be held acceptable or not, approved or disapproved; clearly, depending on the availability of options, on the subjects affected by the decision, on the processes guiding the choice, and on the justification provided for it. According to pragmatists like Levi, justification is always contextual: reasons can vary depending on factual conditions and on the subjects involved in the matter (see also Dancy 2017).

3. How Can Moral Conflicts Be Solved?

According to a more optimistic view, moral inquiry can and should help in deciding which options are better or more justified than others. This cognitivist and rationalist approach has been defended from several perspectives. One possibility is to argue that there is a correct normative ethical theory, or a proper decision-making procedure—such as act-utilitarianism or a deontological theory that establishes priorities among duties—that should be applied and enforced in front of hard choices. A classical and influential way to approach this kind of cases has been suggested by W. D. Ross (1930), but his proposal needs some refinement since it does not offer clear criteria to decide. I argue that a pragmatist view can be a valid alternative: conflicts can be solved after a careful consideration of probabilities and consequences, by looking for consistency between moral and non-moral claims, and via the exchange and democratic evaluation of reasons supporting a decision among subjects who are actually or potentially affected by it.

Is it wrong to break a promise if a more pressing duty arises, such as helping someone in need? Is it ok to push the man off the bridge in the footbridge version of the trolley problem? Was Agamemnon right to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to lead the Achaeans to victory? Sometimes moral dilemmas involve conflict between deontological and utilitarian reasons, or there can be more complex cases with more than two available options and reasons of the same “kind”—e.g., deontological or utilitarian—counting for and against the same option; sometimes there can be conflicts between virtues.

In a famous example by Ross (1930), agent A must choose between either helping a person in need, thus breaking the promise to meet a friend (who A cannot contact), or going to the appointment without stopping to help. According to Ross, in that case there are not two competing duties at play but only one, because under those circumstances it is not obligatory to keep the promise. In that specific case there is only one actual duty and one correct action. For Ross, even though there initially seem to be two *prima facie* duties—i.e., considerations that generally count in favor of both options—in conflict, it is then possible to recognize what Ross calls the *all things considered* duty, i.e., the obligatory thing to do after careful consideration and weighing of reasons in a specific case. The point is that it is

unclear what kind of reflection or decision procedure is necessary to follow to achieve this result, and the choice seems ultimately left to the intuition or perception of individuals, risking to fall into a form of subjectivism or relativism that makes any reflective, deliberative, and justificatory effort pointless, as it seems to be for Williams, or arbitrary, as it seems to be for Berlin (Reichlin 2000). Ross' proposal should be integrated with clearer procedural constraints to improve practical knowledge and understanding, and solve conflicts in a justified way.

Can the justificatory and/or decision-making criterion be linked to just one specific normative theory, such as deontology or utilitarianism? Take the (in)famous footbridge version of the trolley problem: you can choose to save five people who are about to be killed by a process already in course by sacrificing (and killing) another person. What should you do? A deontological position would tell you not to sacrifice the one. A utilitarian one would tell you in most cases to save the five (but also not to sacrifice the one: see Railton 2017; Brink 2014). Simplifying, in the contemporary discussion, deontological judgment categorically denies the acceptability of certain actions, and utilitarian (or consequentialist) judgment favors the evaluation and production of good consequences.

A pragmatist view acknowledges that deontological and utilitarian responses may be produced by different social, cognitive, and epistemic processes, that they may be justified through different reasons, and nevertheless be acceptable depending on the situation. Solving a moral problem does not necessarily mean solving it definitively or claiming to have found the universally right principle, evaluative criterion or decision process for any moral choice. It may mean solving it for oneself and other affected subjects; it means eliminating the conflict by reflecting (mostly with or thanks to others) on the reasons for or against a choice, and not simply based on the "cold" application of an abstract and impersonal code of rules.

Let us assume to consider the maximum possible production of aggregate well-being to be generally a good thing, and that this reason also counts, *prima facie*, in favor of choosing to save the five people in the trolley problem. From a pragmatist standpoint, it seems possible to solve the problem by *not* choosing to increase the greater good (i.e., not killing the person) without producing the hemorrhage of value Williams points at. In this case, producing the aggregate greater good (saving more lives) is possible only by violating a norm that we considered justified, useful, and important not to violate (not treating people as means to produce better consequences for others). In cases of trade-offs between consequentialist and deontological reasons, the duty to respect certain norms may be overriding in the face of producing benefits or positive consequences from the specific act, for example in light of contractarian considerations (Gauthier 1987; Rawls 1971) or the implications or consequences of norm violation (Hooker 2002), for example on trust (Railton 2017). If you choose not to push the man off the bridge, there may certainly be regret, but it would be wrong to consider blameworthy your refusal to produce the greater good. The point is not *what* one chooses, but *how* and, especially, which reasons one offers to justify the choice. Of course, it is also possible that an act-utilitarian solution to the footbridge case is justified, as long as it is shown that norm violation is admissible in that specific case, that the negative implications of that violation are not worse than choosing the alternative, that losses are not greater than the benefits, and so forth.

In short, if a *prima facie* duty is violated but there are good, stronger, and overriding reasons to choose an alternative, although it is justifiable to feel regret or sadness for the loss of value that cannot all be produced (or preserved), it is not

equally justified to feel *guilty*, or to be *blamed*, for not respecting one's duty (Connell 1996). One can be blamed if the reasons that provides are unacceptable, if the choice is made without reflecting, or influenced by prejudices or biases. If agents offer convincing reasons they are not blameworthy, at least until confronted with stronger or better reasons that would make them blameworthy. For Scanlon, for example, moral judgments are not different from other forms of thought, and they are acceptable when they are not reasonably rejected by others (Scanlon 1998: 4). But this can happen if one inquires and discusses about it, both before and after; if sufficient considerations are made, and convincing reasons are provided to support a decision. This may be harder if one treats conflicts as irresolvable and, therefore, undecidable by reasoning; it may be harder if one thinks, like the skeptical and the liberal views described above, that whatever one chooses is wrong or acceptable anyway. It may be harder if one thinks that it is also fine to choose based on mere intuition or subjective reasons.

Inquiry for pragmatists does not just require factual knowledge and abstract or solipsistic theoretical reasoning: it involves social exchange of reasons, perspectives and experiences. For example, in a case where A violates a promise made to B because of an overriding duty (e.g., helping a person in urgent need), A can justify to B the violation of that promise. B may find the violation acceptable or not, in light of their knowledge, for example, of A's behavior and of the world more broadly (e.g., the probability that A is telling the truth, how often A violates promises, etc.). Considering this, B may decide whether to trust A to the same extent or less than before in the future.

Clearly, this reaction has a normative dimension: at stake is not only the rejection of reasons, but the justifiability of such a rejection. Someone may feel offended or angry about the violation of a promise even though there were good reasons to violate it (as in Ross' case). In this case, we would consider that reaction unjustified. The point is to show that the conflicting duty was stronger, apologize for any foreseeable harm the recipient may have suffered, and demonstrate on other occasions that promises are taken seriously and not violated again, except in occasional justified cases. Most importantly, the justification provided must be *supported by evidence*.

Some cases that appear to be dilemmas can therefore be considered solvable; they are only "apparent" dilemmas. From a philosophical perspective, the case of Agamemnon, for instance, is only an apparent dilemma, because the duty not to kill one's innocent daughter is stronger than the duty to kill her to win a battle based on a divine command; not only for the deontological reason that killing innocent people is always wrong, but also because, from an empiricist and pragmatist perspective, there can be no guarantee that if the act is carried out it will produce more happiness. Agamemnon's choice not to sacrifice his daughter by violating the divine command may be considered at most impious but not immoral. From a moral point of view, the dilemma is not a real dilemma. The right thing to do would have been not to kill Iphigenia (in the Tragedy, Agamemnon's choice to kill Iphigenia, though pious, is considered immoral and condemned by the chorus, especially in the absence of a feeling of repugnance and remorse).

Another paradigmatic case is discussed by Sartre, in which a young man must decide between joining the partisans leaving his mother alone, or staying and caring for her, thus giving up actively joining the resistance against a fascist oppressor. This case seems solvable (of course, depending on the details): the son may join the resistance and leave the mother in the care of someone else or, if that

were not possible, being the only person capable of taking care of the mother is a good reason not to join the conflict, which does not make his lack of participation in the resistance blameworthy (Reichlin 2000). In sum, it does not seem true that whatever one chooses is wrong because there is an inevitable loss of value; if the decision taken is supported by acceptable reasons and not outweighed by those supporting the alternative(s), the problem can be said to be justifiably solved.

Some might argue that an advantage of adopting either a purely deontological or utilitarian view is that these theories generally present understandable and simple rules and principles to be followed and used in concrete cases (Hare 1981; Greene 2013). However, this argument presents at least two problems. On the one hand, Williams seems to be right in saying that reducing morality to just a simple formula risks leaving out many important aspects of moral experience and of our convictions about what matters morally. On the other hand, the idea that sophisticated but still understandable and applicable—albeit more costly—theories or principles are impractical or too demanding is a weak criticism. The point in question is precisely that there are difficult cases where one must analyze and carefully reflect about the circumstances, the norms at play, the implications and expected value of choices; if the decision were a simple choice, to be determined by an easy heuristic or appeal to a simple principle, there would be no difference from simple cases and there would be no need for more structured and articulated moral reflection at all (Bina *et al.* 2024).

The big absentee in these discussions is often virtue ethics, and someone might think that in cases of conflict it is practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that helps us decide how to decide. Practical wisdom has been understood in several ways (De Caro and Vaccarezza 2021), but it is important to stress that it should not be conceived of as a kind of *intuition* (pace Levi 1992: 892-831); on the contrary, recent empirically informed models converge in understanding it as an integrated set of decision-making abilities, or as a domain-general moral expertise (Darnell *et al.* 2022; De Caro *et al.*, forthcoming) capable of reflective and flexible cognitive and emotional control, which can be trained and thought.

In light of the above considerations, supporting either utilitarianism or deontology as the only right normative criterion appears problematic, as Williams pointed out, and as the recent debate on these topics suggests. But simply emphasizing the importance of ‘reasoning’, or invoking practical wisdom may still not appear enough. The risk is indeed of being left as directionless as the other views (skeptical, ultra-liberal, Ross’). For pragmatists like Dewey and Levi, conflicts can be solved through a clearer and more flexible method: normative adjustments and revision of practical beliefs, commitments, and actions can occur like the revision of non-moral beliefs, for example when new empirical evidence is available. Even if it seems that the sun revolves around the earth, we change perspective and update our understanding when we know that it is actually the opposite because we have more reliable tools to attest it. Similarly, according to pragmatism, we change harmful, offensive, exclusive, tribal, or self-interested beliefs and behaviors *through experience*, because we discover they are unjustified in light of new knowledge and exchange of reasons.

To function well, this empiricist and fallibilist method must be inclusive, heterogeneous (i.e., data must be diverse) and democratic. According to Dewey and Levi, the principles of good deliberation are the same for both scientific and moral inquiry (a thesis supported, descriptively, by recent empirical and empirically informed philosophical research: see Shenhav and Greene 2010; Arvan 2021).

There is no big difference between practical and theoretical rationality: all rationality serves to solve problems and there is no reason to suppose that moral reasons function in a radically different way from other reasons (Dancy 2017: 5).

According to Dewey and Levi, if we act, support values or change our minds in a way that matters to others we may be required to justify it. We ought to justify why we choose what we choose, why we doubt (or not) certain beliefs and the process that may lead to accept or discard them (Levi 1992). Dewey stressed that this exchange of reasons must be democratic, i.e., open to the subjects involved in or affected by a decision, who in turn can express reasons about it. He also emphasized that, since morality has to do with regulating conduct, the idea that it may consist of a system of abstract principles or norms independent of human psychology and motivation (as non-naturalist moral realists claim: Singer 2005; Huemer 2007) must be rejected. Dewey wanted to introduce scientific methodology in ethics, not so much in the utilitarian sense of naturalizing value (e.g., by identifying it with pleasure) and making calculations, as rather in the sense of experiencing, experimenting, dialoguing, and solving problems democratically as we do with science. According to Levi (1992) this method is empiricist and secular and has cognitive goals. Against the idea of a “messianic” convergence toward truth, Levi more realistically claimed that our main epistemic goal is the *reduction of errors* (a position defended in the contemporary debate on moral progress by Kitcher (2021)). For Levi and Dewey, the adjustment to be sought between new evidence and theory is the same that occurs in moral changes (think of the reduction of prejudices and biases, change in beliefs and actions regarding moral status, social groups, gender equality, patriarchal structures, and much more). This pragmatist thesis appears supported by recent cross-cultural research on value change, showing that the more individuals and populations come into contact with different perspectives and dispose of favorable resources and incentives, the more their moral beliefs change in terms of inclusivity, cooperation, trust, and much more (Henrich 2020).

Even from a normative point of view, for Levi, both theoretical and practical rationality depend on procedural constraints which serve to understand what is acceptable or not given a set of previous beliefs and values. One cannot abstract from the context but only evaluate the consistency of new information with what was previously held and make adjustments in light of the new information and the anticipated consequences (Levi 1992: 833). Rationality is context-dependent: it is impossible to achieve complete objectivity by abstracting from contingency, as non-naturalist moral realists think (Singer 2005).

Dewey was also critical of overly objectivist and too abstract positions detached from the reality of experience, as well as of the risk of extreme subjectivism, as both fail to consider the socially integrated dimension of moral experience. Morality improves by solving problems, and a way to do it is by debunking biased processes or beliefs which turn out to be unreliable in light of new scientific knowledge and social exchange of reasons (Dewey 1922; Hildebrand 2024; Kitcher 2021).

4. The Contemporary Discussion on Moral Decisions and Conflicts

Over the last twenty years, philosophical discussion has seen a drastic increase of attention on moral dilemmas, paradigmatically used to observe the (neuro)psychology of moral reasoning and decision-making. Seminal experimental studies conducted at the beginning of the millennium involving moral dilemmas (Greene

et al. 2001) have produced a boom not only in further empirical research but also in the philosophical discussion about how to interpret experimental results (Greene 2014; Singer 2005; Sauer 2017). One of the most influential and controversial theses in this debate has been proposed by Joshua Greene (Greene 2013; 2014; 2017). While Greene openly advocates the superiority of utilitarianism as a moral theory, I suggest that his methodology can also be compatible with a more pluralist pragmatist approach.

Greene believes that moral decisions involve two types (or systems) of processes: type-1 (automatic, intuitive, emotional) and type-2 (reflective, rational).⁶ Although type-1 processes are efficient and reliable most of the time, they risk misfiring in new and particularly complex cases, since those learned responses not prepared, sensitive, and sufficiently flexible to respond to drastic environmental changes. As experimental data show, in these circumstances type-2 processes are more flexible and therefore more reliable, although this flexibility requires greater costs. To better illustrate his model, Greene proposed an analogy between moral thinking and an SLR camera: the automatic (“point-and-shoot”) mode works fairly well in most cases (different conditions of light, moving subjects, etc.), without requiring much effort, but it may not give us the photo that we want in peculiar conditions (e.g., at night, or with a complex and unusual distribution of lights and shadows). In these cases, we need to use the manual mode (we also need to know how to use it to get a nice shot). Similarly, in complex moral cases, we should rely on type-2 thinking which, based on experimental data, strongly correlates with utilitarian decisions (Greene 2014; Patil *et al.* 2021; Van Honk 2022). In sum, it would be better to rely on the manual rather than on the automatic mode to solve complex moral problems.

In line with the pragmatist view sketched above, Greene stresses that new scientific evidence, combined with normative considerations, can make us conclude that some processes may be held more or less reliable than others:

We can model our own moral thinking and use that understanding to make better decisions. Science can’t, by itself, tell us what’s right or wrong. But if our goal is to solve difficult moral problems, a scientific understanding of moral thinking may be our best hope for progress (Greene 2017: 11).

So far, Greene’s view is convincing. The dubious thesis he defends is that the manual mode of moral thinking coincides with utilitarianism. In fact, recent research shows that even non-utilitarian considerations of justice or universalization can be formulated rationally and not automatically (Bialek and De Neys 2017; Levine *et al.* 2020); that is, not all reasoned or reflective decisions are act-utilitarian. Additionally, recent data also show that not all utilitarian decisions are reasoned or reflective, since they can also be the product of automatic intuitions (Bago and De Neys 2019; Kahane *et al.* 2012; see also Sandberg and Juth 2012).

Let us return for a moment to phronesis (or practical wisdom). As mentioned, it would be inappropriate to understand phronesis as a sort of intuition or

⁶ See Greene 2017 and 2023 for recent revision of the model beyond the original characterization of “fast” vs. “slow” moral thinking. According to a more recent categorization, type-1 and type-2 processes can be also understood in terms of “model-free” vs. “model-based” learning and decision-making processes (Cushman 2013; Bina 2022).

perceptual ability. On the contrary, phronesis should be understood as the exercise of a general moral competence that includes thoughtful deliberation (De Caro *et al.*, forthcoming). In this sense, phronesis is far from being a kind of intuition: it is rather deliberate, calm, and reasoned decision-making; it is “manual mode”, but it is not necessarily utilitarian.

As Greene (2014; 2017) and Singer (2005) have argued, although intuition works well in most ordinary cases, it risks being biased and unreliable in new or particularly complex settings like moral dilemmas. Why? From a pragmatist perspective, because deciding with the manual mode allows for better inquiry, better exploration of the space of possibilities, their expected consequences, value and acceptability; it allows one to consider in advance reasons that can be subsequently invoked to justify the choice. In contrast, rationalizing automatic intuitions and gut feelings usually consists in creating *ad hoc* stories that confirm a response produced by processes which did not involve a careful consideration of the situation, being rather the upshot of reinforcement learning mechanisms leading agents to develop values, dispositions or aversion towards certain types of action (Greene 2013; 2017; Cushman 2013):

Our gut reactions were not designed to be organized, and they weren't necessarily designed to serve truly moral ends. Automatic settings are heuristics-efficient algorithms that get the 'right' answers most of the time, but not always. I put 'right' in scare quotes because our automatic settings, even when functioning as they were designed to, need not be 'right' in any truly moral sense. Some of our gut reactions may simply reflect the biological imperative to spread our genes, causing us, for example, to favor ourselves and our tribes over others. With this in mind, we might attempt to clean house. Before organizing our moral intuitions, we might first attempt to jettison all of our biased intuitions (Greene 2013: 328).

The biased intuitions Greene has in mind refer to the increased evidence that we have that moral judgments are, often unconsciously, sensitive to elements and differences that we would not consider morally relevant (such as proximity, similarity, or different modes of harming someone, e.g., with our hands or strongly involving personal force), and vice versa, insensitive to others (such as large numbers, distance) for biological, psychological and cultural reasons. As it has been recently suggested, phronesis requires precisely this ability to transcend beliefs, intuitions, habits, and values that are merely the product of unreflective affective learning, conditioning, indoctrination, and other epistemically defective processes (De Caro *et al.*, forthcoming).

For Greene, this is not enough. To solve moral conflicts we also need a “common currency”, a basis for agreement that can be shared and understandable by anybody:

We need a shared moral standard [...] to help us make tough choices, to make trade-offs among competing tribal values. Can this be done in a principled way? The proverbial 'relativist' says that it can't be done. There are different tribes with different values, and that's all there is to say. The relativist might be right in some ultimate metaphysical sense. Perhaps our moral questions have no objectively correct answers. But even if that's true, knowing that it's true is not much help. Our laws have to say something. We have to choose, and unless we're content to flip coins, or allow that might makes right, we must choose for reasons (Greene 2013: 290).

Greene's proposal (according to some critics, based on an intuition: see Sandberg and Juth 2012) that it is good to seek the maximization of well-being is, however, an unjustified utilitarian assumption that does not seem to be open to question. On the contrary, pragmatism is inherently open to do that. A main difference between pragmatism and utilitarianism is that the former does not need to assume a specific, substantive, unique and definitive common currency (such as well-being for utilitarianism): its common currency is procedural, plural, democratic, and potentially always revisable. The project of normative adjustment aimed to reduce errors and achieve reflective equilibrium does not necessarily lead to utilitarianism, which Greene seems to assume in an unjustified way: based on the experience that everyone experiences pleasure, we apply reasoning and universalization (the golden rule) and obtain utilitarianism.

The main difference with Singer's position (on many aspects overlapping with Greene's) is that Singer is a moral realist while Greene is not. According to Greene, deriving moral principles *a priori* from self-evident truths, as Singer (2005) claims, does not seem to help and to have helped solve complex moral conflicts in the past. Greene's alternative and more promising strategy is in fact to adopt a more empiricist and pragmatist epistemological method that tests moral theories in a similar way in which scientific theories are tested. The main difference is just that

rather than testing moral theories against empirical data, we test them against our intuitions or 'considered judgments' about specific cases, or types of cases. Principles that seem to get things mostly right, but not completely right, may then, like scientific theories, be modified in hopes of capturing more of the 'data.' This method, which is very old, and perhaps inevitable, has been dubbed the method of 'reflective equilibrium' [...] To make progress, we must aim for what I have elsewhere called 'double-wide' reflective equilibrium. This means factoring into our moral theorizing not only candidate principles and particular judgments, but also an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the cognitive processes that produce those principles and judgments (Greene 2017: 8–9).

While everything in this passage is correct, Greene goes too far in claiming that only utilitarian decisions are justified in cases of conflict. Other decisions can also be justified if they are reasoned and reasonably non-rejected by others: first, data do not show that utilitarianism is the most reliable method, since it can also be based on biased and automatic intuitions; second, because this could indeed flatten the moral experience, as Williams warned, being closed to the possibility of giving context-sensitive non-utilitarian responses to cases which require it.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how a pragmatist position may address the issue of the resolvability of moral conflicts. On this matter, pragmatism clearly distinguishes itself from skeptical and ultra-liberal theses by claiming that solving moral conflicts through reflection is possible via inquiry, bias reduction, and interpersonal exchange of reasons; it also differs from utilitarian or deontological positions, according to which a single moral theory is the correct one in every context. According to a pragmatist view, both utilitarian and deontological responses can be justified; their justification depends on contextual reasons, on the people to whom reasons are offered (Scanlon 1998), as well as on procedural constraints of publicity, empirical accuracy and coherence. The pragmatist method outlined

here for solving conflicts and making normative adjustments is a form of broad reflective equilibrium, where a central role is played by the revision of moral beliefs and commitments in light of new non-moral knowledge, such as evidence suggesting the (un)reliability of decision processes. Recent empirical research supports pragmatism's pluralist and flexible approach more than monistic and generalist approaches like deontology and utilitarianism.

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