

The Resolution of Conflict Situations

by Brian Lewis

Because of the complex fabric of human relationships, it is not unusual for persons to be faced with conflicting moral obligations, for example telling the truth when to do so may mean serious injury or even death for an innocent party, or putting aside a promise in order to come to the aid of someone in trouble. It is not easy to determine what should be done in situations where one is confronted by more than one moral claim. Ethicists have tackled this problem and given us guidelines to help us to resolve situations of this nature.

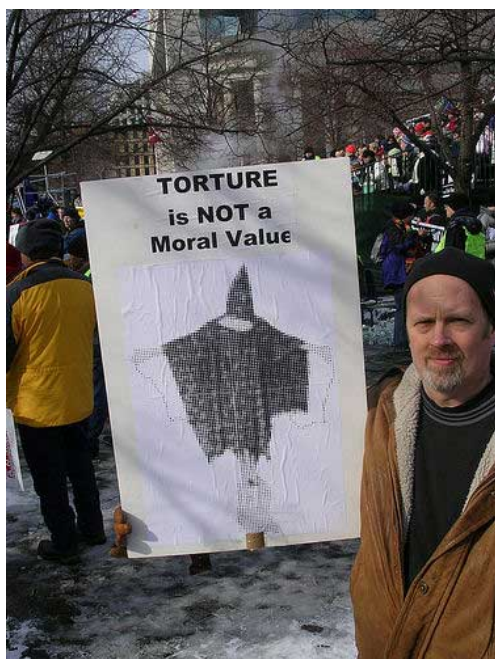


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For utilitarians the problem scarcely arises. In what may appear to be a situation of conflicting claims, the right solution for a utilitarian is to be found by weighing up the consequences of the action and deciding what will make for the greatest good of the greatest number of persons involved. Even when the long-term consequences are taken carefully into account, the difficulties with such an apparently simple solution have already been considered in treating of ‘The Main Ethical Theories’, also on this website.

Other moral philosophers, such as W.D. Ross,ⁱ attempt to unravel conflictual situations of this nature at the level of *moral rules*. The basic moral rules, according to Ross, carry with them a *prima facie* obligation to observe them. They are always binding, in that they present right-making characteristics of acting in a certain way, but they may not always prevail over other similar moral rules.

The *actual* obligation in a particular situation is determined by weighing up all the competing rules carrying a *prima facie* obligation and opting for the most important in terms of living in community with others. *Prima facie* obligations, for example keeping a promise, telling the truth, gratitude, reparation, justice, doing good and not harm to another, are right-making characteristics of actions. Insofar as an act has one of these characteristics, it would be right and obligatory to perform it. However, in practice we are virtually always faced with a choice of an action that has more than one right- or wrong-making feature. In this case we are obliged to opt for the most important rule.

This practical moral principle is helpful as far as it goes. The difficulty lies in determining which rule should prevail in a situation where more than one rule is relevant. For example, if one could construe terminating the life of a person suffering intolerable and unrelievable pain as doing good to that person, should the rule that imposes doing good to another prevail over the rule forbidding the direct killing of that person? Ross would seem to have thought not, as this would constitute an attack on the very basis of ethics itself, but others would differ on the matter.ⁱⁱ

However, since moral norms or rules have been formulated to enshrine and protect moral values, the question of a clash of moral claims is better taken up in terms of *conflicting moral values*. Within the limits set out in the discussion of integral personalism in ‘The Main Ethical Theories’, namely the inviolability of the core values that form a protective shield around the human person and that must be respected, it could be stated as a general principle that in a situation of conflict between such moral values one should choose the prior or more urgent value. This might be spelt out in a number of ‘preference principles’ regarding the order of the human goods we should seek.

For instance:

- a) All other things being equal, a higher value deserves priority over a lower one, e.g., protecting the lives of one's children at the cost of one's physical or sexual integrity or putting those close to us before others. The national good may justify censorship, for example, in time of war, just as community safety may justify the imprisonment of some of its criminal citizens.
- b) The more urgent and basic the value, the more it deserves preference, e.g., feeding a starving child before attempting to teach or instruct him.
- c) The degree of probability of realising a value in one's action must be taken into account. Going on strike may sometimes be morally right, but it is difficult to justify a strike when it has little or no chance of achieving the desired result.
- d) The preservation and support of a value in the long term must be assessed. Thus, a person could jeopardise a value by the type of single-mindedness that leads to poor health.
- e) Values protected by institutions, such as upholding contracts and keeping promises, deserve special attention, since the fabric of social life is at stake.ⁱⁱⁱ

These practical guidelines are meant to help in the quest for the moral truth in particular cases but they do not provide ready answers nor absolve the problem-solver from the often difficult task of moral reasoning.

i See W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1930).

ii See T. L. Beauchamp and J. F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford University Press: New York), pp.45-47.

iii L. Janssens, 'Norms and Priorities in a Love Ethic', *Louvain Studies* 6 (1977) 207-238. See Richard McCormick, 'Notes on Moral Theology', *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 88-89.