"Hard Cases, Particularism, and Moral Absolutes"
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I. Moral Absolutes: Three Realist Positions
- 1. Moral Absolutism: There exist *moral absolutes*. A moral absolute is a moral requirement to never perform X under *any* circumstances, where X can be ultimately specified in non-evaluative terms.[1]
  - G.E.M. Anscombe: Lists the following propositions, common among analytic philosophers, as "inimical to the Christian religion."[2]
    - "8. There are no absolute moral prohibitions always in force."
    - "5. Imaginary cases, which are not physical possibilities for human beings, are of value in considering ethics."
  - Theological reasons for moral absolutism: Scripture (e.g., Decalogue, Mark 10:4-12, esp. Romans 3:8); Church Tradition (cf. Justin Martyr, Augustine, Aquinas); Church Teaching (for Roman Catholics, JPII's *Veritatis Splendor*)
- Non-Absolutism: ~Moral Absolutism. There are no actions X (specifiable non-evaluatively) that do not admit of at least *some* circumstances in which they may permissibly be performed.
  - 2. Consequentialism: The right action is the one that *maximizes goodness*.
    - On my understanding of consequentialism, it is possible to specify some ultimate kinds of good G1, … Gn that each have some weight W1, … Wn and can be instantiated to some degree m1, …, mn. Deciding whether to choose A is a matter of adding up the goodness.
    - Ought to do A if: $W1*m1 + \ldots + Wn*mn > W1*m'1 + \ldots + W1*m'n$. (Where mi is the amount of Gi generated by action A; m'i that generated by action not-A.)
  - 3. Intuitionism: There are "prima facie duties" or "pro tanto reasons"; performing the right action is a matter of *weighing* all the reasons in favor of A and all the reasons in favor of ~A and performing the action with the *most weight* (the action for which one has *most reason*).
    - Consequentialism vs. Intuitionism: The good vs the right.
    - Examples of this view: W.D. Ross, Michael Huemer, Russ Shafer-Landau, Thomas Hurka, probably G.E. Moore.

II. Hard Cases
- Ticking Time-Bomb Scenario: You can save N people by murdering one innocent person. Intuitively, you should; this counts against moral absolutism.
- However, note that there is a *dialectical symmetry* here between moral absolutism and consequentialism; consequentialists also face hard cases.

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[1] Cf. John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes*: Tradition, Revision, and Truth (1991).

[2] Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Twenty Opinions Common Among Modern Anglo-American Philosophers" (1986) in *Faith in a Hard Ground* (2008), p. 67.

- ○ Doctor Case: You can save three patients by murdering and stealing the organs of one patient, who is otherwise likely to survive. Intuitively, you shouldn't; this counts against consequentialism, as I understand that view.

III. Potential Absolutist Responses to Hard Cases
- ○ 1. The Bad-but-Not-that-Bad Response: It is technically wrong to kill the innocent, but it is a "venial" sin at most, and you would be minimally blameworthy.
    - ■ Not a terrible fall-back position; but many find it intuitive that it is not wrong *at all* to kill the single innocent in the ticking time-bomb scenario.
- ○ 2. Theological response: Would it be okay to blaspheme and reject God to save N number of people? Seems not; suggests Christians should remain absolutists.
- ○ 3. Divine Command Non-Consequentialism: Some sort of non-absolutism *would* be true, except that God has chosen to "absolutize" rules that would otherwise have exceptions. (One good reason he might: The "Self-Effacing" worry.) This explains our intuitions in hard cases, while still preserving absolute moral prohibitions. [Cp. Geach]
- ○ 4. The Uncooperative World Reply: Consider the following thought-experiment. Suppose one day we found out from science that there were little people floating in the air, and that every time one breathes 1000 people die. What should we do? Answer: *Stop breathing*. So, every macro-person should stop breathing and die.
    - ■ Unfortunately, *the world has simply put us in a difficult position*; in an analogous way, unless you are a consequentialist, you shouldn't expect that the world could never put us in a difficult position where *the right* might involve, as an unintended consequence, sacrificing *the good*.
- ○ 5. The 'Going Meta' Strategy: If all plausible versions of moral absolutism and moral non-absolutism face hard cases, then we should not treat our intuitions in these cases as reliable (because they are simply inconsistent).
    - ■ So, we must examine whether there are plausible versions of intuitionism that do not face hard cases. I will try to argue that the only form of intuitionism that avoids hard cases is *strong particularism* -- and this version of intuitionism is *not plausible*.

IV. A Challenge for Intuitionism
- ○ Christians have been attracted to people like Ross, Huemer, Shafer-Landau, etc., probably because they provide nice responses to anti-realists. But this is bad!
- ○ Unfortunately, their views are "inimical to the Christian religion" -- sad!
- ○ Worry about intuitionism:
    1. Either *saving life L in circumstance C* has some determinate weight n in its favor for all L, or it does not.
    2. If so, then intuitionism faces hard cases.
    3. If not, then particularism is true of situations involving simple weighing of lives.
    4. So either intuitionism faces hard cases, in which case it is not dialectically superior to absolutism, or it reduces to particularism, which is implausible.
- ○ For 2: n+n > n. So you can make one die to save two.
- ○ For 3: (P) For some m, $L1+...+Lm-4 < L^*$ but $L1+...+Lm > L^*$. But why?

- You might say "m-4 is not too many lives, whereas m *is* too many lives." But too many *for what*?
- Imagine if I were to say: "This city is too big." Presumably it is too big *for comfortable living*, or *for effective governance*, etc.; there is some relatively well-defined standard that imposes a determinate value on the sizes of cities.
- It is difficult to see what rational standard there could be that would generate (P) but not also difficult cases; so it seems that we have to say that the weight of a life is unique to each scenario, and that this weight is not imposed in virtue of some more general standard.
- Strong particularism: There are no general, non-trivial moral principles that determine the weights of reasons in different circumstances; the weight of some consideration must be intuited directly in each circumstance.
- In sum: All plausible versions of intuitionism face hard cases, except for strong particularism. So, other than strong particularists, non-absolutists are not in a dialectically superior position to absolutists. And if there are good reasons to reject strong particularism, then hard cases do not present a decisive objection against moral absolutism.