SYMPOSIUM ON ETHICS AND DECISION THEORY

Introduction

Seth Lazar

When soldiers kill, they are often unsure whether their victims are combatants or civilians caught in the cross fire. When firefighters protect our towns from bushfires, they often burn vegetation to starve the oncoming fire, risking damage to life and property. When governments license coal mines, they risk spoiling the world for future generations, to save us from lesser, but surer, hardships now. From the extreme to the everyday, from public policy to the daily commute, our lives are built on risks. And these risks do not concern the future alone: the moral character of our actions often depends on facts about the past, and the past too is often obscure. We must punish only the guilty, but how often are we sure of a defendant's guilt? People should bear the costs of their choices, but how can we know whether some cost came from choice and not from bad luck alone? Whether our actions are right or wrong always depends on facts about the past, present, or future. And those facts are almost always in doubt. Whenever we act, we risk acting wrongly. Philosophers must explain how such risks can be justified, or else we ourselves risk irrelevance.

To be more precise: we need a moral theory for decision-making with imperfect information; that is, decision-making under what decision theorists call both *risk*, when we can assign probabilities, and *uncertainty*, when we cannot. And yet contemporary philosophy has, for the most part, offered a division of labor: ethicists work out what we morally ought to do if we knew all the facts; decision theorists, working quite separately, focus on what we rationally ought to do, given our doubt. In this symposium, we start to bridge that divide—to bring ethicists and decision theorists together, to work out what we morally ought to do when we don't know all the facts.

This question can be broached in two ways. We can ask which acts are objectively permissible, when we act under imperfect information. And

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we can ask which acts are subjectively permissible. An act is objectively permissible when it is permissible in light of all the facts. It is subjectively permissible when it is permissible in light of your imperfect information. In this symposium, we focus on the latter topic. We take no stand on how that bears on the objective permissibility of our actions. Philosophers have long tussled over whether objective or subjective permissibility is fundamental, with adamant adherents to either side, as well as those who want us, in Frank Jackson's words, to simply 'distinguish and relax'.¹ In these essays, we stay neutral on that question. We simply assume that we need a detailed account of moral decision-making with imperfect information, regardless of whether it ultimately proves fundamental. The puzzles and problems are legion; we have focused here on three.

The first essay, by Seth Lazar, explores the project of bringing ethics and decision theory into dialogue, from the perspective that would seem most allergic to that union. Many decision theorists are consequentialists. Many consequentialists assume that they can give a criterion of subjective permissibility by simply adopting the dictates of decision theory (this assumption is wrong—matters are much more complicated than that). But deontological moral theorists, who balk at deciding what to do by ranking outcomes, are predisposed to revile the decision-theoretic approach yet thus far lack in any well-thought-out alternative. Lazar's essay seeks to reassure them: broadly speaking, decision theory is for deontologists too, although they must adapt it if they would preserve their conviction that we are often permitted to act suboptimally.

Lara Buchak's and J. Robert G. Williams's essays share Lazar's optimism about the prospects for unifying ethics and decision theory. They explore two questions on which significant advances have been made in the recent decision-theoretic literature and which have direct bearing on moral decision-making as well. In her earlier work, Lara Buchak has offered a compelling defense of the rationality of risk-averse and risk-seeking attitudes, in opposition to the orthodox endorsement of risk neutrality.² In her essay for this symposium, Buchak takes the next step: in her book, she argued that nonneutral attitudes to risk can be rationally permissible; here she asks whether, in decisions that affect others, they can sometimes be morally required.

Sometimes moral permissibility hinges on propositions that are not merely risky or uncertain but genuinely indeterminate. J. Robert G. Williams has done much to advance our understanding of indeterminacy in

1. The phrase is one Jackson has used in various presentations, but he describes the underlying attitude in Frank Jackson, "Procrastinate Revisited," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 95 (2014): 634–47.

2. See esp. Lara Buchak, *Risk and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

general and its implications for rational decision-making in particular.³ He now brings that expertise to bear on moral choices, offering a tasting platter of theoretical approaches, from which moral philosophers can choose the method best suited to their theoretical and moral commitments.

The final essay in the symposium returns to the topic of whether deontological ethics can draw on decision theory in developing a standard of subjective permissibility and sounds a note of caution. Sergio Tenenbaum argues that ethicists might face more difficulties importing ideas from decision theory than Lazar, Buchak, and Williams assume. What's more, they might be able to develop their own theory of subjective permissibility without drawing on the 'multiplicative model' of decision theory. And they can do so in a manner that draws directly on fundamental Kantian ideas that not only deliver sensible deontic verdicts on particular cases but do so in a way that is more explanatory than any decision-theoretic alternative.

Our aims, then, are both methodological and substantive. Methodologically, we seek to bring together two vibrant research programs—ethicists and decision theorists have made great strides in recent years, but they have been walking along separate paths. Bringing them together is an end in itself, and we hope that this exchange is a precursor to many more like it. Substantively, we want to explore the contours of a theory of subjective permissibility in more depth than has ever been done before. Ethicists in general—and deontologists especially—have been remiss on this score. We hope that the essays in this symposium will spark a new wave of proposals aimed at shedding as much light on subjective permissibility as has already been cast on decision-making with full information.

3. See J. Robert G. Williams, "Decision-Making under Indeterminacy," *Philosophers' Imprint* 14 (2014): 1–34, and "Nonclassical Minds and Indeterminate Survival," *Philosophical Review* 123 (2014): 379–428.