

Who's Afraid of Epistemic Dilemmas?*

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§0. Introduction

I'm a dilemmist. I think there are epistemic dilemmas: situations in which you ought to believe that p , and at the same time ought not to believe that p .¹ In these situations you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Some people don't like this view. One reaction I've often experienced is that we should only accept it as a last resort, if all else fails. This chapter attempts to make sense of that reaction, and argues that, ultimately, it doesn't make much sense.

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¹ Whenever I say you ought (/ought not) to believe that p , I mean that you *epistemically* ought (/ought not) to believe it, not that you morally, or legally, or prudentially, ought to, unless stated otherwise. The same goes for 'should', 'must' 'required' 'obligated' and the like.

Section one presents two kinds of situations which I think give rise to dilemmas. Section two explains what exactly it is I mean by an 'epistemic dilemma'. Sections three through to six look at several ways one might try to justify the claim that dilemmism should be a last resort, and argue that none of them is persuasive. Section seven concludes.

§I. Epistemic Dilemmas

In Hughes (2019a) I gave an example of what I think is the strongest candidate for being an epistemic dilemma. It involves these two norms:

KNOWLEDGE: One ought to believe that p only if one knows that p

RATIONALITY: One ought to be epistemically rational

In some circumstances KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY issue conflicting instructions. To see how, consider the following case, which is based on a true story:

BRUEGHEL: *The Crucifixion*, a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, hangs in a church in a small town in Northern Italy. A gang of thieves intends to steal it. After weeks of planning, late one March night they quietly disable the church alarm system, break in through the apse door, snatch the painting from its frame, and make their escape. Back at the boss's house, they celebrate; they expect to negotiate a large ransom from the government for its return. Meanwhile, the local police are also celebrating. After being tipped off about the thieves' plan, they set up a hidden camera in the church and replaced the painting with an identical-looking replica. Now they can use the camera footage to identify

the thieves. The actual Brueghel is sitting in a vault in the basement of the Uffizi.²

Let 'p' = 'the thieves have a painting by Brueghel'. According to KNOWLEDGE the thieves shouldn't believe that p, because it's false. But it would be irrational for them not to believe it. So according to RATIONALITY they should believe that p. Hence, if KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY are both genuine epistemic norms, the thieves face an epistemic dilemma: they both ought to believe that p, and at the same time ought not to believe that p.

The Preface Paradox reveals another way that KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY can come into conflict.³ Take a large set of propositions that you believe. Say, ten million of them. Call this set the 'body propositions'. Let's stipulate that each of your body beliefs is rational, and that for each of the body propositions, it would be irrational for you *not* to believe it. Now consider the proposition that at least one of the body beliefs is false.⁴ Call this the 'preface proposition'. It would be irrational for you not to believe it. Given the size of the set of body beliefs, it's as good as guaranteed that at least one of them is false. So RATIONALITY requires that you believe the body propositions, and that you believe the preface proposition. Yet they are logically inconsistent. If the body propositions are all true, then the preface proposition is false. And if the preface proposition is true, then at least one of the body propositions is false. So in believing both the body propositions and the preface proposition, you are guaranteed to violate KNOWLEDGE. Hence, RATIONALITY and KNOWLEDGE conflict: by RATIONALITY, you ought to believe all of the propositions. But by KNOWLEDGE, you ought not to believe all of them. Once again, we have an epistemic dilemma.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47568323>

³ C.f. Littlejohn (fc), Williamson (fc1).

⁴ 'One of' *de dicto*, not *de re*.

Here's another dilemma, one that doesn't concern conflicts between KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY, but rather between norms internal to RATIONALITY – specifically, between norms of substantive rationality and norms of structural rationality. Consider:

SUBSTANCE: One's beliefs ought to be substantively rational

STRUCTURE: One ought not to have akratic beliefs of the form 'p, but I ought not to believe that p'

There are good reasons to think that SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE can come into conflict.⁵ Structural rationality requires you not to believe 'p, but I ought not to believe that p'. But sometimes substantive rationality requires you to believe that p and at the same time requires you to believe that you ought not to believe that p. In these situations, SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE conflict, giving rise to epistemic dilemmas.

Are there other examples of epistemic dilemmas? I think so (see Hughes 2019a). But I'll only focus on these two here.

§II. What Exactly Are Epistemic Dilemmas?

I said that epistemic dilemmas are situations in which you ought to believe that p and at the same time ought not to believe that p. But what exactly does this claim amount to?

⁵ See Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) and Worsnip (2015), amongst others.

Here's how I think of it. When it comes to conflicting 'oughts', there are *deniers*, *debaters*, *dividers*, and *dilemmists*. Let's start with deniers. They think that one of the conflicting 'oughts' is bogus – a fake, an imposter – and that the other one is genuine. If so, there isn't really a conflict here after all. For example, a denier might maintain that *really* there is no sense in which you ought to only believe what you know – there's been a muddle; knowledge is the *aim* of belief, and aims aren't oughts. The only real ought is the one having to do with RATIONALITY.⁶ Other deniers go the other way. They argue that really there is no sense in which you ought to be rational; the only genuine ought is the one having to do with KNOWLEDGE.⁷

Similarly, a denier might maintain that really there is no sense in which you ought not to believe 'p, but I ought not to believe that p'; the only real ought is the SUBSTANCE one.⁸ And of course a denier might go the other way here too, arguing that all that really matters is STRUCTURE.⁹

Debaters see things differently. Unlike deniers, they maintain that both of the conflicting 'oughts' are real, but they argue that there isn't really a conflict between them, because one of them is weightier or somehow more important than the other. Granted that the thieves ought to believe that p

⁶ I used to think this (Hughes 2017, 2019b).

⁷ I'm not sure if there are any card-carrying deniers of this kind, but Sutton (2005, 2007), Littlejohn (2013, fc1) and Williamson (fc2) come close to the view. When it's rational for you to believe that p even though you don't know that p, they think you have an excuse for believing that p. But it's pretty weird to think that you ought to believe that p if you have an excuse for doing so. Excuses mitigate blame in the face of wrongdoing, they don't make wrongdoing rightdoing. More recently Littlejohn and Williamson seem to have backed away from the excuses manoeuvre, Littlejohn (fc2) towards the dividers' camp, and Williamson to dilemmism (fc1).

⁸ See Coates (2012), Weatherson (2019) and Field (2020, fc).

⁹ Coherentists (e.g. Lehrer 1990) might be sympathetic to this view. Though of course they will maintain that there is more to structural rationality than simply not having beliefs of the form 'p, but I ought not to believe that p'.

(by RATIONALITY), and ought not to believe that p (by KNOWLEDGE), they will ask: what ought they believe *all-things-considered?*' And they insist that this question must have a univocal answer. If the answer is 'believe that p', then it cannot also be 'not believe that p', and vice versa and so on.¹⁰

Dividers also maintain that both of the conflicting 'oughts' are real. And like debaters, they think that they don't really conflict. But this isn't because one of them is weightier or more important. Rather, they think it's because 'ought' means different things in KNOWLEDGE versus RATIONALITY and in SUBSTANCE versus STRUCTURE. The thieves ought^K not to believe that they have a Brueghel, but they ought^R believe that they have one. Sometimes you ought^{SUB} to believe 'p, but I ought not to believe that p' and ought^{STR} not to have this combination of beliefs. But, dividers argue, there is no genuine conflict here – at least not of the kind that dilemmists think there is. There is no more conflict than there is in saying that some guy is tall for an academic but not tall for a basketball player. The question: 'What ought the thieves believe *all-things-considered?*' doesn't have an answer, any more than the question 'is that guy tall *full-stop?*' does.¹¹

I'm a dilemmist because I reject all of these views. Like debaters and dividers, and unlike deniers, I think that each of the conflicting 'oughts' is real. But unlike debaters, I don't think that one of them is weightier or somehow more important than the other one. And, unlike dividers, I think that 'ought' means the same thing in each of KNOWLEDGE, RATIONALITY, SUBSTANCE, and STRUCTURE. I also think that the question: 'What should the thieves believe *all-things-considered?*' does have an answer. It's just that it isn't a univocal one. *All-things-considered*, they should believe that p, and *all-things-considered* they shouldn't believe that p. And that's that. There's no getting out of the conflict. These are genuine dilemmas, and we

¹⁰ Simion (fc) seems to be a debater.

¹¹ Littlejohn (fc2) is a divider.

have to find a place for them in our epistemology, making adjustments elsewhere if needs be.

§III. Dilemmism as a Last Resort?

Unfortunately, some people don't like this idea. Of the many epistemologists I've put it to, a small minority are on board with the dilemmic view. The rest fall into one of three lots. The first lot think dilemmism is ridiculous, incoherent, impossible – not a view to be taken seriously (John Gibbons (2013) describes it as 'absurd' and 'nihilistic', amongst other choice epithets). The second lot think it's just wrong. The third lot are wary. They grudgingly concede that we might have to admit dilemmas into our epistemology, but they think we should do so only as a last resort, if all else fails.

In Hughes (2019a, ms1) I've argued that many of the most obvious and pressing objections to dilemmism fail.¹² It's a live option, one that should be taken seriously. So I'll put aside the objections of those who would dismiss it out of hand. It's the final reaction that I am interested in here – the idea that dilemmism should be a last resort. I sort of get it. Dilemmism does seem dissatisfying in some hard-to-pin-down way. So maybe it should be a last resort. But if so, well...why is that? This, I think, is an interesting question.

On the face of it, the very idea of some theory being a last resort can seem puzzling. If competing theories really are genuine competitors, rather than mere notational variants, then presumably only one of them can be right. And in that case, surely we should just try to figure out which one *is* right?

¹² See also Hughes (2018a, 2018b)

This task does not seem to call for any kind of prior preference ranking. How on earth could a right theory be less desirable than a wrong one?

But this is too simplistic. We do and should prefer theories with certain properties. To take one obvious example, everything else being equal, a simpler theory is preferable to a more complex one. So perhaps there is something to the idea that dilemmism should be the view of last resort? In the rest of this chapter, I want to look at some ways this claim might be argued for.

§IV. Theoretical Virtues and Vices

§4.1. *Simplicity*

Let's start with simplicity. The idea that we should prefer simple theories has a distinguished history. In *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle writes that "We may assume the superiority *ceteris paribus* of the demonstration which derives from fewer postulates or hypotheses" (1941: 150). Similar sentiments are expressed by Thomas Aquinas (1945), Immanuel Kant (1781/1787), Galileo Galilei (1632), Isaac Newton (1687), Albert Einstein (1963), and most famously, William of Ockham. It isn't uncontroversial, but I will grant it here for the sake of argument. So, we can ask: should dilemmism be treated as a last resort because it is objectionably complex?

The answer depends, of course, on what makes one theory more complex than another. This is a notoriously difficult question to answer. We know simplicity when we see it, but saying just what exactly it is turns out to be quite tricky. Many answers have been proposed. It is impossible to discuss them all here. But one of the more popular ideas is that theory *A* is simpler than theory *B* to the extent that *A* explains the data with fewer

fundamental principles and postulates than *B*.¹³ Let's focus on that. Does dilemmism do worse than the alternatives on this way of thinking?

I don't think so. Consider the conflict between KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY. Deniers might seem to have an advantage here, insofar as they accept only one of these norms, whereas dilemmists have both. But the apparent advantage is illusory. Deniers who reject RATIONALITY still have to account for the data that motivates it. They do so by employing the machinery of excuses, thereby bringing in additional complexity. Similarly, deniers who reject KNOWLEDGE have to account for the relevant data. They do so by employing the machinery of aims. If anything, dilemmists have the advantage here, insofar as they use only one tool to account for all of the data.

Deniers might reply that KNOWLEDGE plus excuses, or RATIONALITY plus aims, aren't *unrelated* postulates. Proponents of the KNOWLEDGE-and-excuses package argue that it is *because* one ought to believe only what one knows that one has an excuse when one believes rationally but non-knowledgeably – rational belief being something like a good attempt at knowledge that fails to hit the mark through no fault of one's own. Proponents of the RATIONALITY-and-aims package likewise argue that it is because knowledge is the aim of belief that one ought to be rational – again, rationality being a good attempt at achieving the aim of knowledge.

If dilemmists were obliged to accept KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY without positing any explanatory-dependency relations between them – in effect treating each as an independent fundamental norm – then this might be a problem. But the dilemmist is under no such obligation. It might well be that KNOWLEDGE explains RATIONALITY – that the latter depends, in part,

¹³ Einstein writes: "The grand aim of all science...is to cover the greatest possible number of empirical facts by logical deductions from the smallest possible number of hypotheses or axioms" (quoted in Nash 1963: 173)

on the former for its content and normative force – even whilst conflicts between the two give rise to dilemmas (indeed, this is my view).

What about debaters and dividers? Do they offer simpler theories than dilemmists? Not as far as I can tell. Debaters accept both of KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY, but also wheel in the machinery of weightings. Dividers also accept both norms but bring in additional complexity by proliferating ‘oughts’. If anything it seems like dilemmism has the upper hand once again.

What about dilemmism as an approach to conflicts between SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE? Here things play out somewhat differently. Most of the debate has been about whether they really do conflict in the first place. Some epistemologists think not.¹⁴ As noted earlier, there are some deniers. But (for reasons that remain obscure to me) debaters and dividers are thin on the ground.

Do deniers have an advantage over dilemmists when it comes to simplicity? It depends. Some dilemmists (e.g. Alex Worsnip 2015, *fc*) argue that SUBSTANCE is equivalent to EVIDENTIALISM:

EVIDENTIALISM: One ought to believe what one’s evidence supports

If that’s right, then one cannot maintain that SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE are both true and conflict with one another, and at the same time maintain that one can be derived from, or explained by, the other. It is part of the logic of evidential support that if one’s evidence supports believing that *q* (e.g. ‘*p*, but I ought not to believe that *p*’), then it doesn’t also support not believing that *q*. It is for this reason, amongst others, that Worsnip argues

¹⁴ E.g. Smithies (2019)

that substantive rationality and structural rationality are two distinct, *sui generis*, but equally genuine kinds of rationality. On this view, we have two fundamental principles, whereas deniers only have one. Although how much this point favours denial over dilemmism very much depends on whether deniers can explain all the data that needs explaining. One might well think they cannot. It certainly seems to be a datum that it is irrational to believe ‘p, but I ought not to believe that p’. Deniers inability to explain this datum is a strike against their view.¹⁵

In any case, things might not be so straightforward. Consider a dispositionalist theory of rationality, according to which one’s belief that p is rational just in case, in coming to believe that p, one manifests a disposition conducive to knowing that p (Lasonen-Aarnio 2010, fc1, fc2, Hughes fc, ms2, Williamson fc1, fc2). My view – unfortunately there is no space to elaborate on it here – is that this explains both SUBSTANCE *and* STRUCTURE.¹⁶ Yet in certain unfortunate situations, manifesting a knowledge-conducive disposition both requires and prohibits believing ‘p, but I ought not to believe that p’. Hence, we still have dilemmas, but only one fundamental principle.¹⁷

§4.2. *Internal Consistency*

Simplicity considerations don’t make dilemmism a last resort, then. But simplicity isn’t the only theoretical virtue. Another one is internal

¹⁵ Though see Field (2020, fc) for an error theory.

¹⁶ I also think that EVIDENTIALISM is false; it can’t explain why beliefs influenced by unconscious biases are irrational, whereas ‘dispositionalism’ can (Hughes fc).

¹⁷ The idea that one and the same norm could give rise to conflicting requirements may seem odd, but it shouldn’t. Ruth Barcan Marcus (1980) points to the following example. Consider the norm ‘keep your promises’. Now imagine that you have made inconsistent promises, such that if you keep the first one, you will necessarily break the second one, and vice versa. You face a dilemma, one that is generated by the application of a single norm.

consistency. It is close to uncontroversial that theory *A* is *ceteris paribus* preferable to theory *B* if *B* contains contradictions and *A* does not.

At a glance, dilemmism might look internally inconsistent. (1) and (2) are contradictories:

1. One ought to believe that *p*
2. It is not the case that one ought to believe that *p*

If dilemmism was committed to (1) and (2) both being true in conflict cases, this would be a problem. But it isn't. In conflict cases, the dilemmic view asserts not (1) and (2), but rather (1) and (3):

1. One ought to believe that *p*
3. One ought not to believe that *p*

And (1) and (3) are not contradictories.

However, given standard deontic logic (SDL) contradictions can be derived from them.¹⁸ This means that the dilemmist must reject SDL. Is that a problem? It depends on whether an acceptable dilemmas-tolerant logic can be developed to replace it. Jeff Horty (2003) and Lou Goble (2009) have proposed such logics. They can be tested for simplicity as compared to SDL. That is too large a task to undertake here. If they turn out to be objectionably complex, then dilemmists might be on the hook for complexity after all.¹⁹ But that is an open question.

¹⁸ See McConnell (2018)

¹⁹ C.f. Littlejohn (fc2)

§4.3. Internal Coherence

Another theoretical virtue is internal coherence: the absence of *ad hoc* hypotheses tacked on in order to get out of isolated problems. How does dilemmism do on this front compared to its rivals?

I don't see a problem here. There is nothing *ad hoc* about adopting a dilemmic approach to conflicts between KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY and between SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE. The dilemmic view is not motivated by the desire to get out of a sticky situation, but rather by a desire to respect the observation that these principles all seem to have genuine normative force.

What about the alternatives? Deniers who accept the KNOWLEDGE-and-excuses package are sometimes accused of bringing it excuses in an objectionably *ad hoc* manner (Gerken 2011, 2017, Gao 2017). However, this is a dubious charge. *Any* norm can be blamelessly, and hence excusably, violated in the way that proponents of KNOWLEDGE maintain that it can (Srinivasan 2015, Hughes 2019a). If so, it is no objection to the KNOWLEDGE-centric view that it appeals to the possibility of excusable violations.

What about debaters and dividers? Debaters seem to be okay here too. It is very plausible that some conflicting obligations can be weighed against one another, with one coming out on top. This is clearest in the moral domain. Suppose you promise to meet a friend for lunch, but on your way you come across a person lying in the road bleeding heavily. There is no one else around. If you stop to help, you'll miss lunch. But if you don't stop, the person will die. It is perfectly clear which of your conflicting obligations should take priority here. There is nothing *ad hoc* about appeals to weightings *per se* – they are an essential tool for normative theorising. The question is whether norms like KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY and SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE can be weighed against one another. I don't

think they can. It is impossible to compare them along the same, or sufficiently similar, dimensions of evaluation in a way that makes weighting possible. However, whilst this is a reason to reject debaterism, it is not a reason to accuse debaters making *ad hoc* appeals.

Dividers, on the other hand, may be worse off. Deontic modals like ‘ought’ ‘may’ and ‘must’ are context-sensitive in many ways.²⁰ But it is far from clear that they exhibit the kind of context-sensitivity needed to resolve conflicts between epistemic norms in the way that dividers would like. If dividers propose that we accept a new kind of context-sensitivity simply in order to get the result they want in conflict cases, this really would be *ad hoc*.

§4.4. Summary

In summary, there is no straightforward way of arguing that dilemmism should be a last resort on the grounds that it fails to exhibit theoretical virtues like simplicity, consistency, and coherence. Indeed, in some respects it seems to do better than rival views along these dimensions of evaluation. Epistemologists who want to bump it to the back of the queue will have to find a different justification for doing so.

§V. It Would Be Nice If P, Therefore P

§5.1. Wouldn't It Be Nice If There Weren't Dilemmas?

Let's try a different tack. It would be nice if there weren't epistemic dilemmas. No-one wants to be in a situation where they cannot but do

²⁰ See e.g. many of the essays in Charlow & Chrisman (2016) for discussion.

something wrong. We can't always have nice things, but it isn't unreasonable to try to get them if we can. Could this be a reason for thinking that we should only accept dilemmas as a last resort?

As it stands, this reasoning is obviously flawed. It would be nice if we didn't have a Tory government in the UK. Unfortunately, we do, for the time being, at least. It would be nice if no-one suffered and death was quick and painless. But they do, and it usually isn't. 'It would be nice if p' doesn't entail 'p', and the idea that we should believe as a last resort that there is a Tory government, that no-one suffers and that death is always quick and painless is absurd.

§5.2. *Sayre-McCord*

But these are all *descriptive* facts. Might things be different when it comes to *normative* facts? Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ms1, ms2) thinks so. He argues that the fact that it would be nice if there weren't moral dilemmas is a reason to think there aren't moral dilemmas. His reasoning is that a theory of a better morality is a better theory of morality. What he means by this is that we can figure out what the *correct* moral theory is by figuring out what the *ideal* moral theory is – the one we would most like to be the case. Sayre-McCord takes this to rule out the possibility of moral dilemmas, arguing that they have no place in an ideal moral theory.

Why not? Because, he argues, it is unfair – morally objectionable – to blame someone for φ -ing or ψ -ing if they had no choice *but* to either φ or ψ . Now, if there were no other acceptable moral theory that didn't allow for dilemmas, then the unfairness of our moral theory would be something we would just have to live with. But Sayre-McCord thinks that each dilemmic moral theory has a fairer non-dilemmic counterpart. So, he thinks, we should reject the idea of moral dilemmas.

Could an argument like this be made in epistemology? If it could, we would have reason to think that dilemmism should be accepted only as a last resort. But how exactly would the argument go?

Sayre-McCord thinks we should reject moral dilemmas on moral grounds. So maybe we should reject epistemic dilemmas on *epistemic* grounds? Okay, but what are the relevant epistemic grounds? One possibility is that they are the usual things we look at in theory choice – fit with the data, simplicity, consistency, coherence, and so on. But we've already seen that dilemmism does no worse than the alternatives by those measures. Perhaps the idea should instead be that it is *epistemically unfair* to maintain that there are some situations in which one cannot but mess up from an epistemic point of view? Unfortunately, it is very difficult to see what 'epistemic unfairness' is even supposed to *be* in this context. To me it looks like a phrase without a meaning.

A better idea might be that it is morally unfair – or perhaps just unfair *tout court* – to *epistemically* blame someone for φ -ing or ψ -ing if they had no choice but to either φ or ψ . This makes more sense. We do sometimes judge people to be epistemically blameworthy even when they haven't violated any moral norms (Brown 2020a, 2020b).

However, even if it is unfair to epistemically blame someone for φ -ing or ψ -ing when they had no choice but to φ or ψ , this won't tell us anything about whether there can be epistemic dilemmas, or whether dilemmism should be a last resort. As noted earlier, *any* norm can be blamelessly violated. So if we reason that if it's unfair to blame someone for φ -ing, they were under no obligation not to φ , we will end up with a normative epistemology with no norms *at all*. Hardly an attractive endpoint.

§5.3. *Broadening the Search*

Still, even if we reject a straightforward application of Sayre-McCord's argument, we might nevertheless take inspiration from it. Perhaps there are moral reasons of a *different* kind to treat epistemic dilemmas as a last resort? Recently analytic epistemologists have been increasingly interested in the moral and political dimensions of our epistemic practices. For instance, Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that women are subject to epistemic testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, and Charles Mills (2007) argues that White Ignorance perpetuates the subjugation of black people. Such critiques of epistemic *practices* are, by extension, critiques of *implicit* normative epistemologies themselves (i.e. implicit normative epistemic *theories*).

Fricker and Mills's points are well taken. It would be naïve and myopic to ignore moral and political considerations when developing normative epistemologies. But the question is: are there moral or political reasons to treat the kind of dilemmic views I advocate as a last resort? That is, dilemmas involving KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY and SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE? Perhaps I'm short-sighted, but I must confess that I can see none.²¹

²¹ Others may disagree. Amia Srinivasan (2020) argues that a radical worldview should lead us to be epistemic externalists. Zoe Johnson King (ms) argues that it should lead us to be epistemic *internalists*. Perhaps they would have views about dilemmas. I am unpersuaded by both of their arguments, but there is no space to discuss them here.

§VI. The Methodology of Normative Epistemology

§6.1. *A Methodological Concern About Dilemmism*

We've looked at several ways one might try to justify treating dilemmism as a last resort, none of which is very compelling. Time to call off the search? Not quite. There is one final line of thought I would like to consider – one that might have real bite.

Earlier, when discussing theoretical virtues like simplicity, consistency, and coherence, I focused on two *specific* dilemmic views – one involving conflicts between KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY, the other involving conflicts between SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE. I argued that they are not theoretically vicious. But if we focus instead on the *methodology* of an approach to normative epistemology that accepts dilemmas, things might look less rosy.

Here's the worry. In accepting dilemmas, we run the risk of allowing norms to proliferate unchecked. Every time we discover that two would-be norms turn out to conflict, each of which has something to be said in its favour, we can simply declare them both to be genuine, and assert that cases in which they conflict are dilemmas. What is this method likely to produce? Very likely an ungodly mess; a theory overflowing with superfluous unexplained and disunified fundamental principles. In other words: a theory that is the exact opposite of simple and coherent.²²

²² This worry may be what Worsnip has in mind when he writes "...allowing just any kind of conflict between requirements is permissive in a way that makes the methodology of arguing for particular requirements considerably more difficult. One check on our ability to posit rational requirements costlessly is the possibility that such rational requirements might conflict with other, more plausible, requirements. If we allow for rational dilemmas, then we can never show a putative requirement of rationality to be false by showing that it conflicts

§6.2. Norms Running Riot

To see how this pan out in practice, consider some examples.

There is something to be said for a certainty norm on belief (Beddor 2020):

CERTAINTY: One ought to believe that p only if p is epistemically certain

There is also something to be said for a biconditional version of the KNOWLEDGE norm:

BI-KNOWLEDGE: One ought to believe that p iff one knows that p

Suppose that one can know that p without p being epistemically certain.²³ In that case, there will be situations in which CERTAINTY and BI-KNOWLEDGE conflict, with BI-KNOWLEDGE telling you to believe that p , and CERTAINTY telling you not to believe that p .

In the other direction, there is something to be said for a fallibilist probability norm on belief (McGlynn 2013):

PROBABILITY: One ought to believe that p if p is probable above some threshold $n < 1$

with some other important requirement.” (2015: 36) As noted earlier, Worsnip argues that SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE are two distinct, *sui generis*, but equally genuine kinds of rationality, and suggests that it is okay to accept conflicts between them because these conflicts run *across* normative domains but not *within* them. This is compatible with accepting a ban on intra-domain conflicts. Worsnip advocates this ban as a way of ruling out at least some putative requirements

²³ This is controversial. Some infallibilists (e.g. Williamson 2000) argue that if one knows that p , then p is epistemically certain.

Suppose that *p* can be probable above the threshold even when one is not in a position to know that *p*. In that case PROBABILITY and KNOWLEDGE will conflict in some cases, with PROBABILITY telling you to believe that *p*, and KNOWLEDGE telling you not to believe that *p*.

Or, moving away from epistemology for a moment, consider Causal Decision Theory (CDT) and Evidential Decision Theory (EDT). Each has something to say for it, but, as Newcomb's Paradox shows, sometimes they deliver conflicting verdicts. EDT tells you to be a two-boxer whereas CDT tells you to be a one-boxer.

I could continue, but you get the point. Now, should we be dilemmists about *these* conflicts? Surely not. But how do we rule them out if we've already allowed dilemmas into our epistemology? And if we can't rule them out, then it looks like we'll end up with an extremely complex and highly disunified epistemology. Does this mean that dilemmas should be a last resort?

§6.3. *Response*

No. All it means is that our methodology should respect the usual theoretical virtues – simplicity, consistency, coherence, and the like. An epistemology which accepted all of the norms just described, and maintained that whenever they conflict there are dilemmas, would not be doing so. To see why, it will be helpful to contrast it with the dilemmic views that I advocate.

As I said earlier, KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY stand in an *explanatory-dependency* relation. It is *because* one ought to believe only what one knows that one ought to be rational. The two norms aren't *both* fundamental principles – only KNOWLEDGE is. Put another way, RATIONALITY is

predictable given KNOWLEDGE. By contrast, there are no explanatory-dependency relations between CERTAINTY and BI-KNOWLEDGE, or between KNOWLEDGE and PROBABILITY, or CDT and EDT. Unlike KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY, they are *competitors*, not *compliments*. In each case, accepting both brings a theoretical cost – additional complexity. This is a reason to think that we should choose between them.

What about SUBSTANCE and STRUCTURE? These two don't stand in an explanatory-dependency relation in the way that KNOWLEDGE and RATIONALITY do. According to my view, they are both manifestations of a single norm. But if so, then there aren't even two norms to be *potential* competitors here, just one norm that happens to sometimes give rise to dilemmas. According to Worsnip, they are two distinct, *sui generis*, kinds of rationality. Is this a problem? Not necessarily. On Worsnip's view, although there are two fundamental norms, they are, in an important sense, once again not *competitors*. SUBSTANCE tells you what beliefs to *have*, whereas STRUCTURE tells you how those beliefs should *fit together*. They are not trying to answer one and the same question. They're answering different questions, it's just that sometimes they collide. So again, there is a difference between them and norms like CERTAINTY vs. BI-KNOWLEDGE, KNOWLEDGE vs. PROBABILITY, and CDT vs. EDT. In each case, these competing norms *are* trying to answer the same question. And so, a good methodology should lead us to choose between their answers. Otherwise, we will once again end up with unappealing complexity.

§6.4. Summary

If accepting dilemmas meant committing oneself to an anarchic mishmash of unchecked proliferating norms, then dilemmism should indeed be treated as a last resort. But it doesn't; adopting a methodology that disregards the usual theoretical virtues does. The possibility of dilemmas

need not concern us, provided that we develop our normative epistemology in a responsible way.

§VII. Conclusion

We've looked at a number of ways one might justify the claim that accepting epistemic dilemmas should be a last resort. None of them stands up to scrutiny. There's nothing to be afraid of.²⁴

§VIII. References

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