

## 1

## Moral struggle

## 1.1 Two kinds of struggle

Adam lost his innocence and acquired a taste both for good and for evil. Yet he ate the forbidden fruit and after, it was clear what was good and what ought to be done.

According to this vision of our moral predicament, there are no gaps in our moral knowledge requiring completion through inquiry as there are gaps in our scientific knowledge. We may be ignorant of the consequences of our choices; but given any conjectured consequence, there is no doubt about its value. The remedy for our ignorance of consequences is, indeed, to be found either in scientific inquiry or in better decision theory. Aside from these aids to conduct, however, the best that can be done for Fallen Man is to institute a regimen of character building designed to strengthen his will. Moral problems are problems of moral training and therapy. There is no need for moral inquiry because there is no dearth of knowledge of good and evil.

To claim that we know everything there is to know about nature is quixotic arrogance. The results of science offer knowledge of some things but insist on our ignorance about others. In my view, the same holds for knowledge of good and evil. Our knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete. As in science, it is open to revision and improvement, and no amount of therapy will indicate how we should proceed. No doubt we have a taste for good and for evil. But our wickedness is often the product of our ignorance and not our perversity. Therapy should be supplemented by inquiry.

Dewey and Tufts point in a congenial direction when they distinguish between two kinds of moral struggle:

One kind, and that the most emphasized in moral writings and lectures, is the conflict which takes place when an individual is tempted to do something which he is convinced is wrong. Such instances are important practically in the life of an individual but they are not the occasion of moral theory. The employee of a bank who is tempted to embezzle funds may indeed try to argue himself into finding reasons why it would not be wrong for him to do it. But in such a case, he is not really thinking but merely permitting his desire to govern his beliefs. There is no sincere doubt in his mind as to what he

should do when he seeks to find some justification for what he has made up his mind to do.

Take, on the other hand, the case of a citizen of a nation which has just declared war on another country. He is deeply attached to his own State. He has formed habits of loyalty and of abiding by its laws, and now one of its decrees is that he shall support war. He feels in addition gratitude and affection for the country which has sheltered and nurtured him. But he believes that this war is unjust, or perhaps he has a conviction that all war is a form of murder and, hence, wrong. One side of his nature, one set of convictions and habits, leads him to acquiesce in war; another deep part of his being protests. He is torn between two duties; he experiences a conflict between the incompatible values presented to him by his habits of citizenship and by his religious beliefs respectively. Up to this time, he has never experienced a struggle between the two; they have coincided and reinforced one another. Now he has to make a choice between competing moral loyalties and convictions. The struggle is not between a good which is clear to him and something else which attracts him but which he knows to be wrong. It is between values each of which is an undoubted good in its place but which now get in each other's way. He is forced to reflect in order to come to a decision. Moral theory is a generalized extension of the kind of thinking in which he now engages. (Dewey and Tufts, 1932: 174–175)

A moral struggle of the first kind is a struggle against temptation. The challenge to the agent is to do what he recognizes he ought to do, all things considered when desire, habit, fear and the like incline him in some other direction. Moral reflection and inquiry directed at finding out what one ought to do are unnecessary. There is no doubt as to what ought to be done. Strength of character aided and abetted by psychomoral therapy or exhortation must be summoned to ensure that what ought to be done will be done.

In contrast, strength of will is of little help when an agent is undecided as to what he ought to do. Inquiry, not therapy, is required to address the issue at hand. Of course, if such inquiry is brought to a successful conclusion so that it becomes clear that some given option ought, all things considered, to be performed, moral struggle of the second kind should cease to be followed, perhaps, by moral struggle of the first. But struggle against temptation presupposes that the task of moral inquiry has been completed or was unnecessary in the first place.

Anyone wishing (as I do) to follow Dewey and Tufts in emphasizing the importance of moral inquiry will resist the suppression of moral struggle of the second kind in favor of moral struggle of the first. The need for such resistance demands as much advertising today as it did, according to Dewey and Tufts, when they wrote.

A subtle and interesting suppression of moral inquiry is found in D. Davidson's discussion of weakness of the will. According to Davidson (1980: 33–34), all occasions where strength of will is demanded

Cambridge University Press

0521386306 - Hard Choices: Decision Making under Unresolved Conflict

Isaac Levi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.1 TWO KINDS OF STRUGGLE

3

arise when there is moral conflict in a “minimal sense”, which exists “whenever the agent is aware of considerations that, taken alone, would lead to mutually incompatible actions.” Davidson cites as illustrations of moral conflict in this minimal sense predicaments which exemplify situations Dewey and Tufts would take to be illustrative of moral struggle of the second kind, such as the conflict between patriotism and pacificism. Two or more principles apply to a specific case and do so in a manner which yields prescriptions which cannot, in that case, be implemented jointly.

Davidson (1980: 34) asserts that very little attention has been paid to this problem, and even then it has been focused on one of two unsatisfactory solutions. One of these approaches insists that there be only one ultimate moral principle – an outlook Davidson rejects.<sup>1</sup> An alternative suggestion denies that the allegedly conflicting principles prescribe actions which are not jointly feasible. According to this view, the principles prescribe no choice at all. In the case of the agent torn between pacificism and patriotism, pacifism supports a *prima facie* case for conscientious objection. Considerations of patriotism afford a *prima facie* warrant for signing up. Neither pacificism nor patriotism taken alone makes categorical recommendations as to what ought to be done.

Davidson appears to think that when the two values are taken into account together, they will “add up” to a verdict concerning the relative merits of conscientious objection and joining the army.<sup>2</sup> But this verdict is also a *prima facie* verdict. What remains to be addressed is how the agent is to determine what ought categorically to be done. Davidson’s recommendation is that the agent determine which of the options is *prima facie* best, “all things considered” – i.e., relative to all the known relevant reasons. He should then identify the categorical appraisal of his options which is to guide his conduct with the *prima facie* appraisal all things considered. To determine categorical valuations in this way is to follow a “principle of continence” analogous to Carnap’s requirement of total evidence for inductive reasoning. It is well known that statistics can be made to lie by a partial and selective use of the available evidence. The statistician who lies in this way parallels the incontinent agent who loses the struggle against temptation by recognizing as better an option which is *prima facie* better relative to some partial set of the relevant reasons rather than all things considered (Davidson, 1980: 41–42).

According to this account, an akratic agent may be said to have acted for a reason even though he recognizes his action to be *prima facie* wrong, all things considered. We may seek explanations as to why he fails to live up to the practical analogue of the total evidence requirement and, perhaps, find them by examining such factors as “self-deception, overpowering desires, lack of imagination and the rest”.

Cambridge University Press

0521386306 - Hard Choices: Decision Making under Unresolved Conflict

Isaac Levi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Davidson concedes that the akratic agent's actions are not fully rational. They do not cohere well with his values, desires and beliefs. This failure of rationality parallels the failures exhibited by the agent who does not obey the total evidence requirement and whose failures may sometimes be subject to some kind of explanation appealing to psychological disturbances rather than to an account which provides a full and cogent rationalization.

Strength of will requires character through training, therapy, exhortation and the like in Davidson's view, just as it does in Dewey's. To this extent, there seems to be little difference between moral struggle of the first kind as depicted by Dewey and Tufts and Davidson's *akrasia*.<sup>3</sup>

The interesting and important differences between the views of Dewey and Davidson concern the analysis of conflict. Nowhere in his discussion does Davidson acknowledge the possibility that when all the relevant considerations are taken into account there is no uniquely permissible value ranking of the feasible options. The agent divided between patriotism and pacifism might think that, all things considered, enlisting is neither better than, worse than or equal in value to conscientious objection. If he does, Davidson's principle of continence should recommend that the agent refuse to make a categorical appraisal of the first option as better, worse or equal to the other. As Dewey and Tufts maintain, the agent should recognize that he does not know what ought to be done and acknowledge that his predicament is an appropriate occasion for moral reflection and inquiry. No amount of willpower will be of use to the agent (except the strength of character needed to carry on the inquiry) until such inquiry is brought to a successful conclusion. Davidson's account of weakness of the will is consistent with recognizing this possibility, but he nowhere acknowledges the possibility or its importance. To the contrary, he seems to think that contexts of moral dilemma are precisely the occasions where challenges to willpower arise.

This is simply false. When moral conflicts arise because the relevant moral considerations yield conflicting *prima facie* recommendations, it will usually be the case that there is no clear *prima facie* recommendation if these moral considerations are taken together. Further inquiry will be needed. To suppose otherwise is to assume that before the conflict a definite all-things-considered *prima facie* verdict was provided by the available arsenal of moral principles, that direct inspection of the specific situation provides the required *prima facie* verdict or that this verdict is rendered arbitrarily. In my judgement, it is better to admit that one does not know what is for the best, all things considered, than to invoke the shaky authority of intuition or arbitrary fiat. And although it may be true sometimes that we have ready-

made recipes for resolving conflicts, the supposition that we always have such recipes at our disposal is just not credible. When we do not, weakness of will – at least in the sense envisaged by Davidson – is not an issue.

Davidson should have said that when moral inquiry is over and a settled verdict as to what ought to be done, all things considered, has been reached, the agent must then gird his loins and implement what he recognizes he ought to do. When moral conflict is over, the testing of the will begins. When it is clear what ought to be done, all things considered, the agent may be tempted to follow a course of action which can be rationalized by taking into account only some of the relevant considerations while neglecting others. Succumbing to this kind of temptation is, indeed, incontinence just as Davidson says, but it is not an example of moral dilemma or conflict.

Genuine dilemma or conflict presupposes that what ought to be done, all things considered, is as yet unsettled. The only weakness the will can exhibit in such a context is coming to a conclusion as to what ought categorically to be done when, all things considered, no verdict is warranted. In emphasizing the importance for moral reflection of moral struggle of the second kind, Dewey and Tufts were warning against this very special form of *akrasia*.

### 1.2 Withholding judgement

A moral struggle of the second kind arises when the following four conditions are satisfied:

1. The agent endorses one or more value commitments  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$ .
2. Value commitment  $P_i$  stipulates that in contexts of deliberation of type  $T_i$ , the evaluation of the feasible options should satisfy constraints  $C_i$ .
3. The specific decision problem being addressed is recognized to be of each of the types  $T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n$  so that all of the constraints  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$  are supposed to apply.
4. The decision problem currently faced is one where the constraints  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$  cannot all be jointly satisfied.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes value commitments are represented in the guise of moral principles (e.g., the prohibition against breaking promises), but they need not appear that way. They may be represented as expressions of life goals, personal desires, tastes or professional commitments. Nor need moral struggles of the second kind be restricted to conflicts involving one or more value commitments of an allegedly distinctive moral type. Choosing one of several careers often entails a moral

struggle and is widely recognized to do so by agents who face such choices. This is so even though no issue raised by the Decalogue or other systems of categorical imperatives appear to be at stake.

Given a specific context of choice with a specific set of feasible options as described according to the information available to the agent, a constraint  $C_i$  is intended to impose requirements on the permissible ways of evaluating feasible options. An account of ways of evaluating feasible options will be developed in chapter 5. For the present, it suffices to think of a way of evaluating feasible options as a comparison of the feasible options as better or worse. A way of evaluating feasible options is permissible according to the agent if the agent has not ruled it out for the purpose of determining which feasible options are admissible – i.e., not prohibited from being chosen. A constraint  $C_i$  imposes conditions which every permissible way of evaluating the options must satisfy.

If several constraints are imposed on a given set of options, more and more ways of evaluation will tend to be ruled out. The agent's "value structure" or evaluation of the feasible options is given by the ways of evaluation which meet the requirements imposed by all the constraints imposed by the agent's value commitments.

The constraints are not satisfiable for a given set of feasible options if there is no way of evaluating all the feasible options which satisfies all of them. Thus, if constraint  $C_1$  requires that option  $x$  be ranked better than option  $y$  and constraint  $C_2$  demands that  $y$  be ranked as better than  $x$ , the constraints are not jointly satisfiable over the pair  $\langle x, y \rangle$ .

A constraint imposes restrictions on the ways a given set of feasible options is to be evaluated by specifying how options of different types are to be compared with one another. Hence, whether a constraint or set of constraints is satisfiable in a given option set depends on how the members of the set are described. Whether condition 4 is met, therefore, depends on the information available to the agent about the feasible options.

The circumstance that constraints  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$  are not jointly satisfiable in some context of choice does not entail inconsistency in the system of constraints themselves. Constraints  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$  are consistent (consistently applicable) if they are jointly satisfiable in some context of choice regardless of whether they are satisfiable in others.

Value commitments  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$  (in contrast to the constraints they impose) are logically consistent if and only if it is logically possible to satisfy the constraints  $C_{i1}, C_{i2}, \dots, C_{ik}$  in all contexts of choice simultaneously of types  $T_{i1}, T_{i2}, \dots, T_{ik}$  (for any subset of the scope restrictions  $T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n$ ).

The  $n$  value commitments are universally applicable if and only if,

Cambridge University Press

0521386306 - Hard Choices: Decision Making under Unresolved Conflict

Isaac Levi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.2 WITHHOLDING JUDGEMENT

7

for every subset  $T_{i_1}, T_{i_2}, \dots, T_{i_k}$  of the  $n$  scope restrictions and every context of choice satisfying all of the  $k$  scope restrictions, the constraints  $C_{i_1}, C_{i_2}, \dots, C_{i_k}$  are jointly satisfiable.

The strong generalization condition (SGC) requires that when an agent endorses value commitments  $P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n$ , he assume the universal applicability of the  $n$  value commitments as part of his body of knowledge. If one accepts SGC (as I shall), the agent's endorsement of the  $n$  value commitments will contradict what he knows given that he knows there is at least one context of types  $T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n$  where the constraints are not jointly satisfiable. Thus, when conditions 1–4 obtain, the decision maker embraces value commitments making presuppositions inconsistent with what the agent knows. This epistemological inconsistency in the value commitments should not be confused with logical inconsistency. The  $n$  value commitments may be logically consistent and recognized to be so by the agent even though their universal applicability contradicts what he knows.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, there is nothing logically inconsistent in the hero of the Dewey–Tufts example embracing the “habits” of loyalty and patriotism simultaneously with his opposition to war. According to SGC, endorsement of both value commitments implies that in all decision contexts within the scopes of both principles, both constraints are satisfied by ways of evaluating feasible options. As long as there is no logical inconsistency in supposing that they are satisfied in all such decision contexts which have obtained or will arise, the joint endorsement is also logically consistent.

Nonetheless, specific occasions can arise in which the expectations of the hero in a Dewey–Tufts scenario are frustrated. A decision problem may be presented to him in which the requirements of patriotism and pacifism are to apply but in which the joint satisfiability of the constraints is inconsistent with what the agent knows. Given what he knows, he cannot consistently impose constraints required by both commitments in all decision contexts within the scopes of the two principles.

In some respects, recognition of this inconsistency is analogous to recognition that two or more mutually consistent hypotheses entail a result confounded by experiment. The set of hypotheses may be mutually consistent, but this set and the report of the experimental results are inconsistent.

Sometimes questioning the experimental results may be appropriate. Often, however, it is preferable to question the hypotheses. To question the hypotheses, however, is to move to a position of suspense between them. This involves a change in the agent's body of knowledge or settled assumptions. It has been modified so that it is no longer inconsistent. Once this is done, inquiry aimed at settling



Cambridge University Press

0521386306 - Hard Choices: Decision Making under Unresolved Conflict

Isaac Levi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the emerging controversy among the several hypotheses may be undertaken without begging the question as to which (if any) of the hypotheses jointly inconsistent with the data ought to be reinstated in the evolving doctrine (Levi, 1980a: ch. 3). Thus, the inconsistency between the several hypotheses and the data must be distinguished from the conflict generated by the recognition of this inconsistency. The conflict or dilemma arises when the investigator shifts to a position of suspense among the hypotheses. Since the posture of suspense does not entail inconsistency, being in a state of conflict is not to be confused with being in the state of inconsistent belief which provoked it.

Moral struggles of the second kind are provoked by inconsistencies between value commitments and information concerning the kinds of decision problems which arise. One might remove such inconsistencies by questioning some of the assumptions concerning the types of decision problems which obtain. Although it is far from obvious that this response is always unattractive, it often is. Typically, the joint endorsement of the value commitments is questioned. A shift is made to a state of suspense concerning the evaluation of options in contexts of choice like the problematic one being confronted. At a minimum, the scopes of the original value commitments, if not the constraints, have thereby been modified so that the constraints no longer apply to the problematic cases. A conflict in value emerges. But this conflict is not a case of inconsistency. The conflict or "dilemma" involves suspension of judgement among competing value commitments. When removal of the conflict is sufficiently urgent, inquiry is undertaken and may be undertaken without begging any questions concerning which of the constraints being considered ought to be satisfied in the predicament presenting the dilemma and others like it.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the agent's habits of loyalty should be modified to the extent that the scope of his patriotism is restricted to situations where his country has not declared war. Likewise, the scope of his pacifist principles should be reduced so that they no longer require opposition to war declared by his native land. Pending further inquiry, neither patriotism nor pacifism can be ruled out as applying to the kind of situation where the native land has declared war. But neither can be taken to be mandatory for that kind of situation. Although no single evaluation of the options can consistently meet both the requirements of patriotism and pacifism, the agent must consider evaluations to be permissible which meet one or the other system of constraints.

Suspending judgement in scientific inquiry removes inconsistency, but only at the cost of a loss of information. Had the investigator



removed inconsistency by deleting one of the conflicting theories while retaining the other, he would have minimized the loss of information while still avoiding contradiction. Doing so, however, would beg the question in favor of the hypothesis which is retained. The additional loss of information incurred by removing both of the conflicting theories from the body of settled assumptions is justified by the desirability of adopting a viewpoint with respect to which both alternatives can be given a hearing without prejudice.

Nonetheless, shifting to a position of suspense is only the beginning of inquiry. The main task remains – to wit, undertaking investigations in order to choose one of the rival hypotheses or some new proposal which, perhaps, was not envisaged when the inquiry began.

Much the same procedure should be followed when inconsistency in the application of two or more value commitments to a given situation arises. The scopes of the value commitments are modified so that neither constraint applies to the given context. In such contexts, judgement is suspended as to which, if any, of the erstwhile conflicting constraints is to apply. This is generally preferable to retaining the applicability of one commitment at the expense of the other without giving a nonprejudicial hearing to the rival commitments.

Moving to a position of suspense, however, does not eliminate moral struggle of the second kind. It is merely the first step in that direction. When an investigator is in suspense between rival hypotheses, he is in doubt as to the truth values of these hypotheses. The truth (and falsity) of each rival is a serious possibility as far as he is concerned.

Suspension of judgement should be understood differently in the evaluation of feasible options as better or worse. Each way of evaluating feasible options as better or worse is intended to furnish the decision maker with a criterion for determining which of his options are optimal. The agent's doubt as to the ranking of the feasible options is not reducible to suspension of judgement between rival truth value bearing hypotheses even though questions of fact and scientific theory may have an important bearing on the weights to be accorded different rankings. When the hero of the Dewey–Tufts scenario is in suspense between a pacifist and patriotic evaluation of his options, the question before him is not which of the rankings or evaluations is true. That question does not even arise.

Thus, when the agent's value commitments generate no conflict but constrain the agent to evaluate his feasible options in an unequivocal manner, the agent is obligated by those commitments to restrict his choice to one of the feasible options which is optimal according to the mandated ranking. It is not a question of the ranking being true or being believed true by the agent. Rather it is that the ranking is

the only one the agent is permitted to use (according to his commitments) in determining which options are admissible for him.

If, however, the agent starts off committed to two or more value commitments which on the specific occasion mandate different rankings of the feasible options, he should avoid contradiction by moving to a position of suspense which avoids prejudicing the resolution of the conflict among the rival value commitments.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the scientific case, the agent does not hold that one of the rankings is true while professing ignorance as to which it is. Rather he regards all of the rankings as permissible for the purpose of assessing optimality. The upshot is that any option which comes out optimal relative to some permissible way of evaluating options has not been prohibited by the agent's value commitments from being chosen by the agent. The options which have survived criticism in this manner are called *V-admissible* – i.e., admissible relative to the agent's valuations of the feasible options as better or worse, all things considered. There is no implication in all of this that one of the *V*-admissible options is the best, all things considered, but the agent does not know which it is. In contrast to suspension of judgement among rival scientific hypotheses, the agent does not presuppose that there is a "truth of the matter" unknown to him and that the rival ways of evaluation are possibly true hypotheses as to what that truth is. They are permissible to use in evaluating options and not possibly true conjectures.

An important ramification of the difference between possibility as applying to truth-value-bearing hypotheses and permissibility as applying to ways of evaluating feasible options concerns the concept of compromise or potential resolution. When in suspense as to the truth of some hypothesis *h*, the agent refuses to rule out the assignment "true" or the truth value "false" as possible truth value assignments for *h*. However, there is no third possibility between these possibilities which represents a "compromise" between them. To be sure, probabilities may be assigned to *h* and its negation, but we should no more confuse probability assignments with intermediate truth values than we should confuse certainty with truth.

The situation is different in the case of suspense among different rankings of feasible options as better or worse. Not only should the agent regard each of the different rankings as permissible; but other rankings different from those originally in conflict may be recognized as representing potential resolutions or compromises and as such should also be regarded as permissible.

The technical presentation of the notion of a potential resolution will be given in section 5.4. For the present, its ramifications will be explained through illustration.