

Conflict of Values: A Decision View¹

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I want to address myself to some aspects of the foundations of the nature of value conflicts, questions whose answers have very real consequences. We do make far-sighted decisions, decisions whose consequences run into the very distant future. A current example is the issue of climate change and appropriate policy responses. We are engaged; we have to think ahead and imagine what the human world will be like a hundred years from now and five hundred years from now, and how we are going to make the appropriate decisions today and anticipate those to be made in the future.

There are two themes dominating these discussions. One is that the application of norms or values (I take these words as synonyms) and the conflicts arise in a social context, in interpersonal relationships. There is a strong tendency to talk about what's moral or what's appropriate *for me*. I think that is missing most of the issue.

There is a second point, one I am going to mention only briefly. If we have a decision that resolves some conflict of norms, that decision has to be executed (as I will explain). Any serious decision is a complex plan. This means that it will have to be implemented in various circumstances, the implementation being frequently the responsibility of individual agents. Once it is understood that the information needed to carry out the decision depends on information that is dispersed and also that individual agents are different, we find that the possibilities of compromise are restricted, and therefore, irreconcilable situations are created, which might not appear in an ideal world.

I am speaking as the representative of economics on this panel. As we see it, a choice is not something you do today in isolation; it is part of a plan that includes some choices to be made in the future. Even if

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one considers a single point of time, a choice is a vector. I can buy so much bread and so many shirts and choose a place to live. These choices are constrained in some way. If I consider the choice between going to the opera and going to a movie, I am constrained because I have time to do only one. In the full context, the fact that I am going to the opera next week may weigh in this decision. In general, any one component of the decision is conditional on the possibilities in other dimensions; if I am going to buy bread, I might want some butter or the modern healthier equivalent thereof.

Hence, even in the most ordinary economic or other daily decisions, there are conflicts. Time available sets limits; so does income. The usual economic view is that these choices are mediated by some consistent underlying relationship among the alternatives. There is some comprehensive good that aggregates all the dimensions of the choices, which may be called "utility," or "well-being." It is a measure the individual seeks to increase to the extent possible within the constraints.

Even within this individualistic context, there are some goals that are frequently regarded as higher. One might say that I "should" be concerned about my health, and therefore, I should be restrained from eating the chocolate cakes I love. Are these "norms"? Or merely a kind of "taste"?

I want to advance the view that the real meaning of compelling values and norms, which might override the simple tastes of everyday life, arises in the context of society. We are engaged in relations with others. Partly, they are necessary relations; our well-being, however conceptualized, depends on others. A market, the economists' preferred mode of social interaction, is still a social organization, requiring social interaction. Cooperation takes many other forms, be it an irrigation system, or barn-raising, or a government. Perhaps the most important form of cooperation in human history has been the making of wars, from those between Neolithic villages to those on a world scale. Of course, war shows the moral ambiguity of norms.

Norms thus exist and govern our behavior, though they might conflict with other criteria, other norms. I have been increasingly of the view that all these discussions of utility, preferences, and rights have as an essential component the sense of obligation. An extreme example occurs in Robert Frost's famous poem "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poem is rather oblique, but the reader comes to realize that the speaker is contemplating remaining in his cold environment to freeze to death, a suicide. But the poem concludes:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Even in such compelling circumstances, there is an obligation, to keep a commitment. That is a fact but also a norm.

Even if we recognize obligations to others, there are many others; we must make a choice. Of course, the family is a biologically given set of others (though much of family structure is socially constructed). Beyond the family, there are those with whom we have face-to-face contacts, then broader and more impersonal groups, nations, ethnic identities, and of course the whole world of human beings. Many, not all, hold that there are obligations beyond the human world, to other species.

One striking example of a socially accepted obligation is that toward children. This obligation is so widely accepted that it passes without comment. If you look at the Bible or the Qur'ān, you will find many injunctions to honor one's parents. There is nothing about honoring or being responsible for one's children. The optimistic interpretation is not that children are unfairly treated but that the obligation is so fully accepted that it goes without mention. Nevertheless, there is a socially enforced obligation to children, on the part of parents but also against parents, if necessary, Blackstone, the eighteenth-century jurist, noted both the obligation on parents and the unlikelihood of enforcement's being needed: "The duty of parents to provide for the *maintenance* of their children is a principle of natural law: an obligation . . . laid on them not only by nature herself, but by their own proper act. . . . The municipal laws in all well-regulated states have taken care to enforce this duty though Providence has done it more effectually than any laws, by implanting in the breast of every parent that natural . . . insuperable degree of affection" (quoted from Mnookin and Weisberg [2000], 256–57). The state does have the right to intervene to protect children, and there is a considerable set of judicial decisions to this effect. We have a social agreement, an accepted norm.

Another problem of conflicting norms, which has long been with us but has been raised still further by the issue of climate change, is between the demands of the present and those of the future. What do we owe the future? Do we owe anything beyond our responsibility to our children? Economists have slid into a simple representation. We acknowledge a value to our children. But our children will have a similar obligation to their children, and so on. This argument is called a "dynastic" model of obligations. Our responsibility to our far-off children is indirect, via our concern for our own children's welfare, which, in turn, depends on the welfare of their descendants. This is a convenient formulation, which permits us to do some concrete analyses.

But I don't feel that, realistically or morally, our obligations to the future are fully subsumed by the dynastic argument. When we are talking about exhaustion of resources, we are considering the effect on an abstract future, not only the effect on our biological descendants. (Climate change is really an example of exhaustion of a resource, the atmosphere as a sink for carbon dioxide, methane, or other greenhouse gases.) There is empirical evidence that, for example, childless people vote for school bonds. Those with no biological stake in the future still consider an obligation to future people.

There is a great variety of actions with effects on a time scale shorter than climate change but longer than a human life. We erect dams that may last a century or more. We engage in wars, in part, to preserve the nation for the future. The concept of the nation is that of a long-enduring entity, an abstraction, to be sure, but one that motivates individuals strongly. It is clear that people do behave in a way that is consistent with the idea that their obligations go beyond the present.

I have argued that, in a social context, we find a series of obligations perceived by at least a large number of people. I have used obligations to children and future people as illustrations.

These obligations appear to be of a type different from what we usually think of as "tastes." It is true that one way of modeling them for application is to consider an obligation as a kind of taste. Individuals feel a loss of pleasure when they fail to fulfill an obligation. This has been the utilitarian tradition. But this seems to be an inadequate representation of the sense of obligation we feel in many social situations.

The examples I have given thus far are asymmetric (parent and child, present and future). There are significant examples of responsibilities to contemporaries. A striking example is the provision of health care. With all the heated discussion, no one seems prepared to say, "Each person should take care of his or her own health; it's not my problem." We do say exactly that about bread or even automobiles. There certainly is a sense that others should not be deprived of available and needed health care simply because of lack of money. Of course, the extent of this obligation is subject to debate with regard to costs (i.e., depriving some individuals of other goods), but the general obligation is perceived.

I don't mean that there is some universally and permanently given set of recognized obligations in a society. These values are certainly historically and culturally conditioned.

The social context does more than set the environment in which norms are formed. It also provides the mechanism by which the decisions determined by the norms are implemented. There is a need

for coordination. That is the purpose of legislation and other governmental actions. But there is much more coordination at the non-state level. Queuing up and walking down the street without shoving others out of the way are everyday examples of social coordination. In many cases, a single individual's actions are of little effect, as in climate change or in financial support for a health program. It is only massive coordination that will be helpful. The classic example is law and order, as already argued by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century; an accepted authority is valuable because in the state of nature, man's life is "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In general, submission by individuals to a norm is significant and useful only if all individuals take the same action or take parallel actions that coordinate properly.

What kind of norms or obligations are going to permit the decisions based on them to be coordinated appropriately? For one thing, one must consider oneself as well as others. I distrust any ethic that does not give some priority to the self. It is usually hypocritical or even tyrannical.

If we accept this principle, then people will inevitably have different values. In regard to the future, this means a positive rate of discount. With regard to the present, it means a preference for the self and, usually, a preference for those with whom one is more closely associated.

Once a degree of egocentricity is accepted, it is clear that there the values held by different individuals are necessarily inconsistent. If we add to egocentricity a degree of respect on the part of each individual for others, we might even say that individuals have conflicts within themselves.

One approach to resolving competition among norms or obligations is seeking agreement on the principles of reconciliation, what we might call *meta-norms*, analogous to the concept of meta-languages in logic. We don't avoid conflicts, but we agree on a way to resolve them, a principle of fairness. Patrick Suppes has called my attention to Stuart Hampshire's monograph (2000) making this point. This was the direction I was trying to go in my *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1951). I suggested a set of criteria for a meta-norm, only to find that they could not always be satisfied.

There are other approaches to meta-norms. Most of them are based on the idea that morality means that no individual can be distinguished from any other; a norm has to be anonymous. R. M. Hare (1963) has stated this criterion of *universalizability*; the very formulation of a norm should not include any statements about individuals. Rawls (1971) achieved the same end by imagining a social contract made be-

fore each individual knows who he or she is. The uncertainty has the effect of creating universalizability. Long before any modern viewpoints came the Golden Rule (Leviticus 19:33).

Let me introduce one more complication before I close. Suppose somehow we arrive at a resolution of a conflict among norms, that is, a decision as to how to react to all possible circumstances. The rules of behavior will inevitably be complicated. A simple rule, such as "Don't lie!" is clearly not going to be fully acceptable. If a murderer, pursuing someone who takes refuge with you, asks you if that person is there, I think most of us would not feel obligated to tell the truth. There may indeed be a good rule as to when to tell the truth in varying circumstances, but it is not likely to be simple. It will have to be left to the judgment of the individual agent.

But individual agents have limited knowledge, and the knowledge they do have is not the same for all. They will have to act as best they can, given what they do know. Further, there will be a limit to how they can be checked by others, who have differing knowledge sets. Once individuals are acting to carry out a norm and cannot be fully checked, their natural norm of self-interest will come into play. The rules actually acted upon will therefore move away from any norm that might be acceptable on the basis of general principles.

In any actual system, there cannot be a full resolution of conflicts.

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