

Bewilderment of Moral Agents in the Context of Uncertainty and Doubt

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Abstract: This paper is a research into different versions and implications of normative uncertainty. To do so, I provide a brief account of uncertainty in ontological, epistemological, social, and psychological domains, and drawing on the method of descriptive-analytic research, I roughly consider the impact of uncertainties on normative ethics. Given the uncertainty, real consequences of events, knowledge of events and their ramifications, constancy of the states of moral agents, and social reactions are not determinate, and the existence of constant moral laws is dubious. On the one hand, moral criteria are not sufficient for decisions in the normative domain, and on the other hand, normative uncertainty has specific implications along with the subjectivist or objectivist reading. Given moral uncertainty and its combination with other uncertainties, the decision-making process becomes more complicated, since under such circumstances the moral agent does not face the right/wrong or the permissible/impermissible option. Rather, s/he might face maximally right and minimally wrong options. Moreover, in acting upon the maximal alternative, blaming the moral agent leads to the violation of morality.

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Introduction: The uncertainty of events and that of human knowledge have implications for morality. Assuming such uncertainty and the unpredictability of consequences, one is not only faced with a right or wrong decision, but an uncertain amount of right and wrong decision. A doubtful decision may well lead to the desired consequence, fortune, and happiness, or it might lead to an undesirable consequence, harm, and unhappiness. Moreover, how might a utilitarian make decisions based on consequences in such an uncertain context? Assuming the uncertainty of the states of a moral agent, how might a virtue theorist take a virtuous moral agent as the criterion of right and wrong action? And finally, given such uncertainty, is it possible to sustain Kantian constant moral principles? In this way, moral theories might also be assessed in case of their efficiency. On the whole, the

abundance of epistemic and moral uncertainties might lead to what I call ‘bewilderment.’

Decision theories have been concerned with decisions made in states of uncertainty, but this has only recently entered the literature of moral philosophy and moral inquiry. The present research, concerning such decision in the moral domain, might be divided into two groups:

There are authors who hold that decisions are always accompanied by some sort of an epistemic uncertainty, as human beings live as an indeterminate being. In fact, such decisions are essentially risky. Such authors consider ethics of risk, contemplating the relation between morality and risk in order to be able to specify the moral framework of such decisions. Sven Hansson (2005, p. 5-7; 2013, pp. 12-13, 26) is a case in point. He believes that morality and risk are two distinct categories and tries to account for the role of values in his analysis of risks. In his

view, justice and moral responsibility are frameworks of decisions in risky circumstances, and from this perspective, he considers moral problems pertaining to uncertainty. There are others who generally consider uncertainty in morality as well as the ethics of uncertainty in the field of normative ethics. These include MacAskill, Amelia Hicks, and Abelard Podgorski.

Methodology: In this research, I benefit from these studies, and by drawing on the method of analysis and description of the present literature, I show that they fail to draw a sharp distinction between uncertainties in the moral domain and those in non-moral domains. For this reason, they are sometimes concerned with an uncertainty in the domain of decision, but they finally consider it in the domain of moral theory, or sometimes while they are concerned with moral uncertainty, the moral theory

in which such uncertainty is explained is not known: is it accounted for in terms of moral realism and objectivism or in terms of subjectivism? In addition, the impact of non-moral uncertainties on normative uncertainties is either vague or incomplete. Thus, this research seeks to grapple with the following questions: What are the domains in which uncertainty applies, and how is it related to uncertainty? What is moral uncertainty, how does it affect decisions, and what are its implications? Does the solution of different readings for decision in such a condition work?

Findings: The findings of the research show that the moral agent's doubts concerning the rightness or wrongness of a behavior, its permissibility or impermissibility, psychological states, moral requirement, and other uncertainties (empirical, descriptive, etc.) concerning moral reason have

ramifications for one's decision, and the distinction among certainty, probability, and epistemic uncertainty leads to a distinction of decisions into those in states of certainty, those in states of probability, and those in states of uncertainty. In the moral domain, the distinction might be extended to certainly right/wrong decisions, probably right/wrong decisions, and uncertainly right/wrong decisions.

In the domain of moral uncertainty, MacAskill distinguishes between right and more right decisions, Amelia Hicks casts doubts about the possibility of morally proper effects of the agent's behavior (Hicks, 2018, p. 161-165), Christian Barry (2016, pp. 900-902), and Julia Staffel (2019, pp. 55-62 and 75) casts doubts about the possibility of moral blame in states of uncertainty. In contrast, Abelard Podgorski believes that behaviors grounded in maximal and reasoned beliefs are justified,

and it is unreasonable to blame the moral agent in such cases (2020, pp. 59-60).

Discussion and Conclusion:

I argue that the division of decisions into the above-mentioned three kinds is plausible only when the real world is seen as determinate and certain. Otherwise, decisions would either be probable or uncertain. Moreover, it should be noted that the notion of uncertainty differs in accordance with the ground of morality: when the moral agent's belief is distributed between maximal and minimal alternatives, the notion of moral uncertainty is read in terms of subjectivism, and when the moral agent's cognition hesitates between alternatives with (say) 90 percent and 10 percent of probability, moral uncertainty is closer to the ground of objectivism, but when the moral agent hesitates in her or his moral state—that is, when s/he does not know whether s/he could continue the moral

conduct—moral uncertainty becomes closer to the virtue-based moral theory, and such uncertainty also seems to be subjectivist. And in accordance with different versions of moral uncertainty, the notion of moral blame and moral doubt will also be different.

A solution for decision making in conditions of uncertainty is that of decision theories, namely cost-benefit calculations of the decision. The method is sometimes inconsistent with justice when it comes to social decisions. Moreover, decisions are always directed at the future, while cost-benefit assessments occur at present, and it is difficult to provide an accurate estimation of costs and benefits. A second solution is to decide in terms of maximal belief and maximal probability. But, in cases where the choice of the maximal alternative leads to the expected benefit of the agent, and the minimal alternative prevents a serious

threat, it is more rational to opt the latter. A third solution is to apply the method of decision theories in which the consequence of a decision is estimated in terms of an objective empirical measurement. In this method, it should be noted whether the probable or contingent consequences are positive or negative, whether other people's reactions are positive or negative, whether doubt as a mental state affects the action, and whether beliefs or facts should serve as grounded of a moral decisions. In this case, possible threats or harms will be predicted, controlled, or compensated, and thus a justified rational decision might be made.

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