

Theory and Decision Library A:

Rational Choice in Practical Philosophy
and Philosophy of Science

Volume 49

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John R. Welch

Moral Strata

Another Approach to Reflective
Equilibrium

 Springer

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ISSN 0921-3384 ISSN 2352-2119 (electronic)
ISBN 978-3-319-08012-3 ISBN 978-3-319-08013-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-08013-0
Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014945757

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Printed on acid-free paper

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These heavy sands are language
—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Preface

This book began an embarrassingly long time ago. In looking for discussion material for an ethics class, I chanced across my copy of William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. The work's central dilemma intrigued my students, who concluded that an act-utilitarian and a Kantian using the second formulation of the categorical imperative would make very different decisions about the case. The question was then unavoidable: Which theory offers the better ethical advice? I was dissatisfied with my own attempt to answer.

Meanwhile, I had become accustomed to responding to students' contrasts of science and ethics by citing Alan Gewirth's "Positive 'Ethics' and Normative 'Science,'" which warns of the fallacy of disparateness: "the fallacy of discussing one field on one level or in one respect and the other field on a quite different level or in a quite different respect." To contrast a scientific discovery such as the molecular structure of DNA with an ethical discussion of the highest good is an instance of this fallacy. Yet I was unable to be clearer about Gewirth's levels or respects until I discovered Larry Laudan's analysis of scientific discourse in *Science and Values*. In reading the work, I formed the hypothesis that moral discourse, like scientific discourse, could be analyzed into factual, methodological, and axiological levels. This hypothesis gained momentum when, in the book's Epilogue, Laudan himself mentioned the possibility of extending his approach to moral theory.

Rationality in morality, I thought, appears to be governed by the cognitive ideal of reflective equilibrium among levels of moral discourse analogous to Laudan's levels of scientific discourse. I proposed this ideal in "Science and Ethics: Toward a Theory of Ethical Value," which can be seen as a kind of mission statement for this book. But the article offered only the sketchiest indications of how reflective equilibrium might be attained at each of these levels, and very difficult technical problems lay half-submerged in each case. My attempts to resolve these problems led to explorations of quantitative inductive logics and comparative decision theory.

In the course of these explorations, I began to see what I take to be rational grounds for choice among theories. Rival ethical theories can offer conflicting advice about dilemmas, and quantitative inductive logics can be used to resolve a common sort of dilemma. Whenever this occurs, any theory that recommends the inductively preferred option secures an advantage over theories that recommend

other options. In addition, decision theory can be employed to guide the choice between one theory and another, particularly when formulated in terms of comparative plausibilities and utilities. This book presents such a version of decision theory, offered in the hope that it will aid in the quest for reflective equilibrium.

Quotation marks in this work are handled as follows. Double quotes are employed for short quotations, whether attributed or not, and quotations within long quotations. No quotes are used for long quotations, which are set off from their context by indents and smaller type. Single quotes are used for quotations within short quotations and words cited as words, such as the predicate 'just'.

The development of the outlook presented in this volume was facilitated by interactions with many people: students, colleagues, conference participants, anonymous reviewers, and editors, among others. These interlocutors are too numerous to be listed individually, but I cannot fail to mention my parents, the late Mary V. and Robert J. Welch, who showed by example the centrality of morality to human life. Nor could I omit my colleagues Renzo Llorente, Olga Ramírez Calle, and Jawara Sanford, who commented insightfully on sundry parts of the manuscript. Talented people at Springer who played vital roles in this project include Associate Editor Lucy Fleet, Assistant Editor Martin Rechenauer, and Senior Editorial Assistants Diana Nijenhuijzen and Mireille van Kan. Finally, my wife Cristina and son Guillermo formed the uniquely supportive environment that enabled this work to be completed. Each, in different ways, has helped me through this project. It is an unmingled pleasure to thank you all.

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