A Surprisingly Common Dilemma

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There is a dilemma that arises for a surprising number of ethical views and that is generated by a thesis they share. They all hold that it’s a necessary condition for an act or state of affairs to have an ethical property such as rightness or goodness that it be accompanied by the belief that it has that property. There is an escape from the dilemma that is open to some of these views, but it isn’t open to others; for them the dilemma poses a problem.

1 The Dilemma for a View about the Right

Consider, as a first view of this type, one that is sometimes attributed to Kant and that says an act is right or your duty only if you do it because it’s right, or from the motive of duty. To act rightly, this view says, you must be motivated by thoughts of rightness. But to do an act because it’s right you must believe that it’s right, so on this view it’s a necessary condition for an act’s being right that it be accompanied by a belief in its rightness.

The dilemma arises when we ask what exactly the content of the required belief is. One possibility is that it’s the belief that the act is right simply or in itself, regardless of any accompanying motives or beliefs. It’s right just as an act, whatever mental states go with it. But this belief is one the view we’re considering says is false; it says an act is right only when accompanied by the belief that it’s right. And though there is no logical incoherence in this, it would surely be odd for a view to make it a necessary condition for an act to be right that it be accompanied by a false belief about its rightness. Can you really act rightly only given a mistaken belief about your act’s deontic status? An alternative possibility tries to avoid this difficulty by making the required belief one the view says can be true. More specifically, it says that to be right an act must be accompanied by the more complex belief that it’s right only if accompanied by the belief that it’s right. But now we have to ask what the content is of the belief embedded in this one, the belief you believe must be present. If it’s that
the act is right just in itself and apart from any accompanying beliefs, the em-
bedded belief is again one the view says is false. And that makes for a larger or
embedding belief that it would again be odd to make necessary for rightness.
It would be odd to require, as a condition for acting rightly, that you believe
your act is right only when accompanied by a false belief about its rightness.
And making the embedded belief conditional on a further belief about your
act’s rightness only raises the same question and the same difficulty about that
further belief, leading to an infinite regress of beliefs that your act is right only
when accompanied by the belief that it’s right only when accompanied by the
belief that it’s right … and so on. At no point do we reach a required belief with
no content that is false.

This, then, is the dilemma for the view that an act is right only when ac-
 companied by the belief that it’s right: either it makes it a necessary condition
for acting rightly that you have a false belief about your act’s rightness, or it
generates an infinite regress. W.D. Ross raised just this dilemma for the view in
The Right and the Good:

If ... we say ‘it is my duty to do act \(A\) from the sense of duty’, this means
‘it is my duty to do act \(A\) from the sense that it is my duty to do act \(A\)’. And here the whole expression is in contradiction with a part of itself.
The whole sentence says ‘it is my duty-to-do-act-\(A\)-from-the-sense-that-it-is-my-duty-to-do-act-\(A\)’. But the latter part of the sentence implies that
what I think is that it is my duty-to-do-act-\(A\)-simply.\(^1\)

In saying the latter part of the sentence contradicts the whole, he was taking
that part to be or at least claimed to be true. But in a later discussion he saw
that the view in effect requires us to act with a false belief about our act’s right-
ness, saying “it can hardly be claimed that it is our duty to act from a mistaken
thought.”\(^2\) This was the first horn of the dilemma, and he went on to describe
the second:

And if ... we try to amend the latter part of the expression to bring it into
accord with the whole expression, we get the result ‘it is my duty to do act
\(A\) from the sense that it is my duty to do act \(A\) from the sense that it is my
duty to do act \(A\)’, where again the last part of the expression is in conflict

\(^1\) W.D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 5; see also H.A. Prichard,