

Dealing with apparent moral conflict

As we have seen, debates over PAS, AVE, and euthanasia generally often appeal to moral principles like autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. The problem is that these principles sometimes appear to pull in opposite directions.

Apparent moral conflict occurs whenever different moral principles seem to prescribe incompatible actions in a given situation.

For example, suppose principle A says “be honest” and principle B says “protect the innocent from harm.” If you’re harboring Jews during WWII and an SS officer comes to your door and asks if any Jews are inside, should you follow A and tell the truth, knowing that innocents will almost certainly be harmed as a result, or follow B and protect the innocent by deceiving the SS officer?

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There are several possible strategies for dealing with apparent moral conflict:

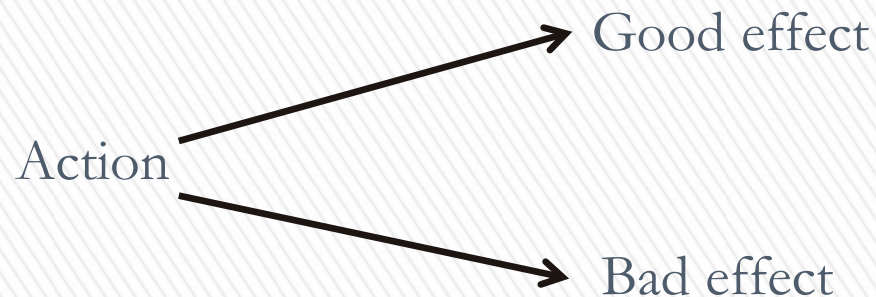
- Study the situation more carefully.. Often the real debate turns on non-moral factual assumptions. Once those assumption are made clear, the apparent moral conflict often dissolves as we can then see that one of the principles isn't applicable.
- Revise the moral principles involved to resolve the conflict. (E.g., we could replace “be honest” with “be honest unless dishonesty is necessary for the greater good.”)
- Appeal to more fundamental moral principles (e.g., the Golden Rule) to argue, e.g., that principle B trumps principle A when the two conflict.
- Moral cynicism: Accept the conflict as genuine.
 - Why is this a conclusion to be resisted?

The doctrine of double effect

The doctrine of double effect (DDE) is an influential strategy for resolving apparent moral conflict between two very fundamental moral principles:

- Do good (beneficence)
- Avoid evil (nonmaleficence)

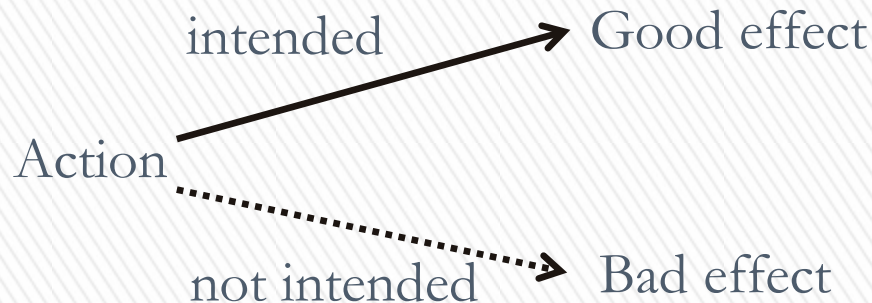
More specifically, DDE is relevant to cases in which a contemplated course of action foreseeably will have both good and bad effects.



The doctrine of double effect

According to DDS, an action that we can see will have both good and bad effects is morally permissible only if:

1. The action itself is not intrinsically bad (i.e., independently of the good and bad effects).
2. Only the good effect is positively *intended*. The bad effect is *merely permitted* or tolerated.
3. The bad effect is not the means by which the good effect is produced; rather, the bad effect is merely incidental (a side effect).
4. There are no better ways to bring about the good effect, and the good effect is sufficiently good to fully compensate for the evil effect.



The doctrine of double effect

There are numerous suggested applications of DDE. Here are a few:
(*disclaimer: I do not necessarily endorse any of these arguments; in some cases, a fuller description of the scenario might yield a better application of the doctrine of double effect.)

- A terror bomber aims to bring about civilian deaths in order to weaken the resolve of the enemy. In contrast, a tactical bomber (in a just war) aims at military targets foreseeing that it may well result in some civilian deaths. If his bombs should kill civilians this is a foreseen but *unintended* consequence of his actions. Even if it is equally certain that both bombers will cause the same number of civilian deaths, terror bombing is impermissible while tactical bombing may (depending on the situation) be permissible.
- A doctor who intends to hasten the death of a terminally ill patient by injecting a large dose of morphine acts impermissibly because he intends to bring about the patient's death. However, a doctor who intends to relieve the patient's pain with that same dose while merely foreseeing the hastening of the patient's death may be acting permissibly.

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- A doctor who performs an abortion on a mother to save the mother's life acts impermissibly if he intends to kill the fetus. However, it may be permissible for a doctor to perform a hysterectomy on a pregnant woman with cancer if that is the only way to save the woman's life, despite the fact that performing the hysterectomy will foreseeably cause the death of the fetus.
- Assuming it was the only way to stop a runaway trolley from killing five people, it would still be wrong to push a fat man into the path of the trolley in order to stop it, since that would involve using a bad effect as a means to a good effect. If possible, however, it would be permissible to divert the runaway trolley such that it foreseeably will kill only one person instead of the five. The death of the one is not intended nor is it a means to the saving of the five. It is merely an unintended side effect.

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- To preemptively kill a person you know to be plotting to kill you is impermissible because it would be a case of intentional killing; however, to strike in self-defense against an aggressor is permissible, even if one foresees that the blow by which one defends oneself will be fatal.
- A soldier who throws himself on a live grenade intends to shield others from its blast and merely foresees his own death. He acts permissibly. In contrast, a person who commits suicide intends to bring his or her own life to an end. He acts impermissibly.