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Making Moral Decisions

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One component of a moral theory consists of principles that assign moral status to individual actions—principles that evaluate acts as right or wrong, prohibited or obligatory, permissible or supererogatory.

Consideration of such principles suggests that they play several different roles. The first such role may be viewed as theoretical. In this role, moral principles specify the characteristics in virtue of which acts possess their moral status. For example, they tell us that an act is right because it maximizes happiness, or is wrong because it violates a promise. Understood in this way, such principles are (roughly) comparable to a scientific theory which specifies the factors governing the state of a given physical system. Thus the gas laws tell us that the volume of a body of gas depends on its pressure and temperature. Such a scientific law can be illuminating even though it may be impossible, at least in particular cases, to ascertain what the pressure and temperature of a given body of gas are. Similarly (or so it appears) moral principles may be illuminating as theories even though it may be impossible, at least in particular cases, to ascertain whether a given action has one of the characteristics (such as maximizing happiness) that determine its moral status.

The second function for moral principles may be thought of as practical. This encompasses two subfunctions. On the one hand, there is the second person practical use of moral principles—their use as standards by reference to which an observer can guide another person's behavior by recommending or advising against various courses of action. On the other hand, there is the first person practical use of moral principles—their use as a standard by reference to which a person can guide his or her own behavior: a standard to help the
person choose which acts to perform and which not. The theoretical and practical roles of moral principles are closely linked. Indeed they are so closely linked that most discussions do not even distinguish them. But it is not at all clear that what enables a moral principle to fill one role automatically equips it to fill the other roles. In this paper I shall examine the first person practical role of moral principles. The goal is to determine what characteristics moral principles must have in order to fulfill the first person practical role, and so to discover whether any moral principles are adequate for the task.

Several words of warning. First, it is important to note one potential source of misunderstanding in any discussion of using a principle to guide one's behavior. Clearly, using a principle involves some kind of mental activity. But it is possible that this activity takes different forms, depending on how the principle itself is mentally represented by the decision-maker. A decision-maker may explicitly represent the principle as the content of a propositional attitude: for example, a belief that the principle is correct, or a desire to follow it. Or a decision-maker may only "subscribe to" the principle in the sense that he is disposed under certain circumstances to follow a mental procedure that conforms to the principle, even though the decision-maker never represents for himself the content of the principle. Providing an adequate account of this distinction is not easy, but we have some intuitive grasp of it. A new employee who refers to printed instructions for closing out the cash register at the end of the day represents those instructions to herself in explicit propositional form; while an experienced bicycle rider who shifts his weight to keep his bicycle upright may be following a mental decision procedure whose content could be stated in propositional form ("Always turn the wheel in the direction the bicycle is falling"), but which he has never represented to himself in this way. In this paper I shall be concerned with the use of moral principles as explicitly represented objects of propositional attitudes. People may sometimes (perhaps usually) make moral decisions by using moral principles that are only available to them as mental procedures whose content they never represent to themselves. But the concern of moral philosophy is with moral principles as objects of evaluation, which are to be rejected or adopted in view of considerations offered for or against them. This process is most rational when the evaluator entertains those principles in propositional form. Hence it seems appropriate to assess the usability of principles by someone who holds them in that same propositional form.

Second, we should remember that many moral philosophers claim that morality does not involve principles at all, but rather "reasons"
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or "considerations" which elude expression in rule form. These considerations must somehow be weighed against each other in making decisions. Philosophers of this persuasion might be tempted to derive comfort for their view from any difficulties we discover in using principles to make decisions. Such a conclusion would be premature, since both conceptions of morality are probably equally vulnerable to the difficulties we will examine.

Third, the concept of following a rule has attracted a good deal of attention from philosophers in recent decades. For example, followers of Wittgenstein have concerned themselves with what it is for a person to follow one rule rather than another rule which is co-extensive with the first over part of their domains. (Wittgenstein, 1953; Kripke, 1982) I shall not try to deal with these issues, but simply assume that we have some satisfactory account of how to pin down the content of the particular moral principle the agent attempts to follow.

Finally, much of what I shall say will apply to other practical principles in addition to morality—principles of prudence, law, belief-formation, and so forth. But to keep exposition brief, I shall confine my remarks to the case of moral principles.

I. USING MORAL PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE BEHAVIOR

Let us start with the question of what is involved in guiding one's behavior by reference to a moral principle. As Kant pointed out, simply behaving in conformity with a principle does not guarantee you have used it for guidance. You may order chicken rather than pork at a restaurant, thus conforming to the Levitican law proscribing consumption of any animal that parts the hoof but fails to chew the cud. But if you are wholly unaware of this law, you have hardly used it for guidance. Nor does knowledge of what the law requires, together with conformity of behavior, show that you have guided your action by it. You might be aware of the dietary law but completely unmoved by it; your only concern is to avoid high cholesterol foods. The coincidence between the Biblical command and the avoidance of cholesterol is purely accidental. These considerations suggest that we can say that an agent uses a principle as a guide for making a decision just in case the agent chooses an act out of a desire to conform to the principle, and a belief that the act does conform.

But this account is ambiguous between two different possibilities. The process of deciding to perform an action has both a mental (or internal) and a behavioral (or external) aspect. As a whole the process may go astray in various ways. Thus suppose John wants
to follow the principle, "Always stop at red lights." He thinks he sees a red light, and forms the desire to stop his car. But not all goes according to plan: perhaps he was mistaken about the light's being red, or his brakes fail and the car doesn't stop. In an external sense, he has not regulated his behavior in accordance with his principle, but in a purely internal sense his decision has clearly been guided by it. Both these senses have important uses, so we need to distinguish them. Definitions accomplishing this aim may be stated as follows:

A. Agent S uses principle P as an internal guide for deciding to do act A if and only if S chooses to do A out of a desire to conform to P and a belief that A does conform.

B. Agent S uses principle P as an external guide for deciding to do act A if and only if A conforms to P, and S does A out of a desire to conform to P and a belief that A does conform.²

External regulation requires not merely that S go through certain mental processes, but also that these processes have a certain result—S must actually do A, and A must actually conform to P. Internal regulation is a weaker notion, since it only requires certain mental processes on S's part. It permits cases in which S's choice results in no action at all, or the resulting action is not A, or the resulting action is A, but A fails to conform to P.

Taking note of this distinction, we may say that a moral principle is usable for making a decision on a particular occasion just in case the agent is able (then) to use it in the sense of (A) or (B).

II. THE PROBLEMS OF ERROR AND DOUBT

Let us define the theoretical domain of a moral principle as all the actual or possible acts to which it ascribes moral status (where "moral status" includes being right, obligatory, wrong, permissible, supererogatory, and so forth). Different moral principles have different theoretical domains. Act utilitarianism, for example, ascribes moral status to all possible acts, while a principle prohibiting lying has a smaller domain, since it only assigns the status of being wrong to acts of lying, and no other status to any other acts. Let us further define the practical domain of a principle as all the acts with respect to which the principle can be used for guiding decisions (including decisions based on an assessment of the act as morally permissible).

It is plausible to think that a moral principle's practical domain ought to approach its theoretical domain as closely as possible, and indeed ought to match its theoretical domain exactly. A principle which meets this ideal may be said to be universally usable. Such a
principle can be used for making a decision, not necessarily with respect to every action, but with respect to every action that it evaluates. This ideal, although rarely articulated, seems to be implicitly assumed in many discussions of moral principles as decision guides. Representative expressions of it may be found in Rawls and Castañeda:

[P]rinciples are to be universal in application. . . . I assume that [everyone] can understand these principles and use them in his deliberations. (Rawls, 1971, p. 132)

Morality is. . . . a complex system of norms . . . that are universal, in that they apply to all persons; [and] pervasive, in that they apply to every moment of each person’s life; [and] practical, in that they purport to constitute an effective guidance to action. . . . (Castañeda, 1974, pp. 15-16)

The ideal that a moral principle should be universally usable is a naturally compelling one. We will consider its rationale more carefully later, but for now we can note two sources of its attractiveness. First, it seems clear that a tool falls short of perfection if it cannot be used on every task that calls for it. A calculator with keys too small to be manipulated by large hands is less perfect than one with keys that fit anyone’s hands. If a moral principle can be used for only some decisions within its theoretical domain, then it is a less perfect tool than a principle which can be used for all such decisions. This is especially true if no substitute decision-making device can be found. Second, there seems to be a special form of injustice created by moral principles which cannot be universally used. Suppose it turns out, for example, that certain moral principles cannot be used as widely by the dull or the poorly informed as by the highly intelligent and well-educated. Such a morality would violate the ideal that the successful moral life be available to everyone. Bernard Williams, who traces this ideal back to Kant, claims that it has the ultimate form of justice at its heart, and embodies something basic to our ideas of morality. (Williams, 1981, p. 21)

Given the intuitive appeal of the ideal of universal usability, let us inquire whether or not standard moral principles satisfy it. (By standard principles, I mean both the moral principles commonly discussed by philosophers, such as forms of utilitarianism and various deontological theories, and also the moral codes invoked in everyday life, including both informal codes and formal codes such as the Ten Commandments, codes of professional ethics, and school honor codes.) Little reflection suffices to convince us that the standard principles fail the test of universal usability in one respect or another. Many of these failures, and the only ones I shall be concerned with in this paper, are accounted for by our cognitive deficien-
cies as decision-makers. Problems arising from this source, which afflict deontological principles as well as consequentialist ones, fall into two distinct categories.

First there is what we can call the Problem of Error. This Problem afflicts agents who can reason in the requisite manner, i.e., who can deduce a prescription for action from their moral principle. But some empirical premise they invoke, in order to infer that the act is prescribed, is false, and their conclusion is false as well. The act they believe to be right is not in fact prescribed by the principle. Consider a politician who wants to follow utilitarianism in deciding whether to vote for a flat-rate tax or a progressive tax. The politician believes, falsely, that the flat-rate tax would maximize happiness, and so decides to vote for it. But instead the progressive tax would maximize happiness; only it satisfies utilitarianism. Or consider a juror who wants to follow a deontological principle requiring adequate compensation for injured plaintiffs. The juror believes, falsely, that granting the plaintiff $100,000 in damages would adequately compensate him, while in fact $500,000 is needed. The juror’s decision to vote for $100,000 does not satisfy her deontological principle.

These cases show that the politician’s and the juror’s principles are not usable as external decision guides, since invoking them would not lead these agents to perform the acts prescribed by their respective principles. They are, however, usable as internal decision guides, since each agent chooses to perform an action out of a desire to conform to his or her principle and a belief that the chosen action does so conform. In another place I shall argue that universal external usability of moral principles, however desirable, is not an obtainable goal. We must therefore content ourselves with mere internal usability. Here I will assume these results without argument; from now on I shall understand the quest for universality to be a quest for universal internal usability.

The second kind of difficulty for using a principle, and the one focused on for the remainder of this paper, can be called the Problem of Doubt. In this kind of case, the decision-maker cannot even engage in the requisite mental processes: he or she lacks the empirical premise necessary to connect the principle to any act, and so cannot come to believe of any act that it is prescribed by the principle. For example, the politician may feel uncertain which tax would maximize happiness, and the juror may feel uncertain how great an award would adequately compensate the plaintiff. Neither of these decision-makers can assent to an empirical premise stating that some particular act has the right-making characteristic specified
by his or her moral principle. Hence no prescription can be deduced from those principles. This is true even if the decision-maker can assign definite probabilities to a given act's satisfying the principle. The politician might believe that there is an eighty per cent chance that the flat rate tax would maximize happiness, and so conclude there is an eighty per cent chance that voting for this tax is prescribed by utilitarianism. But this does not enable him to infer what utilitarianism actually requires him to do. And since our definition of a moral principle's usability requires that the decision-maker be able to infer what that principle prescribes—not what it may prescribe, or what it probably prescribes—the politician is unable to use utilitarianism in deciding what to do.7

These cases show how a moral principle may fail to be internally usable by someone to guide his or her decision. Lack of sufficient empirical information can prevent the decision-maker from making an appropriate practical inference from the principle to a decision. This defect has frequently been ascribed to consequentialist principles, but the juror case shows how it can afflict deontological principles as well. Common occurrence of the Problem of Doubt shows that most standard moral principles not only fail the test of universal (internal) usability, but fail it by a wide margin. Theorists faced with this problem have suggested various responses. Some argue that the Problem is merely an artifact created by employment of an overly restrictive acceptance rule vis-a-vis the minor empirical premise necessary to apply the principle. More commonly, the Problem itself is accepted as discrediting the standard moral principles, and it is argued that they must be tossed out in favor of revised principles designed to be immune to the Problem. I shall argue elsewhere that neither of these strategies works.8 But the most popular, and initially most promising, response has been to suggest that the Problem can be eliminated by supplementing the standard moral principles with auxiliary rules designed to permit decision-making despite deficient empirical information. In the remainder of this paper I shall examine this proposal.

III. A PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF DOUBT

The solution under examination is most often proposed by those act utilitarians who hold objective act utilitarianism to be the correct theoretical account of right-making characteristics, but recognize that inadequate information sometimes (perhaps always) renders it useless for actual decision-making. These theorists conclude utilitarianism must be supplemented by auxiliary or subordinate rules designed for ease of application when knowledge is scant. The idea is that the
agent is to apply one of these auxiliary rules if he cannot apply
utilitarianism itself. For example, it is often suggested that when
the agent cannot decide which act would maximize happiness, he
should follow a rule prescribing the act with the maximum expected
happiness. He can decide which act satisfies this rule, even if he cannot
decide which act satisfies utilitarianism itself. And deciding what
to do by reference to this rule is a rational second-best strategy when
one’s underlying goal is to comply with utilitarianism.\(^9\)

Although utilitarians are standardly the proponents of this solu-
tion to the Problem of Doubt, it is clearly adoptable by deontologists
as well. Naturally an auxiliary rule suitable for a deontological theory
may differ from one suitable for utilitarianism. For example, a deon-
tologist might advocate a rule prescribing the act that maximizes
the probability of fulfilling the most stringent duty incumbent on
the agent.

Of course, the fact that a decision-maker can apply some auxiliary
rule only shows that the auxiliary rule itself is usable. It does not
yet show that the original moral principle is usable. We previously
said that a moral principle is usable only if the agent can choose
an act out of a desire to conform to the principle, and a belief that
the act does so conform. Agents involved in the Problem of Doubt,
even if they can employ an auxiliary rule, are still not in a position
to believe of any act that it conforms to their original moral principle,
or to choose an act on this ground. However, they are in a position
to choose an act because it bears a suitable relationship of a different
kind to the original moral principle. They can choose an act because
it is prescribed by an auxiliary rule that is appropriate to follow
when one cannot apply the original moral principle itself. The original
moral principle still governs the choice, but in a different manner
than when the prescription is directly deduced from it. Once we
see this, we can see that this solution amounts to the claim that
our previous definition of what it is to use a principle is too narrow.
It must be expanded to include cases in which the agent reasons
from a principle to an auxiliary rule and finally to an act. Let us
say that any such inference is an indirect inference from a principle
to an act, while the simpler inferences we examined before are direct
inferences. An agent who chooses an act on the basis of such an
indirect inference can be understood to be using his moral principle
in this extended sense.

Since the auxiliary rules have often been called “rules of thumb,”
we may call this the Rules of Thumb solution to the Problem of Doubt.
Examples of commonly suggested auxiliary rules (for utilitarianism)
include the rule of maximizing expected utility, some variety of
“satisficing” rule, the rule of performing the act with the greatest
likelihood of maximizing happiness, and the rule of minimizing the
greatest possible loss of happiness. But it is also often suggested
that the maxims of common morality (such as ‘‘Do not kill’’ and
‘‘Do not lie’’) would promote happiness if employed as auxiliary
rules, and so should serve this purpose. Analogous rules might be
constructed for use with deontological principles. In one traditional
locution, such rules prescribe an act as subjectively right, whereas the
moral principle itself prescribes an act as objectively right.

If an agent is able to make an indirect inference from her moral
principle, via an auxiliary rule, to a prescription for action, we may
say that the principle is indirectly usable for that agent. But what,
exactly, is required for an agent to count as having the ability to
make such an indirect inference? In particular, must the agent believe
of some auxiliary rule that it is the most appropriate auxiliary rule
to use when she is unable to use the moral principle itself? Or is
it merely necessary that if the agent believed this of some auxiliary
rule, she would be able to derive a prescription from the rule? Clearly
the latter is not sufficient. Even if there is some auxiliary rule that
she could utilize if she believed it to be appropriate, if she does
not believe of any rule that it is the appropriate one, then her at-
ttempt to indirectly apply her original moral principle will be blocked.
It will be blocked just as surely as her attempt to directly apply her
moral principle was blocked by her ignorance of, say, which action
would maximize utility. If we agree that a principle is not directly
usable when the agent lacks the requisite beliefs about her actions,
then we must also agree that a principle is not indirectly usable
if the agent lacks the requisite beliefs about auxiliary rules.

However, must we require that the agent explicitly believe of
some rule that it is the most appropriate usable auxiliary rule? In
effect we have just seen we must require that if the agent wanted
to follow her principle, there is some auxiliary rule she would employ
in attempting to do so. But must the agent explicitly represent it
to herself as an auxiliary rule? Why not allow cases in which the
agent would simply reason in accordance with a procedure conform-
ing to the rule, although she would never state the rule to herself
as a rule? Of course we need not require that the agent believes
‘‘R is the most appropriate auxiliary rule for P.’’ This formulates
the matter in our terms, but they need not be the terms employed
by the agent herself. Even so, requiring her to have a belief with
equivalent content may seem overly stringent. But let’s imagine a
case in which this requirement is not met: the agent wants to do
whatever action is prescribed by utilitarianism, realizes she is not
sure which action this is, and then, via some mental procedure whose
character she could not describe, comes to a decision to do act A.
And let us imagine that the mental procedure she follows in fact conforms to an appropriate auxiliary rule for utilitarianism, say a rule prohibiting any act of theft. Does her reasoning process make it true that utilitarianism is indirectly usable, and indeed used, by her in making her decision? It seems to me that it does not. The events we have described so far do not determine whether she is indirectly using utilitarianism via an auxiliary rule, or doing something else altogether, e.g., abandoning utilitarianism in favor of traditional morality, or switching from morality to the law as a basis for her decision. To guarantee that this is a genuine instance of indirect use of utilitarianism, it appears we must require either that (a) she explicitly believes R to be the best usable auxiliary rule for utilitarianism, or else that (b) if she has no beliefs about R itself, but simply follows it as a mental procedure, then her conclusion at the end is a belief that \textit{A is subjectively right relative to utilitarianism} (or some equivalent of this belief). Such a conclusion would distinguish the case of someone following a procedure as an auxiliary rule to P from someone switching from P to another principle altogether as the basis for her decision.\textsuperscript{10}

There are several features of the Rules of Thumb solution to the Problem of Doubt that have often been overlooked by its advocates. First, it seems clear that a moral principle will not be rendered universally usable if it is merely supplemented by one or two rules. This fact easily escapes notice. For example, act utilitarians often advocate supplementing their principle just with the rule of maximizing expected utility. But to know what this rule prescribes typically requires an agent to perform a complex arithmetical calculation involving the probabilities and values of the possible consequences of each alternative action. Obviously not every decision-maker will feel certain what values or probabilities are to be assigned to the various possible consequences. Even those who can make such assignments may not feel certain that the result of the computation is mathematically accurate. And some decision-makers may not have the intellectual capacity to perform this computation at all. All of these decision-makers are still subject to the Problem of Doubt, since they remain uncertain which act their principle (indirectly) prescribes. Some theorists, aware of these problems, have additionally supplemented utilitarianism with the “minimax” rule for application in such cases. This rule prescribes minimizing the greatest possible loss of happiness. One can apply this rule even if one cannot assign probabilities to the various possible consequences of one’s acts. But even adding this rule does not ensure universality for utilitarianism, since not every agent has the information or ability to apply it. One can be uncertain what values to assign the various
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possible consequences, or uncertain at the end of a long analysis which act really was shown to minimize possible loss of happiness; one can even be intellectually unable to structure the problem in the requisite way. It appears that the Problem of Doubt will be fully eliminated only by supplementing the target moral principle with a host of rules, each designed to cover a different cognitive gap. (It is clear this point holds for both deontological and consequentialist theories.) Given the extreme deficiencies of information and intellect handicapping some decision-makers, some of these rules must be extraordinarily simple to apply. Perhaps the rule of final resort must simply direct the agent, when all else fails, to choose an act at random. The necessity for numerous rules, some extremely easy to apply, means that some agents may be able to apply more than one rule. In view of this, we may revise the traditional terminology by saying that the "subjectively right" action is the act prescribed by the most appropriate usable auxiliary rule.¹¹

It is worth noting that the necessity for numerous auxiliary rules provides a clue to why the strategy of throwing out standard moral principles in favor of more usable ones is not an attractive solution to the Problem of Doubt. If anything like universal usability is to be achieved, substituting a single new principle for, say, utilitarianism, will not work. Instead it will be necessary to substitute an entire array of principles (perhaps equivalent in content to appropriate auxiliary rules), each designed to accommodate a particular cognitive gap. Such a morality would be, to say the least, unwieldy.

In connection with this we can see the Rules of Thumb solution implies that moral theories are much more elaborate edifices than we may have imagined. They must contain not only a set of moral principles for the theoretical evaluation of actions, but also a host of auxiliary rules for guiding decisions. In addition they must contain a normative standard for determining which auxiliary rules are appropriate to the moral principles, and for rank-ordering the set of appropriate rules so that it may be determined which of several feasible and appropriate rules would be the best for an agent to employ. In this paper I will not attempt to determine what content such standards should have. Clearly the standard itself must be appropriate to the moral principle it supplements. Various candidates have been suggested by both utilitarians and decision theorists. Some proposed standards assess an auxiliary rule by reference to its empirical properties, such as its likelihood over the long run to generate prescriptions co-extensive with those of the governing moral principle.¹² Other standards assess the rule by reference to its fulfillment of various purely formal conditions. Axiomatic decision theory can be interpreted as providing such formal standards; an example would
be the requirement that the rule deliver a set of complete and transitive evaluations over the decision-maker’s alternative acts.\textsuperscript{13}

To recapitulate: the Rules of Thumb solution claims that there is a legitimate form of practical reasoning from a moral principle, to an auxiliary decision rule, and from there to a concrete prescription for action; and that an agent who decides what to do by using such reasoning counts as using his moral principle to make his decision. Provided the moral principle is supplemented with an adequate variety of auxiliary rules and a standard for assessing them, it will be usable to make any decision within its theoretical domain, thus evading the Problem of Doubt entirely.

IV. PROBLEMS WITH THE RULES OF THUMB SOLUTION

The Rules of Thumb solution to the Problem of Doubt is both popular and promising. Unfortunately a severe difficulty besets it. Consider an agent who wants, say, to follow act utilitarianism. She knows she is uncertain which act would actually maximize utility, and concludes she must derive a prescription by employing the most appropriate auxiliary rule. But she is uncertain which auxiliary rule, among those directly usable by her, is most appropriate. Perhaps she can’t think of any usable auxiliary rule which she is certain is appropriate at all, or perhaps she believes several to be appropriate, but isn’t sure which is the most appropriate. For example, she might believe that the best rule must satisfy certain formal conditions, but be unsure of any usable rule whether it satisfies these conditions. Nor is there any mental procedure (corresponding to an auxiliary rule), resulting in a conclusion that a given act would be subjectively right, that she automatically invokes in cases such as this.\textsuperscript{14}

By our account, then, utilitarianism is not usable \textit{even indirectly} by this agent.

What has happened is that we have eliminated the Problem of Doubt at the level of applying moral principles to acts, only to have it re-appear at a higher level, the level of choosing auxiliary rules. Uncertainty as to which act satisfies the principle has been replaced by uncertainty as to which auxiliary rule would be most appropriate. Either form of uncertainty prevents the agent from constructing a bridge between her principle and an act to be done.

Since this difficulty is just a reappearance of the Problem of Doubt, we might suppose it could be solved at this new level in the same way we solved it at the lower level. Suppose the agent’s uncertainty about which auxiliary rule to apply has the following source: she possesses a standard for ranking the different auxiliary rules, but lacks sufficient information about the rules to determine
for certain which one satisfies her standard. We might assume her problem would be solved if she had an auxiliary standard designed to be usable despite her impoverished information about the rules. In our recent example, if the agent’s standard stipulates that an auxiliary rule is the most appropriate one just in case it satisfies formal conditions C1 through Cn, the auxiliary standard might recommend applying the auxiliary rule that most probably satisfies these conditions. Possession of such an auxiliary standard would enable the agent to reason from her moral principle to a prescription for action via an auxiliary standard and the auxiliary decision rule satisfying it.

But unfortunately there is no guarantee that introducing such an auxiliary standard will solve the agent’s problem. Any inference invoking this concept will only count as legitimate if the agent uses an auxiliary standard she believes to be the most appropriate usable one relative to her original standard. Otherwise she cannot believe of any act (so derived) that it stands in a suitable relation to her moral principle. And clearly she might be uncertain which auxiliary standard is in fact best. For example, even though she knows which auxiliary rule most probably satisfies C1 through Cn, she might wonder whether this fact is really sufficient to show its suitability. And if she is unsure, there is no legitimate way for her to draw an inference from utilitarianism to a prescription for action.

The Problem of Doubt, then, can raise its head at still a third level—the level of beliefs about auxiliary standards. What we are discovering is the possibility of an infinite regress. Embellishing the moral theory with auxiliary decision aids which enable an agent to sidestep inadequate information at one level only defers the problem to a higher level where inadequate information may reappear. There appears to be no end to the possible levels: uncertainty at any level may in principle be overcome by use of an auxiliary aid at the next highest level, but uncertainty may exist at that level too. Auxiliary rules and standards only solve the Problem of Doubt completely if, for every agent and every decision within the theoretical domain of the principle in question, there is some level at which he possesses the requisite belief—the belief that such-and-such an aid is the most appropriate one. Of course, for some particular decisions, such a belief will exist, and the principle will be usable on those occasions. But it seems wildly optimistic to hope that every agent will have such a belief on every occasion when he could apply a given principle. In fact most of us feel far more certain about the empirical features of our proposed actions than we do about the moral appropriateness of possible decision aids. And the higher
the level of an aid, the more likely we are to feel uncertain about its status. If we are unsure which auxiliary decision rule ought to be used, we are very unlikely to be able to solve our problem by appeal to some higher level component in an embellished moral theory.\footnote{16}

These considerations suggest that we should understand the Rules of Thumb Solution to the Problem of Doubt in the following way. It attempts to solve the problem of inadequate information at one decision-making level by appealing to information available at a higher level. For example, lack of information about the character of one’s acts is circumvented by appealing to information about a suitable auxiliary decision rule. But in effect this strategy requires decision-makers to have more information at higher levels in order to compensate for their lack of information at lower levels. Unfortunately, there is no reason to suppose that all decision-makers have this higher-level information. Hence, although the Rules of Thumb solution may extend the internal usability of moral principles, it fails to render them universally usable. Because internal usability is a necessary condition for external usability, failure of the Rules of Thumb solution provides an additional reason why universal external usability is unobtainable as well.

V. REASSESSING THE DEMAND FOR UNIVERSALITY

We have now examined the most promising strategy for solving the Problem of Doubt—the Rules of Thumb solution. As we have seen, it fails to establish the universal usability of moral principles. Since, as I argue elsewhere, no other solution is more successful, this leaves us with only one choice: to give up the demand for universal usability of moral rules.

But we need to evaluate how serious a loss this is. How far should we relax the quest for usability? One alternative is to drop the demand for practical usability altogether, and admit it was an illusion to think moral principles could be used for making decisions. (But then we need to find some decision-making substitute.) Another option is to view usability as only one valuable feature (among several) of a moral system. On this view we would grade one moral system as better than another, other things being equal, if the first is more widely usable than the second. (But then we need some technique for balancing breadth of usability against other desirable features of candidate moral systems. Is a more widely usable system which recommends morally worse acts better than a less usable system which recommends more desirable acts?) A third option would be to stipulate that a moral system is acceptable only if it achieves a given
level of usability; beyond this level, differences in usability among systems do not affect their relative merits. A fourth alternative would be to require usability only in the most important cases, where what counts as an important case would vary from system to system.

To decide among these alternatives we need to return to the question of why usability is valuable. Let us start by examining some of the most natural rationales for the idea that usability has value. When we introduced the requirement that a moral principle be universally usable, we cited Bernard Williams’ contention that justice requires the successful moral life to be available to everyone. We took this to mean that each person should be able to make decisions by applying his moral principle; that moral principles should be usable by the well-informed and the poorly-informed alike. But a closer look at Williams’ remarks suggests that what he means by a “successful moral life” is a life to which no blameworthiness accrues. Each of us, whether well-educated or not, should have the same opportunity to avoid culpability. But universal usability of moral principles is not necessary to ensure this form of equality. A person bears no blame if he must make a decision, wants to use his moral principle for guidance, but is prevented from applying it by lack of information (assuming no culpability infects his ignorance). So even if our moral principles are largely unusable, or are less usable by the ignorant than by the well-informed, it does not follow that we are condemned to blameworthy lives, or that the ill-informed must lead more blameworthy lives than the well-informed. Williams’ worry seems to provide no reason to value usability at all, much less to demand universal usability.

What other rationales might be offered to support the importance of universal usability? It might be claimed that universality is valuable because it ensures compliance with the moral principle among well-motivated agents: all who attempt to apply it will actually perform the prescribed acts. Since (according to the principle) those acts are better than their alternatives, naturally it is preferable that they be performed. Unfortunately, universal usability does not guarantee universal compliance. Recall that we are interpreting “usability” as mere “internal usability,” so universality only assures universal ability to go through certain mental processes—not that the act selected by these processes will be the one prescribed by the principle. I earlier assumed we must settle for this lesser goal, since (as I argue elsewhere) universal external usability is unobtainable. So we cannot advocate universality on the ground that it leads to an ideal pattern of action.

We cannot even say that more extensive usability is better than
less extensive usability on the ground that the former leads, or probably leads, to a better pattern of action. Supplementing a moral principle by auxiliary decision aids does extend the internal usability of that principle. It might be argued that the principle should be supplemented with decision aids which would produce a better pattern of action if used. But there is no assurance that individual agents themselves will employ this criterion in selecting their aids, or that even if they do, they will accurately select aids which satisfy it. (Recall that a decision-maker reasons legitimately even if he employs an aid that is not in fact the best one usable by him.) So even if a principle were widely—indeed, universally—internally usable because each agent possessed and used a decision aid believed by him to be correct, use of those aids would not necessarily lead to a superior pattern of actions. Perhaps the agents would perform better acts (as measured by the original moral principle) if they made their decisions without any reference to the original principle at all.

It might be claimed that usability is important because it is psychologically impossible to maintain a commitment to the values of a moral principle if one can rarely (or only sometimes) apply that principle in making decisions. But this seems wrong. One can still care about, for example, not injuring others, even if one cannot decide what to do in particular cases because one is uncertain whether someone may be injured. Caring about events is not, in general, linked to the possibility of acting to alter them; we care just as much about people injured by unpreventable natural disasters as we do about people injured by our own acts. So securing more extensive usability for a moral principle does not seem necessary to securing allegiance to its values.

It might also be thought that usability is important because agents will be unable to make any decision at all if they cannot derive a prescription from their moral principle. But again this is wrong. Failure on a given occasion of one decision-making tool does not entail failure of other decision-making tools. If an agent cannot derive a prescription from his morality, he can turn to other sources: consideration of self-interest, efficiency, etiquette, tradition, law, or whatever. Or perhaps he can turn to an alternative moral source. Perhaps his degree of confidence in the correctness of his original moral principle is limited. Finding it not to be applicable, he may prefer to use some alternative moral principle which he feels has at least some chance of being correct, and which he can apply in this case. Thus the juror, uncertain what compensation is required by her deontological principle, might think there is some chance that the principle is wrong anyway, and invoke utilitarianism to decide how much to award the plaintiff. (It is a difficult but in-
teresting question whether it is more rational to turn to non-moral or alternative moral decision-guides in such a case.) Thus it may be possible to make a decision, even if not by reference to one’s preferred moral principle. Poor usability of that principle does not necessarily entail lowered capacity to make any decisions.

None of the suggestions we have considered so far even begin to show why internal usability is important. But failure of the last rationale suggests a new idea: that the importance of usability can be explained by reference to the concept of autonomy. Autonomy has, notoriously, been defined in any number of different ways. But one central idea may be that a person acts autonomously insofar as his decision to act is governed by the kinds of considerations that he deems most important. If we are committed to a certain moral principle, but cannot select which action to perform by reference to that principle, then we must turn elsewhere (say, to considerations of self-interest, or to a moral principle we are less certain is correct) for guidance on how to act. Insofar as our choice is determined by these considerations, rather than by the ones we would prefer to govern it, it does not express our deepest values; we do not act autonomously. Inability on the part of a morally committed person to apply his moral principle is, in this respect, unlike inability of a soldier to apply the orders of his commanding officer. The soldier may have no intrinsic interest in carrying out these commands; indeed he may be relieved that he is unable to discover what his officer wants him to do. But the morally committed person does have an intrinsic interest in carrying out the precepts of his morality. Lack of internal usability of one’s moral code, then, undermines an important form of autonomy in the agents whom it strikes. From this point of view there is a special injustice if moral principles are more widely usable by some categories of persons than by others.17

We have at last found at least one reason why internal usability is valuable: it makes possible an important form of autonomy. But how important is this form of autonomy? What price should we be willing to pay for it? Only when we know the answers to these questions will we be able to settle the problem with which we started this section, the problem of how much usability we should seek in our moral system. As yet I am unsure how to answer these questions, or even how to approach them. Their solution must wait until another occasion.18

Thus we are not yet in a position to say how widely usable we want our moral principles to be. However, we are in a position to see more clearly that supplementing the moral principles with auxiliary decision aids is not sufficient to attain universal internal
usability. We cannot hope to achieve wider usability merely by tinker-
ing with the content of the moral system. Since the real difficulty lies in our lack of information, we can only overcome it by enhan-
cing our information.\(^1\) We must change ourselves as well as change the moral system. This means we must either enhance our empirical information about our future actions; or else we must enhance our moral knowledge—our awareness of which auxiliary decision aids are appropriate to use when empirical information fails us.\(^2\)

**References**


**Notes**

\(^1\) Bales, 1971, is a salient early exception to this. Since this article was accepted for publication (July 1985), several articles have appeared in which a similar distinction is made. See, for example, Brink, 1986.

\(^2\) Note these definitions do not require that S’s belief that A conforms to P be justified or reasonable (nor will the subsequent definition of “usability” make this requirement). Some readers may wish to strengthen the definitions by imposing such a requirement, but in the interests of making usability as easily obtainable as possible, I shall forebear from doing so in the text. See note 18 for further comment.

\(^3\) Note that Castañeda’s requirements on morality’s usability are stronger than my own, because he is referring to an entire moral system, rather than a single principle (which might constitute only part of a moral system).

Nell, 1975, Chap. 7, offers an interesting argument that the practical domain of Kant’s moral theory is wider than its theoretical domain.

\(^4\) Note one immediate problem. Although an action, if it takes place at all, only takes place at a given time, there are many earlier times at which a decision might take place
whether or not to perform that action. There are clear advantages to having a principle usable on each occasion on which the agent might consider whether or not to perform the action. However, the discussion that follows will implicitly assume we are only requiring some more restricted notion of universal usability, perhaps usability on at least one such occasion.

It seems clear that there is a dimension along which the notion of universal usability employed in the text is too strong. It requires that a principle be usable by anyone, whatever his condition—even if he is drunk or unconscious. Clearly it is no defect in a principle that it cannot be applied by someone in one of these conditions. It may be (as Nicholas Sturgeon has suggested to me) that we can differentiate such conditions from mere cognitive inadequacies by referring to what an agent can do when he is within the range of his normal intellectual capacities. Since we shall not be concerned with such examples, I shall not try to fill out this idea.

I include only the kind of principle sometimes called "objective" as opposed to "subjective." An objective principle assesses an action in virtue of the features it actually has, while a subjective one assesses an action in virtue of features the agent believes it to have. Thus "Do not kill" is an objective principle, while "Do nothing you believe may be a killing" is a subjective principle. Interest in subjective principles arises primarily because adopting them is seen as a way of avoiding the Problems of Error and Doubt. Since, as I shall argue elsewhere, this strategy does not succeed, in this paper I will restrict consideration to objective principles.

7It might be suggested that this problem could be overcome by invoking a general rule of practical reasoning allowing one to choose an act on the basis of a premise stating that the act is probably morally right (or whatever normative status is at issue). But we then need to ask what the precise content of such rules should be, and would find ourselves engaged in debates parallel to the ones I shall describe below when discussing the "Rules of Thumb" solution to the Problem of Doubt. So there is no need to pursue this suggestion here as an independent solution.

8For a discussion by decision theorists of the necessity for several such rules, and a survey of some candidates, see Coombs, 1970, Chap. 5.

9Hare, for example, states that "The best set [of auxiliary rules] is that whose acceptance yields actions, dispositions, etc. most nearly approximating to those which would be chosen if we were able to use critical thinking all the time [i.e. accurately apply the moral principle itself]" (in Hare, 1981, p. 50); Rawls asserts that "... utilitarianism recognizes ... secondary rules are necessary to guide deliberation. ... These norms may be thought of as devised to bring our actions as close as possible to those which would maximize utility. ..." in Rawls, 1980, p. 563. See also Chernoff, 1959, pp. 94-99 for a defense of such a standard by decision theorists.

10For an accessible treatment, see Luce, 1957, pp. 23-31 and 278-306.

11It has sometimes been suggested by Bayesians that all decision-making automatically proceeds in accordance with the rule of maximizing expected utility. But it is clear that using this rule would often exceed our computational capacity; and empirical studies strongly suggest that different decision rules are used in different circumstances. For discussion, see Coombs, 1970, chap. 5.

12Or (following our earlier discussion of the use of unarticulated mental procedures
instead of auxiliary rules in propositional form) it will count as legitimate if she follows a mental procedure (corresponding to some such auxiliary standard) whose outcome is a belief that auxiliary rule R is the most subjectively appropriate usable rule relative to P.

14 Of course, many agents will not represent the problem to themselves in terms of decision aids at all. Their problem is that it will simply not come to them how to proceed in a case where they are uncertain which act satisfies their moral principle.

15 I am grateful to Samuel Scheffler for suggesting the label of "autonomy" for the value at issue here. Discussion of something like this concept is contained in Nozick, 1974, pp. 48-50.

16 We need to know the value of this form of autonomy for another reason as well. The sense of internal usability I have defined is a very weak one. For example, according to it a principle might be usable by an agent even though none of the agent's operating beliefs (concerning the empirical features of his actions, or the appropriateness of his auxiliary aids) are either true or justified. I have accepted such a weak notion in order to maximize the possibility of satisfying it—of finding principles which are usable in this sense. (See note 2.) Even so we have seen that standard moral principles fall short. But one might feel that the sort of autonomy achievable through internal usability would be even more valuable if the kind of usability in question were more demanding—for example, if it required the agent's beliefs to be reasonable given his evidence. Since more stringent forms of usability will be even harder to achieve, we need to know the comparative values of these various forms.

17 On the weak notion of usability employed in the text, "enhancing our information" could be accomplished by arbitrarily (without regard to truth or evidence) constructing our beliefs so that we always had the kind of belief (such as "Act A would maximize happiness") necessary to apply our moral principles. I do not believe that it is psychologically possible to shape one's beliefs in this manner. But if it is possible, then we will have to decide whether the epistemic value lost by such a procedure would be counterbalanced by the gain in autonomy.

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19 The author has previously published under the name "Holly S. Goldman."
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