C.E. Harris' Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

Commentary On
What Job You Can Accept

Gerald's dilemma is not a problem in professional ethics. Rather, it is a problem in personal ethics which is generated by his professional training and his professional aspirations. Like all dilemmas, Gerald's problem involves a conflict between two competing obligations. On the one hand, he wants to be true to his own moral ideals, which include his belief in the superiority of organic farming. This belief is probably related to a general commitment to environmental causes about which he and his father care very deeply. On the other hand, he feels morally bound to do what he can to save the family farm. No doubt this sense of moral obligation is also related to strong emotional ties to his family and to the land where he was raised. Probably his family has lived on the farm for several generations.

Gerald's predicament has all of the earmarks of a classic moral dilemma. He feels himself pulled in opposite directions by powerful emotional forces and by persuasive moral considerations. Yet he apparently cannot satisfy both of the demands. He feels that he would do something wrong no matter what he does. Yet he cannot do nothing. "Doing nothing" would presumably be to continue in school, but the decision to stay in school might well involve sacrificing the family farm. So he is forced to decide, and yet both decisions seem wrong. A classic moral dilemma!

Such dilemmas can produce a sense of panic which often results in paralysis of thought as well as of action. We are inclined to either freeze up or to decide irrationally. "Just put two numbers on two pieces of paper and place them in a basket, "1" for staying in school and "2" for getting the job with Pro-Growth. Then pick one of the numbers and act accordingly." We all know that neither of these methods of deciding is appropriate, so we need to think more carefully and critically.

One way of escaping from the dilemma is to argue that one of the options really is better than the other. All of Gerald's friends appear to adopt this tactic. They argue

that taking the job with Pro-Growth really is better than abandoning the family farm to its fate. Furthermore, the arguments of Gerald's friends are all of a certain type: they are all utilitarian arguments That is, they reason in terms of the consequences of the two courses of action. The consequences are evaluated in terms of human happiness or well-being.

Allen, Bob, and Don argue that, with respect to the environmentalist perspective, the consequences of Gerald's taking the job will be no worse than the consequences of someone else's taking the job, and they may even be more desirable. If Gerald does not take the job, someone who is less sympathetic with environmental considerations might take it. Thus, by not taking the job, Gerald may both harm the environment and fail to do what he can to save the family farm. From a strictly utilitarian standpoint, this is a powerful argument.

There are two problems with this argument. The first problem is a difficulty even from the utilitarian standpoint. We have to ask whether Gerald's three friends have correctly assessed all of the consequences of the course of action that they recommend. If Gerald makes his reservations about pesticides known to the interviewer, it is possible he/she might reply, "You know, we have a small unit that is attempting to develop products for use on organic farms, so we will be in a position to take advantage of this market when it develops. We could put you in this unit." Or, perhaps Gerald's criticism of pesticides might prompt the company to set up such a unit. Again, if Gerald goes to work, there is the chance that he might never finish his degree. Finally, Gerald's friends might have underestimated the chances of saving the family farm by other methods.

A second problem with the recommendation of Gerald's three friends is that it fails to take into account the effects that following their recommendation might have on Gerald himself. This is perhaps a type of consequence, but it is a consequence of a different order. It is an effect on Gerald's sense of integrity, on Gerald's status as a free moral agent who lives in terms of his own moral convictions. In terms of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, their recommendation requires that he treat himself as a "mere means" to some higher good, namely the salvaging of the family farm, and that he do this by violating his own conscience. Should one ever violate his conscience in order to achieve some supposedly "higher" end? This is not always an easy question to answer. Sometimes people do feel justified in doing this. For example, a legislator may agree to support a piece of legislation which he thinks is wrong in order to gain passage of another piece of legislation which he thinks is

vastly more important. Is this justified? If so, is this analogous to Gerald's situation?

Before attempting to answer these difficult questions, it might be well to investigate in a more careful way whether there is any way to satisfy both of the moral demands that created the dilemma in the first place. If we can satisfy both of these demands--even in a modified form--we might come out better, from a moral standpoint, than trying to satisfy one and reject the other. Here is where one's imagination comes into play.

These two demands--saving the family farm and not violating one's conscience--might be satisfied in various ways. Could Gerald get a loan on the basis of his good job prospects? If he could do this, he could save the family farm without violating his conscience. Could he take a short-term job with Pro-Growth? This would require his violating his conscience to some extent, but it would also allow him to save the family farm. Could he encourage his family to sell off part of the family farm in order to pay the debts on the remaining part? This would require at least a partial fulfillment of his obligation to his family without violating his conscience. Or perhaps he could both get a short-term job with Pro-Growth and encourage his family to sell part of the farm. This would require a partial violation of both of the original moral demands, but also allow him to respect those demands in a modified form.

If we knew more about the specifics of the situation, we might be able to think of additional compromises. But of course there are those who say that such moral compromises are wrong. Moral demands are absolute and unqualified. If this is true, then we must go back to our earlier considerations in order to determine which demand should receive priority. However it is important to keep in mind that most moral demands are not really unqualified. We might be inclined to say, "Never lie." But we all know we cannot hold to this absolute, unqualified norm in all situations. When someone with a knife in his hand who is obviously deranged asks for the whereabouts of our friend, we would be justified in lying. Similarly, we may not be able to hold to a moral requirement such as, "Never in any way violate your conscience." On the other hand, actions that violate our conscience should not be undertaken lightly.