WHAT PROFESSOR LUCKHARDT CANNOT REGRET

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Abstract:

In his recent article "Remorse, Regret, and the Socratic Paradox" (Analysis 35.5 (1975) p.159-166) Professor C. Grant Luckhardt attempted to show why those who deny that there is weakness of will need not be troubled by the phenomenon of remorse or regret. He did this by arguing (1) that contemporary formulations of the Socratic "To know the good is to do the good" principle are unacceptable and must be qualified and (2) that once the Socratic principle is properly qualified remorse and regret will not constitute evidence against the truth of the Socratic principle. In my response I show (1) that Professor Luckhardt's proposed qualifications of the Socratic principle are unnecessary and that if we merely understand what the original principle asserts, then it is clear that the unqualified principle is not subject to the two sorts of difficulties that Luckhardt raises and (2) that even if the Socratic principle is modified in the proposed manner, it is still unable to answer the remorse/regret objection.
What Professor Luckhardt Cannot Regret

Ever since Socrates interrogated his fellow citizens, philosophers have been troubled by the apparently paradoxical phenomenon of weakness of will, i.e., of people failing to do that which they allegedly believe they ought to do. Many thinkers have felt that if A believes that he ought to do X in situation Y, then when presented with situation Y, A will do X and should he fail to do so, this reveals that A really does not believe that he ought to do X in situation Y. Various objections have been offered to this position, one of the most important being the inability of those denying the existence of moral weakness to explain the remorse or regret which we feel for having not acted in accordance with our professed moral beliefs.

In a recent article Professor C. Grant Luckhardt has attempted to show why those who deny that there is weakness of will need not be troubled by the phenomenon of remorse or regret. He does this by arguing (1) that contemporary formulations of the Socratic "To know the good is to do the good" principle are unacceptable and must be qualified and (2) that once the Socratic principle is properly qualified remorse and regret will not constitute evidence against the truth of the Socratic principle. In this response I will show (1) that Professor Luckhardt's proposed qualifications of the Socratic principle are unnecessary and that if we merely understand what the original principle asserts, then it is clear that the unqualified principle is not subject to the two sorts of difficulties that Luckhardt raises and (2) that even if the Socratic principle is modified in the proposed manner, it is still unable to answer the remorse/regret objection.

Professor Luckhardt opens his paper by declaring that "Stated without qualification the modern versions of the Socratic Paradox are patently false." Luckhardt argues that the formulations of R. M. Hare, P. S. Gardiner, and

1 Luckhardt, C. Grant "Remorse, Regret, and the Socratic Paradox", Analysis 35.5 (1975) p. 159-166.
2 Luckhardt, p. 159.
Steven Lukes all fail to account for two sorts of cases: those where people change their moral beliefs and those where people do not fulfill their moral obligations because they are unable to do so. Thus Luckhardt rejects a simple statement of the Socratic principle such as R. M. Hare's "Everyone always does what he thinks he ought to do" in favor of a more qualified version, "If a person fails to do what he purportedly thinks he ought to do, then that person cannot really have thought at the time he failed to act that he ought to act, provided that he was able to act". However merely by properly understanding the original principle, both of Luckhardt's qualifications are rendered unnecessary.

Consider Luckhardt's first type of counter-example. Would someone defending Hare's formulation be the least disturbed by the fact that at time t₁ I believe that at time t₃ I ought to do X, but when time t₃ arrives I do not do X because at time t₂ I changed my mind and decided that at time t₃ I need not do X? Of course not. The claim that "Everyone always does what he thinks he ought to do" does not concern past or future moral beliefs but rather only those beliefs which I now have. Hare's statement of the Socratic principle is in the present tense - it asserts that at any given moment each person does exactly what at that moment he believes he ought to do. Thus Hare would not be the least troubled by Luckhardt's case of a man who on Saturday decides to return a bag of money on Monday, but who changes his mind in the interval so that on Monday he does not return the money. On Monday such a man is not doing what he believed he ought to do but he is doing what he believes he ought to do. Since Hare's version of the Socratic principle is concerned with what one believes one ought to do, not with what one believed one ought to do, Luckhardt's first sort of objection is simply irrelevant.

Turning to Luckhardt's second sort of objection, no one would deny that people who believe that they ought to do X might fail to do X through inability. However, contrary to Professor Luckhardt, such failures do not show that these people violated their professed moral beliefs. Luckhardt has simply forgotten that a person can only be morally obligated to do that which he can do. Should a blizzard make travel on Monday impossible, I am no longer obligated to return the money on Monday. I may have been morally obligated to anticipate and prepare for this contingency and I may have failed to fulfill that obligation. However this does not mean that my inability to act does not release me from my original moral obligation. Simply by recognizing that "X ought to do Y" entails that "X can do Y" enables us to ade-

5 Lukes, Steven "Moral Weakness" Philosophical Quarterly XV (1965) p. 106.

6 Luckhardt, p. 162. The underlined words are Luckhardt's two qualifications; the underlining of the phrase "at the time he failed to act that he ought to act" has been added.

In the discussion that follows I will refer to R. M. Hare's version of the Socratic principle. However my response can be applied, mutatis mutandis, to the formulations of Gardiner and Lukes.
quately defend any of the modern formulations of the Socratic principle against Luckhardt's second group of objections.

In reply to my criticisms, Professor Luckhardt might respond by claiming either (a) that his proposed qualifications merely provide certain normally assumed but unstated modifications of the Socratic principle or (b) that his proposed qualifications do not really alter the principle but rather merely explicitly state that which is already implicit in the original principle. However, on the one hand, rejoinder (a) fails because, as I have argued, Luckhardt's 'qualifications' do not in any way alter the initial principle. It is as if someone were to object to a geometrical theorem about triangles on the ground that the theorem did not explicitly state that a triangle was a three-sided plane figure. On the other hand, Luckhardt cannot make reply (b) save on pain of contradicting his initial claim that the unqualified versions of the Socratic principle "... are patently false". There is surely a great difference between saying that a certain principle is patently false and saying that a certain principle is true but in need of further exposition lest it be misunderstood. Thus neither response will save Luckhardt's analysis from my objection.

In short, merely by understanding that which the initial versions of the Socratic principle assert enables us to avoid Professor Luckhardt's alleged counter-examples without adopting either of his amendments.

II

Let us now examine whether Professor Luckhardt's modified principle does enable him to answer the remorse/regret objection to the Socratic principle. According to Luckhardt, the fact that at time \( t_1 \) \( X \) does \( Y \) and at time \( t_2 \) \( X \) feels remorse for having done \( Y \) at time \( t_1 \) does not show that at time \( t_1 \) \( X \) believed that he should not have done \( Y \). On Luckhardt's account, remorse or regret at best shows that at time \( t_2 \) \( X \) believes that he ought not to have done \( Y \) at time \( t_1 \), not that at time \( t_1 \) \( X \) believes that he ought not to do \( Y \) at time \( t_1 \).

However closer examination reveals that Luckhardt is only able to make this response by fundamentally misinterpreting the relation of my present beliefs about my past action to the beliefs that I had when I performed those actions. Certainly between time \( t_1 \) and \( t_2 \) I may change my moral beliefs so that at times \( t_1 \) and \( t_2 \) I believe that I ought to do different things. However if we are to understand remorse and regret properly we cannot do so in the terms which Luckhardt proposes. His analysis would mean that the thing for which \( X \) feels remorse at time \( t_2 \) is never the fact that at time \( t_1 \) \( X \) did not do what at time \( t_1 \) \( X \) believed he ought to have done at time \( t_1 \).

Consider the following two cases:

Case One: Jones has all his life been trained to be a soldier. He comes from a family with several generations of soldiers. In his youth he went to a mil-

7 Luckhardt, p. 159.
itary academy and then graduated from West Point first in his class. He has bravely fought in three wars. He steadfastly believes in all of the military virtues. However, in a certain battle, Jones' entire regiment is killed and he himself is badly wounded and in great pain. The enemy charges and in spite of all of his previous training and behavior Jones runs away. Jones survives, fights bravely in many other battles, but always feels remorse for having once acted in a manner contrary to his moral beliefs. Doesn't it seem implausible to say that in every case of this type the person for one day ceased believing that which he believed the rest of his life?

Case Two: Natasha is a dedicated, thoroughly committed Communist. Her parents and grandparents have been lifelong party members. She can recite all of the Marxist classics from memory. Before joining the party, she belonged to the Young Pioneers and the Young Communist League. She has self-sacrificially volunteered for five years on a collective farm in Siberia. While on a special mission abroad to sell the crown jewels in order to provide money for famine relief, she falls in love with a capitalist. Throughout their relationship she continues to espouse her Communist beliefs, hates her lover for his reactionary views, but still finds him the most attractive person whom she has ever known. In spite of her years in the movement and her commitment to the cause, out of her love she betrays her beliefs by giving the crown jewels to her lover. Feeling remorse for having acted in a manner contrary to her moral beliefs, she returns to Russia, confesses her crime, is sentenced to Siberia, and for the rest of her life she declares her punishment to be just. Isn't it far easier to say that Natasha, because of her emotional state, acted contrary to her moral beliefs than to say that she ever abandoned her belief in Communism?

My reason for introducing these two cases is that in his paper Professor Luckhardt only discusses cases which readily lend themselves to a defense of the Socratic principle and neglects those very cases which lead people to think that the principle is false. I agree with Luckhardt that in the cases he cites, such as that of a man who calmly decides not to return a bag of money and that of a professor who calmly decides not to attend a faculty meeting, the evidence clearly indicates that these people are following their real rather than their professed moral beliefs. However it is not cases such as these which cause the Socratic difficulties but rather cases such as those I have just offered where one's emotional state is at fever pitch and one does not do what one normally would do.

What would a Socratic say of such cases? In each case the person definitely seems to believe that he or she ought to do something which he or she does not do and the remorse which they later profess to feel is for having acted in a manner contrary to their moral beliefs. Though not every case of remorse or regret involves a person feeling remorse or regret for having acted in a manner contrary to their moral beliefs, any adequate account of that for which \( X \) feels remorse at time \( t_2 \) is going to have to allow for the fact that at least occasionally that for which \( X \) feels remorse is \( X \)'s not having acted at time \( t_1 \) on \( X \)'s time \( t_1 \) moral belief. It is this inability to ever explain remorse or regret in terms of a failure to have acted on a previous moral belief that is the crux of the remorse/regret objection to the Socratic principle and nothing in Professor Luckhardt's paper answers it.
One final point - should the Socratic attempt to respond to my two cases by arguing either (a) that both Jones and Natasha did what they did because they were unable to do anything else or (b) that Jones and Natasha could not have believed what they professed to believe simply because they did not act in accordance with their professed beliefs, his reply fails either due to lack of evidence or because it reduces the defense of the Socratic principle to a circular argument in which the principle is rendered a mere definition- al truth.

Conclusion

Professor Luckhardt has failed to establish either of his points. He has shown neither that the modern versions of the Socratic principle are patently false unless qualified nor that if the Socratic principle is modified in the manner that he proposes, it enables the Socratic to answer the remorse/regret objection to the Socratic principle. The Socratic still finds himself unable to account for the phenomenon of a person's feeling remorse for having at time $t_1$ acted in a manner contrary to his time $t_1$ moral beliefs.8

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8 An earlier draft of this paper was read at the 1975 meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association as a response to an earlier version of Professor Luckhardt's paper. I have considerably benefited from Professor Luckhardt's criticisms of my earlier draft and I should also like to thank my colleagues at California State University, Los Angeles for their assistance.