

John Peter Andersen

Can logic prove ethics?

An examination of two arguments in favour of an objective ethics

In his book "Kunsten at blæse en ballon op indefra" (The art of inflating a balloon from the inside), Joachim Israel, Swedish sociologist and philosopher, is setting out to prove his doctrine that it is indeed possible to deduce moral value statements from basic rules of logic.

When the book was published a few years ago it stirred a scholarly debate in PHILOSOPHIA, the Danish Philosophical Periodical of Aarhus University between professor Israel himself and the Danish philosopher Peter Kemp who denied the validity of Israel's approach.

By and large I agree with Peter Kemp's view on the matter. However, it is possible to expose the fallacies inherent in Israel's theory in a more striking way - because the theory, I contend, is loaded with fallacies, even very basic ones - by examining his argument by means of the weapon that he himself has chosen i.e. logic. This to show that the total ethical building of professor Israel is manifestly ill-founded and is subject to imminent collapse as the first mild breeze comes along.

Moral relativism is the philosophy holding that all ethical values and judgments are based entirely on relative factors such as time, place and social environment. The ethical judgments - statements of values - do not carry any cognitive meaning to which the qualities of truth or falsity can be attributed. In the end they all reflect nothing but cultural and subjective attitudes. On these grounds, therefore, there is no way of producing any kind of evidence to demonstrate that some moral judgments are more valid or more correct than other moral judgments. Moral standards of general validity with universal binding effect to all are nonexistent.

This is the very doctrine that Israel is trying to disprove in chapter 5 of his book where he deals with issues of ethics, acts and language. The surprising thing in Israel's approach is the fact that he is advancing a very special reason as to why moral relativism should be considered erroneous. The reason is, he maintains, that moral relativism leads into a logical contradiction. Albeit Israel's book applies a somewhat more expanded concept of logic covering a kind of general rules of meaning inherent as a basic feature in our everyday language - in this particular context Israel is appealing to formal logic. He is forwarding two specific arguments in support of his view that moral relativism is incorrect. These arguments constitute the full

foundation for his subsequent analysis and his deduction of a number of "objectively valid statements of values".

His arguments are these:

"...My first argument is: If I assert that no absolutely valid statements of values do exist, do I not then myself express an absolutely valid statement of values, namely the value statement denying the existence of absolutely valid value statements? This value statement - and it is a value statement and not a descriptive and verifiable statement - cannot be relatively valid. If so, the implication would be that it only applied in a limited context. In consequence, it is a contradiction to deny that value statements of absolute validity do exist.

The second argument is more substantial. If I believe all values to be subjective, fx to be merely expressing individual emotions and ideas, the implication would be that we are all in the same boat as far as values are concerned. But if we assert that we are all in the same boat, does it not follow then that we can assert that some values do exist that are the same to all in the boat? Can not everyone in the boat claim that some values are of general validity, presupposing that everyone in the boat can make a like assertion, without any other motivation than they are all equal in certain respects, fx because they share the same boat? Would it not be a contradiction if we denied this to be the case...?" (p.119-120)

Let us name the first argument "Argument I", the second "Argument II".

Argument I can be reproduced in the following way.

premise 1 If it is asserted that value statements of absolute validity do not exist then this assertion is equal to asserting a statement T

premise 2 The statement T is of absolute validity

premise 3 The statement T is a value statement

conclusion: It is a contradiction to deny that value statements of absolute validity do exist

Even without the technical interim assumptions necessary to satisfy the rules of derivation, it is obvious that Argument I is valid under the laws of logic. The conclusion can be soundly drawn from the premises. Premise 2 and premise 3 make up one proposition in Israel's explanation. Here they are kept apart to clarify the steps of the analysis.

Although Israel is wording his first tenet through a question as to what you can assert or not assert, the fundamental contradiction lies in the built-in statements "no value statements are of absolute validity" and "some value statements are of absolute validity" (for instance statement T), i.e. an E-statement and an I-statement in the language of syllogisms. These propositions are clearly contradictory which may easily be shown by a truth-table test.

Israel halts his argument at the contradiction, though his obvious intention of course is to apply the rule of reductio ad absurdum to the contradiction so as to conclude that it is not the case that there are no value statements of absolute validity.

Argument I is valid. That raises the question whether it also be true. By this I mean if all the premises on which the conclusion rely are true so they can be taken to warrant the truth of the conclusion. If but a single premise proves false then the argument does not provide any certainty that the conclusion is true.

There is no way of attacking premise 1. At face value it does not appear to be a tautology. A closer scrutiny, however, reveals that there can be little doubt that its meaning is tautologous. The meaning of premise 1 is to say that if you assert that there are no such things as value statements of absolute validity and if this assertion is tantamount to asserting the statement T then, undeniably, you do assert the statement T when asserting that no statements of absolute values do exist. Premise 1 can not be proven false.

Necessarily then, an attack on argument I must turn its attention to premise 2 and premise 3.

Let us first consider premise 2. Israel advances the following argument in support of the truth of premise 2. We shall call it argument A.

It goes like this:

premise A1 If a statement is of relative validity
 then it is only valid in a limited context

premise A2 Statement T is not only valid in a limited
 context

conclusion Statement T is not of relative validity.

Again we omit the technical assumptions. Again the conclusion is that argument A is valid. In addition, it must also be considered to be true. The statement T is presented to be a valid statement concerning any value statement. Statement T asserts it to be true that no value statements are of absolute validity. The generality of this proposition is not in any way impaired by any additional reservation or conditional fact. Considering the philosophical issue to which statement T is addressed statement T is asserted as a statement claiming to be of absolute validity as to its philosophical subject-matter. As this is the case premise 2 of Argument I can be judged true - not to confused with the possibility that statement T on its own merits may prove true or false under a specific examination.

An attempted rebuttal of Argument I must proceed to premise 3 of Argument I.

Israel's argument in favour of the truth of premise 3 - let

us call it argument B - goes like this:

premise B1 If a statement is not descriptive and verifiable then it is a value statement

premise B2 Statement T is not descriptive and verifiable

conclusion Statement T is a value statement

Argument B is valid. It should be noticed that Israel cannot avoid the assertion of the first premise. He has to assert that lack of descriptivity and verifiability is sufficient - in contrast to being only necessary - to classify a statement to be a value statement. If he would only go so far as to assert that "only if a statement is not descriptive and verifiable then it is a value statement" - then he would only be able to reach the conclusion of argument B by affirming the consequent in order to derive the antecedent - a plain logical fallacy.

Argument B is valid - but is it true? Let us take a closer look at premise B1. As it stands it may be subject to a misinterpretation. Does the antecedent deny a conjunction or does it deny two separate propositions? Does a statement qualify to be a value statement if it fails to be either descriptive or verifiable? Or does B1 require the joined absence of both these properties in order to classify a statement as a value statement?

I shall adopt the latter interpretation as this seems to conform with a natural reading of the sentence and at the same time gives Israel the stronger position. Adopting the first interpretation would seem to disagree with the general sceptical opinion on the distinction between statements of facts and statements of values (the classical philosophical "is and ought"-theme) which Israel is expressing on several occasions in his book (fx p. 123 and 147). If premise B1 went "if a statement is not both descriptive and verifiable then it is a value statement" you would be able to infer that either a statement is descriptive or else it is a value statement.

This precision be granted I am willing to approve of premise B1 as true even if an extended analysis probably would conclude that the premise uses a too wide criterion for value statements. In the present context this inherent weakness is immaterial since the intention of premise B1 is to provide a distinguishing mark for the class of propositions to be sorted out - descriptive propositions.

What about premise B2? Obviously, it has to be submitted to a corresponding interpretation as that of premise B1. But is it true? Is it really correct that statement T - the assertion that no value statements are of absolute validity - is not descriptive and verifiable?

The answer depends on the definitions of the concepts of descriptivity and verifiability.

If these concepts shall serve a function in a chain of evidence concerning the foundations of ethics, clearly the evidence will only carry any weight if the parties of the

controversy agree on the principal contents of these concepts. The concepts should be defined in such a way as to include all facts of substantial relevance to the arguments involved. A minimum definition that I believe meet this requirement is the following.

A descriptive statement is a statement addressing the factual properties, be well-defined or not, that are attributable to the object to which the statement refer. The statement "all spruces are evergreen" addresses a distinct property, evergreenness, asserted to be attributable to the objects referred to, the spruces. Moral subjects are not excluded as objects since it is easy to make statements concerning their factual contents such as for instance "According to the moral view of the authorities of Singapore spitting on the street is a filthy and abominable habit". The fact that the statement addresses a moral issue does not deprive the statement of its descriptive content. The statement informs how a specific pattern of behaviour - spitting on the street - is evaluated from a moral point of view by the authorities of Singapore.

A verifiable statement is a statement the truth or falsity of which can be established in principle, given the adequate means of evidence. A verifiable statement will be true if the objects do possess the properties attributed to them in their description. A verifiable proposition must be determinable in principle. It is not required that truth or falsity can be established by present means, since we may not at present time know what means are adequate or how to get hold of means that we think adequate; only that basic scientific and logical doctrines - as we know them - do not exclude the possibility of reaching a final conclusion on the issue of truth or falsity. The famous shroud of Turin exposing an enigmatic image suggesting that the shroud has at some time been used to protect the body of a crucified person did for years thrill the imagination by the mere possibility that the shroud was the authentic item in which the Corpus Christi was wrapped after the historical events of Golgatha 2000 years ago. The shroud withstood even quite persistent scientific attempts to unveil the truth until recently it was reported that carbon isotope tests contradicted its authenticity dating it back only a few centuries. The statement that the shroud was an genuine artefact from the crucifixion event was all along a verifiable statement - and, as it turned out, a falsifiable one as well.

This portrait of the ideas of descriptivity and verifiability seems simple and uncontroversial. There is little doubt, however, that a traditional philosophical analysis will be able to point out number of problems severely disturbing the portrait. It is of no importance. What is needed in the present context is but one single working definition allowing an examination of professor Israel's arguments. The definitions offered are minimum definitions. It is not likely that they can be altered substantively without forcing the concepts into an artificial sphere of language that is outside the conceptual frame

controlling the issue of whether ethical statements are susceptible to proof or not.

Statement T deals with a specific category of objects - namely value statements. Statement T asserts that any statement which has the property of being a value statement does not also have the property of being of absolute validity. Statement T, in fact, is dealing with the relation between two conceptual classes: the class of value statements (whatever its proper delimitation) and the class of that which has the property of being of absolute validity (whatever its proper delimitation). Statement T says that nothing of that which shares the membership of the first class also shares the membership of the second class - in other words that the class of value statements of absolute validity is empty. No statements qualify for membership. As statement T is a statement on statements only - and not on the ethical standards proposed in such statements - statement T, in consequence, should be classified a descriptive statement. A clear indication of this is the fact that it would not be possible to transform statement T into an "ought"-statement without changing its meaning. Statement T is about value statement. It does not itself advocate any values. The fact that a statement asserts something about other statements with specific properties does not mean that the statement itself shares these specific properties. The fact that a statement states something to be a fact about the subordinate clauses of the Polynesian language does not make the statement a subordinate clause of the Polynesian language.

It can be safely concluded therefore that statement T is a descriptive statement.

The next question to be dealt with concerns Israel's secondary contention in premise B2 that statement T is not verifiable.

If the above definition of verifiability is adopted I should think it quite clear that Israel is wrong. It is true that an attempted verification based on empirical facts is out of the question. It is always possible to maintain that the moral standards people apply and the reasons they give in justification of their application differ from the standards they would apply and the reasons they would give, if they but understood the true principles of ethics. Nevertheless, empirical material of various kinds may contribute to constructing an indirect evidence adding support to the view that statement T is in principle subject to be proven true or false. Apart from this I suggest that central ideas of moral relativism may be tried on a logical basis to the extent it be possible to reach a consensus on the exact definition of key concepts of moral relativism, in particular such notions as "absolute validity", "moral obligation" and "binding force". The idea of validity at least seems to be a strong mind seducer that should not be allowed to escape clear-cut analysis. In theories of moral absolutism this concept is often employed as an all-round vehicle somehow attributing predicates of genuineness to some ethical principles and not to others. In the moral relativistic line of thought it is usually construed to be a relational notion describing the

relation between individual value statements and the standards of judgment that are used to justify them - not unlike the relation between laws and sources of law which is well-known in general jurisprudence.

I shall conclude that it is not correct to say that statement T is not verifiable. On the contrary, an improved precision of its conceptual ingredients should allow it to be tested in a way making it possible to deliberate on its truth or falsity.

Furthermore, on this point attention should be drawn to a strange flaw in Israel's line of reasoning. If he would concede to my definition of "verifiability" meaning "determinable in principle", how then can he possibly claim that his own doctrine - that some value statements are of absolute validity - is true? His doctrine contradicts the moral relativist point of view - in fact Israel is using the contradiction as a weapon with which to do away with moral relativism. But if his doctrine is true then evidently the moral relativism is false. But if it is false then apparently the case does not evade determination - which in turn runs counter to his premise B2 of argument B.

To sum up, statement T is descriptive as well as verifiable under the definitions suggested above. In consequence, premise B2 in argument B is false. Though this does not necessarily imply that the conclusion of argument B is false it does imply that argument B does not support its conclusion that statement T is a value statement. On the contrary it appears that statement T lacks the traditional characteristics of a value statement. The fact that it is about value statements does not convert it into a value statement. Since the conclusion of argument B is used as premise 3 in Argument I the implication is that neither the conclusion of Argument I is warranted by its premises.

On this background I conclude that Argument I has not proven its case. Argument I does not prove that it is a contradiction to deny that value statements of absolute validity do exist.

Israel's second argument against moral relativism is based on much the same ideas as the first one. Again his aim is to refute moral relativism by means of a reductio ad absurdum. His second argument is this.

premise 1 If all values are subjective then we are all in the same boat as far as values are concerned

premise 2 If we all are in the same boat as far as values are concerned then we can assert that some values do exist that are the same to all in the boat

conclusion All values are not subjective

First, let us establish whether Argument II is valid. In

order to reach the conclusion it must be initially assumed that all values are subjective. On this assumption and the use of a modus ponendo ponens derivation we get the consequent in premise 1. Using the derived consequent in a repeated modus ponendo ponens with premise 2 we arrive at the consequent of premise 2. We have now an assumption that all values are subjective and we have an interim conclusion saying that we can assert that some values do exist that are the same to all in the boat. If, on further development, it turns out that these two propositions do in fact constitute a genuine contradiction - then it is possible to draw the conclusion of argument 2 by virtue of an *reductio ad absurdum* derivation. But the argument still is somewhat obscure and needs elucidation before venturing on any decision as to the presence of a contradiction.

If "assert" in premise 2 means nothing more than we are free to articulate the assertion that some values do exist that are the same to all in the boat, no contradiction will arise. In a philosophical context the statement that "all values are subjective" means that values are without objective rationale of the kind needed to make them susceptible to be proved in the same way as it is possible to prove the truth of the Pythagorean Theorem or the laws of Boyle-Mariotte. Of course, this fact does not bar anyone from the possibility of asserting whatever they please. That table manners have no objective foundation do not exclude anyone from entertaining the view that some kinds of *tiquette de table* are preferable to other such *tiquettes*. If Israel's argument is to make sense as a valid argument the meaning must be that "assert" in premise 2 shall read "be justified in asserting". Since the assertion is only justified if what is asserted is true then refining the statement into the contents stated in the assertion does only beg the question since the issue as to the truth or falsity of premise 2 remains open. Accordingly, premise 2 may be reformulated as follows:

premise 2 If we all are in the same boat as far as values are concerned then some values do exist that are the same to all in the boat

The picture is clearer now. But an ambiguity remains to be removed. It is the expression "the same". Until it is exactly clear what this expression covers in the context it is not possible to venture on any judgment as to the presence of a contradiction. The case may be solved by examining the sub-argument that Israel is offering in support of premise 2. We name it argument C.

It goes:

premise C1 If we all are in the same boat as far as values are concerned then all can assert the same thing

premise C2 If all can assert the same thing then all can assert that some values are generally valid

premise C3 We are all in the same boat as far as

values are concerned

conclusion All can assert that some values are generally valid

To repeat, it is immaterial from the point of argument if something is merely being asserted; what counts is what is being asserted. If this were not the case Israel would end up with the ultimate conclusion that everybody can assert that all values are not subjective. That would not mean that they were right any more than medieval belief of the flatness of the Earth exerted any influence whatsoever on the factual shape of our planet. Assertions know of no boundaries. Truth, however, is controlled by facts.

Argument C shows that the term "the same" is used synonymous to "generally valid", i.e. of absolute validity, in Israel's language of argument. This is not surprising. If the word was used in the sense of "alike", Argument II would never lead to any contradiction because moral relativism does not preclude the possibility that values may coincide. The assertion that religious articles of faith rest solely on the personal creeds of the individual believer does not preclude the assertion that some religious articles of faith are alike for all believers.

With these refinements let us try to reformalise Argument II as follows.

premise 1 If all values are subjective then we are all in the same boat as far as values are concerned

premise 2 If we all are in the same boat as far as values are concerned then some values do exist that are of absolute validity to all in the boat

conclusion: All values are not subjective

By now, Argument II can be judged valid from a logical point of view. Given the premises and assuming for a start that all values are subjective you can soundly draw the interim conclusion that all values are subjective and there are some values that are of absolute validity to all in the boat. Since this interim step contains a contradiction under the interpretation of the terms involved, the conclusion, constituting a negation of the assumption that all values are subjective, can be reached by means of a reductio ad absurdum. Under the bookkeeping of formal logics the conclusion rests solely on the premises 1 and 2.

Now, the question is this: is Argument II, admittedly valid, also true? If yes, premise 1 and premise 2 must be true on their own merits.

A moment's reflection on premise 1 suffices to show that premise 1 - exactly as was the case with premise 1 of Argument I - is a clever tautology. In the metaphoric maritime language adopted by Israel to depict his line of

argument, premise 1 does not report itself to be a tautology at a first superficial glance. But its meaning shows it to be a tautology. Premise 1 states nothing more than the trivial fact that if indeed all values are subjective then we all share the subjectivity of values - we are all in the same boat, the boat of subjective values. If we all have false teeth then we all share the falsity of teeth. If we all have the same hair colour, then we all share the same hair colour. And if all values are objective we would - as far as values are concerned - be in exactly the same situation as we would be if they were subjective. Bluntly put: If an object has a specific property then we are all in the same situation as regards that object. Whatever item we may choose from this class of objects and whoever chooses it, it will surely possess the property. Facts allowing for no exceptions make us all very equal.

There is no way of refuting premise 1. It is a tautology.

If Argument II shall be declared untrue the error must lie in premise 2.

Premise 2 is saying that given the circumstances that we are all in the same situation in relation to a specific fact - values in case - then it follows that some values do exist that are of absolute validity to all in the same situation. From the fact that we all - if values are subjective - are subject to the availability of subjective values only, Israel derives the conclusion that there are some values of absolute validity to all of us; in other words, that some values are not subjective, but objective.

Premise 2 is based on argument C. Apart from clarifying the interpretation of the term "the same" in premise 2, argument C does not present any solution since the argument merely pushes the problem one step backwards. The problem is this: from the assumed fact that we are all in the same boat as far as values are concerned how is it possible to arrive at the conclusion that some values do exist that are of absolute validity to all in the boat - ? To this argument C holds no answer. Clearly, our mere capability of making assertions on moral issues does not provide any answers as to which assertions are the right ones and which are the wrong ones. The interpretation of "assert" meaning "be justified in asserting" as introduced above for the use in argument 2 can not be grafted onto argument C without disrupting the argument and begging the question since a justified assertion in the present context is to be taken to mean a true one. Israel, in fact, does not give any reason to adopt premise 2 of Argument II. Premise 2 is a pure postulate. Argument C does not support it since argument C contains the very same postulate.

That this is the case is not at all startling. Taken on face value premise 2 appears unconvincing. No reasons are given to explain how the antecedent can imply the consequent. If all religious articles of faith are beyond proof then all believers are in the same situation as far as religious articles of faith are concerned. But that particular fact surely does not imply that some religious articles of faith do exist that can be proven to all believers. If all laws are the work of man then all mankind is in the same situation as

far as laws are concerned. But that fact does not imply the existence of laws that are not the work of man.

It should be noticed that the falsity of premise 2 does not depend on the interpretation of values as meaning values of absolute validity. Even if the interpretation were narrowed down to mean only values of coincidental contents - which would spoil the purpose of the argument of course - it would still be wrong. From the fact that we share a situation in one relation nothing follows as to our sharing it also in other relations.

It can be concluded that Argument II does not support its conclusion. The conclusion that all values are not subjective is drawn on the basis of a premise which must be deemed untrue. Argument II can be rejected just like Argument I. None of the arguments provide any acceptable evidence in favour of the tenet that moral relativism is wrong.

As it can be seen from this analysis the fact of the case is that professor Israel himself introduces into the arguments the very premises holding the contradictions that he blames onto moral relativism. These premises are handy when you are desirous to kill your enemy by use of a reductio ad absurdum. The method, of course, is completely arbitrary. On the basis of a contradiction it is possible to refute or negate any of the premises from which it is derived. Logic does not make the choice as to which one to negate out of a plural number. Logic only requires you to negate either of them in order to get rid of the contradiction. Therefore, there is no logical rationale for what professor Israel is doing. He might as well have refuted his own favourite premise that values of an absolute validity do exist. The proof that they do would be just as good and just as bad as the proof for the contrary view.

Professor Israel's moral philosophy rests on argument I and argument II. The principle of contradiction, also referred to by Israel as the consistency criterion, is the cornerstone of the whole building. The principle of contradiction is the core of his belief that an ethics comprising fundamental rules of general validity can be founded on logical reasoning. The principle of contradiction is one of the rules in what Israel names the logic of common everyday language. The logic of common everyday language is also valid, Israel claims, for normative propositions and value statements. Because of this, logic provides the tools with which it is possible, in Israel's view, to lay down basic rules of ethics of a kind we cannot possibly deny without contradicting ourselves.

On this theory Israel confidently sets out to prove some objective human rights and some generally valid statements of values. In the course of a few pages he proves that all humans have equal rights and that there should be an order of justice based on and controlled by a democratic society. He also proves that all of us should have optimal opportunities to acquire knowledge and that an act is morally indefensible if it restrains the freedom of a fellow human. Keine Hexerei, nur Beh.,ndigkeit.

As argument I and argument II bear the construction the whole building is doomed to collapse once it is realised that these arguments do not prove their case.

This does not preclude, however, that Israel's value statements may be approved. But logic does not control the process. Logic cannot prove moral propositions or moral philosophies without applying premises that somehow embody statements of values. Initially then these statements need to be assumed - thereby raising the question as to their justification. It may be conceivable that such assumptions somehow may be inferred from principles of a more general and abstract nature. But then, these principles need justification - and we are back where we started. This is how it is. Some philosophers subscribe to the view that there is a way out of the circle. I disagree. Moral statements are a human invention. They do not reflect any generally valid cognition of events belonging to the world of objective facts. Moral statements are not derivations; they are decisions. We may adopt them or we may reject them. They can not, however, be proven to be objective truths drifting imperishable through the ages as lofty Canons beyond the reach of mundane modifications.

But what about this - moral relativistic - view? Can it be proven? And if not, why claim it to be a valid point of view? The answer is that it can not be finally proven under any logical pattern. That fact does not transform the view into a value statement. It is a hypothesis on a specific class of facts - moral judgments of human beings. In addition, it is also a very resistant hypothesis having survived many very persistent and highly intelligent attempts of refuting it. In all probability it will go on doing so.

The burden of evidence should be carried by those who claim to have identified instances - and one instance will suffice to disprove the hypothesis - of moral statements of absolute validity; or those who claim to know of principles or criterions with which to identify such statements.

Many have tried to lift the burden of evidence. The outcome has been to poor to convince anyone not already convinced - and they probably weren't so because of the evidence. A similar case applies to the moral statements presented by Israel to be a result of his moral derivations on the basis of the principle of contradiction. The moral statements are familiar expressing as they do well-earned Western ideas. No extensive philosophical analysis is necessary to show that these ideas need a wealth of supplementary rules if they are to be implemented into a social context. Equality - does that imply that minors shall be relieved of their traditional protective legal status and be granted the full right to enter into binding business contracts? Does it imply that colour-blind people can not be precluded from acquiring sea captaincy certificate? Does it imply that a person with a prior conviction of theft can not be debarred from setting up his own business as locksmith? An order of justice based on and controlled by a democratic society? Does that imply that we need more ordinary people in the courts so as leave

delicate questions of law to be decided by a body of laymen jurors with no specific legal education? Optimal opportunities to acquire knowledge? Does that include information filed with private and public offices so as to make information on other people accessible to any citizen who wants to peep into the files of his neighbour? Does it mean that no admission requirements can be imposed by educational institutions in order to select among the applicants? And what about the proposition that an act is morally indefensible if it restrains the freedom of any fellow human? Does that imply an abolition of imprisonment making it possible for crime victims to meet their attacker on the street the day after the mugging? Or, in the more peaceful line: if the tenant is thrown out of his apartment pursuant to a court order caused by his breach of contract in not paying his rent does that make the bailiff an immoral man when attending to his duties? I presuppose, of course, that it is agreed to be a severe intrusion into the freedom of the tenant that he is forced to accept the deprivation of his housing accommodations. But are his interests in avoiding this deprivation of higher priority than the interests of his landlord in regaining control over his house once established that the tenant fail to pay the rent?

As can be readily seen questions like these cannot be solved by any logical acrobatics. What is needed is a decision of moral nature from outside the confinements of logical reasoning, a choice.

And furthermore: what should be done, if professor Israel's principle of contradiction - assuming its workability - did advise options that were in conflict? Logic requires that contradictions must be dissolved by striking one of the conflicting propositions - but logic doesn't tell which. Are we to save a haemophiliac or 500 heart patients? Naturally, one can choose to deny the true existence of such conflicts of moral imperatives as did Immanuel Kant. But the denial is based on a pre-emptory ruling on the moral issue before it is allowed to be tested under the alleged moral criterion, in order to preclude the possibility of ethical short circuits. If the moral issue is to be judged on its own merit an act of choice is indispensable. And to make a choice is equal to admitting that the ethical criterion is not exhaustive and therefore does not hold the keys to solve the problems of ethics.