

Moral Dilemmas

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1. Introduction to Moral Dilemmas

a) What is a moral dilemma?

A Moral dilemma is a situation in which a decision has to be made, and there seem to be several different answering the question 'What should I do'? Often none of the possibilities seems right: think of the film *Sophie's Choice*; should she save one child by abandoning the other? And if so, which? Or should she refuse to choose, and lose them both? Sometimes, quite conflicting answer seem equally right – for instance, how ought workers in a refugee camp divide an inadequate amount of food between the people in the camp; to those in the worst state of health?; those with the best chance of survival?; mothers with children?; just to children?

b) Why are they important?

Because they are dramatic examples of problems we face every day, and so thinking about dilemmas can throw light on how to make our 'ordinary' moral decisions.

c) Why are they difficult?

I suggest they are difficult for one or more of the following three reasons:

i) We discover that we are not clear about the meaning of the key moral principle involved:

- Does discontinuing this procedure count as 'killing' or 'letting die'?
- Would sacking this person count as 'unfair dismissal'?

ii) Two or more important moral principles seem to conflict in this particular situation; and we cannot readily see which one should give way to the other.

- Grandma very much wants to keep on living in her own house, fifty miles away, and it is not clear that she can look after herself. She is adamant she does not want to come and live with us. We feel we should look after her, and also that we should respect her autonomy and her own decision.
- A woman has an ectopic pregnancy

iii) What in general do we expect in ethics? Is there always a right answer? Is there always only one right answer?

2. Our Moral Vocabulary.

a) Meanings of words are learned gradually.

i) Take 'brave' or 'unfair': contrast how you would now understand those terms and contrast it with the way you would have understood those terms when you were, say, five years old, or ten years old when you had never thought of the courage needed by a whistle-blower. Then try some rather trickier examples – 'adultery', or 'human being'.

ii) We gradually learn which types of consideration are *relevant* in discovering what a moral word means.

iii) In a way, our moral principles are summaries of the moral judgements we have already made in the light of the use of moral words. Have you changed your view of the 5th commandment over the years? Or the 8th? Will your understanding of your principles ever change again in the light of further experience?

b) How do we know how a moral principle has to be applied in a particular case?

i) Do we argue? Just see? Or what. (Think of *how* a court arrives at a view about what counts as 'unfair dismissal' or 'negligent'). Newman points out that one just has to 'see' which considerations require us to understand our moral principles differently and which do not – on which he invokes Aristotle and might equally have cited Aquinas.

ii) We *always* have to judge whether and how a principle is to be understood in regard to a particular case.

iii) It is often especially difficult when new technology is involved, such as genetic manipulation, organ transplants. We have to try to learn how such things affect human welfare, what, if anything, they endanger.

c) Which elements in our experience contribute to this learning process?

i) Anything which we take to affect human welfare: obvious basic things: health (physical and mental), education, exercise of responsibility, affection, love, companionship.

ii) Less obvious things, which might be needed for a fulfilled life. How about, for instance, feeling one is doing something worthwhile; selflessness, fun.....

- iii) Considerations to do with fairness and justice
- iv) The culture into which we are introduced and in which we are brought up.

3. How Moral Principles are Used

a) The simple procedure.:

- i) We use one kind of **deductive** argument; an example might be:
 - Stealing is wrong
 - Taking this £10 note would be stealing
 - Therefore, I ought not to take it.
- ii) But perhaps, though this seems to fit the easy cases, it is too simplified to explain, or to describe how we cope in more difficult cases; indeed maybe it does not really analyse the simple cases properly either. There are two problems with it:
 - how do I know that *this* action here is a case of stealing? Have I applied the principle properly?
 - Don't the first and second premises in this argument *interact*: I don't understand how the first applies *here*, if it does, until I have decided about the second.

b) The Complex procedure.

So, think about a more difficult case, and try to discover how you actually do make moral decisions. The little argument above might be a good example of how you *explain* what you did: but not a good account of how you went about deciding about it. Here are some of complexities; notice that in fact you usually manage to cope with such things every day in life; and how you do so is often not simple.

- i) Is it true that if some consideration (say, truthfulness) is relevant to, or even decisive for some decisions, it must always be relevant/decisive? Here are two ordinary everyday examples:
 - The disastrous quiche;
 - the budding author;
 - Where granddad ought to live.
- ii) And here are some of the really difficult examples
 - The refugee camp; Sophie's choice. Budget for Health and Education Services
 Ask yourselves in each case:
 - whether there is always at most one right answer? Is there ever no right answer?

c) Probabilism

A position formulated by a Dominican in the late 16th century, and defended by Jesuits against Pascal in the 18th, and frequently applied by moral theologians ever since.

- i) Suppose that more than one view can be reasonably defended
- ii) *Any* such view may legitimately used in practice, because If there is no way of arriving at 'the one' correct answer, any reasonable answer may be followed, precisely because it is reasonable.

I would imagine that is how you usually deal with difficult cases in your own lives: and you are quite right!