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## Moral Dilemmas

**Abstract:** *Moral dilemmas are situations where two or more moral values or duties make demands on the decision-maker, who can only honour one of them, and thus will violate at least one important moral concern, no matter what he or she decides to do. This chapter draws a distinction between real and false dilemmas. It defines the former as situations where there is tension between moral values and duties that are more or less on equal footing. The decision-maker has to choose between a wrong and another wrong. It defines the latter as situations where the decision-maker has a moral duty to do one thing, but is tempted or under pressure to do something else. A false dilemma is a choice between a right and a wrong.*

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Anne is the project manager of a large industrial project in a developing country, run by a Nordic company. On a crucial day for the project, the electricity is suddenly gone from the entire plant. Large quantities of cement are about to congeal in the blenders, and it is crucial to activate them again, quickly. More than a thousand employees are unable to do their work. Anne contacts the local authorities to solve the problem. A bureaucrat turns up at the plant and explains that he can get the electricity back on again very quickly, on the condition that he can bring ten of the company's PCs back to the town hall. There is a desperate shortage of PCs there, and the bureaucrat and his colleagues are therefore unable to do provide adequate service to the local community. Thus, he suggests a trade-off: PCs for electricity. In this manner, Anne and her company can make a significant contribution to the society in which they operate.

Time is of the essence, and Anne has little time to dwell on the alternatives. There is no time to contact top management in her home country to get advice or instructions about what to do. She has to figure this out by herself. If the cement congeals today, it will mean a considerable delay in the project. Several operations will have to be redone, at a high cost, particularly compared to cost of losing ten PCs that can be easily replaced. Anne also has sympathy with the local bureaucrats and the population they are serving. They will probably make very good use of the PCs. On the other hand, if she gives in to blackmail this time, the same may happen again, at other crucial stages of the project. Anne faces a difficult choice. What should she do?

Anne wants to honour the moral value of finishing the project on time and within budget, but also the moral value of not giving in to blackmail or corruption. One of these values will have to give way at the expense of the other. There is no harmonious way out, where Anne can say that she has done everything right.

Moral dilemmas are a pervasive part of working life. They occur in the public and private sectors and from the smallest to the largest organizations. Every decision-maker can encounter them, from the executive level and downwards. In hectic working environments, people can become blind to the moral dilemmas they face, by failing to see the moral dimensions of their choices. Understanding the nature of moral dilemmas is important within organizations, in order to identify and recognize them, and find ways in which to deal with them in a responsible manner. Kidder (2005, p. 89) has suggested that although there can be a myriad of moral dilemmas, they tend to fall into four patterns: Truth versus

loyalty, individual versus community, short term versus long term, and justice versus virtue. Categorizing moral dilemmas in this manner can be a useful way to identify and start to address them.

We can understand morality or morals as a set of personal and shared beliefs about right and wrong in the interaction between human beings (Goodpaster, 1992, p. 111; Buchholz and Rosenthal, 1998, p. 4). Over time, individuals and groups form moral convictions and beliefs about how one ought to behave towards others. The universe of beings we believe to have moral obligations towards may include other animals. The concepts of morals or morality on the one hand, and ethics on the other are in many contexts understood to be synonymous. From the outset, the concepts have had the same meaning. Morals have Latin roots and ethics stems from classical Greek, and both depicted respectable and good behaviour in a given society. Gradually the concepts have become labels for different phenomena. As noted above, morality can be defined as a set of beliefs and convictions about right and wrong in the interaction between human beings, and our obligations towards animals. Ethics, on the other hand, is the discipline of thinking systematically about right and wrong. We learn morality differently from how we learn ethics. Moral beliefs and convictions is something we adopt through social interaction, while ethics is an academic discipline that we can study and learn by reading books and attending seminars. We can take ethics courses and pass ethics exams. There are no equivalent activities on the morality side. The closest we come are the everyday or more extraordinary moral tests and challenges where have to make choices and either live in accordance with our moral convictions or not.

Morality and ethics play different roles in decision-making. A person facing a challenging situation can have a *moral intuition* about what would be the right choice, based on personal moral convictions, more or less shared in the community or culture. He can also engage in *ethical analysis* in order to clarify the issues at stake. We can liken these two approaches to Kahneman's distinction between fast and slow decision-making processes (Kahneman, 2011). He describes how human decisions originate in either what he calls System 1 thinking, which is quick and impulsive, and System 2 thinking, which is slow and analytic. When a person faces a morally challenging situation, he or she can draw upon the resources of both systems. There may not be time for a full-scale analysis of the options at hand, and the person may have to rely on a gut feeling or moral impulse about what to do. Kahneman documents

how we are systematically prone to make mistakes when we rely solely on quick thinking and what the heart immediately tells us (Kahneman, 2011). We can reap great benefits from activating the slow System 2 to weight the pro and cons of the alternatives. People who rely too heavily on analysis, however, can tend to be passive and immobile in situations that call for a rapid response. When we have thought things thoroughly through, it is too late to do anything.

We have system 1 and system 2 resources in place to think about and respond to moral dilemmas. On the one hand, we have moral intuitions and gut feelings about what we should do, based on our moral beliefs and convictions. On the other hand, we have the opportunity to engage in ethical analysis, identifying alternative courses of action and testing whether they can be properly justified.

A dilemma in the most general sense is a situation requiring a choice between two options that are or seem to be equally undesirable or unsatisfactory. There can be non-moral dilemmas, where the choice is between options that are undesirable or unsatisfactory for non-moral reasons. A person can have enough money to buy either a book or a shirt, and need both. Only one choice is possible, and the preference for one over the other will lead to some disappointment, in that it will fulfil only one of the two desires. There need not be any moral dimension to the undesirability of prioritizing the purchase of a book over a shirt, or the opposite choice.

A moral dilemma is a situation where the decision-maker has to give priority to one moral value over another (Toffler, 1986; Maclagan, 2003; Jackson, 1996; Brinkmann, 2005). They “arise when, faced with a difficult situation (e.g. fair treatment for some versus job security for others), two or more such values conflict in the perception of a decision maker, or when one is assessing another’s moral choice” (Maclagan, 2003, p. 22). A person facing a dilemma must decide which moral duty to prioritize, and “whichever action is taken it will offend an important moral value” (*ibid*, p. 23).

In a moral dilemma, it is impossible to live up to all of one’s moral convictions and beliefs regarding how one should behave in that situation. Anne in the opening example is morally committed to keep the industrial project on track, but also to reject blackmail and bribery. In the situation she faces, one of these moral commitments will have to give way at the expense of the other. She may not have a clear system 1 intuition about what to do, and even after some initial system 2 reflection, the

dilemma and the tension remains. Top management at home may still be unavailable, so she has to decide upon a response to the bureaucrat's offer on her own.

A moral dilemma may occur because of a prior personal mistake. The predicament of the situation is self-inflicted. A classic example is the story from the Bible about King Herod. On his birthday, his stepdaughter Salome danced so well in front of him and the guests at his party that he promised to give her anything she wanted. Salome consulted her mother about what she should wish for, and decided to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king now had a choice between honouring the promise to his stepdaughter, or honouring the life of John the Baptist. The king had inadvertently designed a moral trap for himself, a dilemma where whatever he decided to do would be morally wrong.

One contemporary and everyday instance of a self-inflicted moral dilemma can be a situation where you make a double booking in the calendar, and hand out individual promises to be somewhere at 2 o'clock to two different people. You cannot keep both promises, and must choose between the wrong of breaking one promise and the wrong of breaking the other promise. You may have good moral reasons to keep promise 1 as well as promise 2, but must make a choice between them.

In a narrow sense, a moral dilemma is a situation where the moral values at stake are of equal importance. The appointments you have made for 2 o'clock may have equally strong pull and significance. Your moral reasons for keeping promise 1 are then exactly as strong as your moral reasons for keeping promise 2. There really is no choice available that is less wrong than the other choice. The situation is one where moral wrongdoing is inescapable (Gowans, 1994).

In a wider sense, there can be moral dilemmas where a person has strong moral reasons to do one thing, and notable but not equally strong moral reasons to do something else. When you consider the nature of the two promises, you may conclude that it is more urgent to meet one of them rather than the other. Something of moral value will be lost if you decide to keep the former promise and break the latter, but it is not really a hard moral choice, in the sense that anybody will have reasons to challenge or cast doubt about the rightness of your decision. You have a choice between a lesser wrong and a greater wrong. The other person you were supposed to meet will be disappointed and irritated by the cancellation, but is likely to understand the priority given to keeping the other promise.

The Herod case is also one where there is an imbalance in the moral weight of the two options. Herod in his exuberance made a questionable promise to Salome, and she in turn took advantage of the situation to make a horrible request. It seems that the king has stronger moral reasons to spare the life of John the Baptist than he has to keep his word to his stepdaughter. Something of moral value and importance will regrettably have to give way, but the other option is or appears to be morally superior. We can still call the situation a moral dilemma, although not in the pure sense of representing a decision between moral values that are on equal footing.

False moral dilemmas are instances where it is clear what a person ought to do, but he or she is either tempted or pressured to do something else. In business ethics, the distinction between these types of situations has also been labelled as one between dilemmas and temptations (Kidder, 1995, p. 7; Brinkmann, 2005, p. 183). Later in the book I discuss professional ethics and how the handling of conflicts of interest are at the core of the professionals' moral responsibilities towards clients, customers, patients, students, and other users of professional services. A lawyer or an accountant can face an opportunity to prioritize self-interest over the client's interest. The knowledge gap between the professional and the client is such that the risk of detection for such a choice is minimal. The professional can claim that he or she is facing a moral dilemma when an opportunity arises to oversell or overcharge a client. In the vocabulary of this book, it is more appropriate to describe such a situation as a false dilemma. It may resemble a real dilemma in that the decision-maker must decide between two options that are both undesirable in some way. Cheating on the client feels wrong, and so does the choice of turning down a chance to earn some extra money. The former feeling has moral component to it that is lacking in the latter. Thus, conflict of interest situations are generally false moral dilemmas, with only superficial likeness to real ones.

In connection with the dichotomy between real and false dilemmas, we need to acknowledge that there can be a continuum between them, as suggested by MacLagan (2003). On one side of the spectrum, we have situations where there is perfect balance between the two moral values that are at stake. Two promises are equally important. In another situation, the option to be compassionate towards another person has equal moral weight to the alternative of being honest to him or her. On the other side of the spectrum are the situations where the choice is clearly

between a morally right and a morally wrong option, as when a professional can choose to give priority to self-interest over client interest. In other cases where self-interest is involved, the distinctions are not so clear-cut, since pursuing self-interest on a personal as well as on an organizational level can have some moral value. Protection of one's own economic security has a moral dimension to it (Maitland, 2002, p. 5), and not standing up to defend one's own interests can be seen as a form of servility (Hill, 1985). Concrete cases, then, belong somewhere on the spectrum between purely real and purely false dilemmas.

Anne has to decide whether to get the electricity back by giving in to blackmail from local bureaucrats, or stand firm and see the cement congeal. Where exactly does the situation belong on the scale between real and false dilemmas? That depends on the further details of the case. The analysis Anne has to make in preparation for a decision does not require a precise placing of the dilemma on the scale, but rather an acknowledgement of the general dilemma nature of the situation. Anne's particular dilemma builds on a true story, where the outcome was that the project manager decided on a two-step response. First, she handed over the PCs and got the electricity back on to get the project on track again. The next day she invited senior bureaucrats from the town hall to a meeting, where she explained that the company wanted to contribute to the local community, but not in the haphazard way of the previous day. Instead, she proposed a systematic plan for how the company could help the town hall to modernize its PCs and other electronic equipment. With this initiative, she came on better and closer speaking terms with the local administration, and avoided further blackmail situations.

The following case can serve to highlight how challenging it can be to face a situation close to the false dilemma end of the spectrum: Ben is the manager of a small private banking unit within a large financial services group. Results have slumped recently, mainly due to a bitter conflict between one employee and some of his colleagues. They complain that he is rude and difficult to cooperate with. Ben has attempted to mitigate, to no avail. National legislation prohibits the option of firing the quarrelsome employee, at least in the short run. Key members of Ben's unit have become very upset by the situation and have started to look for work elsewhere.

A recent turn of events is that the employee himself has applied for a job in a different part of the financial services group. Ben has agreed to serve as a reference person. He receives a phone call from the manager

of the unit currently contemplating to hire the employee. She is particularly interested in the employee's social skills. "Does he function well with his colleagues?" she asks. If Ben gives an honest answer, he is likely to be stuck with the employee for a long time. If he is vague about the employee's social skills, he may get rid of a problem. He then runs the risk that his honesty will come up for questioning later. It also feels wrong to lie to another person in order to get rid of a problem at work. Lying in this case would be an attempt to transport one's own problem over to someone else, instead of taking responsibility and deal with it in one's own organization. How should Ben respond to the question about the employee's social abilities?

Ben must choose between being honest about an employee's anti-social behaviour and telling the truth, an option that seems guaranteed to block the employee's move to another organization. Like Anne, he acknowledges that whatever he decides to do, something will be wrong.

At first glance, it can appear to be an obvious example of a false dilemma. Ben can choose between honouring the moral value of being truthful to others, or giving priority to a selfish need to get rid of a human resource management problem. We can understand that it is tempting to withhold information and thereby help the difficult employee on his way to a new job, but doing so would violate the moral duty to be honest in business dealings. Ben might reason that the employee deserves another chance in a new work environment. If he can open a new page in his career, he might blossom and be better able to fulfil his personal and professional potential. That is all very well, but these considerations seem weak and constructed to camouflage a violation of a moral requirement to be straightforward and honest as a reference person.

The extent to which Ben's situation is a real or a false dilemma will depend on the details of the case. I have used the case as a starting point both for ethical teaching of business managers and business school students, as well as for research in moral psychology, where the purpose has been to map the extent to which the situation creates moral dissonance and gets managers to engage in moral neutralization activities (Kvalnes, 2014). I return to that topic in Chapter 11. The participants in ethical training have conveyed their experiences from being on both sides of the table under circumstances where one party is strongly tempted to keep silent about the negative features of a person applying for a job. Some have been untruthful as reference-persons. Among those, some have lived to regret it because the choice has backfired.



When the employee ends up in the same kind of conflicts at the new workplace, it generates painful inquiries from the new employer about the honesty of the reference person. Others convey that they came away with one less burden on their shoulders. They have avoided further questions and inquiries about how and why they withheld information. I have also encountered managers who have been open and honest about the employee's problems, and have found other means to deal with the conflict. American leaders have failed to grasp the tension of Ben's situation. "What is the problem?" they say. "Why doesn't Ben just fire the man with cooperation difficulties?" My work has for the most part taken place in Norway, where the legal scope for firing people in this manner is very limited.

The responses people have to Ben's dilemma expose their moral beliefs and convictions. When I ask for justification of the choice of either being truthful or not, the participants at my ethics courses have come up with a wide variety of reasons, expressing their individual loyalties and preferences. The first response is often that one alternative or another feels right or wrong. Two people who disagree on what to do compare feelings, and reach the conclusion that they feel differently about the case. The conversation is on Kahneman's system 1 level, where quick gut feelings and intuitions rule, and my task as a facilitator is to introduce the slower system 2 level of reflection and analysis. Ethical reasoning is the process of lowering the tempo in order to become aware of the moral issues at stake, and to progress from a state of mismatching feelings to one where the participants are able to recognize the ethical and moral foundations for their own choices.

Moral dilemmas are everywhere in organizational life. Situations on the entire scale from real and acute dilemmas all the way to false pseudo-dilemmas constitute challenges that the decision-makers should prepare for. The following chapters present analytic resources from moral philosophy and ethics, in the shape of principles and concepts that can serve as tools in the process of figuring out what one ought to do and how to justify one's choices in moral dilemmas.



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