

## Do you think that there are genuine moral dilemmas? Why?

### The problem of definition in moral dilemmas

In this essay I investigate whether genuine moral dilemmas exist and why. To do so, I first explore different definitions found in philosophical literature and focus in particular on two of them: one stating that they occur when moral wrongdoing is inescapable (Jackson, 2009, p. 1) and the other saying that we face genuine moral dilemmas when neither moral obligation overrides the other (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1988, cited in McConnell, 2024).

I then use examples to show that, in some cases, one of these definitions applies, while the other one doesn't, therefore demonstrating that they are not equivalent. By equivalent I intend that the former implies the latter, and the latter implies the former (Wolfram, 1989, cited in Honderich, 2005, p. 267). If they *were*, they would either both apply to a given dilemma, or neither would. Therefore, they cannot be used interchangeably.

I conclude by arguing why the former is not an appropriate definition, and that denying the possibility of unavoidable moral wrongdoing does not imply that genuine moral dilemmas do not exist. Indeed, Sophie's example shows that they do.

### A problem of definition

To understand whether genuine moral dilemmas exist, we need to first clarify what they are.

According to Gowans (1987, cited in Honderich, 2005, p. 215) a dilemma occurs when a person faces two conflicting moral obligations.

This is well shown in Socrates' example about returning a weapon to a friend who has gone mad (Plato, 2007, p. 7). On the one hand, the agent has a moral obligation to keep his promise to his friend, but, on the other hand, he has a moral obligation to prevent harm if he can. And, since his friend has gone mad and wants to use the weapon to shoot his wife (Lemmon, 1962, quoted in Guttenplan *et al.*, p. 80), and the agent can prevent him from doing so by not returning the weapon, he is now in a situation where he both ought to return the weapon and ought not to return it. If we use A to represent returning the weapon, we can express the problem in the following way: the agent ought to do A, but also ought not to do A (Guttenplan *et al.*, 2021, p. 79).

While this definition sets out a scenario in which an agent faces two contrasting moral obligations, it does not provide any insight into whether one obligation is stronger than the other. In the example above for instance, it is clear that returning the weapon (ought to do A) could have much more tragic consequences, potentially resulting in the death of the friend's wife, than not doing it (ought not to do A).

Because, as we have seen, this definition does not give any detail on the weight that each of these obligations carries, it is not sufficiently specific to identify genuine moral dilemmas. McConnell (2024) explains that: ‘When one of the conflicting requirements overrides the other, we have a conflict but not a genuine moral dilemma.’

It follows from this that, in order for a moral dilemma to be genuine, neither of the conflicting requirements can override the other.

Another way in which genuine moral dilemmas are characterised stems from Marcus’ view that ‘it is possible to be in circumstances in which one will be guilty whatever one does’ (Foot, quoted in Guttenplan *et al.*, 2021, p. 89). This is equivalent to saying that there are situations in which moral wrongdoing is inescapable. Others have also defined moral dilemmas in this way (Jackson, 2009).

These two definitions of genuine moral dilemmas (that they are situations in which neither moral obligation overrides the other, and that they are situations in which moral wrongdoing is inescapable) are sometimes used interchangeably. The implication is that both these propositions are held to be true at the same time. So we have:

1. genuine moral dilemmas occur when moral wrongdoing is inescapable  
but also
2. genuine moral dilemmas occur when neither moral obligation overrides the other.

This poses a problem because, while the two definitions are used interchangeably, they do not have the same meaning.

### **Evidence of why the two definitions cannot be used interchangeably**

Let’s consider Jim’s case (Smart and Williams, 1973). He is having to choose between either killing one person and saving many others, or doing nothing, knowing that the direct consequence of this is that all the prisoners will die.

Unlike in Socrates’ example, in which it was clear the consequence of returning the weapon was much greater than that of not returning it, here the possible outcomes are:

- 1) 1 death by action
- 2) > 1 deaths by omission.

So, let’s apply the first proposition to this example and ask: Is moral wrongdoing inescapable in this case?

Since it is not Jim who is looking to kill someone, but he has been unfortunate enough to find himself in this tragic situation, and he has only these two choices available to him, we can see how all he can do is choose the least tragic according to his outlook. And, since he is doing the best he can do, he cannot really be considered

guilty (Guttenplan *et al.*, 2021, p. 99), so we can see how in this case moral wrongdoing is escapable.

Foot indeed argues that, unless we believe in a cruel God, we cannot possibly be morally guilty for ‘disobeying either of two laws on occasion where both cannot be obeyed’ (Guttenplan *et al.*, 2021, p. 90).

But does it follow from this that he was never in a genuine moral dilemma?

We can say so, if we consider that, while the consequences are tragic in both outcomes, depending on Jim’s ethical outlook he would be able to choose one over the other, and therefore solve this dilemma.

The next scenario will show us this is not always the case.

Let’s consider an example akin to that of Sophie’s choice. Let’s assume that Sophie’s children are the same age, and with the same level of dependency on her (Greenspan, 1983, p.119), so as to focus on the core of the debate: Sophie ought to save child A, and at the same time she ought not to save child A. The direct consequence of not saving child A is that she is able to save child B instead.

In a situation that is perfectly symmetrical, there is no moral principle or ethical outlook that the agent can appeal to to establish what he/she ought to do.

A moral code can tell us which actions are wrong (deontological ethics), prompt us to consider the consequences of our actions (consequentialism), or explain to us what kind of person we should be (virtue ethics), to guide us towards the better moral choice (Larry and Moore, 2021).

But, in a case, like this one, in which the wrong actions are exactly symmetrical – Sophie can either save child A, by sacrificing child B, or save child B, by sacrificing child A – in other words there is not one which is worse than the other, and the same can be said about the consequences of her choice, no ethical code or hierarchy of obligations can help her determine what the right course of action is.

And this remains true regardless of the resolution, which, in such a situation, can only be based on a random choice made either by the agent or by external agents or circumstances, but in any case it is not based on any ethical theories, as we have seen those do not offer any help.

So, applying our definitions to this example, we can see that:

definition 1 (genuine moral dilemmas occur when moral wrongdoing is inescapable) does not apply as it is still true that Sophie is not morally guilty, and she cannot possibly be considered as such for something that she believes to be the least terrible option out of the two she is offered.

But, it does not follow from this that she did not face a genuine moral dilemma as there is not one moral obligation that overrides the other. So, definition 2 (genuine moral dilemmas occur when neither moral obligation overrides the other) applies to this case.

As long as we define genuine moral dilemmas as situations in which neither obligation overrides the other, we can say that they exist.

And this is indeed the most appropriate way of defining them as it puts the stress on the gravity of the obligations themselves rather than on the misguided idea that in certain cases moral wrongdoing is unavoidable (Foot cited in Guttenplan *et al.*, p.95).

And it is by negating the idea that moral wrongdoing is unavoidable that the opponents of genuine moral dilemmas often try to deny the latter's very existence (McConnell, 2024), but, as we have shown, this does not follow.

## Conclusions

So, we can conclude that, as shown by Sophie's example, genuine moral dilemmas, intended as situations in which neither moral obligation overrides the other, exist.

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