

Do you think there are genuine moral dilemmas? Why?

By Gillian Chapman

In this assignment: 'moral dilemma' means a situation in which there is a moral obligation to do A and a moral obligation to do B, where it is not possible to do both A and B; and 'genuine moral dilemma' means a moral dilemma where neither obligation ceases to have moral effect (even if overridden for action-guidance purposes) so moral failure is inevitable. I argue that there are no genuine moral dilemmas on the basis that all moral dilemmas can be resolved without moral failure. I explain my reasoning, consider some of the other anti-dilemma arguments and then address some pro-dilemma arguments.

When faced with conflicting moral obligations to do A and to do B, one may not know which (if either) should prevail from a moral perspective but, for action-guidance purposes, one still has to decide whether to do A or B. In practice, one has to identify the 'best' outcome in the particular circumstances. This will involve weighing up a range of factors which may include, for example: the relative importance of the two obligations (so preserving life might outweigh telling the truth); the outcomes, as far as they can be anticipated; and the impact on oneself, those to whom some form of duty is owed (such as family) and others. It may be a relatively easy decision as, in Plato's example, deciding not to return the weapon to one's murderously angry friend despite one's promise. However, it may be a difficult and painful decision, particularly if there is: uncertainty about one's obligations and/or the outcomes; conflict between different *types* of moral obligation; or harm to others especially those to whom we owe some form of duty. A good example is Jean-Paul Sartre's case of a pupil torn between looking after his dependent mother and joining the Free French Forces in the (uncertain) hope of defeating the Germans (cited by E.J. Lemmon in 'Moral Dilemmas' (1962) (Guttenplan, 2003 p.114)). Another example is the Sophie's Choice-type situation where the dilemma is generated by a single moral obligation (i.e. to save one's child). Nevertheless, however difficult, for action-guidance purposes, one has to resolve the conflict and decide which obligation overrides the other. The question then arises whether the overridden obligation remains or falls away.

By determining to do, say, A, the obligation to do B has been overridden for action-guidance purposes. Does the obligation to do B then remain morally binding (which will result in unavoidable moral failure as doing B is no longer possible) or does it cease to have moral effect? It seems to me that, as long as the action-guidance determination has been carried out reasonably and in good faith to identify the best outcome, then the obligation to do B should cease to have moral effect so there is no moral failure. Morality is about regulating behaviour so we can live well together and providing action-guidance. It is not in the interests of morality to attach moral failure to not doing something which is impossible. Something should only be a moral obligation if it is possible (i.e. 'ought' implies 'can'). Another way of expressing this is to say that one has an overriding moral obligation to determine the best outcome. It is true that by adopting this type of approach, rather than, say, a deontological approach, moral decisions become more subjective. However, when faced with a moral dilemma where the moral position is unclear, one still has to decide whether to do A or B. If that decision is made in good faith, it should not result in moral failure.

The argument I have put forward to deny the existence of genuine moral dilemmas is a conflict-resolution approach (i.e. all moral dilemmas can be resolved without moral failure).

Philsoc Student Essay Prize, Trinity term, 2019 – Highly Commended

Utilitarianism propounded by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill is another such approach. It argues that all moral dilemmas can be resolved by applying the single overriding principle of utility. This holds that 'actions are right [i.e. moral] in proportion as they tend to promote happiness [for all] and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness [for all]' (Guttenplan, 2003 p.123).

It is interesting to note here the position of the dilemma-supporter, E.J. Lemon. In 'Moral Dilemmas', he accepts that utility can be helpful in resolving moral dilemmas. Unlike Mill, he concludes that such help is practical rather than moral (effectively, preserving the existence of genuine moral dilemmas) but he admits such conclusion is paradoxical (Guttenplan, 2003 p.113). Bentham believes utility comes down to a calculation of the amount of happiness. This ensures a certain degree of objectivity and impartiality. However, to my mind, it is too crude a measure and does not necessarily give proper consideration to 'the few'. Mill introduces the idea of quality of happiness as well as quantity. This makes the principle more flexible but also more subjective. In practice, the type of deliberation envisaged by Mill may not be so very different from that outlined at the beginning of this assignment.

As well as the conflict-resolution arguments, the other main approach to denying the existence of genuine moral dilemmas is to deny that moral obligations can conflict in the first place. This is on the basis that such a conflict would contradict deontic logic. One such argument relies on the deontic principles that 'ought implies can' and 'if one ought to do A and one ought to do B, then one ought to do A and B'. Applying these principles to a moral dilemma results in a logical contradiction (McConnell, 2018). There has been much debate about whether deontic principles operate to exclude genuine moral dilemmas. However, whatever the merits of the argument, it seems to me to be less appealing to rely on an argument which is based on formal logic and which does not explain how dilemmas are avoided in practice rather than a conflict-resolution argument which reflects the practical difficulties of moral dilemmas.

In support of the existence of genuine moral dilemmas, many will point to the negative emotions which arise, even when one believes one has taken the best course of action. Most notably, Bernard Williams in 'Ethical Consistency' (1973) argues that these emotions indicate that the overridden moral obligation is not eliminated but continues as a moral 'remainder' (Chappell and Smyth, 2018). It is clear people experience (often intense) negative emotions in relation to moral dilemmas. However, I am not convinced that these emotions (even if they feel like regret or remorse) show that the overridden obligation remains. They seem to me to be an understandable reaction to the harm one has caused by not being able to perform an action thought to be so important that it has been accorded moral status. The anguish of Williams' ship-wrecked officer is entirely understandable given he had to drive away drowning sailors to preserve the occupants of the life-boat but it does not indicate moral failure. If only I could

Other supporters of genuine moral dilemmas have built on Williams' idea that an overridden obligation remains. Lisa Tessman, for example, moves the debate on from emotional response and argues that an overridden obligation remains binding (even though it is impossible to fulfill) if nothing can either substitute or compensate for the value associated with it (i.e. it is non-negotiable) (although she suggests that blameworthiness in this situation might be limited) (Tessman, 2014). It seems that Tessman is trying to preserve those moral obligations which are particularly important (for example, the right to life of the one who is killed to save the many). While I accept the significance of such moral

obligations, it does not seem to be in the interests of individuals, or society more generally, that moral failure should attach to a moral obligation which has been (reasonably) overridden for action-guidance purposes.

In conclusion, when faced with a moral dilemma, one has to determine the best outcome in the circumstances for action-guidance purposes. If one decides to do A, then, in my view, the obligation to do B (which is now impossible) ceases to have moral effect and there is no moral failure. This means there can be no genuine moral dilemmas. A supporter of genuine moral dilemmas will argue that B does not cease to have moral effect (at least if it is non-negotiable) and therefore resolution of the dilemma involves moral failure. This is clearly a significant difference in terms of moral theory. However, in practice, there seems to be much commonality between supporters and opponents of genuine moral dilemmas. Most will agree that, for action-guidance purposes, one has to determine the best outcome in the circumstances (and, in many cases, are likely to agree on such outcome). Most will agree that a moral dilemma will result in guilt-like emotions (regardless of whether they indicate moral failure). Furthermore, most are likely to attribute no, or very limited, blame in these circumstances. Therefore, although the existence of genuine moral dilemmas is important in terms of moral theory, it seems to have less significance at a practical level.

Bibliography

Chappell, S.G. and Smyth, N. (2018). 'Bernard Williams', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Zalta, E.N. (ed.). Available from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/williams-bernard> (Accessed on 8 July 2019).

Guttenplan, S., Hornsby, J. and Janaway, C. (2003). *Reading Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

McConnell, T. (2018). 'Moral Dilemmas', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Zalta, E.N. (ed.). Available from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas> (Accessed on 26 June 2019).

Tessman, L. (2014). *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press. Available from: <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199396146.001.0001/acprof-9780199396146?rskey=F9VdY1&result=2> (Accessed on 27 June 2019).