

## THE NATURE OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS

[DIGEST FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, 1966]

A **dilemma** is “ a situation in which ‘ the agent ‘ has [choices available] each of which requires a morally impermissible action. Plato presented a famous example - a man borrows a weapon from his neighbor promising to return it anytime it was requested. One day the neighbor, in a fit of rage, asks for the item apparently with the intention to kill someone. The dilemma was whether to keep the promise of returning it or become an accessory to a murder. So a **dilemma** is “ a situation involving choosing between opposing courses of action (usually two) where there are (difficulty) moral considerations in support of each course of action. ” You are supposed to do x and you are supposed to do Y, but both x and y may lead to moral violations. It is a dilemma because you can ’ t perform both actions at the same time.

Those who believe in **dilemma resolution** say there are systematic ways of determining which course of action represents the truer or higher or best obligation. Genuine or **intractable moral dilemmas** don ’ t really exist and are only apparent (though during initial consideration it appears that the choices are opposed). W.D. Ross (discussed by Silva) takes this view in his The Right and the Good. He says each obligation is *prima facie* right or valid on its face until one discovers (through analysis) the, or a stronger obligation which overrides the other.

Other writers argue that conflicting moral choices may really not be capable of systematic resolution at all and one can only toss a coin to make the decision. Either choice might turn out later to be the ‘ right one. ’ One has to rely on luck [assuming good intentions in the first place]. But if none of the choices have a priority, then none can be absolute, so resolution boils down to going with ones preferences (a relativist position), not with objective considerations. If there are priorities among obligations, the agent must show convincingly how they should be resolved, that is, convincingly argue that one course of action is better than another. This is one of the key challenges to most ethical theories.

[Silva ' s views on dilemmas] **Dilemmas** are conflicts about what decisions are right and what actions should be taken when moral reasoning [not ethical analysis] is inconclusive. She gives an example, (I think a weak one) of a father ' s choice to go to the only world-season ball game his team might ever play or go to his son ' s high school graduation). She also describes as ' ethically important those situations in which ethically right decisions/actions are not clear because there are conflicting or competing moral (good) alternatives. Silva ' s conflicts take two primary forms: In the first, two (or more) alternatives are considered " good, " but in different ways. That is, each one is supported by important ethical principles, but only one can be chosen. In the second case two (or more) alternatives are considered " wrong " or ethically unacceptable in different ways. Some principles would have to be violated. **Typical examples** (mine, not Silva ' s) would be: To chose between rescuing a mother or a child if only one can be saved; to turn in a rascal in an agency and by doing so jeopardize a valuable public program; to expose a police informant and by doing so lose the capacity to catch many criminals in the future.

There are many other ways of describing a dilemma. **Common to all** of them are good intentions and an obligation to chose or act. A list of them follows.

**Dilemmas** may exist when: **A.)** Critical evidence bearing on whether a deed is or was or might be right or wrong is inconclusive or ambiguous; **B.)** When the results of applying a principle are ambiguous or inconclusive; **C.)** When good principles are in conflict, i.e., we should do x and y but only x seems possible meaning we must forego realizing important principle Y. It should be noted that a **Faustian Bargain** is never right - giving in to a temptation to get more wealth, power, beauty, health, longevity, even if you intend to use them to do great good, but agreeing in the bargain to do whatever ' Faust ' (the devil) asks you to do.

A **dilemma** is a conflict between equally weighted alternatives - it is/seems not possible to tell which alternative has more utility, more virtue, more right, more (or less benefit), avoids more harm, or which duty has priority, but a choice must be made (or seems necessary).

You have a **dilemma** when every alternative has moral drawbacks. The initial (and maybe final) reasoning about why x is better than y is not convincing. No option appears to be capable of complying with all the entailed ethical obligations. (**Example:** evicting an indigent old lady from a trailer in the winter because she can ' t pay her gas bill or rent).

A **dilemma** exists when it is necessary to distinguish and to choose right action, duties, or principles from wrong ones where the distribution of benefits and harms is confusing. Or when you appear to lose something ethically valuable whichever way you decide (**examples:** forest job protection or spotted owl protection; saving your buddies being tortured by the enemy or take the risk of not reporting the position of the enemy to headquarters).

**Dilemmas** exist when you must act and give reasons for the best choice when you are not sure why it is best; when all known solutions have benefit, but can ' t avoid significant harm; when important good and bad may result from every known alternative but a decision must be made (**examples**: moving people from homes to create a water project such as TVA; when all highway extension proposals will remove the only playground -see the Kurasawa movie " Ikiru " ).