

What is a Moral (Ethical) Dilemma?

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By now, you should have a good understanding of how we define “ethics” and “morals.” We will now turn our attention to defining moral (ethical) dilemma. When defining moral (ethical) dilemma, it is important to recognize that a moral (ethical) dilemma is not simply a question that requires you to make a decision of “What color outfit should I wear today,” or “Will the red or blue shoes best match my outfit?” Nor is a moral (ethical) dilemma a situation where you must decide between an action such as “Should I eat chocolate or vanilla ice cream for dessert” or “Should I read the introduction to my textbook or start with chapter one?” As far as I know, there is nothing immoral or unethical with eating either chocolate or vanilla ice cream for dessert or with skipping over the introduction and beginning with the first chapter of a book (except, you might overlook some helpful information by not reading the introduction to your textbook).

The point is a moral (ethical) dilemma involves making a choice between two or more moral (ethical) values and in making a

decision or in taking action you will compromise or violate some other moral (ethical) principle(s) or value(s). A moral (ethical) dilemma is a situation that involves a choice, decision, act/action, solution that may include an unpleasant problem or situation where you feel you simply do not know what to do or which way to turn. When identifying what is or is not a moral (ethical) dilemma, we need to remember the key words here are “moral” or “ethical” (as a reminder, we are using these words interchangeably).

A response to a moral (ethical) dilemma is not always a matter of “right versus wrong,” as both courses of action or decision could seem moral or ethical (or the “right thing to do”). In some cases, it is a “right versus right” type of dilemma, which involves having to decide the better or best way to respond when faced with two or more “right” courses of action or decisions to select from. When faced with a moral (ethical) dilemma, you will probably be asking yourself “What should I do?” or “What ought I do now?” You may have a “little voice” inside your head telling you to do one thing, while your immediate desire is to do another. Some may refer to this “little voice” as your conscience, and you may be the type of person who is keenly aware of their own “moral compass.” Have you ever known what you “must do,” but simply did not “feel” like doing it? When faced with a situation like this, do you listen to that “little voice” and follow your moral compass? Or, do you simply do the first thing you think of, what most pleases you or others, or do nothing?

The “right versus wrong” ethical dilemmas, are not usually the ones we have a problem resolving (such as, “Should I cheat on a test?” or “Is it okay to harm an innocent person?”). It is the “right versus right” ethical dilemmas that seem to be the hardest to resolve.

Let’s look at a few examples of what could be considered “right versus right” moral (ethical) dilemma:



- Your eighteen-year-old son/daughter confided in you that they had been involved in the recent theft of your neighbor's car. Should you call the police and turn your son/daughter in because you want to be honest with you

neighbor, as well as want to tell the truth? Or do you simply “keep quiet” because you want to remain loyal to your son/daughter, especially since they told you in confidence? (Think about truth versus loyalty when pondering this dilemma, such as in the relationship with your son/daughter and your neighbor.)



- You have a failing grade in your English class, and you were quite surprised when you received your final exam back. It shows you scored 100% on the exam, yet you cannot figure out how you even passed the exam. You did not study, and you totally guessed when completing the multiple-choice and true/false questions. There is no way you could have passed the final exam, and you were prepared to earn an F in the course. You had even planned to retake the course during the summer. You really need to pass this class to graduate. Upon reviewing

the exam, you notice the teacher made a big mistake in grading my exam. You should have earned an F on the final exam, and not the grade of 100%. Even with the grade of 100% on the final exam, you will barely pass the course with a D. The error in grading was not your fault, so you are wondering if you should say anything to your instructor about her big mistake in grading my final exam? If you say something, then you will fail the course and have to retake it in the summer. If you do not say anything, you can at least earn a D and not have to retake the course. (Think about the short- and long-term impact of this situation on you as the student, the instructor, and other students in the same course.)

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- You cannot stand wearing a mask due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It makes your glasses fog up and it is simply uncomfortable. You have not been feeling ill either. For the most part, you stay home and only venture out for occasional groceries. You live alone and do not live in a state or locality where wearing a mask is mandatory. Should you wear a mask when you occasionally go to the grocery store? When pondering this dilemma, consider that there's no law that makes it mandatory to wear a mask (such as, there is no law that applies to your state or community). Just because something is legal, still consider if it is ethical. (You should consider the impact of wearing or not wearing a mask in relationship to you as the individual, as compared to the community in which you live.)



- You are the manager of a restaurant and one of your long-term employees did not show up for work on a Friday night when your restaurant is slammed with

customers. This really put you in a jam, and you end up having to ask one of your other employees to work late to cover the shift for the missing employee. What is surprising to you is your long-term employee has never done this before. It was shocking they never called to let you know what happened and inform you they would not be coming in. The following morning the long-term employee shows up for their scheduled morning shift. You are not very happy because the employee acts like nothing happened, and did not even offer an explanation. In the employee handbook, there is a statement about zero tolerance for “no shows” when it comes to being at work (this is really important on a Friday night too). The employee handbook further explains it is the employee’s responsibility to notify you prior to their scheduled work time/shift. What should you do? Do you immediately tell this long-term employee they are fired because it was very disrespectful to both you and the other employees, as well as making it difficult to provide quality service for customers because you were short-handed in terms of staff? Or, do you give this employee a chance to “redeem” themselves? (You should consider if you believe justice is served by enforcing the rules and holding employees accountable for their actions. Or, should you look with mercy on the wrongdoer since they are a long-term employee and perhaps give them another chance?)

