Do you think there are any genuine moral dilemmas? Why? by Andrew Peasgood

'I'm in a real dilemma' seems an over-used expression in today's reality TV world. But can we be sure when it is more than mere ratings-grabbing hyperbole, and is in fact accurately describing a genuine philosophical issue?

Let's start by clarifying what constitutes a dilemma. Dilemmas involve choice: a choice between alternative courses of actions, where either both actions are considered good, or both bad, but where, respectively, only one can be chosen or only one avoided. Here I am focusing on those where both are seen as bad, because 'dilemma' is most commonly considered in its negative sense. I am also ignoring matters which may well involve difficult, complicated choices, but which are of a *practical* nature. We are concerned here with issues of a *moral* nature, concerning how we interact with, and consider, other people. Unwittingly committing yourself to a night out with two separate groups of friends may not be a big issue compared to which of two houses to buy, but a moral choice is required in the first situation, to choose between which commitment to honour and which to renege on.

So a moral dilemma exists when we are required to make a choice when either alternative would have an unfavourable outcome for others and our relationship with them: where a choice is to be made between conflicting moral claims upon us. Undeniably such dilemmas occur. But what would constitute them being 'genuine'? Further analysis is required to distinguish between 'must', 'ought', and 'can'. Lemmon (1964) articulates this distinction, stressing that if something *must* be done, then you cannot choose not to do it, and, helpfully, that the opposite of *must* isn't *must not*, but is *do not have to*.

The choice, therefore, must be necessary: that is, it cannot be avoided. It must be capable of being carried out. We must be free to choose, and to act. There must be capability of action: you have to be there, you have to be physically capable; and mentally you have to be capable of understanding the situation, identifying the options, and exercising a choice. (I accept that strict determinists, in denial of free will, may choose to stop reading here). If in fact there are constraints such that one or both options are not really available, then there is no choice. For example, worrying about which person injured in a car crash to help when trapped yourself, is not actionable, and not a dilemma. Nor must you be coerced. You may be forced by unalterable circumstance to choose, but you must be free which of the available options to select. (In the much-discussed 'Sophie's Choice' scenario - Styron, 1979 - a mother is forced to choose only one of her daughters to save, but she is able to choose either).

Being faced with a free choice of two courses of action, where in both the outcomes will be unfavourable, is not in itself, however, commonly thought of dilemmatic. A choice easily made would not be considered a real dilemma. For most of the moral choices and judgements we face we are guided towards our action by moral codes, and with these we are able to resolve straightforwardly the majority of choices, by differentiation and ranking.

The application of a code does not, however, necessarily remove all difficulties. The deontological rule follower is clear which actions are good (and which bad). But for the absolutist there can be too many red lines, and even for the more flexible in nature there can be judgement required to establish hierarchy when a choice has to be made between two prohibited actions. For the consequentialist dilemmas are easier to overcome, as one bad action, maybe unacceptable to the deontologist, would be morally permissible if the alternative was worse. But calculation of relative benefit (or harm) can descend to a form of cost-benefit analysis: reliable only if all relevant factors can be identified, and reduced to a common unit of value. It is easy to say that an act would be acceptable, as the best thing to do all things considered, as long as we were sure that, indeed, all things had been considered.

The 'good soldier or good son' dilemma set out by Sartre (1948) is one of incomparability. Attempts to decide which duty over-rides the other would likely defeat both the application of rules and of calculation. A judgement is not, though, impossible: the virtuous person, through suitable education and experience, will have the wisdom to identify the right act. We may be left wondering: is what the virtuous person does the right thing, or does the virtuous person do the right thing; do they select it, or define it? But the tools exist to identify what makes these apparent dilemmas asymmetric, and resolve them.

We have left remaining the possibility of there being no difference in possible act or perceived outcome - the symmetrical dilemma. Sophie's choice is such. We may argue that this is an extreme and unlikely scenario, but not that it is impossible. So now, surely, we have found the conditions for a true dilemma.

Now, in rides the logician to further confound us. If, as in a symmetrical dilemma, option A is only an available option provided the agent does not carry out option B, and vice-versa; then the two alternative actions each become both obligatory and prohibited. This is incoherent, and logically impossible.
Alternatively, following the 'agglomeration' principle, if I ought to do A and I ought also to do B, then I ought to do both A and B. And yet in particular dilemmas one *cannot* do both A and B. If to overcome that difficulty I maintain that instead I ought to do *each* of A and B, but not necessarily *both*, then I am arguing against a principle that is necessary in other logical constructions (Bearlain, 2011). So, logically, dilemmas cannot exist.

This evaporation of moral dilemma as a concept does not instinctively feel right, and is certainly not helpful. We are left to make what remains a seemingly impossible choice, adrift in a flood of emotion. To decline to participate, hoping the matter is taken out of our hands, is not an option. It may seem noble to let fate decide or to pass moral responsibility onto others, but to do so is to show bad faith. In Sophie's case, had she declined to choose, perhaps knowingly provoking her own death as well as that of both her children, she may have been brave, but morally a coward.

Is arbitrary choice any more praiseworthy? Where in perceived outcomes there are absolutely no differentiating features between two alternatives then it truly does not matter which action is taken. Either choice is equally good, or bad. It's the toss of a coin. Accordingly, it can be argued, there should be no dilemma in choosing. What moral significance can there be to your choice? You could do no better.

But, irrationally maybe, regret, remorse and guilt are likely consequences for us. We cannot avoid what Strawson (1974) refers to as 'reactive attitudes' (along with such other feelings as gratitude, resentment, anger and disgust); and what are sometimes, euphemistically, labelled 'moral residue'. We feel bad about having carried out (or permitted) a wrong act, and responsible for the negative outcome, whatever the mitigating circumstances or when the bad deed was accompanied by a comparable good one. Williams (1972) acknowledges that in situations such as we have considered, you could not be blamed, but, in realising that two obligations conflict we are not entitled to absolve ourselves of one of them and its consequences: we are right to feel this guilt.
Genuine emotional consequence does not itself prove moral dilemma. But, accepting the existence of dilemmas (as an inevitable consequence of morality as a set of social rules designed to be simple enough to be teachable: a "limitation of the mechanism") Greenspan (1995) views the associated guilt as 'practical'. It can be character forming, increasing our capability to make future wise judgements. Perhaps, then, we *need* dilemma, to develop our moral education.
In strict analytical terms, there may be no 'genuine moral dilemma'. That may come as a relief to some. Guardians of moral theory might be content to see 'dilemma' disappear, as situations where action cannot straightforwardly be guided could be seen as evidence of systemic failure. And maybe only journalists and celebrities would miss the word 'dilemma', a word now diminished in value, inappropriately and over-used.

Seemingly 'technical' denials of dilemma - by the rational removal of blame, or through logical disavowal - would in most situations be of scant comfort to the person facing the choice. Williams (1985) acknowledges that different viewpoints give different answers: "It is the world, not logic, that makes it

impossible for both conflicting obligations to be satisfied". In the practical - psychological, emotional - terms of this human world, there are moral choices to be made by our fellow men and women that can only be described as being for them genuine dilemmas. To argue against that would be to place insufficient value on their very real feelings. Dilemma as a moral issue is only too real.

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