

Ethical Dilemma Assembly

A few years ago the BBC did a survey of responses to ethical dilemmas. The outcome of the survey, in which more than 50,000 people took part, were very interesting – they give an insight into what the public in general considers right and what we think is wrong. I thought I would share the dilemmas with you this morning.

The first dilemma is this: You wake up in hospital, next to a world famous violinist connected to you with various tubes. You've been kidnapped by the Music Appreciation Society. Aware of the maestro's impending death, they hooked you up to the violinist. If you stay in the hospital, connected to him for nine months, he will be totally cured. You are unlikely to suffer harm. No one else can save him. Do you have an obligation to give up nine months of your life and stay connected?

Think about it yourself. What answer would you give?

The results of 57,779 votes cast: 25 percent said yes you do have an obligation to stay connected and give up 9 months of your life, 75 percent said no.

As expected, most people believe it's morally acceptable to disconnect yourself, but a significant minority think otherwise. It would be interesting to find out how you selected your answer. Is there a duty to save the violinist? Does he have a right to life that would be violated by disconnection, or does he just have a right not to be killed? Is unplugging yourself killing him or letting him die, and does it actually matter morally which it is? I suspect many will say that you are not killing him, but letting him die.

If you are one of the 25% who thought it was morally right to remain connected to the violinist, you need to confront the following issue: as I speak, hundreds and hundreds of thousands are dying of preventable diseases across the world. You could save some of them, just like the maestro, by giving up far less than nine months of your life. Does consistency require you to make some personal sacrifice to others whose lives could also be saved by your actions?

For the second dilemma, imagine a runaway trolley car racing down a hill towards five innocent bystanders. If you do nothing, the trolley car will hit the people and they will all die. You're standing on a bridge above and you could decide to jump on the track to block the trolley car. But then you realise that you are too light to stop the trolley car.

Your sacrifice would be useless - if you jump down, you would be killed and then the trolley would still go on to kill the other five. But - next to you is a fat man. He would certainly block the trolley, although he'd undoubtedly die. A small nudge and he'd fall right onto the track below. No one would ever know. Should you push him?

What do you think? Decide in your own mind what the right thing to do is.

The results: of 52,178 votes cast, 25 percent said yes you should push him off the bridge to save the five; 75 percent said no that would be wrong.

So most people opt to let the five people die. It appears that the end does not justify the means in this scenario. Perhaps the issue is psychological rather than ethical - the fat man is next to you and need to physically push him off the bridge.

Maybe that shifts the balance? Does this say something about the role of emotions in moral judgement?

In our third and final dilemma, we need to imagine that we are cave explorers. A rock falls and blocks the exit of a cave you and five other tourists are exploring. You spot a hole elsewhere and the first of your group tries to leave. However, as he is also enormously fat, he gets stuck. There is no other way out. The tide is rising and, unless you get out soon, everyone but the fat guy, whose head is sticking out of the cave, will inevitably drown. Searching through your backpack, you find a stick of dynamite. It will not move the rock, but will certainly blast the man out of the hole. He pleads for his life; he does not want to die, but neither do you and your four companions. Should you blast him out? What do you think?

The results: of 51,107 votes cast 75 percent said yes blow him up, 25 percent said no.

It's interesting that to save five people, the majority of people are *not* willing to push the fat man off the bridge, but *are* willing to blast him out of a hole. It is interesting to reflect on what the relevant differences are, if any, between the previous dilemma and this one. Is it that *you* are trapped and self-preservation prevails?

Whatever our views, these experiments encourage us to examine our moral beliefs and intuitions and, perhaps, to uncover some inconsistencies in our thinking.

- Does someone else's right to life require us to make great personal sacrifices?
- If so, should we donate far more to humanitarian aid?
- Is there a moral difference between killing someone and letting that person die?
- When does the end justify the means?
- Are there actions we should never perform, whatever the consequences?

These are deep questions to which none of us will find a complete or definitive answer. But just giving time to reflecting upon them makes us more involved in understanding what we mean by right and wrong. Socrates, the great Ancient Greek philosopher, said that an unexamined life is not worth living. By thinking about ethics and morality you are beginning to live an examined life.

In light of these questions, it's unsurprising that philosophers are still grappling with these cases and their implications for morality and moral judgement. For those of you who are not deterred by the complexity, I recommend the study of ethics or philosophy... or perhaps, instead of paying for a university course, should you instead send the money to Oxfam?