

Moral Dilemmas in a Complex World: Navigating Difficult Decisions

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Assistant Professor on Contract
Department of Philosophy
University of Kerala
Kariavattom

Abstract

Human life rarely unfolds in straight lines. Instead, it is marked by crossroads where values, duties, and desires conflict in ways that make decision-making profoundly difficult. These moral dilemmas can be as intimate as deciding whether to keep a painful secret for a friend, or as far-reaching as determining the right stance on war, capital punishment, or climate change. In an age of rapid technological transformation, economic globalization, and cultural pluralism, such dilemmas have multiplied in scale and complexity. This article examines how moral dilemmas arise, why they remain difficult to resolve, and how philosophical frameworks can help individuals and communities navigate them with greater clarity. Drawing on ethical theories—utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, justice theory, and care ethics—alongside practical tools such as logic-based therapy, narrative therapy, and values clarification, the paper explores ways of thinking critically and responsibly about moral conflict. By emphasizing reflection, dialogue, and self-examination, it argues that confronting dilemmas is not merely a test of reason but also an opportunity for growth, empathy, and the cultivation of a more just society.

Keywords: Moral dilemmas, Ethical frameworks, Utilitarianism, Deontology, Virtue ethics, Philosophical counselling, Values clarification, Socratic dialogue, Logic-based therapy, Narrative therapy, Practical ethics.

Introduction

Every human being is confronted with decisions that carry ethical weight. Some choices are trivial, involving no more than preference—what to eat for lunch or what color shirt to wear. Others, however, entangle us in deeper conflicts where moral values, social expectations, and long-term consequences intersect. These are moral dilemmas, situations where no option appears entirely right or entirely wrong, and where choosing one course of action often

means betraying another equally compelling principle (McConnell 5).

In personal life, dilemmas often arise when love, loyalty, and honesty pull in opposite directions. Should one tell a painful truth to a loved one, risking the relationship, or protect them from hurt by withholding it? Professional life presents equally challenging cases: a doctor who must choose between two patients when only one life-saving organ is available, or a journalist who must balance the duty to inform the public with the responsibility not to incite harm. On the global scale, dilemmas manifest in urgent questions: How should nations balance security with human rights when designing immigration policies? Should individuals boycott affordable products that are produced through exploitative labor practices? These questions resist easy answers because they reveal the tension between competing goods.

The twenty-first century has intensified the complexity of such moral knots. Globalization means that personal choices—what clothes we buy, what food we consume, how we use technology—are tied to vast networks of production, labor, and environmental consequences (Singer 35). Advances in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and surveillance raise new ethical questions about autonomy, privacy, and the very nature of humanity (Floridi 112). Cultural pluralism ensures that ethical norms differ across societies, making it difficult to apply a single universal principle without encountering resistance. Against this backdrop, moral dilemmas are not simply private puzzles but pressing social challenges.

Philosophers since antiquity have wrestled with the problem of moral conflict. Socrates encouraged his interlocutors to interrogate their assumptions, revealing that what seems obvious often conceals contradictions. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, argued that ethical decision-making is not about applying rigid formulas but about cultivating virtues that enable wise judgment (Aristotle 23). Immanuel Kant, by contrast, insisted that moral principles must be universal and exceptionless, even when following them leads to painful results (Kant 14). Modern thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Martha Nussbaum continue this exploration, proposing frameworks that emphasise consequences, justice, and human capabilities. What unites these diverse approaches is the recognition that moral dilemmas cannot be ignored; they must be engaged with thoughtfulness, lest decisions be guided by impulse, fear, or prejudice.

The aim of this article is not to offer final solutions to every moral problem but to provide intellectual tools and reflective practices that allow individuals to approach dilemmas with greater clarity. First, the paper will examine the nature of moral dilemmas and illustrate their presence in personal, professional, and global contexts. Second, it will explore major ethical frameworks—utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, justice theory, and care ethics—as lenses through which dilemmas can be analysed. Third, it will discuss philosophical counselling and problem-solving techniques, including Socratic dialogue, narrative therapy, values clarification, and logic-based therapy, which can translate abstract principles into practical guidance. Finally, the conclusion will reflect on the significance of cultivating moral awareness in an interconnected world, where each decision has the potential to ripple outward into larger social consequences.

By situating individual struggles within a broader philosophical and global context, the article underscores the importance of both rational analysis and compassionate imagination. Moral dilemmas test our integrity and resilience, but they also invite us to grow in wisdom, courage, and empathy. In

confronting them, we do not simply choose between options; we shape the kind of person we become and the kind of world we inhabit.

Moral Dilemmas

A moral dilemma occurs when a person faces a situation where competing moral principles or values appear to demand incompatible actions. As Terrance McConnell explains, the essence of a dilemma is "that no matter what one does, one will violate some moral requirement" (3). This sense of being pulled in two or more directions distinguishes dilemmas from ordinary choices. They are not simply difficult decisions but rather conflicts that expose the limits of moral reasoning itself.

For instance, a person may face the classic "lifeboat scenario," where saving one individual means letting another perish. In such cases, the wrongness lies not in a careless or immoral choice but in the tragic structure of the situation itself. Dilemmas thus challenge the belief that morality always provides clear answers. Instead, they remind us that ethical life often involves ambiguity, compromise, and loss (Williams 24).

Personal Dilemmas

In personal life, dilemmas frequently involve conflicts between honesty, loyalty, and compassion. Consider the situation of discovering that a close friend's partner is being unfaithful. One must choose between telling the truth—which respects honesty but may cause pain—or remaining silent, which preserves the friend's happiness but undermines integrity. Both choices carry moral weight, and neither seems entirely satisfactory. Another common example arises in family responsibilities. Imagine an adult child caring for an aging parent while also raising young children. Devoting more time to one group inevitably means neglecting the other. Here the dilemma is not about selfishness but about competing duties of love and care, each of which feels morally binding (Tronto 54).

These personal dilemmas highlight that ethical conflicts are not abstractions but lived experiences. They occur in relationships marked by affection and responsibility, where every decision shapes trust, identity, and the quality of human connection.

Professional Dilemmas

Moral dilemmas also occur frequently in professional contexts, where individuals balance personal integrity with institutional demands. Healthcare provides striking examples. A doctor may have to decide how to allocate a scarce resource, such as a ventilator during a pandemic. Saving one patient may mean denying treatment to another equally deserving individual. Such situations reveal the tragic dimension of medicine: the goal is to heal, yet circumstances sometimes force practitioners to choose who lives and who dies (Beauchamp and Childress 112).

In business, dilemmas often involve balancing profitability with ethical responsibility. A company may be tempted to use cheaper suppliers despite questionable labor practices, rationalizing that this secures jobs and keeps prices low. Yet doing so perpetuates exploitation. Similarly, employees may witness corruption but hesitate to report it for fear of losing their livelihood. The whistleblower dilemma captures this tension between loyalty to one's organization and the duty to prevent harm (Crane and Matten 185). Education presents another sphere of professional ethical conflict. Teachers may struggle between fairness and compassion when grading students. Should a student who worked hard but fell short of the standard receive a passing grade? Upholding standards maintains fairness but may crush the student's motivation. Offering leniency demonstrates care but undermines equal treatment. These

professional cases show how institutions generate dilemmas not only for individuals but also for the systems they inhabit. Navigating them requires balancing personal conscience with organizational expectations and broader social consequences.

Global Dilemmas

At the global level, dilemmas arise when nations, cultures, and communities face conflicts of rights, justice, and survival. Climate change is perhaps the most pressing contemporary example. Wealthy nations must decide how much to reduce emissions, knowing that stringent action may slow their economic growth. Yet failure to act endangers vulnerable populations in poorer regions, who bear the brunt of rising seas, droughts, and extreme weather (Gardiner 58). The dilemma here is intergenerational: should present comfort be sacrificed for future survival?

Another global dilemma is immigration policy. Restrictive border controls may protect national security and jobs but often separate families and deny safety to refugees fleeing violence. Conversely, more open policies may express humanitarian values but strain resources and fuel political backlash (Carens 97). War and peace decisions illustrate dilemmas on a tragic scale. Leaders must decide whether to intervene militarily to stop atrocities in another nation. Non-intervention respects sovereignty but allows suffering to continue; intervention may prevent immediate harm but cause long-term instability and civilian casualties (Walzer 102). Technological dilemmas are also increasingly global. Artificial intelligence raises questions about fairness, privacy, and control. Should governments allow facial recognition technologies that improve security but infringe on individual freedoms? Should autonomous weapons be deployed if they reduce risks to soldiers but increase risks to civilians (Bryson 142)? These global dilemmas illustrate that moral conflicts are no longer confined to local communities. They extend across borders, affecting entire populations and future generations. They remind us that ethical reasoning must expand to encompass global citizenship and planetary responsibility.

The Emotional Weight of Dilemmas

Beyond intellectual analysis, dilemmas carry a profound emotional burden. They generate guilt, anxiety, and regret because no matter what decision is made, something valuable is sacrificed. Philosophers such as Bernard Williams argue that this “moral remainder” is inescapable: when values collide, resolution does not erase the sense of loss (Williams 26). A doctor who chooses one patient over another may save a life but still feel anguish for the life lost. A whistle blower may act with integrity but still regret the harm caused to colleagues. This emotional dimension underscores the importance of compassion and resilience in ethical decision-making. Facing dilemmas requires not only rational clarity but also the capacity to live with imperfection, acknowledge limits, and accept the tragic aspects of human life (Nussbaum 92).

Philosophical Frameworks for Resolving Dilemmas

Philosophical reflection has long sought to provide structured frameworks for resolving moral dilemmas. These frameworks do not eliminate the difficulty of ethical conflict, but they offer tools for reasoning systematically about competing values and obligations. By examining dilemmas through different lenses—consequences, duties, virtues, justice, and relationships—we can better appreciate both the possibilities and limitations of ethical reasoning.

Utilitarianism: Weighing Consequences

Utilitarianism, rooted in the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, proposes that moral choices should maximize happiness or well-being for the greatest number. This framework evaluates actions by their outcomes, offering a clear method of comparison: calculate potential benefits and harms, then choose the option that produces the most overall good. In personal dilemmas, utilitarian reasoning often prioritizes impartiality. For example, if one must decide between helping a close friend or a group of strangers in urgent need, utilitarianism would recommend assisting the greater number, even at the expense of personal loyalty. This may feel counterintuitive, but it reflects utilitarianism's commitment to universality.

In professional contexts, such as medicine, utilitarian calculations often underpin policies like triage in emergencies. When resources are limited, saving the largest number of lives becomes the guiding principle. However, critics point out that this approach can overlook the dignity of individuals, reducing people to units of utility. Bernard Williams (1973) famously argued that utilitarianism may force individuals to violate their personal integrity, such as compelling someone to harm an innocent person for the sake of a greater good. Nevertheless, utilitarian reasoning remains influential in global dilemmas. Climate policies often involve cost-benefit analyses, weighing economic losses against the reduction of long-term harm to future generations. Here, utilitarianism pushes policymakers to consider not only immediate interests but also the welfare of countless future individuals.

Deontology: Duties and Principles

In contrast to utilitarianism, deontological ethics emphasises duties, rules, and respect for persons. Immanuel Kant argued that moral action arises from adherence to universal principles, rather than contingent outcomes. His categorical imperative insists that one act only on maxims that could be willed as universal law, and that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means.

Applied to personal dilemmas, deontology stresses honesty and fidelity. If one promises a friend to keep a secret, Kantian ethics would argue that breaking that promise—even for good reasons—undermines the very possibility of trust. Duties, for Kant, do not bend easily to circumstances. In professional life, deontological reasoning grounds many codes of ethics. A lawyer's duty to maintain client confidentiality, for example, is based on the principle of respect for the client's autonomy, not on the calculation of broader consequences. This strictness can sometimes feel rigid, but it also provides a safeguard against justifying harmful actions through expediency. Globally, deontology informs human rights discourse. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflects Kantian principles: every human being possesses inherent dignity that must be respected, regardless of consequences. For instance, even if torture could extract information to save lives, deontological ethics would reject it as a violation of human dignity. Critics of deontology argue that it can be overly absolutist, leaving little room for compromise in complex situations. Still, its insistence on principled action provides a powerful counterbalance to purely consequentialist reasoning.

Virtue Ethics: Character and Flourishing

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, shifts attention from rules or outcomes to the moral character of the agent. The central question is not merely "What should I do?" but "What kind of person should I become?" According to Aristotle, virtues such as courage, justice, temperance,

and wisdom are cultivated through practice, leading to eudaimonia—a flourishing life. In personal dilemmas, virtue ethics highlights balance and moderation. For instance, in deciding how much to sacrifice for others, the virtuous person avoids both selfishness and self-destructive selflessness. The goal is to act in ways that harmonise one's own flourishing with that of others.

In professions, virtue ethics emphasizes integrity and excellence within practices. A virtuous doctor is not merely one who follows rules or maximises outcomes but one who embodies compassion, honesty, and practical wisdom in patient care. Similarly, teachers guided by virtue ethics focus not only on imparting knowledge but also on nurturing curiosity, fairness, and resilience in their students. Globally, virtue ethics provides insight into leadership. Political leaders who embody virtues such as justice, humility, and courage can inspire trust and cooperation across divided communities. Unlike rule-based frameworks, virtue ethics acknowledges the importance of context and character in navigating dilemmas. Critics, however, argue that it lacks clear decision-making procedures in cases of acute conflict.

Justice as Fairness: Balancing Competing Claims

John Rawls' theory of justice, articulated in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), introduces another perspective on dilemmas. Rawls proposed the "veil of ignorance" thought experiment, where individuals designing social rules must imagine themselves without knowledge of their position in society. This ensures fairness by preventing biased preferences. In personal dilemmas, this principle encourages empathy and impartiality. For instance, in resolving a family inheritance dispute, one might ask: what arrangement would be fair if I did not know whether I was the wealthiest or poorest member? Professionally, Rawls' framework supports policies ensuring equal opportunity and fairness. In education, for example, resource distribution may prioritize disadvantaged students to reduce inequality.

At the global level, justice as fairness is crucial for addressing climate change and poverty. Wealthy nations, from this perspective, bear greater responsibility to reduce emissions and provide aid, since fairness requires compensating for historical advantages. Critics argue that Rawls' framework, while powerful, is less effective when applied to international relations, where enforcement mechanisms are weak. Yet it continues to inspire debates about global distributive justice.

Care Ethics: Relationships and Responsiveness

A more recent development, care ethics, emphasizes relationships, empathy, and contextual responsiveness. Thinkers such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) argue that traditional ethical theories often neglect the moral significance of care and interdependence. At the personal level, care ethics acknowledges the legitimacy of prioritizing loved ones. While utilitarianism might demand helping strangers over family, care ethics values the bonds of intimacy that shape our identities.

Professionally, care ethics reshapes practices in nursing, education, and social work, highlighting attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness to particular needs. For example, a nurse caring for a terminally ill patient may prioritize comfort and presence over aggressive interventions, recognizing the patient's emotional as well as physical needs. Globally, care ethics challenges abstract principles by insisting that moral responsibility begins with concrete relationships. Climate change, from this perspective, is not only about statistics but also about caring for vulnerable communities, future generations, and nonhuman life. Critics argue that care ethics risks parochialism, but its emphasis on compassion provides a much-needed corrective to abstract, impersonal reasoning.

Integrating Frameworks

Each philosophical framework illuminates different aspects of moral dilemmas. Utilitarianism clarifies consequences, deontology stresses duties, virtue ethics focuses on character, justice emphasizes fairness, and care ethics highlights relationships. No single approach provides a perfect solution, but together they offer a toolkit for richer moral reasoning. When individuals and communities confront dilemmas, drawing on multiple perspectives can prevent narrow thinking and promote more balanced decisions.

Philosophical Counselling and Problem-Solving Methods

While philosophical frameworks provide structured ways of analyzing moral dilemmas, individuals often find it difficult to apply abstract theories to the messy details of lived experience. Emotions, personal history, and social pressures can obscure clarity. Philosophical counselling seeks to bridge this gap by offering methods that combine rational reflection with self-exploration. Inspired by both ancient traditions and contemporary therapeutic practices, these approaches do not dictate ready-made solutions but help individuals cultivate insight, coherence, and resilience.

Socratic Dialogue: Questioning Assumptions

Socratic dialogue, inspired by the method of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, is rooted in the belief that self-knowledge arises through critical questioning rather than passive instruction. In counselling contexts, the practitioner adopts the role of a facilitator who poses probing questions to help clients uncover the assumptions behind their beliefs. Rather than offering direct advice, the counsellor encourages the individual to examine the logical and ethical implications of their own views. For example, a student struggling with guilt about pursuing a career in art rather than medicine might be asked: Why do you believe choosing art is selfish? What assumptions about success and duty underlie this belief? If everyone had to follow parental expectations, would individual freedom have meaning? Through such dialogue, the student may realize that their guilt stems from unexamined cultural assumptions rather than genuine moral obligations.

Philosopher Leonard Nelson and later practitioners of philosophical counselling revived this Socratic tradition, emphasizing that well-structured dialogue empowers individuals to arrive at their own conclusions (Achenbach, 1984). The process cultivates critical thinking, autonomy, and the courage to live according to reasoned convictions rather than inherited dogmas.

Values Clarification: Discovering What Matters Most

Values clarification exercises are designed to help individuals identify and prioritise their deepest commitments. When faced with dilemmas, people often feel torn because they are unclear about what they value most. Clarification does not prescribe what those values should be but provides tools for self-discovery. Techniques include reflective writing, guided ranking of values, or envisioning hypothetical scenarios. For instance, a professional conflicted about whether to accept a high-paying corporate job or remain in a lower-paying non-profit role might list core values such as financial security, social impact, creativity, and family time. By ranking these values and reflecting on past moments of fulfilment, the individual may recognise that social contribution outweighs financial gain in their sense of meaning. Louis Rath, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon (1966) developed the values clarification approach in education, emphasizing its role in moral growth. By applying similar exercises in

counselling, individuals facing dilemmas can align choices with a coherent sense of self. The process reduces confusion, prevents impulsive decisions, and fosters integrity.

Narrative Therapy: Rewriting the Story

Narrative therapy views individuals not as passive victims of problems but as active authors of their life stories. Developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990), this approach emphasizes that the stories people tell themselves shape their identities and perceptions of possibilities. Problem-saturated narratives—such as “I always fail” or “I am unworthy of love”—trap individuals in cycles of despair. In counselling, the practitioner helps the individual analyze these narratives, identify inconsistencies, and highlight neglected strengths. For example, someone who feels hopeless after repeated job rejections may be encouraged to reflect on times when they demonstrated resilience, creativity, or kindness. By recognizing these alternative storylines, the individual can reframe their identity from one of failure to one of perseverance.

Narrative therapy is particularly powerful in addressing social dilemmas tied to identity, such as experiences of discrimination or cultural conflict. By externalizing the problem—viewing it as separate from the self—individuals can challenge oppressive narratives imposed by society. This not only promotes personal healing but also empowers collective resistance against injustice.

Logic-Based Therapy: Identifying Irrational Thinking

Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), developed by Elliot D. Cohen (2003), integrates philosophical logic with cognitive-behavioural insights. It begins with the premise that emotional distress often stems from irrational beliefs rooted in faulty reasoning. By identifying and correcting these logical errors, individuals can resolve dilemmas more effectively. LBT employs a six-step method: identifying the emotional problem, detecting the underlying irrational belief, analyzing the logical fallacy (such as false dichotomy or overgeneralization), refuting it with rational counterarguments, replacing it with constructive principles, and practicing these principles in real life.

Consider a young professional who believes, “If I fail at this project, I am worthless.” The counsellor identifies the fallacy of overgeneralization: one failure does not define overall worth. By challenging this belief and replacing it with the principle, “My worth is not defined by single outcomes but by consistent effort and growth,” the individual can approach challenges with greater resilience. LBT also emphasizes the cultivation of guiding virtues, such as courage, compassion, and perseverance. By connecting rational corrections to character development, it bridges logical clarity with ethical growth.

Integrating Methods in Problem-Solving

While distinct, these methods can complement one another. A counsellor may begin with Socratic questioning to uncover hidden assumptions, use values clarification to prioritise commitments, apply narrative therapy to reframe identity, and employ logic-based therapy to dismantle irrational beliefs. Together, these tools not only resolve immediate dilemmas but also equip individuals with lifelong skills for navigating complexity. For example, imagine a healthcare worker torn between staying in an underfunded rural hospital or moving to a lucrative urban clinic. Socratic questioning might reveal assumptions about success and duty; values clarification could highlight the priority of service over income; narrative therapy could reframe the worker’s self-image as a committed advocate for marginalised communities; and LBT could counter irrational fears of inadequacy. By integrating these methods, the worker arrives at a decision aligned with both rational reflection and authentic identity.

Conclusion

Moral dilemmas are inescapable features of human life. They arise in the intimate sphere of personal relationships, in the structured contexts of professional responsibilities, and in the vast and interconnected domain of global challenges. What unites these diverse contexts is the experience of tension between competing values and the difficulty of reconciling them without loss. The search for resolution is therefore not about eliminating dilemmas altogether but about cultivating the resources—intellectual, emotional, and practical—that enable individuals and communities to respond with clarity and integrity.

Philosophical frameworks offer indispensable guidance. Utilitarianism directs attention to consequences and collective welfare; deontology underscores the inviolability of duties and respect for persons; virtue ethics reminds us that moral life is as much about becoming as it is about doing; theories of justice illuminate fairness in distributing resources and opportunities; and care ethics insists that empathy and relationships are foundational to moral life. None of these frameworks alone suffices, but together they form a toolkit for reasoning about dilemmas in ways that prevent narrow or one-sided thinking.

Yet abstract frameworks often remain distant from the emotional and practical struggles people face in everyday life. Here, philosophical counselling and therapeutic methods bring philosophy into practice. Socratic dialogue fosters self-examination and challenges hidden assumptions; values clarification helps individuals discover what they truly prioritize; narrative therapy empowers people to reframe their identities and resist oppressive stories; and logic-based therapy dismantles irrational beliefs while promoting virtue-guided reasoning. Used together, these approaches provide not only solutions to immediate problems but also long-term strategies for building resilience and cultivating wisdom. Ultimately, the task of navigating moral dilemmas is not merely about choosing correctly in isolated situations. It is about shaping lives, communities, and societies that reflect our highest aspirations for justice, compassion, and human flourishing. In an era of global uncertainty—climate change, conflict, inequality, and technological disruption—the ability to reason clearly, reflect deeply, and care responsibly has never been more urgent. Philosophy, far from being an abstract exercise, remains a living practice that equips us to meet these challenges with courage and clarity. By integrating frameworks of thought with methods of counselling, we affirm philosophy's enduring role as a guide for the art of living well.

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