

Moral Dilemmas

Have you ever felt torn between two decisions and you're not sure which one to make? You feel pulled in opposite directions and that whatever you do, you will not achieve a good outcome? If the decision you need to make concerns a moral question, you may be experiencing a [Moral Dilemma](#).

What is a Moral Dilemma?

A [moral dilemma](#) is a situation in which there is a conflict between two or more moral actions, where the execution of one of the actions would violate the other, but the situation you are in is such that you have no choice but to perform one of them. For example, I may have a moral imperative to always tell the truth and also a moral imperative to protect the lives of the innocent. These are rules that I have chosen to guide my conduct. What then, if I am hiding a person from a violent attacker?

The attacker comes to my door demanding to know if the person is in my house. If I tell him 'no', I am violating my moral rule to always tell the truth. If I do tell him, I am violating my moral rule to protect the lives of the innocent. Hence, I am faced with a moral dilemma. I have to choose which action to perform. In this case, let's say I decide to tell a lie and say that I do not know where the person is hiding. The attacker leaves and the person is safe. In this case, I have kept to my moral imperative to protect the innocent, but I have broken my moral imperative to always tell the truth.

Another moral dilemma often cited is the conflict between stealing and helping one's family to stay alive. If one has no food and faces the prospect of dying from starvation, is it wrong to steal food? Normally perhaps one would say that stealing is wrong. But the prospect of allowing your children to starve to death may prompt someone to disregard the immorality of stealing and do it anyway.

What we can see from this is that to view a situation as a 'moral dilemma' is to view it from an objective perspective. When we view things from a personal perspective, we make a choice between the two alternatives and decide how to act, or about how we think someone else should act.

Moral Hierarchies

Among the serious moral dilemmas facing society today are questions such as abortion, euthanasia, the treatment of asylum seekers, torture, capital punishment and more. In each case, proponents of both side of the argument put forward what are for them, strong cases to back their views. Legislators make choices about which side they support, how they will vote and as a result, what the law will be. Factors taken into account will vary according to country, culture and prevailing values.

As individuals, we face many moral concerns that require decisions. They are not always simple or clear-cut. What causes us to make the particular choice that we do between the alternatives? Whether consciously or unconsciously, we make our choices in terms of moral hierarchies. A [moral hierarchy](#) is a ranking or grading of our moral principles in order of importance or value.

Moral hierarchies challenge the idea that at least some moral principles are absolute, that is, always applicable under all circumstances. [Truth](#), for example, is an important value for most people. But is Truth correct under all circumstances? Are there cases where this could be questionable? When deciding whether to tell the truth, as with other moral questions, we resort to our moral hierarchy.

We choose what we believe to be the most important value at the time. The question of whether there can be absolute moral values that would always apply is still an open one for [Philosophy](#).