

A definition of moral dilemmas in bioethics

Une définition des dilemmes moraux en bioéthique

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Abstract

Bioethics is a growing field in practical philosophy and seems urgent to talk about it when it comes to decision-making. This work aims to describe the basic logical aspect of a dilemma and explore how this concept would apply in bioethics. The intention of this work is to present an idea of what bioethical dilemmas are and analyze if the work we have in moral dilemmas so far in philosophy is enough to help us describe and solve real dilemmas. This work will be divided into three main parts. The first one will describe simplified dilemmas, the second one will discuss amplified dilemmas and moral mathematics and the third will describe bioethical dilemmas. To build this article I made research using tools such as books – physical and on line, articles on line and Stanford research basis. I concluded that the work we have so far concerning moral dilemmas and bioethics is not enough to describe or solve bioethical dilemmas and there is still much work to be done.

Keywords

Dilemmas; Moral dilemmas; Bioethics.

Abstrait

La bioéthique est un domaine en pleine expansion dans la philosophie pratique et semble urgent d'en parler quand il vient à la prise de décision. Ce travail vise à décrire l'aspect logique de base d'un dilemme et explorer comment ce concept serait applicable en matière de bioéthique. Le but de ce travail est de présenter une idée de ce dilemmes bioéthiques sont et d'analyser si le travail que nous avons dans les dilemmes moraux à ce jour dans la philosophie est assez pour nous aider à décrire et résoudre de vrais dilemmes. Ce travail sera divisé en trois parties principales. Le premier sera décrire des dilemmes simplifiées, le second sera de discuter des dilemmes moraux amplifié et les mathématiques et la troisième sera décrire des dilemmes bioéthiques. Pour construire cet article, je faisais des recherches en utilisant des outils tels que les livres - physique et en ligne, des articles en ligne et Stanford base de recherche. Je conclus que le travail que nous avons jusqu'ici concernant les dilemmes moraux et de la bioéthique ne suffit pas de décrire ou de résoudre des dilemmes bioéthiques et il ya encore beaucoup de travail à faire.

Mots-clés

Dilemmes; Des dilemmes moraux; La bioéthique.

1. Introduction

The concept of dilemma is a very old riddle in the world of philosophy. The concept of bioethics, on the other hand, not so much. Officially recognized as an issue in 2006 by an Unesco conference the term “bioethics” is a very specific subject on contemporary philosophy and practical ethics (Willmott, 2004).

As a nurse my fascination for bioethics grew as fast as the problems would appear at the Oncology floor that I worked in as an intern. Mostly, that happened because the agent usually had two or three possible ways to deal with the same problem. The answer concerning what to

do when a dilemma would arise was never too obvious for one simple reason: Human beings are too complex!

Why pair these two together? I am not the first one to do so. Dilemmas and bioethics – well, perhaps not this specific word since it's so new – but issues on health care, hospital cases and life administration have been used as an example in philosophy throughout the years. It use shows us how philosophy has a role on thinking practical ethics and has its share on solving real life situations and that is quite fantastic.

As a nurse doing philosophy I could not help but to think on *bioethical dilemmas*. That is: What to do when a specific situation would arise with two or more possible outcomes in the day by day reality that involves bioethics decisions? I was not surprised it was so difficult to answer this question. Mostly because dealing with bioethics is too polemic – It involves life and death, rights and wrongs, beliefs and disbeliefs. And choosing – having in mind that people think different from each other – of course, it's chaotic!

Reasoning did not seem to help in some situations because sometimes there was not best choice, add on that I did not wish to show people what they should do but why they choose what they choose and how this affect us (Parfit, 1984). I meant to show what the problem with *bioethical dilemmas* truly was. And, although this is a work for many years to come, begin to untie the issues around *bioethical dilemmas* seems urgent in the present world and very suitable for a nurse doing philosophy.

2. Simplified dilemmas

Before even entering in that specific aspect of bioethics (bioethical dilemmas), let us try to understand what a dilemma is in its most basic formula. If we understand the logical aspect of a dilemma that might help us comprehend how a dilemma behaves in a real life situation: bioethics.

The first step is to think of what composes a dilemma, so let us begin with "*lemma*". The noun "*lemma*" means "a philosophical statement that you accept as correct". A lemma is off personal matter and has nothing to do with a general rule or law. One good example would be "I (personal) should always donate to charity when I can (lemma)". To ease the way into thinking "*dilemmas*" let us think of "*lemma*" this way:

1. Σ is consider true or correct (my *lemma*);
2. U is a possible way to act if Σ is true;
3. If Σ is false then U is not a good way to act.

If I assume that Σ is true or correct (my *lemma*) then I can analyze the truth-value of U that is, whether U it's a rational justified way to act, but if Σ is false then U is necessarily false. So, I have to assume that my lemma is true or correct in order to use this as principle for acting.

So, if my lemma is "I should always donate to charity when I can" (Σ) and I consider that to be true or correct, then if I have money available, to donate would now be a possible way to act (U). If I don't have money available, then I do not have the possibility to donate. In the case where I don't have money available Σ would still be correct or true, even though I don't have a U (a possibility).

Nevertheless, if a lemma is false for me, for example, if I don't believe that charity is a good thing for some reason, then although I might even have a possibility to donate, I would not consider U , because Σ is false for me, U is not a good way to act.

As the word itself suggests, the word dilemma can be deconstructed into "*di*" and "*lemma*" that refer to *two statements*. The Oxford Dictionary defines dilemma as "a situation in which a

difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives"; The Cambridge Dictionary defines dilemma as "a situation in which a choice has to be made between possibilities that will all have results you do not want".

1. Σ is true or correct
2. If Σ is true then \bar{U} and β are correct ways to act
3. \bar{U} and β are possible outcomes but cannot coexist
4. Σ will fail either \bar{U} or β

Here is one example: Jean Paul Sartre created in the twenty century a classical conflict that was not simple to be solved. In his tale a young French student whose brother had been killed by the Germans in 1940 wanted to join the war to avenge his brother. But, on the other hand, he lived with this mother and was, indeed, her one consolation in life. So, the student had what he believes to be a conflict of obligations in which he could not choose both. If he joined the war, he would, in his believes, fail the duty to care for his mother and if he stayed home he would fail to avenge his brother.

According to Sinnott-Armstrong (McConnell, 2014) true dilemmas involve symmetry, conflicting, and identical obligations of at least two parts. Thus, it seems that the same act is both required and forbidden. The person should do both, but not doing one is a condition to do the other. In this sense, Sartre's student should go to war but also should be with his mother. Furthermore, Sartre's student should not go to war to be with his mother and should not be with his mother due to his duty to go to war.

Having all this in mind, I came to this:

✓ Simplified dilemma sketch

1. The agent has two or more possibilities of action,
2. The agent believes all possibilities to be good or correct,
3. It is possible to choose any of the possibilities,
4. The agent cannot choose two or more possibilities,
5. The agent will fail one or more beliefs as he chooses.

The crucial features of a moral dilemma are these: the agent is required to do each of two (or more) actions; the agent can do each of the actions; but the agent cannot do both (or all) of the actions. The agent thus seems condemned to moral failure; no matter what she does, she will do something wrong (or fail to do something that she ought to do) (McConnell, 2014, s/p).

This basic simplified sketch demonstrate what most contemporary philosophers, like McConnell (2014) for example, believe to be genuine dilemmas – including moral dilemmas. I do have some objections towards this sketch, which I plan to talk about in the next section, but, for now, this is not relevant to demonstrate the logics behind traditional "genuine dilemmas". Dilemmas, for most philosophers, like McConnell or Sartre, need to be genuine to take place.

The agent must feel he is required to do both (or more) actions. In this sense, the emotional suffering is real – he will fail one because doing one is a conditional of not doing the other, therefore he will fail what he believes to be, in some level, an ought. It seems impossible to justify good way out in genuine dilemmas – they always seem a failure of at least one ought.

Although there are many situations in which we can point out how difficult it would be to choose, some reasons sometimes seem stronger than others and would indeed justify our choice but that would not be a genuine dilemma as suggested by Sartre or Sinnott-Armstrong.

Genuine moral dilemmas are, in a way, ontological. They do not happen because the agent does not know what the best choice is, or because the agent isn't ready to choose. There is no best choice in the genuine dilemma.

3. Amplified dilemmas and moral mathematics

We have seen in the last section what the basic sketch of a dilemma is but that is not enough to even begin to talk about bioethical dilemmas. Maybe the logical formula is set – and I called it simplified dilemma sketch– but the truth is that real dilemmas are not that simple.

The first problem with using only the simplified dilemma sketch to argue about this work is that not all “lemmas” have a moral content. You can have a “lemma” that you should always watch your favorite show when it's on and there is nothing moral to evaluate there. I am not interested in “lemmas” or “dilemmas” that do not have a moral content.

The second problem – and the most difficult one to solve – is that dilemmas in real life situations don't always follow the basic sketch I draw in the simplified dilemma formula and therefore might be a bit more complex to solve. In my simplified dilemma formula I am working with even values or symmetric situations and if that was the case I could just roll a dice and be done: any possible outcome would be as good as the other – and that is a very odd thing to say about decision-making and would not be a complete or satisfying answer (Parfit, 1984).

Also, I could not present one moral theory and claim that to be a full solution. Although I would love to convince everyone that my moral theory, the Utilitarian, could solve all dilemmas I don't think that would satisfy as an answer. Competing moral theories give competing answers about general questions raised in moral theories for decades and we still don't have a clear way to proceed.

Maybe that is why Parfit suggested that we need more than morality in order to solve moral dilemmas: we need politics and economy (Parfit, 1984). So the point here is not to present one general answer or to defend that one thing is right or wrong within its core, but to present some moral solutions. That solutions might be very specific and solve only one dilemma – but that is all they ought to solve, one dilemma at a time.

When we talk about dilemmas using just a simplified dilemma formula we might forget that persons as same as reasons to act are not as narrow as the formula suggests. That is not all that could influence the basic formula to deform: there are a lot of external influences that could justify why people act the way they act and there are lots of odd situations that can compose one dilemma and it's not always as logical as a formula on a piece of paper (McMahan, 2012).

The formula can deform so much that even “fake lemmas” can compose a true dilemma when it comes to practical problems (Hare, 1997). How is that possible? Let us imagine that you live in a country where you are obliged to vote for president and you not only hate politics but also consider yourself to be an anarchist. The problem is that if you don't vote you lose your passport and therefore cannot visit your mother that lives in a country next to yours. Being an anarchist, of course, you not only don't like the idea of voting for president but also you don't have a lemma where voting is needed or seem correct but, having a mother in another country, this “fake lemma” will compose your dilemma of “Vote X Do not vote”.

	Vote	Do not vote
See mother	Yes	No
Being true to anarchy	No	Yes

The lemmas might not even be logical to all of us but still we might be forced to think about the truth-value of a statement to other people. I am not Jehovah's Witness, for example, and I would always be open to the possibility of receiving blood to save my life (for me that is not even a moral issue) but I can understand that there are some people who would have problems receiving blood and I can respect that (Singer, 1993).

The composition of one's dilemma is strictly personal and its solution has to do with the best option available at that set of possibilities. This will have results that seem acceptable or at least better than others in a moral mathematics calculus (Jeffrey, 1995). Plus, this calculus can sometimes not only consider the best choice for me, but also the choice that will cause less damage for others and that could lead me to choose the second best choice for me just to have the satisfaction of seeing other people happy – and that wouldn't be illogical (Frankfurt, 1988).

4. Bioethical dilemmas

Let us try to point what are bioethical dilemmas. First, remember that I am working with human beings and that is already complex. People have different religions, life history and diseases. So, different people will have different lemmas and that already defines that we are working with one huge set of possibilities.

Second, I am working with the idea of human beings in situations of stress, discomfort and that involve lots of moral issues. Bioethical dilemmas are not just about being sick and fragile (Although that could be a factor in some dilemmas), but it is about being in a situation that involves a choice of personal matter that will need other people (cooperation or approval) to take place (Unesco, 1996).

Third, since we will need other people cooperation or approval we are now leaving the world of "just" moral evaluation and entering the world of social and political issues. Bioethical dilemmas will take place at a hospital, clinic, and home care or even at your own house but will often involve two or more agents (Hare, 1997).

Fourth, we are not just talking about being sick and decisions involving life or death directly. Bioethical dilemmas can involve illness (that would be the case of cancer for example) but it can involve a situation where there is not illness involved (that would be the case of an unwanted pregnancy).

My concept of bioethical dilemmas would be: Bioethical dilemmas are situations in which any person is confronted with an uncomfortable situation concerning her health or existence and needs to make a difficult decision between possibilities that cannot coexist.

When we think about what we have seen in moral dilemmas in the last section and in this section about bioethical dilemmas we can all agree that they fit together: We should consider bioethical dilemmas as a type of moral dilemma and few would disagree on that. Unfortunately, it does not seem enough material to solve real situations on bioethics – nor in any other type of moral dilemmas.

5. Conclusion

After revising some works on dilemmas and moral dilemmas I came to the conclusion that this is a subject where there is still much work to be done. The truth is that none of the logical models I saw until the doing of this work seems enough to explain why people have dilemmas and how they ought to solve it in a real life situation. None of us use only logic to solve dilemmas – and many philosophers seem to have forgotten that. Solving issues on moral dilemmas would need, as Parfit suggested, more than just morality to work out. I believe bioethical dilemmas follows the same idea – since it is a type of moral dilemma as well.

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