

# Contention of Moral Dilemma

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**Abstract:** *Moral dilemma is common in society. It usually refers to the dilemma that people can only choose one of two or more obligation or values. The study of moral dilemma has great social value, which can help individuals live a better life and promote the harmonious and stable development of society. There have been many controversies about moral dilemmas in academic circles. This paper discusses how to deal with moral dilemmas by sorting out and analyzing the existence, connotation, causes and countermeasures of moral dilemmas in academic circles. Through the analysis of relevant literature, this paper finds that the root cause of moral dilemma lies in the conflict between different obligations or values that threatens people's moral beliefs, which leads to the chaos of people's inner order. Therefore, in order to deal with moral dilemmas, we should train people to form firm moral beliefs, and encourage people to practice and reflect on their own moral beliefs. In practice and reflection, people constantly define their own moral beliefs and deal with moral dilemmas based on this moral belief.*

**Keywords:** *Moral Dilemma, Obligation, Value, Moral Belief*

## 1. Do Moral Dilemmas Exist?

The trolley problem, first identified in 1967 by Philippa Foot, a British philosopher, is that a decision-maker can steer a runaway trolley to kill one person instead of five by switching it, or not flipping the switch and letting the runaway trolley kill five people. The trolley problem describes a typical moral dilemma: no matter what people choose, tragedy is inevitable, someone will die because of your choice.

From a classical utilitarian point of view, sacrificing one to save five is morally acceptable because the action maximizes overall well-being. Instead, from a moral point of view, to sacrifice one to save five people behavior morally is unacceptable, because this and one should not kill other people's code of ethics. Furthermore, classical utilitarianism does not recognize the existence of moral dilemmas. According to the principle of classical utilitarianism, it is moral to provide happiness to the greatest number, so sacrificing one to save five is moral. If a correct action is one of the best actions an actor can achieve, it is always possible to avoid the wrong action. People can avoid mistakes based on the concept of maximum happiness and choose the most moral action in each choice of action.

The American philosopher Ruth Barcan Marcus argues that moral dilemmas are real and that when we choose to perform an obligation, the unfulfilled obligation still binds us, not disappears. The unfulfilled obligation is the source of moral residual, which is the mental activity manifested as "apology" or "guilt and remorse" when we choose to fulfill an obligation. Moral residue means that moral dilemmas are inevitable and objective, leading to a series of changes in our behavior and psychology. Moral residue create moral emotions and psychological tensions related to things not done, paths not taken, and moral choices abandoned. This moral and emotional tension forces us to arrange things so that they don't happen.

More recently, it has been argued that the ability to perform has been introduced into the moral dilemma. When people are unable to perform multiple moral obligations simultaneously, it is understandable for them to abandon one obligation. Because people have limited ability, they can do one thing under certain conditions. Moral dilemmas often set two kinds of moral obligations against each other, such as when people's ability to save only one drowning person is not enough to save another. There is no moral obligation when it is physically impossible for one person to save another drowning person. As soon as it becomes impossible, moral demands disappear and moral dilemmas cease to exist. As we all know, duty and ability are not the same, moral obligations sometimes persist in the absence of ability, and cannot be evaded. As it is often said that it is natural for parents to support their children, this obligation cannot be evaded, whether or not parents have the capacity to support

their children.

From the perspective of historical materialism, moral dilemmas are related to specific historical periods. With the changes of society, economic development and material abundance, moral standards develop accordingly. First of all, morality is determined by the social economic basis, belonging to the superstructure and social consciousness, and exists in people's social life. Since morality as a social consciousness exists objectively, moral dilemmas also exist objectively. Secondly, the development of the diversity of moral norms often makes us into a state of no choice, so that we face moral dilemma, so the moral dilemma is objective and inevitable. It is clear that moral dilemma is real and people have carried out further research on the meaning and causes of moral dilemma.

## **2. What is the meaning of moral dilemmas?**

Moral dilemma is a kind of value conflict, self-contradiction and a difficult position that people cannot escape. Although moral dilemmas are real, their implications are hard to pin down. In addition, moral dilemmas involve a conflict between an individual or group of people between two moral principles, beliefs or values, each of which is regarded as equally important by the individual or group concerned. Faced with moral dilemmas, people have to make choices, but they do not know how to choose. Every choice means the abandonment of other choices, meaning the abandonment of other values and obligations.

Moral dilemma is manifested in various aspects, and its connotation and essence can be seen from different angles. Firstly, research in western countries mainly explain moral dilemmas from the perspective of individual obligations and responsibilities, and regard moral dilemmas as an unsolvable conflict of obligations. This brings us to Kant's moral philosophy, that is, what drives moral behavior is duty, and morality comes from duty. Facing moral dilemmas, we must deal with conflicting moral obligations or conflicting moral values. The moral dilemmas that are difficult to solve are mainly reflected in: it is wrong to do both A and B but one must make a choice; or two moral requirements conflict but one cannot overwhelm the other in terms of power. It is followed by guilt and remorse caused by moral dilemmas, which constantly affect people's daily life in many aspects, such as emotion, value and behavior. Second, one of the characteristics of related research in China is to interpret moral dilemmas from the perspective of history and times change in connection with social development and era background. Today's moral dilemma arises from the transformation of people's social life. When the old moral culture has been disintegrated and the new moral culture has not been established, people are difficult to make moral judgments and choices and thus fall into the dilemma of moral chaos. In the process of transformation from tradition to modernity, people's moral belief is constantly impacted, and their value orientation is more utilitarian and practical, which is rooted in the transformation of ethics. In the process of the transformation of collectivist ethics, which emphasizes individual responsibility and self-sacrifice, moral practices have undergone various changes, and people's moral behavior patterns and moral standards have become more diversified and individual. Many moral behaviors fall into the gray area between good and evil and therefore constantly cause new disputes.

In a word, Moral dilemmas are difficult to explain clearly in words and easy to be misunderstood as individual subjective imagination, but moral dilemmas do exist. Moral dilemma is not only the duty conflict within individuals, but also the value contradiction between individuals and groups. Faced with different moral values, people have to make a choice among them. After choosing a moral value to follow, they feel guilty in their hearts. Thus, moral dilemmas extend from behavior to emotion and psychology, from reality to virtual imagination, and have a lasting impact on individuals and groups. It can be said that real moral dilemmas not only mean that the moral choices people face are equally important, but also that such moral choices will continue to affect people's psychological activities after they make moral choices, making people feel guilty or uneasy. Moral dilemmas extend from behavior to state and affect people's life at different levels.

## **3. What are the causes of moral dilemmas?**

The viewpoint of moral residue: the viewpoint of moral residue focuses on people's inner experience and explains the causes of moral dilemmas from the perspective of individual psychology. From the perspective of moral residue, the interpretation and analysis of moral dilemmas show that the real moral dilemmas have progressive and continuous influence on human behavior and psychology. When people are faced with moral dilemmas, they first face two or more choices of

obligations. After they have to choose one of them to perform, they suffer feelings of guilt and remorse, which can be produced at the moment when the actor makes moral choices. The root of moral dilemmas, then, is not what we choose to do, but what we choose not to do. The obligation to be relinquished is the source of our guilty conscience, and also the cause of moral dilemmas.

Caused by the development of modernization: in the process of transformation from traditional society to modern society, market economy rules are flooding in all areas of society. The commodity worship, profit-seeking and efficiency principles contained in the market economy impact our moral life, and the market rules in the economic field erode other fields. The practice of social morality is gradually shifting from collectivism which emphasizes self-sacrifice to individualism which emphasizes individual development. The pluralistic and individual moral standards are changing the moral outlook of the whole society. People are faced with many moral standards and ethical norms in moral practice, and the conflict of many values brings difficulties to people's moral choice. Different values mean different value demands, each of which has different requirements for people. People are in the environment of diversified values and cannot follow certain values all the time, which is easy to make people feel separated in their hearts. This is the sense of division brought by modernity. People are sometimes required to conform to one value, sometimes to the other value, so that they are confused about which value they should conform to.

Role conflict: Some people also attribute the emergence of moral dilemma to role conflict, which refers to the situation that different moral subjects have conflicts under certain conditions according to their respective role value demands. A person may play multiple roles at the same time, and different roles have different requirements, leading to role conflicts. However, role conflict is only the indirect cause of moral dilemma, but not the direct cause of moral dilemma. There is an interesting statement about role conflict. Although we can't play many roles and do many things at the same time, we can manage our time so that we can play different roles and do different things at different times. There seems to be no trouble at all when you have time for everything, and moral dilemmas are solved. But after all, human life is limited, it is difficult for us to arrange everything in the limited time, and some things must be done in a certain time, which we can not escape.

In short, from the perspective of moral residue, it focuses on moral dilemmas caused by individual psychological reactions and holds that moral dilemmas arise from the obligation not to be selected. From the perspective of modernization development, the development of modernity pays attention to the moral dilemma caused by social and historical changes, and holds that the overflowing development of modern social and economic rationality leads to the moral dilemma of people. From the point of view of role conflict, moral dilemmas result from the conflict of people's role value demands under certain conditions. I hold that the root cause of moral dilemma is not the pluralistic values, but the conflict between pluralistic values that threatens people's moral belief. The premise of moral dilemmas is that people's moral beliefs are threatened, and whether conflicts between different obligations can lead to moral dilemmas depends on whether such conflicts threaten people's moral beliefs. If the conflict between two different obligations does not destroy people's moral beliefs and can be resolved through trade-offs, then the conflict of obligations will not produce moral dilemmas. Therefore, the root cause of moral dilemma is that people's moral belief is threatened, which leads to people's inner order disorder, and they are at a loss on how to act.

#### **4. How to deal with moral dilemmas?**

Classical utilitarianism determines whether an action is morally right or wrong according to its consequences, and it focuses on the future rather than the past when evaluating whether an action is morally right. It's morally acceptable if people make behavioral choices that improve their overall well-being. Conversely, the same behavioral choice is not considered morally unacceptable if it reduces overall well-being. The basic principle of utilitarianism, which philosopher Mill called the principle of greatest happiness, is that actions are right when they tend to promote happiness and wrong when they tend to produce the opposite of happiness. Utilitarianism provides us with a firm guide and principle, the principle of maximum happiness. It is right and moral to act in accordance with the happiness of the greatest number of people. Therefore, when faced with moral dilemmas, we only need to choose the behavior that maximizes happiness.

Kant said you should always act with humanity, both your own humanity and the humanity of others, as an end and not just a means. To treat people as ends means to treat them as people with their own will, rather than trying to bend the will of others to one's own, and treating them as means to one's

own ends. Moreover, not seeing ourselves as a means means that life itself has value, rather than as a means to our happiness, preserving self-respect and dignity. Kant's moral philosophy is deontological, and holds that only acts out of obligation are moral, that is, human nature is regarded as the end itself. From Kant's point of view, faced with moral dilemmas, we should think as follows: by what code of conduct do we act, and do we want that code of conduct to be a universal one? We act morally if we wish the code by which we act to be a universal code. So, faced with moral dilemmas, we just have to choose the values that we want to be universal.

Unlike classical utilitarianism and deontology, Aristotle's ethics of virtue does not propose a strict formula or abstract method for us to solve moral dilemmas. Complex ethical questions, such as moral dilemmas, are not always answered by ethical principles. For Aristotle, morally right actions can happen automatically over time, rather than relying solely on reasoning. To achieve morally correct behavior or to achieve moral maturity, we need to cultivate our virtue through proper upbringing, through the practice of moral norms. Virtue means courage, modesty, justice, generosity, wisdom, etc. It is the "average" between the two vices of excess and deficiency. Our behavior is to find a middle point between excess and deficiency. Therefore, we can make judgments according to our own moral wisdom when we meet moral dilemmas by learning and practicing moral norms, cultivating our correct moral discernment, and acquiring virtue naturally through habits. Aristotle did not provide a method that could be easily and immediately, but required people to learn and accumulate over a long period of time, emphasizing the cultivation of people's moral literacy and encouraging people to carry out moral practice to cope with moral dilemmas.

By studying women's thought processes when faced with moral dilemmas, American psychologist Carol Gilligan found that many women do not resort to explicit assertions of general principles, but approach ethical issues through a caring lens. Caring ethics does not pursue general principles, but attaches great importance to interpersonal relationships and aims to defend the moral values of personal care, responsibility and response to specific others in interpersonal relationships. According to the proposition of caring ethics, faced with moral dilemmas, we need caring behaviors and attitudes, based on empathy, to pay attention to the needs of vulnerable groups. The moral philosophy of caring ethics is often used in practice. Many caring professions, including social work, are to help vulnerable people in various needs with empathy.

## 5. Conclusion

Moral dilemmas exist widely in the society, which refers to the situation that conflicts and contradictions arise when people have to choose one of two or more obligations or values to fulfill, and such conflicts and contradictions threaten people's moral beliefs. Moral dilemmas are inescapable, meaning that two different conflicts of value or obligation are indeed in front of us, waiting to be resolved. Conflicts between different values or obligations threaten our moral beliefs and force us to make choices. According to the causes of moral dilemmas, that is, different obligation conflicts threaten people's moral beliefs and thus bring difficulties to people's moral practice, to deal with moral dilemmas, we should first cultivate people's moral beliefs, and then practice moral beliefs through action and reflection.

Social background and cultural environment shape people's character and temperament, and people's living environment must be considered to cultivate people's moral belief. After making clear people's social background and cultural environment, moral knowledge can be transmitted to people through family and school education, and people's moral perception and thinking ability can be cultivated. With the growth of individuals and the change of the external environment, people will gradually acquire universal moral values and lay a foundation for better adaptation to the society. However, the cultivation of moral belief is not enough to merely acquire moral principles. Individuals need to internalize universal moral principles into their own moral beliefs through actions and reflection, so as to realize moral cultivation from outside to inside. In the specific moral practice, people often face more complex situations than books and media propaganda. Various values and norms collide with each other, and people have to take practical actions in the complex situation. Through moral actions and practices, people repeatedly review and think about moral norms and norms, and further clarify their moral beliefs.

To deal with moral dilemma and cultivate people's moral belief needs the education of family and school, as well as the guidance and publicity of society. Media publicity is a good means to publicize some moral figures and so on. It is important that the value concern contained in this value orientation

should be closer to that of ordinary people. Tall, abstract figures and people's daily life far away from the mark, easy to make people have a sense of distance. Each person is a member of his own nation and has his own unique value. After external cultivation, moral belief should finally burst out from the inside. Only those bursting out from the inside are more powerful, so that people can really learn to deal with moral dilemmas and give better feedback to the society.

In brief, To deal with moral dilemmas, we need to face up to moral belief. Moral belief is not a commodity that can be bargained over, so we can adjust the price flexibly when our own interests are damaged. Moral belief is people's unswerving belief and pursuit of certain norms and values, which cannot be easily transferred. In our society, despite the diversity and individuality of values, we do not lack the unity of value pursuit and moral belief. We do not lack moral belief, but have a certain belief in proper behavior, believe that they have the responsibility and obligation to choose a proper way of doing things, but in reality did not do, resulting in moral belief crisis, moral dilemma. We have to admit that today's moral belief, as a social universal value, relies more on public power to appeal and advocate. For people at the grassroots level, their lives are increasingly dominated by economic factors, and some self-organized moral ways of life are declining, such as the transformation of traditional festival rituals into impulse consumption waves. Moral belief is still external guidance, not translated into internal motivation. It is precisely because moral belief is not transformed into internal motivation that people often fall into moral dilemmas. Therefore, people should keep in touch with the moral cultivation they have received, constantly take actions and reflect, echo the moral norms, and step by step strengthen their moral beliefs.

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