Moral Decisions

New Trends in Psychology

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Abstract: Every day we are put in the situation of making decisions, in all aspects of our lives. The decision-making process can be quite complicated in certain situations. When it comes to making moral decisions, we often think of the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. However, why we make such decisions has been widely debated. Are we motivated by feelings of guilt because we don't want to feel bad for letting **the other person down? Or by fairness, wanting to avoid unfair results?**

Keywords: decision; moral; moral decision; morality; moral dilemmas; types of moral dilemmas

1. Introduction

What is the process of making a decision? The decision represents a dynamic, rational process, in which, based on appropriate information, a course of action is chosen from a certain number of possibilities (alternatives) in order to influence the activity of the executors and to obtain a certain result.

The following elements can be noted from the definition of the decision:

- it is seen as a process of rational choice;

- represents the final act in establishing the direction of action to achieve an objective;

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- the action is called a decision only to the extent that it corresponds to a choice situation.

The stages of the decision-making process are as follows: identifying the problem and the actors involved, searching for relevant information, developing alternative solutions, evaluating alternative solutions, choosing the best solution, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the solution.

What is morality?

According to DEX, morality represents the set of beliefs, attitudes, habits reflected and fixed in historically and socially determined principles, norms, rules, which regulate the behavior and relationships of individuals with each other, as well as between them and the collective and whose respect is based on conscience and public opinion.

The Romanian word "moral" comes from the Latin "moralis", referring mainly to the social customs that ensure a community's internal coherence and therefore happiness.

What is a moral decision?

The moral decision represents a choice based on a person's ethical convictions, on their manners and character traits, on what the individual considers appropriate. Such a decision affects not only the well-being of the person, but also that of those around him.

In making a moral decision, people take into account a multitude of factors, such as: religious beliefs, personal values and a series of logical reasonings. From these reasonings arise two different kinds of morality: absolute morality and relative morality.

Absolute morality represents a more rigid belief structure that is based on the idea that there is a right choice for every moral dilemma that is valid for all situations. A good example of this would be the Christian commandment, "thou shalt not kill." A person who believes in absolute morality believes that this is true in all situations, even war.

Relative morality assumes that different situations may call for different actions, which may not always adhere to a person's original values. Let's use the same example, "thou shalt not kill." A person who has relative morality would stick with

that belief, but might have a different opinion when it comes to war or protecting a loved one.

There are also two schools of thought about building the personal ethical foundation and how we make moral decisions: intuitionism versus rationalism. These types of thinking define extremes that few people use exclusively.

Moral intuitionism proposes the idea that "we can know that certain things or actions are good by intuition. To come to know something through intuition is to understand it directly, without relying on a rational process." One of the main proponents of the intuitionist approach is Jonathan Haidt, who asserts that people make moral decisions through an innate sense of right and wrong. As for the provenance of the basis of our moral beliefs, Haidt points to the studies of sociologists such as Charles Darwin, which seem to support the idea that moral principles such as sympathy, reciprocity, and loyalty were embedded in the human psyche. While external influences from parents and culture affect the intuitive mindset (especially in terms of peer influence and socialization), intuitionists assert that our morals provide the foundation for the subsequent incorporation of these influences through an emotional and automatic process that can be or not conscious. From this premise, they argue that intuition and "instinct" are the best approaches to moral decision-making.

The intuitionistic approach also has disadvantages. While it may be useful in straightforward situations, it may be less effective in dealing with complex moral dilemmas regardless of experience. Haidt acknowledges that, according to many studies, "people who follow their moral intuitions often produce suboptimal or even disastrous consequences in public policy, public health, and the legal system" because their biases have influenced their decisions.

Moral rationalism holds that morality is an evolution in learning, an ongoing process of maturation centered on reflection and the modification of moral beliefs through reason.

In the 1960s, Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) conducted extensive research on people in the US, Taiwan, Mexico, and even villages in Malaysia. He found that moral reasoning, rather than intuition, is the most important factor contributing to correct and effective ethical decision-making and demonstrated that the rationalist approach is a learning or maturation process that ultimately improves our moral foundation and how we make ethical decisions. Consequently, reflecting on our moral beliefs can contribute to this process and serve us well in the future. Actually,

Kohlberg states that this ability to abstractly discern the complicated aspects of a moral dilemma is what separates the advanced moral thinker from others.

While these two schools agree that external influences such as family, religion, peers, and society shape our conceptions of right and wrong, they disagree about how we process these inputs and make moral decisions.

2. Moral Dilemmas

In his studies, Kohlberg used one of the most used examples of moral dilemma – Heinz's Dilemma, who had to buy medicine for his dying wife. Although the drug cost 1,000 euros, the only pharmacist who sold it asked for 5,000 euros. Heinz was only able to raise 2,500 and had no way of getting more money. Although the man explained the situation to the pharmacist, he refuses to let him pay half later. At this point, Heinz is considering stealing the drug reference

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Ethical dilemmas, also known as moral dilemmas, are hypothetical situations in which it is necessary to make a decision between two different options. They cannot be satisfactorily resolved if the person adheres to a traditional moral code. When presented, neither society nor individual values can provide an acceptable answer to the individual who must make the decision. When an ethical dilemma arises, the two possible choices somehow contradict either the value system of the person facing the situation or the moral norms of the society or culture in which they are immersed. In any case, choosing between the two options is very difficult.

3. Types of Moral Dilemmas

Depending on various characteristics and variables, it is generally customary to speak of six types of moral dilemmas: hypothetical, real, open, closed, complete, and incomplete.

Hypothetical dilemmas are those in which the person is faced with a situation that is unlikely to be faced in real life. In hypothetical dilemmas, a story is usually presented, in which the individual must decide what the protagonist should do based on their own values and beliefs. However, in some cases, he must respond based on

what he thinks he would do himself in a similar situation. The situations presented in the hypothetical dilemmas are not completely impossible, but simply unusual. This is important because if the situations were considered completely outside of reality, individuals would find it much more difficult to empathize with the story and put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist.

Real dilemmas are the opposite of hypothetical ones. These are real situations where the person has to make a difficult decision. In general, real dilemmas tend to involve far less dramatic situations than hypothetical ones. However, due to the relationship of the dilemma to the person's own life, they can arouse much more intense emotions.

When presented with an *open-ended dilemma*, individuals are given all the necessary information about a situation; however, how the story is resolved is not explained to them. The objective is to encourage people to discuss the course of action the protagonist should take. This type of moral dilemma is useful for forcing people to make a difficult decision and choose which of their values is most important to them. However, sometimes they can generate a lot of debate, and if the situation is very extreme, it could be very uncomfortable to answer.

In *closed dilemmas*, we are told not only what the situation is, but also what decision the protagonist of the story has made. Therefore, the purpose is to debate whether the person did the right thing or not, and why. Closed dilemmas are less compromising, in the sense that they only involve judging another person's actions (real or hypothetical) and not making one's own decision, but for the same reason, they generate less emotional involvement.

When a complete dilemma is presented, all the details of the situation being analyzed are shared. In this way, participants are fully aware of the consequences of each possible choice. Thus, they do not have to reflect so much on the possible outcomes of each of the scenarios, but focus only on the moral dilemma raised.

Contrary to what happens in complete ethical dilemmas, in incomplete ones the individuals do not know all the consequences derived from the possible choices of the protagonist of the story. This implies that before choosing which path to take, they must use their creativity and imagination to determine what would happen in each case. Not only can this get them more involved in the story, but it will also encourage discussion.

4. Models for Approaching Moral Dilemmas

Over the years, philosophers have observed five different models of approaching moral problems. These types of approach have developed over time, starting from the time of Ancient Greece until the 19th century. Each of these models was designed to provide the most virtuous and just resolution of a moral dilemma. The five approaches are: the utilitarian approach, the rights approach, the fairness approach, the common good approach and the virtuous approach.

Utilitarianism was devised in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. Both Bentham and Mill suggested that ethical actions are those that provide the greatest balance between good and evil. To analyze a problem using the utilitarian approach, we first identify the various possible courses of action. Second, we ask who will be affected by each action and what benefits or harms derive from each. Third, we choose the action that will produce the greatest benefit and the least harm. Ethical action is that which provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The second important model for approaching moral issues has its roots in the philosophy of the thinker Immanuel Kant and his disciples, who focused on *the individual's right to choose for himself.* According to these philosophers, what makes human beings different from mere things is that people have dignity based on their ability to freely choose what to do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have those choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose. Of course, in addition to this basic one, there are many different but related rights. These rights can be considered as different aspects of the basic right to be treated as we choose. For example, the right to the truth: we have the right to be told the truth and to be informed about matters that significantly affect our choices; the right to privacy: we have the right to do, believe and say whatever we choose in our personal lives, as long as we do not infringe on the rights of others; the right not to be harmed: we have the right not to be harmed, unless we freely and knowingly do something to deserve punishment or freely and knowingly choose to risk such harm; right to what is agreed upon: we have a right to what has been promised by those with whom we have freely entered into a contract or agreement. When deciding whether an action is moral or immoral using this second approach, then we must ask: Does the action respect everyone's moral rights? Actions are wrong insofar as they violate the rights of individuals; the more serious the violation, the more wrong the action.

The equity approach comes from Aristotle's statement, "equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally." This means that everyone should be treated equally. If equality is not an option, then everyone should experience the same level of injustice. In other words, favoritism and discrimination are unfair. Favoritism gives benefits to some people without justifiable reason; discrimination imposes burdens on to people who are no different from those who are not burdened. Both favoritism and discrimination are unfair and wrong.

The common good approach assumes a society comprising individuals whose good is inextricably linked to the good of the community. Community members are bound by the pursuit of common values and goals. The common good is a notion that appeared more than 2,000 years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the contemporary ethicist John Rawls defined the common good as "certain general conditions which are equally to the advantage of all."

In this approach, we focus on ensuring that the social policies, social systems, institutions and environments we depend on benefit everyone. Examples of goods common to all include affordable health care, effective public safety, peace between nations, a just legal system, and a clean environment. Appeals to the common good urge us to see ourselves as members of the same community, reflecting on general questions about the kind of society we want to become and how we must build that society. While we respect and value the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, the common good approach also challenges us to recognize and promote those goals that we share in common.

The virtuous approach assumes that there are certain ideals to which we should strive, which ensure the full development of our humanity. These ideals are discovered through careful reflection on what kind of people we have the potential to become. Virtues are attitudes or character traits that enable us to be and act in ways that develop our highest potential. They allow us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, faithfulness, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues. Virtues are like habits; that is, once acquired, they become characteristic of a person. Moreover, a person who has developed virtues will naturally be inclined to act in ways consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person. In approaching a moral decision using the virtue approach, we might ask: What kind of person should I be? What will promote character development in me and my community?

5. Conclusions

These five approaches suggest that once we have established the facts, we should ask ourselves five questions when trying to make a moral decision:

• What benefits and harms will each course of action produce, and which alternative will lead to the best overall consequences?

• What moral rights do affected parties have, and what course of action best respects those rights?

• Which course of action treats everyone the same unless there is a morally justifiable reason and does not show favoritism or discrimination?

• What course of action promotes the common good?

• Which course of action develops moral virtues?

This method, of course, does not provide an automatic solution to moral problems. The method is only intended to help identify most of the important ethical considerations. Ultimately, we must deliberate on moral issues for ourselves, keeping a close eye on both the facts and the ethical considerations involved.

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