**Moral Dilemmas[[1]](#endnote-1)**

**1. Examples**

In Book I of Plato's *Republic*, Cephalus defines ‘justice’ as speaking the truth and paying one's debts. Socrates quickly refutes this account by suggesting that it would be wrong to repay certain debts—for example, to return a borrowed weapon to a friend who is not in his right mind. Socrates' point is not that repaying debts is without moral import; rather, he wants to show that it is not always right to repay one's debts, at least not exactly when the one to whom the debt is owed demands repayment. What we have here is a conflict between two moral norms: repaying one's debts and protecting others from harm. And in this case, Socrates maintains that protecting others from harm is the norm that takes priority.

Nearly twenty-four centuries later, Jean-Paul Sartre described a moral conflict the resolution of which was, to many, less obvious than the resolution to the Platonic conflict. Sartre (1957) tells of a student whose brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940. The student wanted to avenge his brother and to fight forces that he regarded as evil. But the student's mother was living with him, and he was her one consolation in life. The student believed that he had conflicting obligations. Sartre describes him as being torn between two kinds of morality: one of limited scope but certain efficacy, personal devotion to his mother; the other of much wider scope but uncertain efficacy, attempting to contribute to the defeat of an unjust aggressor.

While the examples from Plato and Sartre are the ones most commonly cited, it should be clear that there are many others. If a person makes conflicting promises, she faces a moral conflict. Physicians and families who believe that human life should not be deliberately shortened and that unpreventable pain should not be tolerated face a conflict in deciding whether to withdraw life support from a dying patient.

**2. The Concept of Moral Dilemmas**

What is common to the two well-known cases is conflict. In each case, an agent regards herself as having moral reasons to do each of two actions, but doing both actions is not possible. Ethicists have called situations like these *moral dilemmas*. 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).

1. Source: [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](http://plato.stanford.edu/index.html) at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)