

Moral dilemmas

Notes for teachers

Introduction

Present the students with the trolley problem moral dilemma. Give them some time to think about it, then ask them to discuss in pairs or groups what they would do and give their reasons why.

The trolley problem

Five people have fallen onto a train track and a train is hurtling towards them. It is too late for the train to stop. You are the signalman and by flicking a switch you can divert the train onto a different track, saving the five people. On the other track is a workman who will be hit by the train if you divert it. What should you do?

Extension question: What if the roles were reversed and you were on the track? Would you want someone else to do the same as you did in the same situation?

Present and discuss the second trolley problem.

The second trolley problem

Five people have fallen onto a train track and a train is hurtling towards them. It is too late for the train to stop. You are standing on a bridge and you can stop the train by pushing a large man off the bridge in front of the train, saving the five people (you can't jump off the bridge and do this yourself because you are not big enough to stop the train). What should you do?

- 1) Was your response different to the first problem?
- 2) What, if anything, is different about the two problems?

Activity

Share the [Moral dilemmas activity](#) and support the students to carry it out.

Moral dilemmas activity

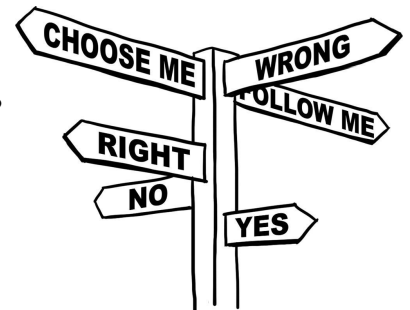
Often it's easy to be good: to hold the door open for someone carrying heavy bags, to give directions to someone who's lost, or to bake a cake for a friend who's feeling down. Most of the time we have a pretty good idea of how to be good. And we just do it. However, sometimes it is not so obvious what is the best thing to do. Sometimes our **values come into conflict** with each other. Sometimes happiness may appear to be in opposition to freedom, honesty, justice, or individual rights. This gives rise to **moral dilemmas**.

Philosophers and other thinkers have developed a variety of principles to help us to think about how to act. No principle, however, provides the perfect answer in every situation. Sometimes different principles come into conflict and so we need to **think carefully** and weigh up which is more appropriate in the particular situation. Often the choice is not between right and wrong but is instead about choosing the lesser of two wrongs.

- 1) Choose a moral dilemma.
- 2) If you had to decide immediately, what would you instinctively do in such a situation?
- 3) Now, take your time and think carefully about what would be the best thing to do. Think about how somebody might disagree with you and why.
- 4) Working in a group, each take one of the ethical principles. Discuss the moral dilemma with others in the group and try to make sure your principle is taken into account. Think about which of the different principles are in conflict and try to decide which should take preference.

Questions to think about:

- A. Which of the ethical principles were in conflict?
- B. Which principle is the most important to follow in this situation?
- C. What did you decide to do and why?
- D. Did your conclusion match your initial instinct?
- E. Were you all happy with the final decision or was anyone uncomfortable?



The humanist approach to ethics is to try to **think carefully for ourselves** about what is the best thing to do in a particular situation. We need to take individual **responsibility** for our actions. Many humanists believe we have certain natural tools at our disposal that support us to do this. We can feel **empathy** for other people and imagine how they might feel. We can also use **reason** to consider the likely consequences of our actions on other people, animals, and the planet. Hearing stories and considering imaginary situations can help us to develop our empathy and reason.

A single answer that satisfies everybody can sometimes be hard to find. Humanists might disagree about the best ethical principles to follow. However, humanists don't believe that morality is all simply a matter of personal preference. Disagreement can sometimes be positive and productive. Dialogue encourages us to recognise, empathise with, and take into consideration alternative arguments. It can help us to recognise that more thinking might need to be done. For humanists, morality is something we learn through taking part.

Question: What do you think about a humanist approach to ethics? What are its advantages and disadvantages over other approaches to ethical decision making?

Moral dilemmas

1) You are driving your car when you see five children run out into the road in front of you. When you put your foot on the brake it does not work. The only alternative to hitting the children is to turn the car onto the pavement. However, a boy is standing on the pavement and if you drive onto the pavement you will hit him instead. What should you do?

Extension question: What if the child on the pavement was your own child?

2) A woman you know has robbed a bank, but instead of keeping the money, she has given it to an orphanage so that it can afford to feed, clothe, and care for children in need. The police have come to ask you if you know who committed the crime. You can tell them who did it, but if you do, there is a good chance the woman will be caught, all the money will be returned to the bank, and the orphanage will be forced to close down. What should you do?

Extension question: What if the woman had instead stolen from just one individual rich person?

3) Your grandmother suffers from asthma. She has a pet cat and the doctor has told you that this is making your grandmother's asthma worse and will reduce her life expectancy and her quality of life. Your grandmother, however, lives alone and does not want to get rid of the cat. She says it keeps her company. What should you do?

Extension question: What if your grandmother was smoking and said she did not want to stop even though it was damaging her health?

4) You are a doctor. You are standing by the side of the road late one evening when you see a motorcyclist jump a red light and crash into another motorcyclist. The motorcyclist who jumped the red light was not wearing a helmet while the other motorcyclist was. Both are badly injured. There is a chance neither will survive if they are not treated straight away, but the one who jumped the red light is in more danger. No one else is around to help. What should you do?

Extension question: After a terrorist attack, one of the terrorists is more critically injured than an innocent civilian. Who should you save first?

5) You work at a company with one of your friends. Your friend is a computer whizz and one day he tells you that he has hacked into the company's accounts and discovered that the assistant manager is stealing money from the company. You feel you should tell the manager, but if you do, she will ask how you know. If the manager hears that your friend has hacked into the company's accounts your friend will be fired. What should you do?

Extension question: What if it was you who had hacked into the company accounts and you were the one at risk of being fired?

Ethical principles

The Golden Rule

Treat others as you would like to be treated.
Do not treat others in a way you would not like to be treated.

Maximise happiness

Think about the consequences of your actions. Act in a way that leads to the maximum overall happiness and the minimum pain and suffering for everyone involved.

Imagine if everyone acted the same

Only act in a way you would be happy that everyone else always acted in the same way.

Treat people as ends rather than means

Don't use other people for your own happiness or for the benefit of others. Respect their individual rights and dignity as human beings.

Ethical principles: extra information

The Golden Rule

When considering how to act towards another person, the Golden Rule states that we need to think about what we would want to happen if we were in their situation. The Golden Rule can be expressed positively – ‘Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself’ – or negatively – ‘Do not treat others in a way you would not like to be treated’. Versions of the Golden Rule can be found throughout history and across the globe.

Maximise happiness and minimising suffering

Utilitarianism is an ethical approach that says we must consider the potential consequences of our actions. We should act in a way that leads to the maximum amount of overall happiness and the minimum pain and suffering. We should consider every person, not just a favoured few. ‘Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness’, said the philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873). Utilitarianism is not without its problems. Some say it is too demanding: do I have to give away all my money to charity if this would maximise overall happiness? Others say it can lead to outcomes that make us uncomfortable: would it be acceptable to use all the organs from one healthy person to save the lives of ten people in need of organ transplants?

Imagine if everyone did the same

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) argued that we should only act in such a way that we would be happy if everyone acted in the same way. ‘Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.’ He claimed, for example, that lying is not an acceptable way to act because if everyone lied, then the general reliability of language would break down – nobody would be able to trust anything anyone else said. Some critics argue that Kant’s principle is too rigid. They say, for example, that we should be able to lie in those circumstances where it helps avoid suffering.

Treat other people as ends rather than means

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) said that we should always treat people as ends in themselves, not as means to some other end. ‘Act in such a way that you treat humanity... never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.’ This means we shouldn’t use other people for our own or others’ benefit. We should respect their dignity and individual rights as human beings.