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## Moral Dilemmas in Ethical Philosophy

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**NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**

Moral Dilemmas in Ethical Philosophy

**A Capstone Submitted to the**

**University Honors Program**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the**

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**With Honors**

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**By**

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**DeKalb, Illinois**

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MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

University Honors Program  
Capstone Faculty Approval Page

Capstone Title (print or type)

Moral Dilemmas in Ethical Philosophy

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## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

### **Abstract**

Moral dilemmas are often discussed in the philosophy of ethics. However, there is disagreement on what qualifies as a moral dilemma and what its implications are. A moral dilemma is thought to be a decision-making problem that involves conflicting obligations where the agent is required to satisfy one of the obligations but is unable to satisfy all of them. In this case, neither obligation is preferable as they each hold the same ethical implications. In a moral dilemma, a requirement may be found. However, there is disagreement among philosophers on whether matched requirements are a possibility. Because of this, I investigated the works of different philosophers to provide background information and a clear explanation of the different dilemmas in philosophy. The aim of my paper was to utilize this information and defend the possibility of matched requirements against those who are in opposition to the possibility. The primary reason for my belief in the possibility of matched requirements is due to the prevalence I find in our lives. Although the possibility of matched requirements is not definitive, the formulation of my argument is done through research of different philosophers, like Simon Blackburn and Peter Railton, while utilizing different scenarios and examples to relate the concept to our real-life.

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

Moral dilemmas, or ethical dilemmas, are often discussed in the philosophy of ethics. A moral dilemma is thought of as a decision-making problem that involves conflicting obligations where the agent is required to satisfy one of the obligations but is unable to satisfy all of them. Neither obligation is preferable as they each hold the same ethical implications. Since moral dilemmas occur in the lives of many individuals, it is important to understand just what a moral dilemma is and how it can affect one's life. In this paper, I address the concept of a moral dilemma and defend the view that some moral dilemmas include matched requirements. To accomplish this, I will defend my position against those in opposition by discussing different scenarios to provide a complete investigation of the plausibility of matched moral requirements.

In our lives, we have to make decisions daily. We have to decide between doing one thing or another or buying one thing or another. Because of this, odds are we encounter a quandary at some point in our lives. According to Simon Blackburn, a quandary is "any situation in which there are a number of alternatives, of which you must adopt one and only one, but where you do not know which one to adopt" (Blackburn 1996, p. 127). There are different types of quandaries, these include objective and subjective or agent's quandaries. An objective quandary is where you do not know what to do, and no fact can provide a reason for you to do one over another (Blackburn 1996, p. 127). An example of an objective quandary is when you are debating between two cans of beans in the supermarket. The beans are the same price and were manufactured by the same place but are packaged differently so you cannot determine which to buy. On the other hand, a subjective or agent's quandary is where you do not know what to do as you do not know anything that will settle your decision, but there may be a fact out there that can provide a reason for you to do one over another (Blackburn, 1996 p. 127). In terms

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

of the cans of beans, you may fear that one can of beans tastes much better than the other can, so you are in an agent's quandary.

When someone is in an agent's quandary, they still believe that there is a right answer. Because of this, dithering occurs. When one dithers, they are trying to solve the quandary as it is the process of looking for reasons. Once this is done, a stable agent's quandary may develop. A stable agent's quandary occurs "when one does not know anything that settles the choice in favor of one alternative, and also where no practical investigation or further exercise of thought or imagination can reasonably be expected to alter this" (Blackburn 1996, p. 128). The beans case is a prime example of a stable agent's quandary because you are confined to just looking at the cans, and once you do that you are out of options, even if one may turn out to be better in the end. Once one decides that the case is a stable agent's quandary, the only option left is to plump. Plumping is when you have to just pick one option without the use of reason or thought because if you do not, then you will be stuck. An example of this is Buridan's Ass. In the story of Buridan's Ass, there is a donkey who always chooses to eat the closest hay. There is a pile of hay on his left side and a pile on his right side, the two are identical and are equal distances apart so there is no reason to favor one over the other. He is unable to plump and so he does neither and starves.

Using the case of Buridan's Ass, someone may suggest that having to plump is never actually required. This is thought to be the case because there are no cases where you have to choose between something that is completely identical. There will always be something that makes one of the options different. In terms of the hay piles, the two are not completely identical simply because one is on the left and one is on the right. Since we can differentiate between the two then they cannot be considered the same. Because of this, one should be able to dither and

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

reach a decision on which option to choose instead of just plumping. Even if we cannot consciously decide, deep down our subconscious prefers one of the options.

I would not agree with this as plumping or the concept of plumping is something that will have to be used at some point or another. For Buridan's Ass, he utilizes the principle of prudence that states, "Always choose the best act, from the standpoint of one's own interests" (Railton 1996, p. 153). With the piles of hay, each of them would satisfy his hunger and are the same distance away. This leaves him in a quandary and the way for him to get out of it is to follow a principle more like one that says, "If there is a uniquely best act from the standpoint of one's own interests, choose it; if there are equal-best acts, choose one of these using a random method" (Railton 1996, p. 153). The way to solve his quandary is to plump because each of the options is equally best for him. Even though they are not perfectly identical because they do not occupy the same space, they are still two equally best options to manage his hunger and therefore require a random act of choosing. Advising someone to never treat a quandary as stable and to continue dithering would be terrible advice. One would not be able to accomplish anything if they were stuck in a stalemate between two equal options, they would end up like Buridan's Ass, undecided in death.

Although plumping is inevitable in some cases, in others it can be a difficult task to complete because of something Blackburn calls inertia. Some quandaries have a great deal of inertia, which means that "even if some fact came along to [favor] one side, one would still be in a quandary" (Blackburn 1996, p. 129). The quandary that you are in involves something that you actually care about. Say if you are looking at two different cars and are trying to decide which one to buy, having \$20 knocked off the price would not help you decide because buying a car is an important financial decision. Since it is such an important decision and you want to buy one

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

that will last you a long time, it would be hard to just choose one option by plumping. Instead, you are stuck dithering to try and find a reason to choose one of the cars because deep down you cannot get over the fact that one may be better than the other.

Once someone is in a stable agent's quandary, or what appears to be a stable agent's quandary with the resources they have, plumping may not be the end of the road. Although plumping sounds like it would be light-hearted since there is nothing left to do, there may be a residue left behind after one plumps. When someone plumps and makes a choice, there may be this strong feeling that the wrong choice was made. This is a form of residue that is left behind after one plumps. In addition to this, they may feel like they could have reached a decision had they known more about the situation, so plumping would not have been necessary. They may even feel an obligation to make it up to the side they did not plump for. Because of this, once you find yourself in a quandary or dilemma, the quandary is not the only thing that will be difficult for the individual as the aftermath is just as conflicting.

Now that we have discussed different quandaries and the implications that come with them, one may often wonder how these compare to moral dilemmas. According to Blackburn, it would be easy for us to say that moral dilemmas are simply juicy examples of stable agent's quandaries. Although he believes this may be true, there is much to discuss for this to become a plausible thought. When looking at different situations, it can be difficult to determine whether you are actually in a moral dilemma or if it just seems like you are. It is mentioned in his view that "we make a quandary a moral one by adding motivations from the territory of virtue, obligation, duty, and right and wrong" (Blackburn 1996, p. 132). A quandary has to have some sort of moral element to be considered a moral dilemma, but this does not mean that there needs to be a moral element found on both sides of the quandary. One type of moral dilemma involves

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

mixed cases. In a mixed case, there is a dilemma or quandary in which one must decide to do either A or B and the reasons to do A are evenly balanced with the reasons to do B. However, in this dilemma some or all of the reasons to do A are moral reasons while none of the reasons to do B are moral reasons.

Although mixed cases are a possibility, I am more interested in cases where requirements are found. This is where someone may believe that there is more to a moral dilemma than a quandary. There are some instances where there is a requirement to do both A and B. Because of this, an individual may be in a moral, or even tragic, dilemma when they are faced with incompatible requirements. No matter what the agent does, they will have to do something wrong or violate a moral requirement. In this case, the requirements may be matched where they each hold equal force but are pushing against one another. Therefore, in this case, you would have to just plump as there is no way to tell which requirement you ought to satisfy by any thought or reason.

Someone may disagree with this thought, or at the very least say that there is no point in thinking of requirements as matched. This is said because if the requirements are matched there is no way to figure out which to do in a logical manner. Instead, all you can do is decide out of fear and hope for the best. Because of this, the typical remorse or regret one often feels after plumping may not occur as there seemed to be no other option. There may also be the thought that a moral dilemma is not capable of having matched requirements because the idea is incompatible with a moral dilemma. If the requirements were to be matched in the dilemma, then you would have to allow someone to do both since there cannot be a requirement to do A and a requirement to do B. In this case, there would no longer be a dilemma because you now have the option to do both or neither one, leaving moral requirements to not be a logical possibility.

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

In response to this, I believe there are certain situations where we find ourselves being told two conflicting things we are required to do because matched requirements are possible in moral dilemmas. An example of this can be seen when someone confides in you that they committed a terrible crime that would often result in the death penalty, but they regret it. Now, the police are trying to figure out who did it, so they bring you in for questioning. At this point, you may feel like you are in a moral dilemma with two conflicting requirements. On one side, you are morally required to tell the truth. On the other side, you are morally required to not harm others. If you decide to tell the truth, then you would harm your friend as they would be arrested and sentenced to death. However, if you protect your friend then you would be lying. In this case, you find yourself in a moral dilemma where you have two conflicting moral requirements that you will just have to plump to resolve.

With a basic understanding of quandaries, moral dilemmas, and matched requirements, I want to dig deeper into my beliefs. Although I believe matched requirements are found in moral dilemmas, not everyone agrees with this statement. Because of this, it is important to look into why some defend and why others oppose matched requirements in moral dilemmas. To do this, I will look at a few different scenarios and how they demonstrate the implications of matched requirements.

An interesting case to look at when investigating matching requirements for a moral dilemma is Sophie's choice. Sophie's choice is an example that is often referred to when discussing moral dilemmas in some form or another. In short, Sophie has two children and she is imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust. One day, a guard comes to her and tells her she has a choice to make between her two children: one of them must be sent to the gas chamber. So, she has to decide which of her two children ought to be killed. "If she will

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

select one of her children to be killed, the other will be allowed to live. If she refused to select one, both will be killed” (Railton 1996, p. 157). In this case, Sophie holds the life of her children in her hands.

Similar to Sophie’s choice, Ruth is also faced with a difficult choice, although her choice is somewhat different. Ruth is a single mom who just gave birth to Siamese twins. She is informed by her doctors that both of her children will die unless they perform a complex surgery to disconnect the two. However, after the two are disconnected, only one of the twins will have the requisites for survival (Railton 1996, p. 157). Because of this, Ruth has to decide whether she consents to the procedure, which in turn causes her to decide which twin will have the capability to survive. Again, Ruth has found herself holding the life of her children in her hands.

In both of these examples, a mother is faced with a decision that no parent ever wants to make. As a parent, one has the obligation, or moral requirement, to protect their children from harm, but what are they supposed to do when they are faced with a decision that harms one child to save the other? Both Ruth and Sophie have found themselves in moral dilemmas. For Sophie, she found herself in a moral dilemma because she has to choose between her two children, and she has an equally strong commitment to each of her children. Furthermore, her case involves taking the life of one of her children, which is a moral matter for most people. Although Ruth’s choice is not as cut and dry in terms of a moral dilemma because it does not explicitly seem like either of her options could be considered going against a moral obligation, she was still found to be in a moral dilemma because she had to decide to have the procedure and choose which child will survive.

Not only were both Ruth and Sophie involved in moral dilemmas, both their moral dilemmas had matched requirements on each side. Sophie’s case portrays a moral dilemma with

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

matched requirements because as a parent she has the moral requirement to protect her child from harm. In this case, she had that moral requirement equally for each of her children, but no matter what she chose, she was going against this requirement and causing harm to one of her children. This led her into a tragic dilemma because she was plagued with equal, yet incompatible requirements, pulling in opposite directions.

Although Ruth's case is more difficult to decipher, she also found herself in a moral dilemma with matched requirements in the same way as Sophie. She had to decide whether to get the procedure, and she also had to choose between her two children as only one could survive. Some may say that she was saving a life instead of taking one, but would she not still be under the obligation to save them both and protect them from harm? So, she would still be choosing to take the life of one of her children, which would go against her obligation to protect each of them from harm. Even though she does not yet have the emotional connection to both of her children in the same way that Sophie does, she was still in a tragic dilemma with matched requirements pulling in opposite directions.

In response to this, some may say that although it may look like there are matched requirements, this may not actually be the case. A way to see this is through a different example involving Pico and Young. Imagine yourself being a recently graduated law student who had borrowed from your former classmates to make an overdue payment on tuition. Since you are all starting your careers, none of you are considered wealthy. Because of this, both Pico and Young need to be repaid in full before the first of June to make their rent payments. You originally believe this will not be an issue as your uncle promised you a large sum of money after graduation. However, your uncle's business went bankrupt, so he will not be able to make the payment as promised. Because of this, you will not be able to pay back both Pico and Young by

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

the first of June. When you figured this out, you were able to scrape together enough to pay one of them back in full or pay both of them back in part. So, you find yourself in a pickle because you have to decide whether to voluntarily choose one of them to receive the payment in full or be responsible for both of them failing to make their June rent payment.

In this case, you may find yourself in a moral dilemma because you have to choose which of your classmates to pay back, and you cannot pay both of them back. Both Pico and Young went into the agreement in good faith that you would live up to your promise to pay them back in full. To them, you have to pay them back and when you do not follow through with your duty, then you are in the wrong, morally. However, it may seem that there is no requirement to pay either in full because one cannot pay both fully. One may argue that the same applies to the supposed matched requirement cases. Because you are not able to satisfy both of the requirements, then you are not required to satisfy either one. So for your debt to Pico and Young, this would mean that you are not required to pay back either one since there is no way for you to pay back both of them, there is no way for you to satisfy your requirements.

Although this response may seem like it holds weight, it does not in terms of matched requirements in a moral dilemma. The case of Pico and Young is not actually a matched requirements case to start with, and I am hesitant to even say that it can be considered a moral dilemma. The reason it is not a matched requirements case is that you cannot pay both of them fully, so there is no requirement. What has been used to defend this example as a moral dilemma in objection to matched requirements, is the very reason why it does not apply to this argument. In addition to this, there may be other options, like instead of choosing either Pico or Young, you could try and reach out to their landlords to see if you could reach a payment plan for that month's missed payment and for any other inconveniences this may have caused. This way you

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

are still taking responsibility for your actions and do not cause any harm to Pico or Young intentionally. In addition to this, it does not seem to hold the moral value needed for a moral dilemma as it would seem inappropriate for Pico and/or Young to morally blame you. As Railton (1996) puts it, “Would either be on good moral ground in claiming that I should have paid him and only him?”(p. 155). Because of this, this case seems to be lacking the necessary qualities to be considered a moral dilemma, let alone the necessary qualities for matched requirements.

Even though the Pico and Young case does not involve matched requirements, it is still compatible with the possibility of other cases involving matched requirements. The example scenario involving Pico and Young does not necessarily teach us a lesson about all other matched requirement cases because it not being one does not eliminate the possibility that other moral dilemmas have matched requirements. Let us refer back to the example of the crime committed by your friend. As a reminder, you are morally required to tell the truth, but you are also morally required to not harm others. In this case, you are not able to satisfy both and if you tell the truth, you cause your friend harm and vice versa. If we were to use the logic that since we cannot satisfy both requirements then neither is required, then neither telling the truth nor preventing harm to others would be required. However, this does not seem logical. If you did not have to satisfy either one, then how could it still be considered a moral dilemma? When the police question you, you cannot refuse to speak to them because you have two conflicting requirements and therefore do not have to satisfy either. You still have to do one of them, you just cannot determine which to pick on your own because of the dilemma you are in. When you are faced with conflicting yet matched requirements, the situation you are in is difficult and tragic. However, that does not mean it does not exist. Instead, it just makes your decision that much more difficult to make, leading to the eventual plumping that ought to occur.

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

I need to point out that the possibility of matched requirements in moral dilemmas does not automatically enable us to consider most cases to have matched requirements. All I am saying is that there are moral dilemmas that involve matched requirements. There are still moral dilemmas without matched requirements. There could be a case where there seem to be requirements on both sides, however, the two are unequal. There could also be cases similar to the ones mentioned previously where one option holds a moral requirement, but the other does not. Requirements in a moral dilemma may take many forms, I just believe there can be matched requirements as well. It may be difficult for us to think about because no one wants to be in a situation where they cannot use reason to decide their form of action. When you have no way to classify a requirement as being more required than another, you may feel a sense of tragedy because either way you are going against something you believe is your duty. This is why residue is often left behind after one plumps because you were just faced with a tragedy, where you could not have possibly known which to choose.

In conclusion, moral dilemmas are not easy to decipher when looking at real-life scenarios. For many people, this is because they are found to be a tragedy of sorts. This tragedy is felt because there reaches a point where one can no longer appeal to reason in the decision-making process as “there is a time to reason, a time to dither, a time to plump, and sometimes a time to mourn” (Blackburn 1996, p. 137). A form of residue is frequently felt when one finds themselves in a situation where they must go against a moral requirement no matter what since there are matched requirements on each side of the dilemma. In my paper, I discussed the differences between moral and non-moral dilemmas to determine that matched requirements are possible in moral dilemmas. After looking at different scenarios as well as the opposing view, it can be seen that matched requirements occur despite the tragic nature surrounding them.

## MORAL DILEMMAS IN ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

Although they may be difficult to deal with, the nature of them remains ever-present in all of our lives every single day.

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