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Philosophy of ethical dilemmas and situational ethics in the context of epic

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Abstract
The term "ethical dilemma" refers to situations where it becomes difficult to distinguish between right and wrong. Individuals, societies, or institutions face challenges in making the right decision in specific circumstances due to conflicts between various values, principles, and needs. Situational ethics is a moral philosophy that judges right and wrong based on specific circumstances rather than relying on universal principles. It asserts that every ethical decision has a unique context, and considering that context is essential. According to this philosophy, no fixed rule or moral ideal is always applicable; instead, humanity, empathy, and practical reasoning should guide the measure of morality. This approach is particularly effective in healthcare, business decision-making, and resolving social issues. Situational ethics emphasizes the importance of thoroughly evaluating circumstances and adopting flexible morality during ethical dilemmas. It is a dynamic method that offers guidance on making the right decisions in ever-changing realities.

Keywords: Ethical dilemma, situational ethics, moral values, ethical conflict, decisions of right and wrong, humanity, empathy, practical reasoning, moral ideals, crisis resolution

Introduction

Many ethical dilemmas are discussed in epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Drawing from a few of these, I aim to demonstrate how such dilemmas can be resolved from the perspective of situational ethics. In the journey of our lives, we often encounter situations where a conflict arises about what is right and wrong, leaving us indecisive. This is commonly referred to as an ethical dilemma. To overcome such dilemmas, we must apply practical reasoning. The characters in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, when faced with such ethical dilemmas, provide inspiration on how to navigate similar or different challenges by applying situational wisdom. I will begin with a brief discussion on the framework of situational ethics, followed by an exploration of a few examples from the stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to illustrate how situation-based decisions were applied.

Main Body

In the Bible, the Greek word "Agape" is used to describe "love" or affection. It refers to a type of love where there is concern for others, and the same level of thought for others as for oneself. This love is not tied to anything else. There is no expectation of gain; it is entirely unconditional love. It reminds me of Kant's "Groundwork," which discusses "pathological love," which is addiction-based, and "practical love," which is free of addiction and guided by reason.

The situation ethicist James Fletcher, in his book *Situation Ethics*, says that laws, rules, norms, and ideals are contingent and only valid when they help to foster love in a particular situation. Therefore, these rules can be broken if a decision is found that leads to greater love. Situation ethics teaches us to follow "rules modified according to the situation" rather than abstract rules, and these decisions should be made based on the particular sequence of events. In this ethics, there is no absolute right or wrong; right and wrong depend entirely on the situation. There are no universal moral rules in situation ethics. Every event is unique, and so is the solution to each event.

"Reflective Morality" claims that rather than adhering strictly to pre-existing norms, it is more reasonable to observe the specific situation and make our moral decisions based on that; "Love" will be the driving force of moral judgment.

Some Advantages of Situation Ethics

1. **Personal Decision Making:** Situation ethics leads to personal decisions. It suggests that if an individual faces a moral dilemma, instead of following rigid ethical rules, they can use their judgment to plan. Here, "love" plays a crucial role. Situation ethics emphasizes "particular" decisions, meaning that in certain special situations, individuals make moral decisions based on their unique circumstances.

2. **Focus on Doing Good:** The foundation of situation ethics is doing good. It encourages actions aimed at greater well-being for others.

Some Disadvantages of Situation Ethics

1. **Lack of Universal Moral Rules:** If we follow situation ethics, there are no universal moral rules. Everything becomes context-dependent.

2. **Ambiguity of "Love":** Although Fletcher is guided by the principle "Love thy neighbour" from the New Testament, situation ethics fails to clarify what "love" really means.

3. **Difficulty in Practical Application:** Converting situation ethics into action is difficult. When faced with moral conflicts, many of us may not be able to make the correct decision based on reason. We often fail to determine how to apply the standard of love, and sometimes may make wrong moral decisions.

4. **No Guaranteed Results:** Situation ethics can never guarantee a definite outcome because, in different situations and at different times, different people may make different decisions.

Situation ethics teaches that there is no inherent moral value in particular actions in special situations; they are good or bad depending on the consequences or the result. Therefore, situation ethics permits actions generally considered bad, such as killing or lying, if these actions lead to a positive outcome. While killing is generally seen as bad, situation ethics shows that it can be acceptable in self-defences.

Moral Dilemma in the Mahabharata

In the Mahabharata, we see that Arjuna had vowed to kill anyone who would insult his divine bow, Gandiva. As events unfold, we observe that Yudhishthira, unable to remain firm in battle with Karna, is humiliated and retreats. Then, losing his resolve, he rebukes Arjuna and his divine bow, Gandiva. Since keeping one's vow is a righteous duty, according to this vow, Arjuna would have to kill his elder brother Yudhishthira. Faced with this dilemma, Arjuna experiences a moral crisis. He must either kill his brother to uphold his vow or break the vow. In this case, both killing his elder brother and breaking his vow are great sins.

At this moment, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that in certain situations, it is necessary to act not according to the vow but by using one's intellect to make a moral decision. Krishna further explains that being harshly rebuked by a younger brother is as bad as death. There are times when telling a lie or breaking a vow becomes more moral than telling the truth or keeping a vow. In this case, breaking the vow is not a sin. Killing the elder brother is a great sin and utterly inappropriate.

To clarify his point, Krishna shares another story to further strengthen Arjuna's moral duty. This famous story is about a sage named Kaushika, who had vowed to always speak the truth. One day, trouble arose when a group of robbers, intent on murder, followed a group of fleeing travellers. Kaushika was sitting in his hermitage when the travellers pleaded for help, saying they were fleeing for their lives and asked him to show them another path. The robbers arrived, and Kaushika, being truthful, did not lie; he told them the route the travellers had taken. The robbers followed the path and killed the travellers.

Krishna then tells Arjuna that despite Kaushika's lifelong commitment to truth, after his death, he did not go to the heaven he had always wished for. Instead, he went to hell, because saving the lives of innocent travellers was a higher duty than preserving his vow of truth. In this case, lying became a dharma, and the truth became secondary. Here, the bond of dharma or ethical righteousness could be broken for the greater good of preserving a higher form of dharma.

Judging the Situation

A second example of Krishna transcending the boundaries of ethics can be seen in the incident where he made Yudhishthira tell a lie. The story of "Ashwatthama is dead, indeed, an elephant" is widely known. When we examine this incident through the lens of the original Mahabharata, it seems rather complicated. On the fifteenth day of the war, Krishna observed that Drona was likely to kill the entire Pandava clan on his own. Drona had started the battle in a highly aggressive form. Krishna thought that unless Drona was made to lay down his weapons and surrender, and then killed, the Kauravas would win the war.

Krishna knew that only Yudhishthira could convince Drona that his son Ashwatthama had died (even though it was a false statement), which would make Drona give up his weapons out of grief. At that moment, Krishna arranged for an elephant named Ashwatthama to be killed, and convinced Yudhishthira to tell Drona the lie. As a result, Drona dropped his weapons, and then he was killed. Krishna's manipulation of Yudhishthira in this case seemed even worse than lying. It was an abandonment of lifelong vows out of fear for one's life, and the final insult was when Yudhishthira uttered the words "Iti Kunjara" (the elephant has died), a self-deception of the highest order.

No one doubted that this action was highly immoral. As a consequence, Yudhishthira's chariot wheel, which was said to hover four fingers above the ground, touched the earth. Arjuna remarked that the stain of dishonor that Rama incurred in killing Bali would forever haunt Yudhishthira due to his involvement in Drona's death. Arjuna also pointed out that Drona, who trusted in Yudhishthira's honesty, had been willing to risk his life, but Yudhishthira had utterly dishonored that trust.

To the ordinary mind, it is clear that Yudhishthira did not speak an innocent falsehood but engaged in a blatant lie to achieve his objective. In response to an immoral war, he resorted to immoral actions for the sake of self-preservation, which left the moral integrity of both sides tarnished.

Furthermore, "the justification for breaking religious norms in this case lies in the need to preserve morality itself from the potential breakdown of ethical principles. This represents a seemingly contradictory action: breaking a smaller ethical principle to protect the core of moral righteousness."[1]

If the war of Kurukshetra had not occurred, and if the Kauravas had triumphed while the Pandavas were defeated, then Gandhari's unforgettable statement "As long as righteousness triumphs, there is victory" would have been proven false. In that case, unrighteousness would have triumphed, and the world would have descended into chaos due to the oppression of the Kauravas' unjust rule. Therefore, in the religious war of Kurukshetra (although the war, in name, was a religious war, both sides frequently fought with unrighteousness and injustice, yet if judged by their qualities, the Pandavas were relatively better), Krishna's guiding of Yudhishthira to lie and Yudhishthira's act of lying were relatively better in the greater context of 'defeating unrighteousness and ensuring the victory of righteousness.' In this context, the principle of 'As long as righteousness triumphs, there is victory' prevailed over the circumstances.

Although, in this example, to prevent the sanctioning of unrestrained actions, Yudhishthira's honor was compromised. His chariot wheel touched the ground because he deviated from his vow of truth-telling, and it was through Arjuna's words that the stain of dishonor was voiced. So, while the great tree of morality was shaken, its core was likely preserved. In this case, the concept of "The end justifies the means" is what situational ethics would suggest. [2]

In the Shantiparva of the Mahabharata, we see Bhishma, while awaiting death on the battlefield, giving various pieces of advice to Yudhishthira regarding his duties and responsibilities. A notable part of his advice pertains to *apadharma* (temporary or emergency rules), where he counsels on what actions should be taken in exceptional situations. According to him, those who act based on judgment and reasoning will ultimately gain the right results.

A moral dilemma discussed in the Ramayana

The importance of upholding one's vow to protect truth has already been discussed, and in this regard, Lord Rama is an ideal figure. His decision to go into exile to preserve the truth of his father's word was not just about his own vow or protecting truth for himself. King Dasharatha had made a promise, and if he did not fulfill it, he would fall from the truth. Therefore, to demonstrate the ideal of filial devotion, Rama went into exile, but he also did not break his own vow. Thus, he remained true to his word. However, a dilemma arose even here.

In the Uttarakanda, when Lakshmana was about to be banished, Rama's vow was tested. His vow was that if anyone interfered while he was engaged in a council of state affairs, he would kill them. This vow brings to mind Arjuna's vow to kill anyone who speaks ill of his divine bow, Gandiva. This example also highlights the consequences of making harsh vows and how such vows can lead to difficult outcomes.

Lakshmana, who stood as a sentinel at the door to the council chamber, was approached by the ascetic Durvasa, who wished to see Rama immediately. Lakshmana, politely and humbly, tried to convince Durvasa to wait, but the ascetic became enraged and threatened to curse the entire royal family of Ayodhya. Faced with this, Lakshmana decided to act decisively, saying, "I will die, and perhaps in my death, my family may be saved." He entered the council room and conveyed the news of Durvasa's arrival.

After calming the irate sage Durvasa with food and gifts, Rama was confronted with a moral dilemma. True to his vow, Rama now faced the necessity of killing his own brother, Lakshmana—who had been with him through every joy and sorrow, every hardship and danger. Faced with the possibility of having to kill Lakshmana, Rama realized that the end of his vow to uphold truth had brought him to this painful crossroads.

Rama then called a council of sages, including Vasishtha, to deliberate on the matter, seeking a way to resolve both the upholding of his vow and the preservation of Lakshmana's life—aiming to find a solution where "the snake dies, and the stick does not break."

Vashistha then spoke about Krishna's role, saying that "abandoning and killing a loved one" is, according to the scriptures, the same thing. That is, if one abandons a deeply beloved person, it is akin to killing them. Therefore, abandoning Lakshmana was the only course of action. However, Lakshmana had said:

"Jahi maṁ saumya vishruddhaṁ pratijñāṁ paripālayet.
Hīna pratijñāḥ kākutstha prayānti narakaṁ narāḥ."[3]

Meaning: "O gentle one, you may kill me, fulfil your vow, for if the vow is broken, O Kakutstha, men go to hell."

Rama, therefore, could not kill Lakshmana, but he decided to abandon him instead. The result was the same, however. Lakshmana, in deep sorrow, left the royal palace and committed suicide. This raises a question: Is Rama indirectly responsible for Lakshmana's suicide? Different people hold differing opinions on this. Some blame Rama, while others do not. It seems that even Rama, the greatest of men, could not completely fulfil his vow.

The famous German philosopher Kant also gave an example of a similar situation in situational ethics. He emphasized duty and the importance of truth-telling. It was said that if a murderer chases our friend to kill them and that friend seeks refuge in our home, and later the murderer comes to our door, the question is whether we should tell the truth or lie to save the friend. Kant argued that in such a case, truth-telling would be the moral duty.

A contemporary French philosopher criticized Kant for treating truth-telling as an unconditional duty, saying that such a rigid approach would render the social system dysfunctional. However, Kant did not agree with this criticism. In response, he said that if you remain steadfast in truth-telling, regardless of the consequences, your actions would not be morally wrong, no matter how tragic the outcome. Kant was not a situational ethicist, nor was he a proponent of result-based utilitarianism. Therefore, he did not agree with the idea of lying to prevent harm or negative outcomes.

However, Kant did not stop there. He also said that, in the case of the murderer, simply telling the truth does not guarantee that the murderer will find and kill the friend. Perhaps the friend had already escaped through another door, or perhaps neighbours or the police would intervene before the murderer could act. Thus, Kant's commitment to truth was slightly unsettled here, much like Rama's. Kant too sought a possible solution in which both truth and the prevention of an unjust murder could coexist. In today's world, finding a solution as neat as those in mythical stories is difficult, but this attempt to find a practical solution is commendable.[4]

Kant further attempted to argue that lying, in this case, cannot be supported. Because even if the lie is told for a noble purpose, once truth is displaced and a lie is placed in its place, it will lead to the destruction of all worldly conduct, societal norms, and trust. The principle that we should always speak the truth, even if it requires a great sacrifice, should never be abandoned. Kant says that truth-telling must be taken as an unconditional duty. However, if we can imagine an extreme situation (such as in Rama's or Arjuna's case), the duty of truth-telling seems not to be absolute in the case of fulfilling a vow.

The mentality towards truth-telling in Kant's philosophy has a reflection in Rabindranath Tagore. Bankim Chandra supported situational ethics and justified telling lies to protect someone's life or for a noble cause. In the 1291 issue of *Bharati*, Rabindranath protested Bankim Chandra's statement, saying: "No lie can ever be the truth, not even if the respected Bankim Babu says so. Not even if Lord Krishna says so." Here, Rabindranath emphasizes the unwavering, absolute nature of truth.

Plato, in his *Republic*, provides an example of situational ethics. During a conversation between Socrates and Cephalus, Socrates asks about paying off debts and the importance of honesty in words and deeds. He presents a hypothetical situation: suppose someone leaves a dangerous weapon with you for safekeeping and then returns after a long time asking for it back. The person was sane when the weapon was entrusted but is now mad. The question is whether it would be right to give the weapon back to a madman. If the weapon is handed over, it will become dangerous to both the madman and others. However, Cephalus believes that not returning the weapon would be unjust, as paying off a debt is a moral duty.

Life presents various situations. The principle of honesty in words and deeds may be valid in many circumstances, but there may be situations where "pragmatism" is necessary, and a temporary departure from the principle of honesty

may be needed. That is, the principle of honesty in words and deeds is not universal or inevitable. Here, we can observe Arjuna's vow. After receiving the divine bow Gandiva, Arjuna vowed that if anyone insulted his bow, he would kill them.

[1] He made a future conditional vow, with the precondition being the insult to his bow [2]. He declared a severe punishment, without considering the circumstances [3]. It seems that when making this vow, he was thinking of his enemies, as he did not consider that his allies or loved ones might do such a thing [4]. When Krishna offered a solution, he stated that it would be like a death sentence for a younger brother to harshly criticize his elder brother Yudhishthira. Thus, the punishment of death was not changed but was applied differently. Krishna would not have issued such a decree if the Kauravas, his brothers, had done it.

In this case, what aspect would situational ethics focus on? Krishna said that killing a brother is a greater sin or injustice than not fulfilling a vow. This is situational judgment. However, Krishna might have said that Arjuna made the vow in the context of war, and did not consider his brothers to be part of the enemies, so the vow does not apply here. The vow was not made in the context of the love and friendship towards his brothers. Therefore, from the love for his elder brother, the matter could be resolved without resorting to "acting like killing" (speaking harsh words).

Conclusion

From the discussion on situational ethics, we can see that situational ethics cannot be completely accepted or completely rejected. Both arguments for and against it are justifiable. However, ethical dilemmas and situational ethics teach us that, when making ethical decisions, it is essential to consider the context of the situation rather than relying solely on rigid rules. In various aspects of life—such as healthcare, law, or personal relationships—individuals often face moral dilemmas. In such situations, decisions can be made with the help of humanity, empathy, and rational thinking.

The main lesson of situational ethics is that every situation is unique and should be ethically evaluated accordingly. It makes our ethical perspective more flexible, humane, and practical. This is an effective method for resolving moral dilemmas and helps in creating an environment of justice and compassion in society.

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2. Yadi'ō 'ē'i dṛṣṭāntē yātē yathēchchāchār praśrōẏa nā pāẏa tāra jan'yē Yudhiṣṭhirēra gaurabhāni ghaṭānō haẏēchē. Yudhiṣṭhirēra rathēra cākā māṭi sparśa karēchē tāra ē'i satya balār pratigñā thēkē cyutō ha'ōẏā jan'yē ēbaṁ Arjunēra mukhē di'ē balānō haẏēchē ē'i kaḷaṅka durapanēẏa. Ēkhānē tā'i nētiḫtār mahīrūkhēkē dhvaṁśa karā hala baṭē, tābē tāra mūlkē bōdhōẏa rakṣā karā gēlā. Ibid, 22.
3. Tarka Ratna, Panchanan, *Ramayanam*, Benimadhab Seel's Library, 1407, 1460.
4. Kiṁtu Kāṇṭ ē'i biṣayē sammata hanani. Tini ē'i samālōcanār uttārē yē mantabya karēchilēn tā hala, galpē kathita sthālē'ō yadi tumi satya balatē dṛṛha pratigñā thāka tāhalē jāgatika nyāẏabicārē tōmār dōṣa habē nā, phalāphal jatē'i śōcanīẏa hōk nā kēna. Kāṇṭ paristhitīmūlaka nētiḫtābādī bā an'yabhābē balā yāẏa phalāphalamukhī hita-bādī chilēn nā. Kājē'ī nṛśaṁsatā rūpa kūphala bā ahita nibṛttir jan'yē tini asatyabhāṣaṇē sammata chilēn nā. Yāi hōk, ēkhānē dēkhī atabaṛa dārśanik Kāṇṭ kiṁtu ē'i balē'i kṣānta hanani. Arthaẏāẏa ē nṛśaṁsatā'ō tāra mana mēnē nīṭē pārcilā nā. Tā'i tini ābār bōlēchēn "Ēkṣētrē satya kathā ballē'ī yē hatyākārī sunishchitabhābē bandhukē khōja karē hatyā karabē'i ēman balā yāẏa nā, haẏatē palāẏamāna bandhuti itimadhyē tōmār bāṛir an'ya darjā di'ē allakṣitē calē gēchē nirāpaddhānē. Athabā ē'ō sambhābō yē tumi satya kathā balār par atatāẏī yakhana bāṛir bhitara ḍhukē khōja karchē takhana pratibēśīrā ḍalbēdhē ēsē paṛalō athabā pulish ēsē paṛalō ēbaṁ atatāẏī hatyā karār āgē dharā paṛalō. 4 Ēkṣētrē tāhalē nara-hatyāẏa sahāẏatā karā hala nā ābār satya kathana'ō hala. Dēkhā yācchē Kāṭēr satyanisṭhā'ō ēkhānē rāmera mato kiñcit bicalitā. Tīni'ō cēchēnēn ēkṭā sambhābya samādhān yātē satya rakṣā'ō haẏa ēbaṁ an'yāẏa nara-hatyā'ō nā haẏa. Ēyugē pūrāṇika galpēra mato managṛā samādhān pā'ōẏā duṣkar tā'i sambhābya samādhān sandhānēra ē'i praśaṁśanīẏa prayāsa." Translation of Abbott, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Appendix, 361-363.
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