
Chapter 11

Moral Dilemmas During the Global Pandemic and Implications for Moral Education in Current and Post-Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 has been gradually invading the health of human beings, the economic systems of societies, and the various dimensions of human activities. In this article, the author first attempts to analyze the moral dilemmas we must face at individual, organizational, and societal or national levels during this period from a macro-sociological perspective, and the concerns about the values we need to base our moral decisions on. The source documents include published academic articles that describe the moral dilemmas we face at various levels of society and in various regions of the world. The author further addresses how these dilemmas and related issues are challenging our current practice of moral education in a global society. Finally, the author provides further suggestions about how to continue improving moral education in both the current and post-COVID-19 eras.

KEYWORDS: moral dilemmas, moral decisions, moral education, global pandemic, COVID-19

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEMS: MORAL DILEMMAS AND MORAL EDUCATION IN AN UNCERTAIN AGE

At the beginning of 2020, an unpredictable corona virus began to gradually circulate and destroy the health of many human beings and societies around the world. Following the rapid development of international and local transportation, which has accelerated the dissemination of diseases generally, the challenges of this new epidemic are much more complicated than those that we've faced before, and many controversial issues related to different types of moral dilemmas have emerged (Chan et al., 2020). However, lives need to be saved in time, solutions need to be found very quickly, and many decisions must be made as soon as possible. Therefore, various struggles regarding COVID-19 in different countries and/or cultural settings have been challenging people's decisions (Borges et al., 2020; Chan, 2020) and their capacity to sustain moral self-cultivation.

Looking back at the history of human epidemics and pandemics, we find that lethal epidemics have become more globalized in the last century.¹ Except for the 1918 Flu Pandemic (or Spanish Flu), COVID-19 is the most threatening disease in the last 100 years in terms of infection and death rates. Even though several good vaccines have been developed for COVID-19, it is becoming increasingly likely that this influenza virus will continue to take many people's lives. Meanwhile, many new challenges and moral dilemmas have appeared during this pandemic period. Thus, it is necessary to investigate and discuss the very important potential role of moral education in the context of this terrible pandemic.

In this paper, I review academic papers that may help to clarify the moral dilemmas we have been forced to face during this terrible pandemic. I analyze them from societal, individual, institutional or organizational, and national/international perspectives, and I point out creative approaches and solutions to the dilemmas, along with their potential advantages and disadvantages. Finally, I propose some approaches

¹ Even in the case of the Black Death, a pandemic in Europe in the 14th Century during which many people died, the disease remained localized in Europe and did not become globalized. However, in the 20th century, during which our global transportation systems continued to advance, our epidemics became increasingly globalized. For example, the 1918 Flu Pandemic (the Spanish Flu) took millions of lives around the globe.

in which we might strengthen our moral education during this global pandemic and (potentially) post-pandemic eras.

MORAL DILEMMAS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 began to silently permeate our human societies. Too quickly it spread not just through China and the rest of Asia but also through many other countries and societies around the world. This disaster has challenged humanity and forced us to quickly make moral decisions while facing dilemmas in multiple social and cultural contexts. These dilemmas at the individual level may be briefly divided into two types: There are the dilemmas which each person faces as he/she plays his/her different social roles, but we also see people's different social roles, and the larger problem of how to play them, pose dilemmas on a larger scale. Multiple authors have proposed many creative solutions to resolving these different kinds of dilemmas.

With the invasion of COVID-19, people naturally have wanted to minimize the risks to their health; on the other hand, they also have wanted, indeed needed, to fulfill their social responsibilities and to keep their jobs, as well as maintain their personal rights. Such dilemmas manifest in various ways: for example, should parents stay home with their children or send them to daycare centers and go to work? Another example is this: Many hospital healthcare workers suffered from mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they still had to stay at the hospital to do their jobs (Agarwal et al., 2021; Delgado et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2021). Some of them developed a kind of aerosol box in order to reduce the personal risk of infection when working on such risky procedures as intubation (Babu et al., 2020). Moreover, many people are still facing the moral dilemma of whether to put their family's health first or to put their family's economic security first. Should they continue their jobs as restaurant servers, travel agents, transport workers, healthcare workers, etc., to support their families, or should they stay at home to prevent bringing COVID-19 to their older family members?

Another type of dilemma manifests in the individual's role in society. For example, when healthcare workers face limited healthcare resources, they have to decide who gets needed medical resources (e.g., a respirator or medical bed) first and who must wait for a longer time (Carroll IV et al., 2020; Chan, 2020; Chan et al., 2020). If we take a closer look at situation, we find that different individuals apply different moral standards in making their decisions when facing these sorts of dilemmas, and they are more likely to adopt utilitarianism than some other ethical doctrine (Everett et al., 2021).

In addition to these dilemmas arising from the different social roles of each individual, there are also dilemmas related to the social roles of different groups of individuals, for example, the human rights of healthcare workers vs patients, older vs younger people, and teachers vs students. This kind of dilemma springs from different personal needs that can only be met by balancing decisions that support each of the social roles involved (Byrd & Białek, 2021). For example, a balance may need to be struck between maintaining the human rights of healthcare workers and preserving the human rights of their patients (Sperling, 2021). On the one hand, healthcare workers may want to avoid some potentially dangerous surgical procedures; on the other hand, patients may want more treatment options. Such circumstances can raise controversial issues such as whether doctors and nurses may choose to see certain patients but not others if they do not have enough protective medical equipment to see each patient (Swazo et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2021).

A similar dilemma may appear when two people have different beliefs or come from different generations. Some people regard attending their religious prayer meetings or engaging in certain political, social, or economic activities as more important than caring for those who may be vulnerable to the life-threatening symptoms of COVID-19 (Byrd & Białek, 2021; Carroll IV et al., 2020). Similar dilemmas involve teachers and students. Say that to protect both parties from COVID-19 it is determined that they should not be present at the same physical location at the same time. The question then arises what to do with students who need social support from their teachers and other students who can only be supplied in the classroom. Should the distancing requirement only apply when the teacher lives in a

high-risk area for COVID-19 and the students live in a low-risk area (Bailey & Schurz, 2020)?

Generally speaking, the above dilemmas raise the problem of the “order of values” in the context of different social roles. That is, a person has to learn how to judge which values should be considered most important and which ones least important. For example, how does a person decide whether love of family members or professional integrity should take priority? Should the human rights of patients be considered more important than those of healthcare workers? Should students’ rights be considered more important than teachers’ health?

The need to make moral decisions in a short time during the global pandemic has forced individuals to experience considerable distress, mainly due to limited information and resources (Borges et al., 2020). A clear value system is required for making proper ethical decisions quickly. Therefore, the ethical dilemmas that have often appeared during the global pandemic have led us to recognize the true significance of moral education, which really means training students to make proper moral decisions at a time of great urgency.

MORAL DILEMMAS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The dilemmas that have appeared at various levels of the social hierarchy during the global pandemic since 2020 have either weakened or strengthened organizations’ unique or specialized functions, and it has forced many countries to suddenly shut down their institutions. During this period, we found that not only schools but also catering services and other such businesses had confronted the dilemma of “shutting down or re-opening” (Bokde et al., 2020). This difficulty forced them to develop different strategies in order to maintain their social functions, as otherwise their organizations might become weakened or forced to downsize. For example, many public and private organization’s activities have been eliminated or reduced, and some economic, religious, and social functions have been weakened. Evidence for such responses to the pandemic can be found in the rising unemployment rates in many countries hit by the pandemic.

Despite the facts that the pandemic has been severe and greatly influenced most people's everyday lives, many institutions have developed relevant response strategies. For example, the aviation industry changed airliners into cargo aircraft to serve the new social needs of its customers, and restaurants began to offer drive-thru meal boxes instead of serving meals inside. Similar changes were made in schools too. For example, online lessons and working from home have become much more common (Toquero, 2021). However, it is also true that the functioning of these institutions has been greatly challenged and/or weakened during the pandemic.

In contrast, given the pressure to release many patients, the capacities of the hospitals and other healthcare organizations have been forced to expand much more rapidly, in spite of the challenges. Confronted by these dilemmas, medical care systems chose to expand and accelerate their functioning by adopting temporary expedients such as mobile home hospitals and drive-through testing facilities. Moreover, to curb and, if possible, to control the endless spread of infections and deaths, abundant resources were allotted to the biomedical industry to promote the production of more medical equipment and vaccines, as well as therapeutic medications (Broockman et al., 2021). At this historic moment, medical departments have thus undergone rapid expansion and made numerous adjustments.

In addition, many schools and businesses have used digital devices (e.g., virtual event platforms such as Zoom, Webex, and Meet) to overcome some of the above dilemmas (Akporehe & Asiyai, 2020). This trend has also led to the digital technology being greatly expanded and the corresponding industries continually strengthened (Ishmaev et al., 2021; Miller, 2021; Subbian et al. 2021). The dilemmas faced by organizations have also challenged such ideals as equal educational opportunities for all children, the right to life, and the right to work.

Suddenly faced with these new dilemmas and challenges during the terrible global pandemic, organizations at every level of society have shown their creativity and resilience. For moral education, a key issue that has appeared during these periods of adjustment is social justice. Many of these adjustments have led to dilemmas of equal vs unequal distribution. For example, many disadvantaged people have become unemployed and thus now have fewer opportunities to obtain such vital resources as high-grade digital and other technical equipment. These problems also have

influenced our educational systems. Students from disadvantaged groups have lacked needed material resources, and their below-standard living environments have lowered their sense of security in the spiritual domain (Sabates et al., 2021). Moreover, the underfunding of schools and other educational organizations has prevented some students from receiving online lessons or digital equipment, as well as helpful knowledge from information technology devices.

MORAL DILEMMAS AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

COVID-19 has not only impacted many individuals and organizations, but it also has created many problems for governments at the national and international levels (Baum & Žok, 2020). Moreover, certain dilemmas with regard to national policies on a variety of issues have appeared in many societies. For example, the dilemma of healthcare (or life) security vs economic suffering in the lower classes and minority groups has destroyed vulnerable communities (Sharma & Mahendru, 2020). Politicians have been forced to make decisions in a short time, and unfortunately their rescue policies have often been announced too late. In addition, the inevitable interruptions in global industrial supply chains during the pandemic have caused food systems to become unstable and made the vulnerable people in the poorest countries suffer from famine (Chakrobarty et al., 2020). In other words, some of the decisions on national policies designed to prevent the spread of the epidemic have led to other life-threatening health problems, not only in East and Southeast Asia but throughout the international community.

Nonetheless, most countries have made good decisions with regard to the dilemma of healthcare (or life) security vs economic risk, basing their decisions mainly on their own national situations rather than on the global threat. Another understandably prominent issue is the unequal distribution of vaccines and other healthcare resources among various countries in the world (Osama et al., 2021). On the one hand, politicians should first address the urgent needs of their own citizens; on the other hand, they need to provide humanitarian aid to high-risk countries and regions with limited resources of their own. Finding proper balances in the face of these dilemmas has remained a challenge.

In addition, such dilemmas have challenged the need for international political cooperation. When COVID-19 first emerged, to keep people calm, some government officials made the bad decision to forbid the release of alarming information about the pandemic, which only reinforced its break-out in many countries (Burkle, 2020). Moreover, relevant information about COVID-19 from professionals was provided too late given the speed of its spread, leading to a series of catastrophes worldwide. This delay has tended to erode trust between nations, thus further inhibiting international cooperation. This erosion of trust has led many nations to pay more attention to their own situations rather than the need to rebuild a global healthcare or medical care system.

Although some controversies have been focused on the question of whether the policies of autocratic or democratic governments will manage the pandemic more successfully, the answer still remains unclear. However, from the global or international perspective, it is essential that national leaders, regardless of whether their governments are autocratic or democratic, take on the responsibility to make ethical decisions not only to protect the health of their own citizens at both the national and local levels, but also to continue to conduct surveys to assess the status of the pandemic and the success of efforts to control it both nationally and worldwide. Obviously, in doing so, adherence to such basic ethical principles as honesty, trust or transparency among individuals and nations, and the democratic principles of freedom and self-management, will be necessary for both individual nations and the larger world order.

HOW CAN PRACTITIONERS OF MORAL EDUCATION LEARN FROM THIS GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

Since the appearance of COVID-19, various moral dilemmas have challenged not only our human ideals and value systems but also the reliability of international cooperation in promoting public health. How can we rebuild a trustworthy, reliable, and safe society? Obviously, moral education will play a crucial role in meeting this greatest challenge of the century. Clearly everyone needs to solidly support the principles of “moral education for all” and “moral education at every level of society.” Making clear the order of priority of various values or virtues at the individual,

organizational, and societal levels remains a challenge. For example, our right to live and our right to work are clearly important, as are the need to avoid medical risks and to save as many lives as possible, the need for continuing professional development and economic efficiency at all levels of society, as well as the values of freedom, democracy, transparency and national security at both the international and national levels.

Individuals, organizations, and societies may differ in how they rank the importance of such values or virtues as courage, patience, caring and sympathy, benevolence, fairness and justice, honesty, and respect. Of course, we may find in assigning these ranks that paradoxes and conflicts appear. Therefore, dialogues, debates, and reflections about the relative importance of different values and virtues in different situations, or social contexts, will remain very important in moral education (Klenk & Van de Poel, 2021).

At the individual level, it is always a great challenge when one has to make value or ethical decisions in a short time or at emergent moments. Making good decisions may require extensive education about morality or values, as well as a deep self-understanding and a clear awareness of self-other relationships. In other words, people should learn to recognize the order of priority of their own value choices. It will take time to continually or repeatedly rank our values in terms of preference, especially when confronted with cases that require our urgent attention. Consideration of ethical doctrines could also help people understand which value applications are most helpful for them, for example, in making their lives flourish (according to Aristotle's ethics), their consciences and minds at peace (according to Kantian or Confucian ethics), and their relationships with others harmoniously (according to the ethics of caring or *ren*-benevolence ethics) (Benko, 2020; Branicki, 2020; Bustan et al., 2021). Of course, sometimes these considerations may lead us into dilemmas or conflict situations. Moral education in our schools, with an emphasis on traditional ethical principles, may further enable us to pursue the path of self-cultivation.

How can organizations face and overcome emerging dilemmas in a changing society? For example, decisions to downsize or expand organizations inevitably raise issues or problems of equality/inequality, which often result in certain disadvantaged people or groups being ignored (Kooli, 2021). How can organizations best perform

what they see as their most important social and ethical duties? The tradition in various societies around the world has often been to adopt utilitarian ethics (Carroll IV et al., 2020). However, during this present period of a (potentially global) pandemic, some disadvantaged and thus vulnerable people have often been ignored. Therefore, to achieve a highly productive level of professional and ethical decision-making, freedom of discussion will remain very important. Here Kantian ethical doctrines or John Rawls' theory of justice could be adopted to support our decision-making, because these ideas are concerned with the true meaning and universal importance of human rights.

Finally, we must always keep in mind the crucial role of national governments and international organizations. Their policies will broadly influence individuals and organizations on matters such as the distribution of healthcare resources and vaccines, the spread of the virus, and economic risks. Obviously, policy makers will need more than a few professional groups to help them evaluate and predict potential trends. In addition, to avoid the influences exerted from the local or national propagandas, and then to engage in rational ethical decisions will become a necessity for leaders to make wiser and more proper decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly tested the global effectiveness of moral education. It has challenged individuals, as well as national and international organizations and polities to quickly make important ethical decisions, where making such decisions depends not only on personal and communal values but also on having sufficient professional information. This exigency has led to the adoption of various strategies for making better moral decisions during the pandemic. For example, the ethics of caring and of *ren*-benevolence, as well as utilitarian ethics, have been adopted to deal with the serious and complex dilemmas we've been facing at the individual and community levels. However, at the organizational and governmental levels, utilitarianism has been more effective than other approaches in guiding good decision-making with respect to the most urgent and threatening events.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has been a terrible burden but also has potentially provided an important lesson for people around the world, as it has led to many utterly challenging moral dilemmas. During this global epidemic, many ethical decisions have been made in a short time at the individual, organizational, national, international, and societal levels. Inevitably, many tragic events have had to be endured. Therefore, the long-term cultivation of moral education, especially the capacity to make wise moral decisions in the face of every major dilemma that might confront at either the individual or institutional level, is always necessary for all human societies. Proper ethical decision-making depends on sufficient professional competence and knowledge, which often require effective teamwork.

To reach the goal of rebuilding a moral society, of course, the daily practice of self-cultivation and thoughtful value judgment, as well as making wise ethical decisions on a daily basis based on sufficient professional information, will always be very helpful. Adopting traditional and contemporary ethical doctrines (*ren-benevolence* or caring ethics, utilitarian discrimination, Aristotle's thoughts on *eudiamonia* (happiness, well-being or flourishing), Kantian ethics) should help decision-makers expand and deepen their understanding of the problem at hand.

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