

The Dilemma

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[Preliminary note to students:

A *disjunct* is one part of an either/or sentence. Hence, "Either Mary will come to class *or* she will stay home", the phrases "Mary will come to class" and "she will stay home" are the two *disjuncts*.

Disjunction is the process of joining clauses with the word "or".]

The dilemma is a common form of argument in ordinary language. It is, in essence, an argumentative device in which syllogisms on the same topic are combined, sometimes with devastating effect. Each of the constituent syllogisms may be quite ordinary, and therefore the dilemma is not of special importance from a strictly logical point of view. But the premises of the syllogisms so combined are formulated disjunctively, and devised in a way designed to trap the opponent by forcing him to accept one or the other of the disjuncts. Thus the opponent is forced to accept the truth of the conclusion of one or the other of the syllogisms combined. When this is done successfully, the dilemma can prove to be a powerful instrument of persuasion.

We say somewhat loosely that a person is "in" a dilemma (or "impaled on the horns of a dilemma") when that person must choose between two alternatives, both of which are bad or unpleasant. The dilemma is a form of argument intended to put one's opponent in just that kind of position. In debate, one uses a dilemma to offer alternative positions to one's adversary, from which a choice must be made, and then to prove that no matter which choice is made, the adversary is committed to an unacceptable conclusion.

The distinguished physicist Richard Feynman, recounting his experiences in the 1986 investigation of the catastrophic explosion of the Challenger rocket, was caustic in his criticism of mismanagement by administrators in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). He said:

Every time we talked to higher level managers, they kept saying they didn't know anything about the problems below them. . . . Either the group at the top didn't know, in which case they should have known, or they did know, in which case they were lying to us."

An attack of this kind is designed to push the adversaries (in this case the NASA administrators) into a corner and there annihilate them. The only explicitly stated premise of the argument is a disjunction, but one of the disjuncts must obviously be true; either they knew or they didn't know about the problems below them. And whichever disjunct is chosen, the result for the adversary is *very* bad. The conclusion of a dilemma can itself be a disjunction (for example, "Either the NASA administrators did not know what they should have known, or they lied") in which case we call the dilemma complex. But the conclusion may also be a

categorical proposition, in which case we call it simple.

A dilemma need not always have an unpleasant conclusion. An example of one with a happy conclusion is provided by the following simple dilemma:

If the blest in heaven have no desires, they will be perfectly content; so they will be also if their desires are fully gratified; but either they will have no desires, or have them fully gratified; therefore they will be perfectly content.

The premises of a dilemma need not be stated in any special order; the disjunctive premise that offers the alternatives may either precede or follow the other. And the consequences of those alternatives may be stated in a conjunctive proposition or in two separate propositions. An argument in dilemma form is often expressed enthymematically; that is, its conclusion generally is thought so obvious that it scarcely needs to be spelled out. This is well illustrated in a passage from a letter of President Lincoln, defending the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves of the Confederacy:

But the proclamation, as law, either is valid, or is not valid. If it is not valid, it needs no retraction, If it is valid, it cannot be retracted, any more than the dead can be brought to life.¹

Three ways of evading or refuting the conclusion of a dilemma have been given special names, all relating to the fact that a dilemma has two (or more) "horns." These three ways of defeating a dilemma are known as "going (or escaping) between the horns," "taking (or grasping) it by the horns," and "rebutting it by means of a counter-dilemma." Note that these are not ways to prove the dilemma invalid; rather, they are ways in which one seeks to avoid its conclusion without challenging the formal validity of the argument.

One escapes between the horns of a dilemma by rejecting its disjunctive premise. This method is often the easiest way to evade the conclusion of a dilemma, for unless one half of the disjunction is the explicit contradiction of the other, the disjunction may very well be false. One justification sometimes offered for giving grades to students is that recognizing good work will stimulate the student to study harder. Students may criticize this theory, using the following dilemma:

If students are fond of learning, they need no stimulus, and if they dislike learning, no stimulus will be of any avail. But any student is either fond of learning or dislikes it. Therefore a stimulus is either needless or of no avail.

This argument is formally valid, but we can evade its conclusion by *going between the horns*. The disjunctive premise is false, for students have all kinds of attitudes toward learning: Some may be fond of it, many dislike it, and many are indifferent. For that third group a stimulus may be both needed and of some avail. Going between the horns does not prove the conclusion to be false but shows merely that the argument does not provide adequate grounds for accepting

that conclusion.

Where the disjunctive premise is unassailable, as when the alternatives exhaust the possibilities, it is impossible to escape between the horns. Another method of evading the conclusion must be sought. One such method is to *grasp the dilemma by the horns*, which involves rejecting the premise that is a conjunction. To deny a conjunction, we need only deny one of its parts. When we grasp the dilemma by the horns, we attempt to show that at least one of the conditionals is false. The dilemma just above, attacking the use of grades in school, relies upon the conditional "If students are fond of learning, they need no stimulus." The proponent of grading may grasp this dilemma by the horns and argue that even students who are fond of learning may sometimes need stimulus, and that the additional stimulus provided by grades promotes careful study by even the most diligent students. There may be good response to this, of course—but the original dilemma has been grasped firmly by the horns.

Rebutting a dilemma by means of a counter-dilemma is the most ingenious method of all, but it is seldom cogent, for reasons that will appear presently. To rebut a given dilemma in this way, one constructs another dilemma whose conclusion is opposed to the conclusion of the original. *Any* counterdilemma may be used in rebuttal, but ideally it should be built up out of the same ingredients (categorical propositions) that the original dilemma contained. A classical example of this elegant kind of rebuttal concerns the legendary argument of an Athenian mother attempting to persuade her son not to enter politics:

If you say what is just, men will hate you; and if you say what is unjust, the gods will hate you; but you must either say the one or the other; therefore you will be hated.

Her son rebutted that dilemma with the following one:

If I say what is just, the gods will love me; and if I say what is unjust, men will love me. I must say either the one or the other. Therefore I shall be loved!

In public discussion, where the dilemma is one of the strongest weapons of controversy, the use of a rebuttal of this kind, which derives an opposite conclusion from almost the same premises, is a mark of great rhetorical skill. But if we examine the dilemma and rebutting counterdilemma more closely, we see that their conclusions are not as opposed as they might at first have seemed. The conclusion of the first dilemma is that the son will be hated (by men or by the gods), whereas that of the rebutting dilemma is that the son will be loved (by the gods or by men). But these two conclusions are perfectly compatible. The rebutting counterdilemma

serves merely to establish a conclusion different from that of the original. Both conclusions may *very well* be true together, so no refutation has been accomplished. But in the heat of controversy analysis is unwelcome, and if such a rebuttal occurred in a public debate, the average audience might agree that the rebuttal was an effective reply to the original argument.

That this sort of rebuttal does not refute the argument but only directs attention to a different aspect of the same situation is perhaps more clearly shown in the case of the following dilemma, advanced by an "optimist":

If I work, I earn money, and if I am idle, I enjoy myself. Either I work or I am idle. Therefore either I earn money or I enjoy myself.

A "pessimist" might offer the following counter-dilemma:

If I work, I don't enjoy myself, and if I am idle, I don't earn money. Either I work or I am idle. Therefore either I don't earn money or I don't enjoy myself.

These conclusions represent merely different ways of viewing the same facts; they do not constitute a disagreement over what the facts are. No discussion of dilemmas would be complete unless it mentioned the celebrated lawsuit between Protagoras and Euathlus. Protagoras, a teacher who lived in Greece during the fifth century B.C., specialized in teaching the art of pleading before juries. Euathlus wanted to become a lawyer, but not being able to pay the required tuition, he made an arrangement according to which Protagoras would teach him but not receive payment until Euathlus won his first case. When Euathlus finished his course of study, he delayed going into practice. Tired of waiting for his money, Protagoras brought suit against his former pupil for the tuition money that was owed. Unmindful of the adage that the lawyer who tries his own case has a fool for a client, Euathlus decided to plead his own case in court. When the trial began, Protagoras presented his side of the case in a crushing dilemma:

If Euathlus loses this case, then he must pay me (by the judgment of the court); if he wins this case, then he must pay me (by the terms of the contract). He must either lose or win this case. Therefore Euathlus must pay me.

The situation looked bad for Euathlus, but he had learned well the art of rhetoric. He offered the court the following counter-dilemma in rebuttal:

If I win this case, I shall not have to pay Protagoras (by the judgment of the court); if I lose this case, I shall not have to pay Protagoras (by the terms of the contract, for then I shall not yet have won my first case). I must either win or lose this case. Therefore I do not have to pay Protagoras!

Had you been the judge, how would you have decided?

Note that the conclusion of Euathlus' rebutting dilemma is *not* compatible with the conclusion of Protagoras' original dilemma. One conclusion is the explicit denial of the other. But it is a rare case in which a counter-dilemma stands in this relation to the dilemma against which it is directed. When it does so, the premises involved are themselves inconsistent, and it is this implicit contradiction that the two dilemmas serve to make explicit.

1, "Letter of Abraham Lincoln to James C. Colliding, 26 August 1863.