



Twelve Moral Dilemmas for Educational Discussions*

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[Didactic Materials]

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Laube versus Stevenson

Mrs. Laube, who lived in New York, occasionally visited her daughter and son-in-law, Mrs. and Mr. Stevenson, who lived in a one-family house in Connecticut. On her visits, Mrs. Laube helped her daughter with household tasks and with the care of the couple's infant son. During one such visit, her daughter asked her to go to the basement to get a blanket to cover the baby while he slept outside. The stairs to the basement were extremely dangerous. There was no light, no hand-rail, and also there were a broken step. Neither her daughter nor her son-in-law warned Mrs. Laube of these conditions. While trying to get to the basement, Mrs. Laube tripped on the broken step and was flung all the way to the bottom of the stairs. She sustained some quite serious injuries and incurred some very expensive medical bills and therefore decided to sue her daughter and son-in-law.

1. Was it right or wrong for Mrs. Laube to sue her daughter and son-in-law? Why?
2. Should the fact that Mrs. Stevenson is her daughter enter into her decision about whether or not to sue? Why?
3. Suppose the situation were reversed and Mrs. Stevenson, the daughter, had fallen on her mother's stairs. Should her daughter sue her, the mother? Why or why not?

Lt. Berg

During World War II, Poland was under German occupation. In a small village, a German soldier was killed at night, but the Germans could not find out how it had happened. The people of the village either refused to inform them or they just did not know. So orders came from Berlin to kill all the population of the village, including women and children. Lieutenant Berg, the German officer in charge of the soldiers in the village, called his superior and argued that they should not kill the women and the children, just the men. The high command in Berlin disagreed but after a long argument between Lieutenant Berg and the command, the orders were changed. The Germans killed all the men and let the women and children live.

After the war, Lieutenant Berg became a Catholic priest. Twenty years later he was identified as the lieutenant who killed all the men in the village. He was accused of mass murder of civilians, and brought to trial. He admitted that he had carried out the order to kill all the men in that Polish village, even though he had known that there was no evidence to indicate that they were guilty. He told the court that he had spared the lives of the women and children.

1. Should Father Berg be tried at all? Yes or no, and why?
2. Should the court consider the fact that he did save some people and give him a smaller sentence? Yes or no, and why?
3. Does it or should it make a difference to the court that he has become a priest after the war?

Lying in Order to Help Someone

After high school, Mike got a job as a plumbing apprentice in a large plumbing company. He worked under an experienced person who taught him how to become a tradesman. One day Mike's boss made a mistake which would cost the company about \$400, and blamed the mistake on Mike so that the owner would be angry at Mike instead of him. The next day Mike got fired from the job.

Mike told his parents what happened and tried to get another job. But it was difficult finding one and after two weeks of looking he still had no results. One day when he came home, his parents told him that the owner of the company had called and asked him to come back to work. What actually happened was that Mike's father called the owner, apologized for Mike (about something that Mike had never done), and pleaded with him to take Mike back.

1. The parent lied to Mike. Do you think that lying, in this case, was a justified act? Give your reasons.
2. If Mike found out the truth about how he was allowed to take back his old job, how would he feel? Why would he feel that way?
3. Is lying in the attempt to help another person different from lying in order to help yourself? Why or why not?
4. Was it right for the parents to call the company owner and lie to him? Why or why not?

Misrepresentation

Two young college students met in their freshman year. The girl was an orphan on scholarship at the college but told her boyfriend a fantastic story, which she made up. She said her parents were in the Orient and her father was a wealthy businessman who believed that children should not be given any money even though he was controlling a large amount of money in trust for her. The boy came from a poor family but he, himself, had ambitions of going into business and becoming rich. He believed his girlfriend's story and saw her as a good prospect. The girl was a very lonely person and desperately wanted to get married. The couple got married six months after they met. One week after the wedding the boy found out that the story was a fantasy. She told him the truth about her life. The boy was extremely angry and sued for divorce. He claimed that he had been cheated and humiliated.

1. Should he get a divorce on these grounds?
2. What do you think are legitimate grounds for divorce?
3. Should people who intend to get married ever keep secrets from each other? If so, what kinds of things and why? If not, why not?
4. Should a married couple try to stay together and make it work out even when they do not really love each other? Why or why not?
5. What is your conception of an ideal marriage?

Mrs. Hernandez – Property Damage Case

Mrs. Hernandez was a poor widow with five children. Her only income came from her house cleaning jobs. One day while working in the Green's apartment, she accidentally knocked their very expensive stereo (worth a thousand dollars) off the high shelf. The stereo was badly damaged beyond repair. When Mrs. Green came home she was very upset because she knew that she could not afford to buy another stereo set.

1. Should the Greens make Mrs. Hernandez pay for the stereo even though they knew that she had barely enough money to keep her family going?
2. If Mrs. Hernandez had been careless in the past, should that make a difference? Why or why not?
3. Suppose Mrs. Green did not like Mrs. Hernandez very well personally but knew that it had really been an accident. Should that make any difference?
4. If the Greens decide to sue Mrs. Hernandez, should the court require her to pay even though it would bring great hardship on her family.

Noisy Child

During World War II, a group of people were trying to run away from the German Gestapo who were trailing them. One of the women in the group had an infant who was ill. It was not known what was wrong with the child but it cried continuously. All of the people were hiding together in a small attic of a large house. One of the men in the group suggested that they kill the infant because it made a great deal of noise. Otherwise, the Germans might discover them and kill them all.

1. What should the mother of the infant do and why?
2. Is it justified to kill one person if it will increase the chance of saving a lot of people?
3. Suppose they killed the baby and the Germans never came into the house, are they guilty of murder?
4. Can you consider this kind of killing murder or self-defense? Why?

Responsibility for an Animal's Behavior

A salesman, who was going from door to door, came to a house to sell vacuum cleaners. The person who owned the house had a dog that bit the salesman. The salesman sued the owner for damages.

1. Are you responsible for everything that happens on your property? Why or why not?
2. Does the salesman have the legal or moral right to sue the owner for damages? Why or why not?
3. Does the salesman have the right to insist that the dog be killed since it is dangerous? Why or why not?
4. If there had been a sign reading, "Beware of the Dog", how would that change the situation?
5. What do you think of the training of dogs to be very vicious or even to kill so that they can be used as guards?

Sex as a need

The Johnson family (with four children) was a very happy and close one. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were in their thirties. One day Mr. Johnson fell from a third-story building where he was working. He broke his back in this accident and was totally paralyzed from his waist down. The accident did not result in economic hardship because of workmen's compensation. Three months after the accident, when Mr. Johnson came home, the problem began. Mrs. Johnson, who was a young person, realized that she would have to give up sexual intercourse with his husband. If she did not want to give up her sex life, she had the following choices: either to get a divorce, or to have extramarital affairs.

1. Is it possible to separate sex from affection? What do you think she should do? Give your reasons.
2. Do you think this woman should remain married to the husband? Why or why not?
3. What do you think would happen to the family if she had an affair?
4. If she decides to have an affair, should she tell her husband or keep it a secret? Why?

Shoplifting

Mrs. Jackson was doing her grocery shopping one week-end in the big supermarket near her house. As she walked into one of the back aisles, she saw a young man putting some cans of food into his coat pocket. She wondered whether or not to turn the young man in to the store manager.

1. Should she report him to the manager or let him get away with shoplifting the food? Why? Is there something else that she might do?
2. If she tells him to put it back and he refuses, should she turn him in? Why?
3. If she knows that shoplifters are always prosecuted by that store and often end up going to jail, should that make a difference in her decision? Why?
4. What if the man who was stealing looked very poor?
5. If she were an employee of the store, should that make a difference? Why?
6. Suppose she knew that the manager of the store was a selfish man who exploited his customers because his was the only store in the neighborhood. Should that make a difference? Why?
7. What should the penalty for shoplifting be? Why?
8. Should the amount of punishment depend on how badly the man needs the food? Why?
9. In what way could the young man's shoplifting affect Mrs. Jackson?

Sterilization

A man was brought to court on charges of failure to provide support for his illegitimate children. He had been married and divorced twice. He had six children to support from these two marriages. In addition, he had three illegitimate children out of wedlock which he had to support. The man did not have enough money to support all of his children. The judge gave the man one month to be sterilized or go to jail for two years. (Sterilization involves a minor operation which would prevent him from having any other children in the future.)

1. Does a man have a right to produce or have children if he cannot support them?
2. Does society have the right to impose sterilization on him? If so, why does it have that right? If not, why not?
3. Suppose it was not the man but an unmarried woman who kept having illegitimate children by different men. Would that make any difference? Why?

The Phoenix House

The Phoenix House drug rehabilitation program had been doing very successful work with addicts in New York. The staff were very enthusiastic about the progress they had been making and decided to expand this program. In their present facilities they could help only a small proportion of people asking for help. They made plans to open another center and rented part of a building in another area of town. When the residents of the area found out about the plan they were furious. They felt that the program would increase the crime rate and bring drugs into their neighborhood. On the other hand, the Phoenix House group was afraid that every time they tried to open a new center they would be refused space. They felt that they had a right to free use of the place they had rented.

1. Do you think the center has the right to move into the neighborhood? Why or why not?
2. Does a community have a right to keep such groups out? Why or why not?
3. Should the members of the community try to prevent the center from moving in?
4. If you lived there and didn't want crime increases but really thought the center could be a great deal of help to many people, would you oppose the move? Why or why not?

Toy Revolver

Henry, a young man in his early twenties, wanted to get married but he did not have any money. He thought of a way of making money quickly. He bought a toy revolver that really looked like a real gun. He went to a distant section of town and tried to hold up a grocery store. The store owner was an old man who, when he saw the gun aimed at him, became frightened, had a heart attack, and died. Henry was caught and tried for murder.

1. Do you think Henry was guilty of murder? Why or why not?
2. When he was brought before the judge, what sentence should the judge give him? Why?
3. Should Henry get the same sentence as someone who used a real gun to rob and accidentally killed someone? What if the man with the real gun did not kill anyone, should he be given a longer or shorter sentence than Henry?
4. Henry seemed really shocked and upset about the old man's death and said that he had learned no to rob anyone again. Should he be let off without a jail sentence or should he be made to go to jail? Why?