

A PRAGMATIST THEORY OF DILEMMAS

Muhammad Amasha, Yale University

TYPOLOGIZING DILEMMAS

Dilemmas are not absent in sociology but are rarely theorized. They are often discussed as a secondary phenomenon and understood in their commonsensical meaning rather than being the center of sociological study. In this section, I discuss the different types of dilemmas to provide a tripartite typology: competing-interests dilemmas, interest-value dilemmas, and competing-values dilemmas (i.e., moral dilemmas). I start by discussing the major tradition of dilemmas in sociology, the rational choice or game theoretic tradition, which often, albeit not always, focuses on the first two dilemma types. Then, I introduce a Weberian example of moral dilemmas, concluding with the typology and the complex relationship between values and interests.

Dilemmas are probably most studied within game theoretic rational choice sociology. Examples from that tradition include the prisoner dilemma (where maximizing one's short-term interest in an interdependent relationship leaves everyone in this relationship worse off), the principal-agent problem (where uncertainties dominate a relationship of principals who try to control the agents representing them to ensure a representation in the interest of the principals), the free rider problem (where some beneficiaries underpay for what they benefit from at the expense of others who then face the dilemma of whether they should contribute for public goods), and other dilemmas common in the collective action literature (e.g., Coleman 1994; Olson 1965). One can see that these rational choice dilemmas often result from a "rational" actor's pursuit of maximizing interest amid uncertainty.

Ivan Ermakoff's (2008) archival work on politicians' decisions during political crises provides a sophisticated game-theoretic account that is worth treating in more detail, especially since he gives attention to contingency and poses a dilemma very relevant to the case I study. Ermakoff studies German and French parliamentarians who had to make a decisive parliamentary vote in Nazi Germany and Vichy France, where any stance could pose a high risk. The politician's dilemma was to decide on prioritizing either personal security (conforming with the oppressive regime), status among peers (conforming with peers' choices), political consistency (commitment to constituents or the "polity"), or self-consistency (commitment to one's ideological convictions). Ermakoff argues that taking a position different from peers, leading to either being oppressed alone or labeled a traitor, was the worst outcome. Therefore, politicians complied with their peers in a process he calls collective alignment.

The reader must see that the dilemmas Ermakoff poses are not moral (i.e., they are not between competing values of right and wrong that call for different courses of action). Rather, it is between

competing interests or sometimes between a value (e.g., self-consistency) and interests (e.g., personal safety, status among peers, and conforming with constituents). Ermakoff assumes that people's ideological convictions would lead them toward only one course of action in that situation. This misses a central type of dilemma, the *moral* dilemma, where one's ideological convictions (in plural) compete to push toward different actions in a specific situation. This is like a dilemma Weber poses in his "Politics as a Vocation" lecture.

Weber's (2019:101–3) theory of action is not radically different from rational choice theory in many aspects (Joas and Beckert 2001). But his "Politics as a Vocation" poses a political, moral dilemma that is very relevant to our study of intellectuals' politics in volatile times, a dilemma probably he himself and many others in interwar Germany faced. "Anyone wishing to practice politics of any kind ... has to be conscious of these ethical paradoxes," Weber (1994:365) told his audience. The heart of this dilemma is "the fact that the achievement of 'good' ends in many cases [is] tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means" (Weber 1994:360). Political action for the "greatness of one's Fatherland," "the future of socialism," or the "achievement of international peace" endangers the soul as violence is the "decisive means of politics" (Weber 1994:360, 366).

He speaks of two types of ethics that are in tension: ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, which are more commonly known in moral philosophy as deontological and consequentialist ethics, respectively. The former is about doing the right thing regardless of the consequences, an "absolutist ethics" that does not change under any circumstances, an ethics whose aim is to ensure that "the flame of pure conviction ... is never extinguished" (Weber 1994:360). Ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, is about assessing the ethicality of the action through its foreseeable consequences on one's political community. In this case, the tension is not between the interests of a utility-maximizing person but the values of a morally committed person.

Based on the foregoing discussion, I propose a tripartite typology of dilemma: *competing-interests dilemmas*, *interest-value dilemmas*, and *competing-values dilemmas* (i.e., *moral dilemmas*). The first type is common in the literature, and it happens when one has to choose one of the competing interests (e.g., Ermakoff's safety or status among peers). The second is choosing between competing values and interests (e.g., Ermakoff's safety or ideological consistency). Finally, moral dilemmas occur when different values compete in the same situation: an action that satisfies one moral value would necessarily violate the other (e.g., Weber's dilemma between conviction and responsibility ethics).

Here, an important note on the relationship between values and interests is necessary. I define "interests" as means to power and comfort in this world, not values about whether such means are good or bad.¹ By interest, I do not mean investment in something, the opposite of which is

¹ A person's pursuit of sensual pleasure is mostly an interest-seeking action, which can be motivated by a moral conviction (e.g., belief in hedonist philosophy) or despite it (e.g., belief in moral philosophies with restrictions on

indifference (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:116; Martin and Lembo 2020). I also use “values” to denote moral principles and ideals that people believe to be guiding criteria for what is morally right or wrong. Thus, I maintain the distinction between interests and values. However, though distinct and not identical, values and interests mutually influence each other in at least two ways. First, our moral reasoning can be occupied with securing interests, the protection of which we consider ethical. Another example from Weber (1994:360): syndicalists following responsibility ethics would do their best to protect the interests of their class, and thus, their moral reasoning would be highly dependent on their perception and calculation of those interests in a specific situation. Consequentialist or responsibility ethics is about achieving valued interests: e.g., utilitarian ethics is about achieving the greatest good for the greatest number (Bentham 1823).

Second, our social position and the interests associated with it can unconsciously influence our tendency to adopt certain values rather than others, *à la* Bourdieu. Our moral thinking, especially in sociopolitical matters, is highly influenced by how we perceive the world (see Gorski 2017), which can be limited by our social positions. While many readings and applications of Bourdieu seem to focus on how our moral values are shaped by our social positions, they neglect that these values can have a relatively autonomous influence on action later when they become habits of thought and feeling. Winchester and Green (2019:262) demonstrate how some justificatory accounts can be motivational when they are “reworked and internalized by actors as part of their own self-interpretations.” This article treats morality as both socially situated and motivational.

Bringing moral dilemmas to the discussion is crucial because it poses a challenge to interest-centered action theories common in the sociology of intellectuals while avoiding the simplicity of idealist accounts. It is also important because while competing-interest and interest-value dilemmas are somehow discussed in a theoretical language within the rational choice theory, sociology of morality brings up moral dilemmas as a secondary common sensical phenomenon as seen in the recent *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality* (Hitlin, Dromi, and Luft 2023). The following section provides the needed theorization, going beyond the casual treatment and rational choice and Weberian accounts.

THEORIZING DILEMMAS

A key limitation in the current sociological understanding of dilemmas, which is based on rational choice theory or even Weber, is its failure to explain why some people face dilemmas while others do not when faced with the same situation. I attribute this to their objectivist view of dilemma, which I start this section by critiquing through pragmatism, following with a central contribution of this article: an alternative subjectivist theory of why we face dilemmas.

sensual pleasure). Values and interests are not necessarily contradictory; seeking particular interests can be seen as ethical, but they are different.

A Pragmatist Critique

Weber and Rational choice theory's dilemma accounts are objectivist in that they explain dilemmas by objective conditions rather than subjective experience in specific situations. Weber (1994:359) assumes the inevitability of his dilemma because, for him, responsibility and conviction ethics are objectively contradictory and "fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims." This stems from his assumption of the objective and intrinsic contradiction between purposively rational and value-rational action, upon which responsibility and conviction ethics are based, respectively: "From the perspective of purposive rationality ... value rationality must always be irrational" (Weber 2019:103). In that regard, Weber cannot account for situations where both responsibility and conviction ethics are aligned, as I show below. He also neglects that facing such dilemmas over time enables people to develop solutions that becomes habitual after a while, deeming that dilemma irrelevant for them. Of course, Weber is aware that these are ideal types of action that are mixed in practice, along with traditional and affectual actions. However, he does not give us a convincing way to study this complexity, even if he acknowledges it.

Rational choice theory's objectivist view of dilemma can be exemplified by its assumption that any situation where some benefit from public good without paying for it would inevitably pose a free-rider dilemma for those paying for the public good. The theory cannot explain why some people in this situation may not face a dilemma. That is because it neglects the constitutive role of situations. In other words, it assumes the relative stability of actors' preferences (ends), whether derived from interests or values (Joas and Beckert 2001:272; Whitford 2002). Some rational choice scholars propose that we act based on a relatively stable ranking of our preferences. But if there is such a ranking, there should be no dilemmas in the first place. But even for rational choice dilemmas, where the preferences compete, the theory neglects how situations themselves can reshape our preferences. Dewey's pragmatist theory introduces "ends-in-view" that are part of the action process as goals get specified and concertized based on the situation. "Goal-setting does not take place as a cognitive act prior to action but is based on prereflective aspirations that are operative in the action situation. The aspirations are located in our bodies. The body's capabilities, habits, and ways of relating to the environment form the background to conscious goal-setting" (Joas and Beckert 2001:273). In that regard, dilemmas occur only when situations evokes certain habitual ends-in-view that push for different directions. Hence, dilemmas in my account are actor- and situation-specific.

To be sure, the dilemmas discussed by rational choice theorists or Weber constitute dilemmas for many. The main critique for their account is how to explain that these same situations can constitute no dilemmas at all for many others. Similarly, while these situations can constitute a dilemma for a person at one point, they may cease to be so when that person develops habits to deal with them—i.e., when these "dilemmas" cease to be dilemmas because the actors already obtained the habits needed to deal with them. This could be understood through the pragmatist theory of action (Gross

2009; Gross, Reed, and Winship 2022; Gross et al. 2022; Whitford 2002), especially as articulated by Hans Joas (1997), building on classical pragmatist philosophers like Pierce, James, and Dewey.

Simply, pragmatism conceptualizes humans as problem solvers who depend primarily on their habitual responses until their creativity is required to solve new problems. Our actions are responses to problems we face every day. If we perceive a problem as familiar, the habits we used previously to solve similar problems get activated to solve the current problem with less reflexivity. These habits can be cognitive (how we often perceive and categorize things), affective (how we often feel about them), or behavioral (how we often bodily respond to them) (Gross 2009:370). Yet, we sometimes face problems that our habits fail to solve or we perceive as novel. These are “problematic situations.” To deal with these problematic situations, we experiment with relatively new (or creative) strategies of action until we solve the problem or despair. Such adaptation to new problematic situations, thus, leads to creative action and, with time, new habits.² The next section build on this to provide an alternative theory of dilemmas.

A Theory of Dilemmas

Why do dilemmas occur? *I argue that dilemmas occur for a person when the situation has cues that activate different sets of habits, each of which calls for a different response to the problem at hand, leading to a problematic situation that requires a more reflexive creative response.*

Central to practice theory is the emphasis on embodied habitual knowledge. From the perspective of the actor, values, interests, and perceptions are cognitive-affective habits. To illustrate value or moral habits, parents educate their kids about the importance of telling the truth, expecting that children should tell the truth whenever they or their teachers ask them about something. But if the child is asked by his aunt what he thinks about her cooked food and tells the truth that he did not like it, his parents instruct him that courtesy, rather than truth-telling, is the moral principle suitable for this situation. Over time, questions by “strangers” regarding one’s opinion of their cooking would habitually mostly activate courtesy morality, and questions by parents on what their child did would activate truth-telling morality. Habits of interest can also be seen in how a university professor who is buying a car would recall many interests relevant to this situation (e.g., the price, safety, etc.), but rarely would she recall her interest in being tenured. Habits of perception are the thoughts and feelings activated when something is mentioned, which vary from sympathetic to

² The similarity between pragmatist and Bourdieusian theories in their emphasis on habitual practice is unmistakable. Indeed, some of the pragmatist critique directed at Bourdieu’s neglect of certain issues (e.g., biographies before field entry), if willed, could be presented as a development and specification of Bourdieu’s undertheorized habitus (Steinmetz 2007:56–65). But given that Bourdieu’s theory of action is tightly linked to his field theory, where action is primarily seen as an (unconscious or conscious) attempt to enhance or preserve one’s field position, the pragmatist theory of action is thinner and, thus, have a wider range of applicability (Gross 2009:368).

antagonistic: what do you feel when you hear, for example, Palestine, classical music, capitalism, Nelson Mandela, or Muslims?

Most situations activate *many* behavioral and cognitive-affective habits. In situations that are relatively routinized, things go smoothly. Driving for experienced drivers activates their behavioral habits of managing the car parts, moral habits of not speeding and protecting surroundings, and habitual interests regarding taking the safest routes. Dilemmas occur when a situation has cues that evoke moral or interest habits that call for contradictory action in this specific situation. When one is late and driving to work, habits about safety or following speed limits might contradict habits about being on time, which is calling to speed, leading to a dilemma. Another example is how many people engage with unhoused people. On the one hand, a moral habit of caring for the poor or considering them the victim of systemic capitalist injustice is nurtured for many, and on the other hand, a cognitive-affective habit is nurtured (by media reporting, for example) to perceive many unhoused people as potentially dangerous. For actors who live in areas where there are no unhoused people, encountering an unhoused person who is perceived as both a victim worthy of sympathy and care but also potentially risky creates a problematic situation that leaves the actor in a dilemma on how to act: e.g., help, smile, ignore, or stay away. With such a definition, we probably face many dilemmas every day. Most of these dilemmas are small and private, and any single choice would not have serious consequences. However, some dilemmas are serious and consequential. Political dilemmas for public figures during revolutionary times are of that serious, consequential sort.

Weber's political dilemma is an example of those consequential dilemmas. This dilemma can be constructed through the theory I propose. One of the most common moral teachings deeply inculcated in most of us is to refrain from using violence, especially against innocent people, and especially if it leads to serious harm like murder. For a (morally inclined) politician faced with a political situation with a potential risk of bloodshed, this habitual anti-violence ethics (conviction ethics) pulls the actor to refrain from any action that would cause bloodshed. However, one is similarly inculcated with a deeply held moral responsibility to protect one's community. This is common in nationalist patriotist morality and other forms of solidaristic morality (e.g., tribal, ideological, or religious). During political crises where one's community is threatened, this solidaristic ideal-cum-interest is activated and pushes the actor to do whatever it takes to protect the community (responsibility ethics). When an intellectual faces a political situation where there is a threat to her community and protecting it requires violence, both conviction and responsibility ethics are activated, leading to a dilemma and problematic situation where she turns to a more conscious pursuit of solutions.