



Martin Cohen *101 ethical dilemmas*

Dilemma 1 The lifeboat

The battleship Northern Spirit was torpedoed in the engine room, and began to sink rapidly. "Abandon Ship!" shouts Captain Flinheart. But few of the lifeboats are intact. One boat, desperately overloaded, manages to struggle away from the sinking vessel, Flinheart at the prow. The cold, grey waters of the Atlantic around it are filled with screaming, desperate voices, begging to be saved.

But faced with the grim knowledge of the danger of capsizing the little boat, endangering the lives of those already on board, should any more sailors be picked up and rescued ?

Dilemma 2

Sinking further

Flintheart mutters unpronounceably under his breath (in Latin), and then, in a bark, orders “no stopping”. Some of the others in the boat mutter too (in Anglo-Saxon), about “bleedin’ murder”, “pitiless bastards” and even about “Captains wot oughter go down with their ships”, but all are accustomed to obeying. Until that is, one of the sailors in the water struggles up to the side of the boat, revealing himself to be Tom, the young cabin boy, who manages to get two frozen hands onto the boat’s gunnels (whatever they are), and with a last desperate, heroic effort begins to haul himself in, tipping the boat alarmingly as he does so. “Knock him back in!” shouts Flintheart, from the rear of the boat, to Bert, the cook, who is nearest. Should Bert obey?

Dilemma 5

The internet bargain

You have bought a new computer from a particularly inefficient internet store, and when it arrives, you notice that the invoice says “paid”, although in fact you have not paid for it. You clicked the “sending money by post” option instead, and then forgot to. Now do you: Hope they don’t notice, and keep mum or ring up straight away to advise a cheque is being sent in the post?

Dilemma 6 The toaster

Sam's live-in partner has a taste in expensive nick-nacks, things like toasters which burn an icon of the day's weather on the toast, or solar-powered fountains for the garden pond. The toaster is in the cupboard as it always burnt the middle of the toast and underdid the rest, whilst the garden fountain clogged up after a day and sank to the bottom of the pond. Unsolicited, a catalogue drops through the letterbox from a very fancy (and expensive) postal store, computer-addressed to the partner.

Should Sam quietly get rid of it before he can be misled or give it to him when he gets home and wait for the next disastrous mistake?

Dilemma 7 The liar

Poor Zjamel. Her boyfriend seems to spend more time with Ethel than with her these days. "Are you two having an affair?" she asks him, more by way of a reminder that she exists, than out of any real concern.

But Bernard is having an affair with Ethel. On the other hand, he doesn't look on it as a "serious" affair. Ethel is married, and he is basically quite committed to Zjamel, who has been through a rough patch recently. He doesn't want to upset her, even though he doesn't like lying either. Gritting his teeth then, and remembering Nietzsche's dictum that "lying is a necessity of life", just part of the "terrifying and problematic character of existence", he says: "Of course not, darling" and gives her a big kiss.

Zjamel's heart picks up, and she feels much better. And anyway, in a few months Bernard and Ethel have got bored of the affair and no one ever thinks about the matter again.

Did Bernard do the right thing?



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