What is a “moral dilemma”?

Examples:

1. You have just paid for your groceries and have left the shop when you discover you were given £1 too much in change. A person just outside the shop is in need of some money.

2. A child is crying in the street. No one is helping her. You need to catch the bus (just pulling up to the bus station now) to visit your friend who is about to have an operation.

3. Your neighbour has Alzheimer’s and is also very anti-social. She gets extremely offended with any offer of help and prides herself on her independence. Sometimes she forgets to turn off the stove, or shut her door properly. You notice that her door is open.

In small groups, identify the two conflicting moral “goods” in each situation, saying how the morally “good thing to do” might be phrased as in terms of general moral “oughts”, (rules or beliefs, or moral ideas)
**Aristotle (384-322BCE)**

“We ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education.” (from The Nicomachean Ethics)

The Golden Mean: do just the right thing, do not do too much or too little.

Morality is a practical matter – it involves action:

“By doing just acts the just man is produced...”

Not by theory: “But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in the soul by such a course of philosophy.” (from The Nicomachean Ethics)

**Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)**

“...love out of inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty – although no inclination impels us...— is practical,.... residing in the will and not in the propensities of feeling, in principles of action and not of melting compassion; and it is this practical love alone which can be an object of command” [be a morally worthy action]. (from The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals)

**John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873)**

(Here “utilitarian” means the aim of producing the most happiness for the greatest number)

“To do as one would be done by, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion.... should... establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes: so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action....” (from Utilitarianism)

Kant on feelings and interests:
When reason is used to produce a will that is good, it is “capable of its own peculiar kind of contentment – contentment in fulfilling a purpose which in turn is determined by reason alone, even if this fulfilment should often involve interference with the purposes of inclination.”

Kant also speaks of our awe or reverence for the moral law. And says it is our moral duty to develop our own talents. So he knows that our feelings and interests are an important part of a good life. But he argues that reason is the source of morality, not our desires for a good life (unlike Aristotle or Mill).

For Kant, honesty lies at the heart of social functioning. Without it no communication would be possible. For society to function we must all play our part, we must not lie, we must keep our promises, and we must show respect to others.

Each of these situations reflects a central concern of one of the philosophers we have discussed. Can you pair them?

**Aristotle**

**Mill**

**Kant**

**THE CHILD AND THE BUS**

**THE WRONG CHANGE**

**THE DISTRESSED PERSON AT THE DOOR**

**THE UNFRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR**