

Morality and Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Have you ever asked yourself why you make certain decisions in some situations? How are you able to differentiate between something ‘good’ or ‘bad’? It is because of your moral principles and values. Morality is basically a set of rules or a code of conduct which guides our behavior and helps us in distinguishing between action or a consequence being good or bad. In our daily life, we directly or indirectly use our morality to judge and decide what to do and what not to do in a particular situation. Whenever an individual does something which is against his moral values, he develops a feeling of guilt. This study attempts to study how our decisions are influenced by our morality and how morality is itself influenced by different factors like the principle of utility or altruism. Thought Experiment was employed to study the morality and decision making among the participants on three different moral dilemma scenarios. Total 300 responses were recorded with the help of an online questionnaire, out of which 192 were female participants and 108 were male participants.

Keywords: *Morality, Decision Making, Judgement, Thought Experiment*

Morality is being one of the major research domain for philosophers and psychologist over many years. Philosophers and psychologists gave various models, theories and conducted experiments to have insight and better understanding of the morality aspect of human personality. The word ‘morality’ is an abstract topic and many different meanings, definitions, interpretations and ideas have been given by various philosophers and psychologists over a period of time.

Joshua Greene (2013) defined morality as “a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation.” (p. 23).

Morality can also be considered a set of rules, norms, or simply a code of conduct which allows an individual to function in a prescribed limit. These moralities sometimes construct limits or sometimes encourages a particular behavior among us depending upon the society, culture, religion, sex, and race we belong to. These moral codes could be written or unwritten, could be universal in nature or can be found only in a particular region. With no doubt we can say that morality in humans is very complex and can only be understood from various experimental researches - taking philosophical ideas, models and theories as a base

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of those researches. In a basic sense, morality indicates and directs the behavior towards 'good' and abstains the behavior from 'bad' in a certain situation.

Moral Psychology is an interdisciplinary approach to study morality from taking philosophy as basis and conducting research and producing empirical results on it. It covers questions and domains like 'How does morality influence our decision making?'; 'How morality directs our behavior and mental thinking?'; 'How do moral intuitions influence our judgements?'. The idea of morality revolves around "good" "right" "virtuous" "just" or "ethical" behaving (Haidt, 2003; Haidt and Kasebir, 2010; Turiel, 2006) and these forms the moral norms in our society – which are mostly universal in nature. There had been many thought experiments in the past in order to study and analyze the moral aspect of human personality, for example – trolley dilemma by philosopher Philippa Foot (1967). Decisions in such dilemmas ignite tensions and multiple level mental conflicts between different and contrasting moral and ethical principles within a person, and his or her final choice or judgement gives understanding of his or her moral branch of personality. With the development of psychology over years, there had been many theories, concepts and models developed in relation to morality – Superego in psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud (1890), cognitive-developmental theories including Moral Development by Lawrence Kohlberg (1958), Moral Development by Jean Piaget (1932), and Dual Process Morality Theory by Joshua Greene (2001).

Psychoanalytic Theory

The psychoanalytic theory laid down the guiding principles and dynamics of personality development and psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud around the 1890s. Freud believed that the human psyche is a combination of Id, Ego and Superego – all developing at different level of age. According to psychosexual stages, Superego is the last one to develop in the child (around 5 years of age – phallic stage). Id is a primitive component of psyche which contains mostly sexual and aggressive impulses, drives and wishes, and mostly works on pleasure principle; whereas ego works on reality principle and mediates between id and superego. Superego is the ethical or moral component which does not care about immediate gratification or reality. He decides what is right and what is not right as per the moral norms of the society and encourages morally acceptable behavior. It keeps checks on control over id's activities and violation of superego's standard results in anxiety or feeling of guilt in oneself.

Dual Process Theory

For understanding morality, judgement and decision making in sacrificing dilemmas like trolley problem or footbridge dilemma, the dual system theory plays a significant role which was first propounded by Joshua David Greene. It is one of the most popular and influential models in moral psychology. The theory posits that moral judgements in human beings are processed in two distinctive cognitive subsystems in the brain: emotional and rational. Emotional driven subsystem is considered fast, gives way to intuitive judgements, behavior and unconscious; while the other subsystem of rational is slow and requires more working memory resources. The theory suggests that people tend to give different responses to the trolley and footbridge dilemma is because here, the emotional driven subsystem is mostly dominating the rational subsystem. The thought of pushing someone from the bridge towards death evokes a stronger emotional response within an individual than just pulling a lever and changing the route of an incoming train (Greene et al., 2001). In pushing someone from the bridge, it is counted as a direct and physical action whereas pulling the lever from a

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distance is mostly considered an indirect and non-physical contact, sometimes referred as principle of double effect.

However, Judith Jarvis Thompson offered a different perspective. She argued that moral theories that judge the permissibility of action based on its consequences alone, such as consequentialism or utilitarianism, cannot explain why some actions that cause killings are permissible while others are not.

Thought Experiments

In simple words, a thought experiment is an imaginative situation in which a hypothesis, model, theory, or principle is laid out for the purpose of thinking through its various consequences.

Thought experiments are basically devices of the imagination. Though many call any counterfactual or hypothetical situation a thought experiment (Rescher, 1991).

There have been several attempts to define “thought experiment” along the lines of traditional conceptual analysis (McComb, 2013). They are employed for various purposes such as entertainment, academics, study and investigation, hypothesizing, theory selection and implementation, etc. Sometimes thought experiments help to demonstrate and elucidate abstract states of affairs, thereby advancing the process of understanding of cognizance.

It is these wide application of thought experiments that fascinates most of the researcher’s attention inside and outside of the philosophical discourse. Thought experiments are interdisciplinary in two important aspects. Firstly, not only philosophers treat them as a topic, but also historians, economists, cognitive scientists, psychologists, etc. Secondly, they can be found in many disciplines, including economics, physics, mathematics, biology, philosophy, and history. It is important to clearly differentiate between the imagined scenarios in thought experiments, and the narratives that establish the scenarios in people’s mind. Once a scenario is imagined it may assume a life on its own, and this explains partly the creative power of a good thought experiment. The moral or ethical dilemmas are part of thought experiments which helps us to gain insight about the decision an individual makes after going through multiple ethical conflicts and doing cost-benefit analysis of various consequences.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a thought experiment to study the morality of the participants. Non-probability sampling technique, snowball sampling (chain-referral sampling technique) was used. The data was collected with the help of a computer questionnaire. An online questionnaire was developed on Google Forms to collect the data from the participants. The whole questionnaire was divided into 4 sections (A, B, C and D). Section A had questions related to socio-demographic details like age, latest education qualification, marital status etc. Section B had an abortion dilemma and participants were given 2 choices, among which they had to choose any one which they thought was the right act or thing to do. Section C deals with the Train dilemma and Section D deals with the Surgeon dilemma. The last section, D, had two scenarios. All the questions and dilemmas were compulsory to answer and the participant’s consent was taken in starting of the questionnaire.

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Socio-Demographic details

Total 300 samples from India participated in this study. The age of participants ranges from 16 years to 50 years out of which 74% were belong to age between 21 to 26 years. Among all the participants, 64% (192) were females and 36% (108) were males. 8% of total samples were married, 10% were in relationship with their partners and 82% selected single as their marital status. Out of 300 participants, 84% (252) belonged to Hindu religion, 6% (18) belonged to Islam, 2% (6) to Christianity and 8% (24) to other religions (Jainism, Sikhism and so on). The majority of the participants were college going students (Bachelors/Masters). The participants were divided into 5 different Zones according to their belonging states. Out of the total participants, 62% belonged to Zone 1 (Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh) and 36% belonged to Zone 2 (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Puducherry and Goa) and 2% belonged to Zone 3 (Gujrat, Haryana and Rajasthan).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aims to study the morality aspect of the individual, choices and decisions an individual makes in a given ethical dilemma. Different ethical-moral dilemmas were asked from the participants and choices were given to choose any one of them.

Scenario A

The abortion debate deals with whether terminating the pregnancy and killing the foetus within the process is morally right or wrong. Abortion is still one among of distressing topics for women and men who find themselves facing the moral dilemma of whether or not to end a pregnancy. It is also one of the most polarising moral issues - most people are on one side or the other while very few are undecided.

Since the 1960s, the problem of abortion became a global-wide issue and debate. It is multi-faceted as it involves multiple factors with it like psychological, social, religion, political, medical, legal and ethics. It is a social issue which not only provides liberation to women but also gives them power to make their own decisions and promote their sexual health and wellbeing.

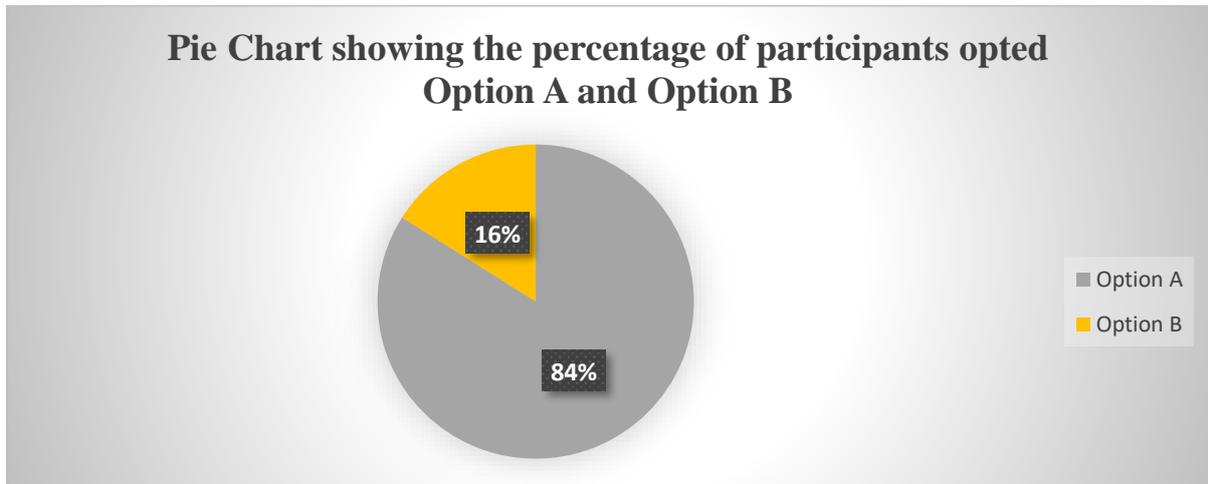
Part III of the Indian Constitution grants us the Fundamental Rights. The article 21 reads, "Protection of life and personal liberty. No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." It means that every individual in India has an individual right to her life and liberty that sanction a woman's right to abortion. However, in 1971 the Government of India passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 making abortion legal in India.

Participants were presented with the moral choice dilemma on Abortion which reads, "Suppose your wife is pregnant for 8 months now and next month she will give birth to your baby girl. But suddenly one day your doctor came up with a medical report saying "The child inside the womb is suffering from a rare disease. After the birth of your child, she will live in severe pain and will not be able to survive for more than two years. There is no medical treatment or cure for this particular disease." As a parent, it's up to you to decide. What will you do?" 2 choices were given to the participants out of which they had to select one which they think is most appropriate thing to do in such a situation. Option A (Choose Abortion and kill 8 months old fetus, a newly forming life inside the womb) or Option B (Proceed with child birth and let your child suffer for 2 years and later watch her die in pain).

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Table 01: Showing the number of participants who opted Option A and Option B

Choices	Option A	Option B
Scenario A	84% (252)	16% (48)



Everyone has different opinions and attitude about abortion. From the above table and pie chart, it is clearly observable that the majority of the participants (84%) choose option A and select abortion whereas, 16% of the participants think abortion is not a solution. There can be many factors behind why the majority runs for abortion in such a situation like psychological, religion, social, or ethical make-up of mind. India legalized the abortion way back in the 1971, and in the span of more than 49 years, the attitude and opinions of Indians towards pregnancy termination have changed. The Lancet Global health report (2015) states that around 15.6 million abortions were performed in India out of which 81% were medical abortions. It means that out of 1000 pregnant women, 47 women commit an abortion, which is much higher than in the USA or China. The liberal views, policy or law has somewhere affected the mindset of Indians which made the majority of participants choose abortion as a better option in this scenario. Also, 64% of the participants were females, which could be another factor for the majority choosing abortion act in the presented scenario apart from personal beliefs and opinions.

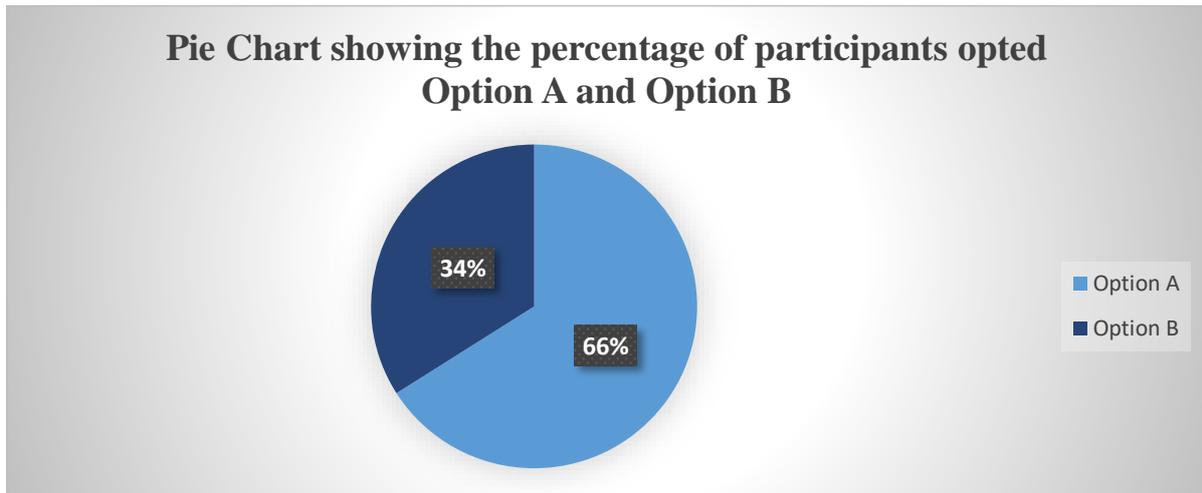
Scenario B

The presented scenario was inspired from the trolley problem, a thought experiment by Philippa Foot (1967). The dilemma reads, “Suppose you are the Head of an Anti-Terrorist Squad and you have a confirm information that in one of the coaches of train no. 92321, there is one terrorist who is planning to kill thousands of people on the next big railway station as soon as the station arrives. If you try to stop the train in middle way - before the station, he will kill all the passengers in the train and will run away and then you will never be able to catch him again. You have only 1 way to stop the terrorist and that is by blowing off the whole train. In next 2 minutes, train will reach the station. You have to decide quick. What will you do?” For this scenario, the participants were given 2 options – A (Yes, I will blow off the whole train killing the terrorist and all the passengers in the train) and B (No, I will not blow off the train and let thousand people die on railway station by the hands of terrorist).

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Table 02: Showing the number of participants who opted Option A and Option B

Choices	Option A	Option B
Scenario B	66% (198)	34% (102)



From the above table and pie chart, it is clearly observable that 66% of the participants think that blowing off the whole train and killing all the passengers and saving passengers on the railway station is the best possible action while 34% of the participants choose not to blow off the train and let passengers die on the railway station with the hands of terrorist.

The most of the participants are ready to blow off the train to save millions at the railway station because of many reasons. One reason could be simple statistics – that saving millions of people on the station is better than saving the passengers on the train. It is just like weighing the options of ‘saving’ and ‘killing’. Option A predicts less killing, whereas Option B predicts less saving. However, there could be other factors too, like utilitarianism.

Like other types of consequentialism, its central notion is that moral rightness or wrongness of any action is determined by their following consequences or effects. It believes that the purpose of morality is to make life better by increasing good things (happiness and pleasure) in the world while decreasing bad things (unhappiness and pain). Utilitarianism rejects the moral code of conducts or systems based on any custom or traditions. Instead, utilitarian’s think that what makes a morality be true or justifiable is its positive contribution to society as a whole. Overall, it proposes that we should always act to produce greatest good for the greatest number of people.

We can see participants using the principle of utility in this scenario. The participants were aware of the foreseeable consequences of this dilemma. Participants weigh the both options and decided which of them will be for the greater good of the society. Somewhere it is clear that option A predicts more utility to the society by saving more people at the station, therefore, we see most of the participants choosing option A in this dilemma.

Philippa Foot provides an alternative explanation to such dilemmas. According to Foot, there is a distinction between killing and letting someone die. There is a difference between killing passengers on the train and letting passengers die at the station. The issue of inflicting ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ harm comes in. The decision of blowing off the train is indirect harm and does not inflict any direct harm on anyone. This is sometimes described as

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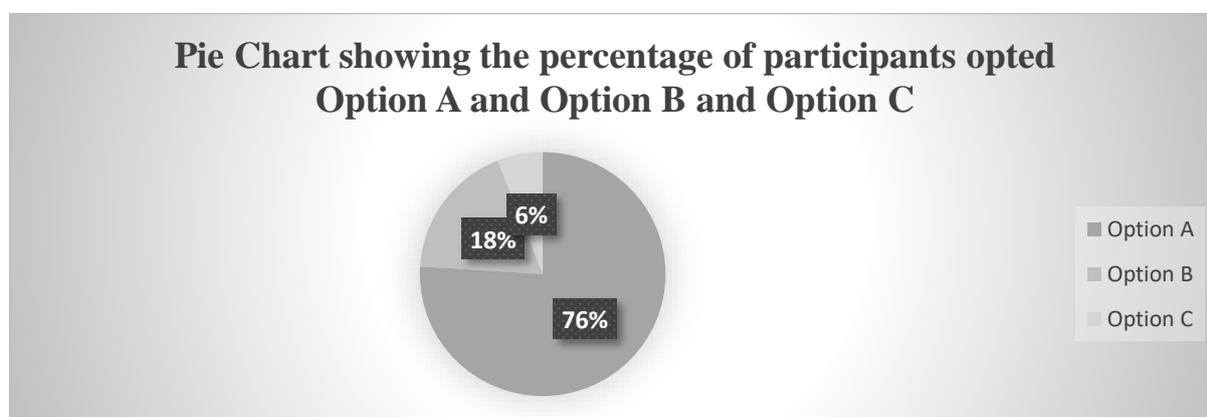
the principle of double effect or the doctrine of double effect which states that it is permissible to cause harm indirectly if the action promotes an even greater good.

Scenario C (a)

The Scenario C basically had two subtypes of scenarios. Scenario was divided into (a) and (b) subtype scenarios. The first one reads, “Suppose you are a surgeon and one day, two critical cases came to you. One of a poor guy and other one of your mother. You find out that your mother urgently needs a heart transplant to survive. You also learn that even if you treat the poor guy, he won't be able to survive for more than 6 months. You think of killing the poor guy and transplant his heart with your mother's heart.” Unlike the other scenarios, this dilemma had 3 options to choose from – Option A (Yes, I will unplug the lifesaving machines from the poor guy and kill him - and save my mother), Option B (No, I will save the poor guy and give a heartwarming farewell to my mother and let her die) and Option C (I will do nothing and let both people die).

Table 03: Showing the number of participants who opted Option A, Option B and Option C

Choices	Option A	Option B	Option C
Scenario C (a)	76% (228)	18% (54)	6% (18)



From the above table and pie chart, it is observable that 76% chooses Option A and save their mother, while 18% will save the poor guy and 6% will do nothing and let both die. It is clear and transparent that why the majority of the people will save their mother in this scenario. It is simply because of the love and care which participants have towards their mother. The bond of belongingness with their mother is why most of the participants will save her in the first place. But here, other factors or reasons could also lead to such decisions, and one of reasons we can find is in kin selection by William D. Hamilton (1964). The theory says that altruism is done more in favor of an organism's relatedness even at the cost of the organism's own survival and reproduction. Kin altruism is a kind of benefit to another organism at a cost of oneself.

Hamilton (1964) proposed that “genes for altruism can increase in occurrence and numbers and be maintained because they may also be present in the recipient of the benefits. Thus, by helping genetic relatives, an individual can maximize its ‘inclusive fitness,’ the sum of its own reproduction (descendant kin), plus its reproduction via its positive effects on collateral kin devalued by its genetic relatedness to them.” In simple words, people have evolved to favor other people more who were genetically related to them so that they can ensure the

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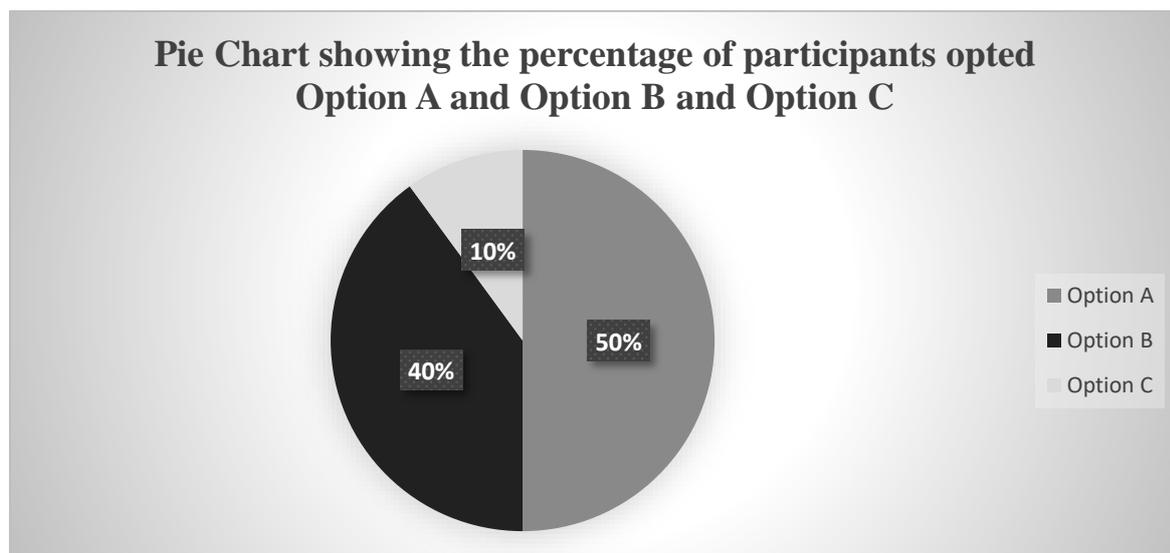
reproduction and replication of their genes to their offspring. Kin altruism influence and guide our actions, cognition, decision making and morality –where most of the people are ready to sacrifice the lives of other people to save the life of one of their relatives so that their genes can remain in the gene pool. In this case, 76% of participants want their mother to be alive because she is a related member as well as want her gene to be in the gene pool. However, 18% of the participants decided to farewell their mother and save the poor guy. This could be explained with the help of reciprocity altruism – where sacrifices are made for the unrelated member. This theory was proposed by Robert Trivers in 1971.

Scenario C (b)

It was a little changed version of first subtype. This version reads, “Suppose you are a famous surgeon and one day, two critical cases comes to you. One case of a poor child who urgently needed a heart transplant to survive. Second case is of your mother who is in severe pain and suffering and oscillating between life-death condition. You think that your mother has lived her life and it’s the child who still has his whole life to live. But you also think that the parents of the poor child will not be able to afford your high surgery fees and even if you successfully operate the child, he will still be a poor lad and mostly, has no bright future. Or what about simply ignore the poor child and let him die and save your own mother. You have very less time to save the poor child or your mother. What will you do in this situation?” This dilemma also had 3 options – A (Put all the resources and time to your mother and do everything to save her - killing the poor child), B (Kill your mother intentionally and save the poor child) and C (I will do nothing and let both people die).

Table 04: Showing the number of participants who opted Option A, Option B and Option C

Choices	Option A	Option B	Option C
Scenario C (b)	50% (150)	40% (120)	10% (30)



The above table and pie chart shows that 50% participants will save their mother, 40% will save the poor child and 10% will choose not to do anything in this scenario. Here also the relationship and bond with their mother, quality of the relation with mother, kin selection, altruistic thinking and behaving and reciprocity are some of the factors or reasons that determine this decision making just like in the previous sub-type of scenario.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study aimed at analyzing the participant's judgement on an ethical dilemma by using a thought experiment. Morality is the differentiation between right or wrong action and consequence. This study focuses on how the decisions we make on the basis of our morality is influenced by other prime factors too like awareness, personal beliefs and attitudes, consequentialism and utilitarianism, principle of utility, doctrine of double effect, kin selection, altruism and reciprocity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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