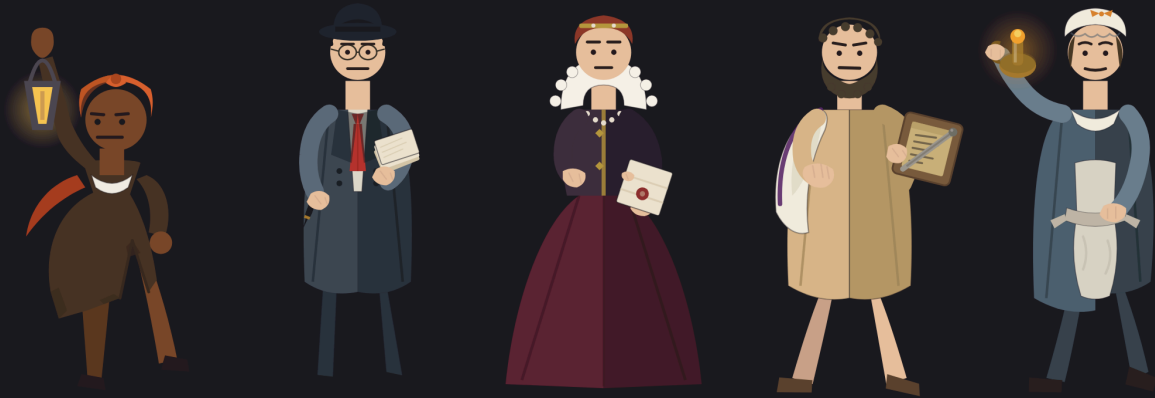




FREE CLASSROOM PACK · 5 BELL RINGERS

Historical Moral Dilemmas

Five real decisions from history, each stopped at the exact moment a real person had to choose.

High school and up

5 to 10 minutes each

History · Ethics · ELA

Answer key included

No One Turns Back

Harriet Tubman

An Anointed Queen

Elizabeth I

What the Drains Did

Florence Nightingale

The Fourth Cable

Chiune Sugihara

The Best Available Man

Marcus Aurelius

Start class with a real dilemma

Each page is one true story from history that stops right before the decision. There is no right answer. The point is the argument: students commit to a side before they know the outcome, then defend it.

1 Read it together (2 minutes)

Read the story aloud, or scan the code on the page and press Listen for the narrated version.

2 Everyone chooses before anyone knows

A show of hands, or a line on a sticky note. Each option comes with its own reason, written in the voice of the time.

3 Argue the other side

Ask students to make the strongest case for the option they did not pick. Use the discussion questions to push further.

4 Reveal what happened

Read the answer key at the back, or open the story's page (the code at the bottom) and press "Reveal what happened". Nothing is recorded.

5 Exit ticket (optional)

"Which reason was hardest to argue against, and why?"

About the stories. Every story is fact-checked claim by claim against the historical record. Where a moment is dramatized or the sources disagree, the story says so on its page. Some stories involve war, executions and slavery, told plainly and without graphic detail.

Want more? A new dilemma goes up every day at moralia.app, free, with no ads and no student accounts. Every past story stays available at moralia.app/stories. Students 16 and over can also play on their own phones.



All past stories

moralia.app/stories

Questions or corrections: support@moralia.app

No One Turns Back

c. 1856 · Harriet Tubman, leading a group north, with dogs heard behind them earlier that night

It's past midnight, and the conductor's line has stopped moving. A young man near the back **sits down in the mud** and won't get up. He's been running for three nights on almost no food, and he says he'd rather turn back and take a beating than get shot running.

She crouches beside him. She has led this trip thirteen times and lost no one, because everyone in the line is safer moving than standing still in open woods. An hour ago, **dogs barked somewhere behind them**, close enough that everyone heard it. Behind the young man, **a mother holds her son** so he won't cry. If this man goes back and fear makes him talk, this route ends tonight (for him, and for everyone still waiting to use it).

Her coat pocket is heavier than a coat pocket should be. He still hasn't stood up.

OPTION A

Hold the line: no one turns back tonight

"One man's fear, if you let it walk backward, can drag everyone behind him with it."

OPTION B

Let him go back

"You cannot march someone into freedom against their will and still call it freedom."

My choice: A ☐ B ☐ because _____

DISCUSS

1. Option B says you cannot march someone into freedom against their will. Option A says one man's fear can drag everyone with it. Which reason is harder to argue against, and why?
2. List everyone in this scene and what each person stands to lose. Whose loss should count most?
3. Is there a third option the story doesn't offer? What would it cost, and who would pay?

ARGUE THE OTHER SIDE



Play it, listen to it, or reveal what happened

moralia.app/d/no-one-turns-back

The outcome is in the answer key at the back of this pack.

The Fourth Cable

July 1940 · Chiune Sugihara, Japan's vice-consul in Kaunas, with Polish-Jewish refugees at his gate

The crowd outside the gate has been there for days. They are families who **ran east when the war started**, and now the east is closing too. A transit visa through his country is one of the last open roads.

He has asked his ministry three times for permission to issue them. Three times **the answer has come back no**. The last cable was blunt: applicants need onward visas and money, and almost nobody at the gate has either.

He can sit down and **write the visas himself, by hand**, one at a time, on official forms with the official seal. It is forgery only in the sense that no one authorized it. It will save the people standing outside. It will also change nothing; the policy stays, and the next consul will follow it.

Or he can resign loudly, name the policy, and make it a scandal his ministry has to answer for. That saves no one at this gate.

His hand is on the drawer.

OPTION A

Resign, and attack the policy in public

"Quietly breaking a rule leaves the rule standing for everyone who comes after you."

OPTION B

Start writing the visas

"You help the people actually in front of you, and you let history argue about the policy."

My choice: A ☐ B ☐ because _____

DISCUSS

1. Which matters more: the people at the gate today, or the policy that will keep turning people away tomorrow?
2. Is breaking a rule quietly more honest, or less honest, than breaking it in public? Explain.
3. What would you need to know about the consequences before you chose? Could he know it in time?

ARGUE THE OTHER SIDE



Play it, listen to it, or reveal what happened

moralia.app/d/the-fourth-cable

The outcome is in the answer key at the back of this pack.

An Anointed Queen

1586 · Elizabeth I, after intercepted letters tied her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, to a plot to kill her

The letters have been read and the plot is real. Her cousin, a crowned queen **held in England for nineteen years**, has been in correspondence with men who intended to kill her and put that cousin on her throne.

Parliament has asked twice. Her council asks daily. The warrant is drawn up and it sits on the desk, and everyone in the building is **waiting for one signature**.

Signing it means **executing an anointed queen**, something no one in Europe has done to a reigning monarch. It tells every Catholic power that a crown is not protection, and it invites them to test whether hers is. It also tells her own subjects that killing the queen is worth attempting, because the punishment arrived nineteen years late.

Not signing it leaves a living, legitimate alternative to her throne inside her own borders, and every plot for the rest of her life **will have somewhere to point**.

The pen is on the desk. It has been for three months.

OPTION A

Sign the warrant

"Every month she stays alive is another month someone plans around her, and mercy that costs other people their lives is not mercy."

OPTION B

Refuse to sign

"Once a monarch can be executed for what she was found writing, no monarch is safe, and you have made the argument that will one day be used on you."

My choice: A ☐ B ☐ because _____

DISCUSS

1. Option B warns that this argument could "one day be used on you." What does that mean, and is it a good reason to refuse?
2. The warrant has waited three months. Does not deciding count as a decision? What has the delay already done?
3. Is a choice that protects your own life a moral choice, or only a practical one?

ARGUE THE OTHER SIDE



Play it, listen to it, or reveal what happened

moralia.app/d/an-anointed-queen

The outcome is in the answer key at the back of this pack.

The Best Available Man

c. 175 · Marcus Aurelius, the first emperor in eighty years with a living son of his own

For most of a century, the empire has been handed on by adoption. Each emperor picked the ablest man he could find, **made him a son on paper**, and trained him. Four times in a row it has produced a competent ruler. It is the reason the last hundred years have not looked like the hundred before them.

He now has a son of his own, the first emperor in that century to have a living one. The boy is thirteen. Everyone at court can see what he is: not stupid, but **vain, easily flattered, drawn to spectacle**, and not much interested in the work.

If he names the boy, the succession is uncontested and no one raises an army over it. If he passes him over for an abler man, he has told the legions that the emperor's own son can be set aside, and he has probably **signed the boy's death warrant**, because no new emperor lets a rival heir grow up.

He has been writing to himself for years about doing the duty rather than the comfortable thing. Now it is his son.

OPTION A

Name your son

"A clear succession no one can dispute is worth more than a better man the legions have to be persuaded about, and you do not buy the empire's stability with your own child's life."

OPTION B

Pass him over

"The office is not property and it is not inheritance. If a hundred years of choosing the best man produced this hundred years, you do not end it because the accident of a son happened to you."

My choice: A ☐ B ☐ because _____

DISCUSS

1. Should loyalty to your own family ever outweigh your duty to the public? Where is the line?
2. The adoption system worked four times in a row. Is past success a good enough reason to keep a practice?
3. Option A says passing over the boy would mean buying stability with your own child's life. Is that fair?

ARGUE THE OTHER SIDE



Play it, listen to it, or reveal what happened

moralia.app/d/the-best-available-man

The outcome is in the answer key at the back of this pack.

What the Drains Did

1855–58 · Florence Nightingale, preparing a report meant to reform British army medicine

The newspapers have made her a saint. There are engravings of her **walking the wards at night** with a lamp, and there is a public subscription in her name, and every politician in London now has to be seen agreeing with her.

She has the numbers, and the numbers say something else.

Men died faster in her hospital after she arrived than before. What stopped it was not nursing. It was a sanitary commission that came out from London, **opened the drains, and discovered** the building was standing on a cesspool with the water supply running through it. The death rate collapsed within weeks of that, and not before.

She can put that in the report, plainly, with her own hospital as the example, and hand every opponent of reform the sentence they need: **even she made it worse**.

Or she can publish the statistics, let them do their work, and let the lamp stand. The reforms she wants are enormous, and the only reason anyone in government is listening is the lamp.

OPTION A

Put it in the report, plainly

"A reform built on a story that isn't true will be defended with the story instead of the evidence, and the next generation will get the lamp and not the drains."

OPTION B

Publish the numbers, let the lamp stand

"Being right changes nothing on its own. You are holding the one thing that makes ministers read a page of statistics, and you do not put it down to feel clean."

My choice: A ☐ B ☐ because _____

DISCUSS

1. Is it acceptable to let a flattering but inaccurate story stand if it helps a good cause?
2. Who is harmed if she tells the full truth? Who is harmed if she doesn't?
3. Think of a modern cause that relies on a famous image or story. Should the people behind it correct it if it's wrong?

ARGUE THE OTHER SIDE



Play it, listen to it, or reveal what happened

moralia.app/d/what-the-drains-did

The outcome is in the answer key at the back of this pack.

What really happened

1. No One Turns Back

Harriet Tubman is recorded holding a wavering passenger to the line, more than once. She carried a pistol on her rescue missions not primarily for slave catchers, but for her own passengers: 'You'll be free or die a slave,' she reportedly told a man who tried to turn back, leaving him no real choice but to keep walking. Over roughly thirteen trips across ten years, she never lost a single passenger.

2. The Fourth Cable

Chiune Sugihara sat down and wrote. For twenty-nine days he issued transit visas by hand in correct consular format, until the consulate was closed around him; his own report to the Foreign Ministry counts 2,139, each covering a family, which is why estimates of people saved run from 6,000 to 10,000. He never argued, never published, and never tried to change the policy that had refused him three times. He was dismissed from the foreign service in 1947 and did not discuss any of it. His neighbors found out at his funeral in 1986, when a Jewish delegation arrived from around the world to bury a man they had assumed was a retired businessman.

3. An Anointed Queen

Elizabeth signed it in February 1587, and then told her secretary, William Davison, to hold it and send nothing. The council sent it anyway. Mary was beheaded at Fotheringhay on 8 February. Elizabeth wept and raged, and had Davison tried, fined ten thousand marks and imprisoned in the Tower for sending the warrant she had signed; his career never recovered. She had earlier hinted to Mary's jailer that a quiet private killing would spare her the necessity, and he had refused. She got the outcome she wanted and spent the rest of her life insisting it was not her decision.

4. The Best Available Man

Marcus Aurelius named Commodus, made him co-emperor at sixteen, and left him the empire in 180. Commodus abandoned the northern campaign, ruled through favorites, renamed Rome after himself and the months of the year after his own titles, and fought in the arena as a gladiator while the administration rotted. He was strangled in his bath by his wrestling partner in 192, and the year that followed had five emperors and a civil war. The most relentlessly self-examining ruler in Roman history had spent a lifetime writing privately about doing the harder right thing, and never turned that examination on his own family.

5. What the Drains Did

Nightingale published the statistics (relentlessly, and with diagrams she invented specifically because ministers would not read a table) and never publicly credited the sanitary commission whose drains had actually saved Scutari. She used the fame. From a sickbed she spent the next fifty years rebuilding British army medicine, the sanitary administration of India, and nursing as a paid profession, and the death rates she moved are not in dispute. She also refused a state funeral and Westminster Abbey, and left instructions that her gravestone carry nothing but her initials and her dates. The lamp is the least accurate thing about her, she knew it, and it made her famous anyway.



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