

CHAPTER 10



Deontology

The Ethics of Duty

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.

—IMMANUEL KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*¹

Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it.

—Bhagavad Gita²

You are a physician at a college health center. One of your patients, Eric, a 27-year-old graduate student, comes to you complaining of pain when he urinates. Tests reveal that he has gonorrhea. When you tell him the results of the tests, he pleads with you not to tell his wife about his condition since he is worried that she'll leave him if she finds out he has been unfaithful. His wife is a senior at the same college and also one of your patients. Eric swears that he loves his wife and that this was a one-night stand and that he will never be unfaithful again. He asks you to tell his wife, should she ask you, that he is taking antibiotics for a urinary tract infection. What should you do?

A 1989 study at a major hospital revealed that the majority of doctors were willing to use deception in a case such as this and would back up the husband's story.³ However, is this lie morally justified? While a utilitarian might say "yes," if the benefits of lying outweigh the harm (possible breakup of marriage) of telling the truth, most deontologists would say that we have a duty to tell the truth in cases like this and that lying is wrong.

In this chapter we'll be studying deontology, which regards duty, rather than consequences, as the foundation of morality. We'll also develop strategies for making moral decisions in our lives when these duties come into conflict as in the above case.

Deontology and Duty

Deontology is one of the most popular approaches to ethics. Deontological theories regard duty as the basis of morality. The word **deontology** comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning "duty" or "that which is obligatory." Moral duties are

not the same as legal duties or cultural norms. A moral duty is transcultural and universally binding. If a cultural norm or law conflicts with a moral duty, then the moral duty should take precedence over the legal duty.

There are strong strands of deontology in both Confucian and Hindu ethics and in many Western ethical theories. The high standards of moral excellence put forth by deontologists have also inspired psychologists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, to study moral development and to map the transition to post-conventional moral reasoning, as exemplified in deontological ethics.

For deontologists, the moral law is not defined in terms of consequences or whether it promotes some goal as it is in ethical egoism and utilitarian theory. Instead, the moral law is an end in itself. Moral duty requires the recognition of and submission to moral laws or rules. Immanuel Kant taught that we should act purely out of good will, not because of rewards or punishment or other consequences. Hindu ethics, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, also teaches that righteous living (dharma) requires discipline and acting out of a sense of duty rather than out of concern for the consequences of our actions:

Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action;
Avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!
Perform actions, firm in discipline,
relinquishing attachment;
be impartial to failure and success—
this equanimity is called discipline.

With the exception of Kant, who argued that moral duties are absolute, most deontologists regard moral duties as *prima facie*. An **absolute duty** is one that is always morally binding regardless of the circumstances. There are no exceptions. For example, Kant regarded the duty not to lie as an absolute duty.

A **prima facie duty**, on the other hand, is morally binding unless it conflicts with a more pressing moral duty. The duty not to lie, for example, may conflict with the duty to prevent someone's death. In this case, a *prima facie* deontologist may decide that the duty to prevent someone's death overrides the duty not to lie. Whether or not lying is morally justified in order to save our patient's marriage (in the introductory scenario) is a more controversial question and would require an in-depth analysis of the other duties and rights at stake in this case.

Duties can also be positive or negative. A **positive duty** entails actively doing something, such as extending a helping hand or returning a favor. A **negative duty**, on the other hand, requires us to restrain ourselves from doing something, such as stealing, cheating on a test, or beating up a motorist who cuts us off in traffic. Most duties have both negative and positive elements. The duty of non-maleficence or "do no harm," for example, is usually a negative duty. We should refrain from harming others, even when we feel a desire to do so. Non-maleficence, however, can also be a positive duty when it requires us to actively

Connections

What is the relationship between a moral duty and a moral right? See Chapter 11, pages 348–349.

do something to stop or remove a harm, such as calling the police when we see someone being assaulted. Nonmaleficence as a positive duty also involves taking action to prevent future harms, such as warning employees about risks in the workplace or strapping young children into car seats.

Although deontologists agree that duty is the basis of morality, they differ in their views regarding the source of moral duty. Kant maintained that moral duty can only be grounded in reason. Sir W. David Ross, on the other hand, claims that moral duties are self-evident: We know what they are through intuition. Ross writes in his book *The Right and the Good*:

[T]he moral order . . . is as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetics. In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved; but that just as certainly need no proof. . . .

We have no more direct way of access to the facts about rightness and goodness and about what things are right or good, than by thinking about them; the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science. . . . The verdicts of the moral consciousness of the best people are the foundation on which we must build.

Deontology is often presented as diametrically opposed to utilitarian theory, but this is misleading. Utilitarians also regard duty as important. "It is part of the notion of Duty in every one of its forms," wrote John Stuart Mill, "that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it."⁴ For a utilitarian, however, our only duties are to maximize happiness (duty of beneficence) and to minimize pain (duty of nonmaleficence) for the greatest number. Deontologists, on the other hand, recognize additional duties. They also emphasize duty for duty's sake rather than because of its consequences.

Deontologists have been accused of being nothing more than rule-utilitarians. Rule-utilitarians and deontologists both believe that rules should be universal; however, the reasoning behind the formulation of the rules is different. The rule-utilitarian asks which rules, in general, bring about the best consequences. Deontologists, in contrast, ask whether a rule, such as "do not lie," is logically consistent. In other words, would a rational person wish that this rule be made a universal moral law?

Deontologists take into consideration more than just happiness when deciding which rules should be universalized. Kant, for example, acknowledged that we have a duty to assure our own happiness because "discontent with one's state, in a press of cares and amidst unsatisfied want, might easily become a great temptation to the transgression of duty." However, unlike the utilitarians, Kant and other deontologists considered the pursuit of happiness an indirect duty because we already have in us "the strongest and deepest inclination towards happiness."⁵

Connections

What is the principle of utility? See Chapter 8, pages 235–236.

Connections

What is the difference between a rule utilitarian and an act utilitarian? See Chapter 8, pages 237–238.



Exercises

1. When making moral decisions, do you act purely from a sense of duty? Discuss other considerations, such as fear of punishment or peer pressure, that motivate you to behave morally. Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.
2. Discuss whether a person's intentions are relevant to doing good. Are being virtuous and acting out of a sense of duty more important than doing good because of the consequences? Support your answer.
3. Adolf Eichmann had never himself killed or even given an order to kill a Jew or any other human being. Although he had been fully informed about the mass killings of Jews, his response was that this had nothing to do with his job. Nevertheless, the court found him guilty, ruling that "the legal and moral responsibility of him who delivers the victim to his death is, in our opinion no smaller and may even be greater than the liability of him who does the victim to death."⁶ Discuss whether the ruling was morally justified.
4. Discuss whether industries that create products, such as cigarettes or assault rifles, that harm consumers should be held morally responsible for the harms they directly or indirectly cause. Discuss also if retailers, such as Wal-Mart or the Gap, as well as we consumers have a negative duty to avoid products created by these industries.

Immanuel Kant: The Categorical Imperative

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

—IMMANUEL KANT, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), p. 421

Duty and the moral *ought* emerged as a dominant theme during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western philosophy. This period, known as the *Enlightenment*, was equaled only by the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., which witnessed the golden age of ancient Greek philosophy and the birth of Confucianism and Moism in China and of Buddhism in India.

Connections

What, according to Plato, is the ideal type of society for promoting virtue and justice in its citizens? See Chapter 6, page 184.

The Enlightenment gave rise to some of the most influential philosophy in Western history, including the deontology of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and the rights ethics of John Locke (1632–1704) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). The rise of science and technology during this period reinforced the ancient Greek belief in the fundamental rational nature of humans and the potential of reason to solve all our problems. The concern with the public sphere that was so central to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle was gradually replaced with an emphasis on autonomy and the dignity of the individual. The individual life, independent of the community, became a value in and of itself.

The Life of Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was perhaps the greatest and most influential of the Enlightenment ethicists. He was born in 1724 in Königsberg, Prussia, the son of a saddler. His mother, a devout Pietist (a Lutheran sect), was remarkable for her good character and natural intelligence and had a great influence upon her son's development.

In 1755, Kant got a job as privatdozent at the University of Königsberg; this licensed him to give lectures. As a lecturer, he was playful, witty, and entertaining. To his many friends, he was a role model and an inspiration. In 1770, after years of trying to procure a permanent teaching position, Kant was finally appointed Professor of Logic and Metaphysics. His first great work in philosophy, *Critique of Pure Reason*, was not published until 1781, when Kant was in his late fifties. It was followed, however, by several other great works.

Kant's most notable trait, it was said, was his sincerity and his devotion to the concept of moral duty. During his later years, Kant gained fame as a sort of oracle. People would come from all around to Königsberg to consult him on all sorts of issues, including the lawfulness of vaccinations. Kant died in 1804, having spent his entire life in Königsberg.

The Ought Quality of Morality

In his early writings, Kant acknowledged the role of a natural moral sense or feeling of concern for others. However, as he became more involved in the critical, analytical philosophy that dominated continental Enlightenment philosophy, he moved away from his earlier position to draw a sharp distinction between reason and feelings.

Kant believed that most people already *knew* right from wrong. Like Aristotle, he used the everyday experience of morality, along with the tentative presumption that our ordinary knowledge of morality is legitimate, as his starting point. In doing so, Kant took care not to confuse morality with cultural relativism, which he strongly opposed. What interested him about our ordinary knowledge of morality were the very general moral principles that transcend cultural particulars.

Kant believed that the problem most people have is not in *knowing* what is morally right but in *doing* it. His primary concern was not to produce a list of duties but to establish a metaphysical groundwork or foundation for ethics that would explain, once and for all, why we *ought* to behave morally (see the selection by Kant at the end of this chapter). To accomplish this, he first asked: What gives morality its imperative or *ought* quality? What is the supreme principle of morality that provides a solid foundation for moral judgment?

Only reason, Kant concluded, can provide a sound foundation for the universality of morality. Empirical data and feelings, though not irrelevant, are insufficient to provide the foundation for moral law. He wanted to keep morality free from the taint of self-interest and external considerations (heteronomy). If there is a moral law and if it is to be morally binding, then it must be logically compelling.

Connections

What is the role of empirical propositions in a moral argument? See Chapter 2, pages 49–50.

As a rational being, I can only will what is not logically contradictory; this includes not making an exception of myself. If a particular action is right or wrong, it must always be so. Otherwise, we are being logically inconsistent.

Because the formulation of general moral principles cannot be derived from empirical experience, Kant concluded that moral knowledge must be *a priori*. An **a priori proposition** is one that we can know to be true prior to or without reference to actual experience. He referred to the *a priori* aspect of morality as the metaphysical foundation of morality.

Carrying this line of thinking one step farther, Kant argued that reason requires not only that moral duties be universal but also that they be *absolutely* binding. There can be no exceptions. For example, we should *never* lie, even in a situation where lying might have beneficial consequences, such as lying to a murderer in order to save someone's life.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

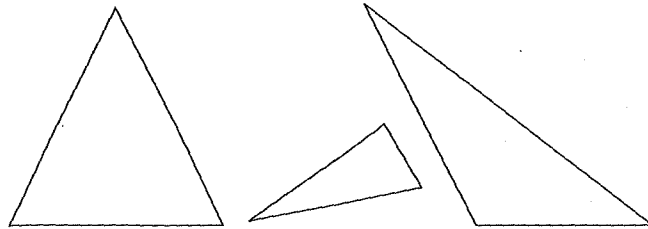
Unlike **hypothetical imperatives**, which tell us we ought do something if we desire to achieve a certain result—such as telling a lie to save a life—moral obligations are categorical, or unconditionally binding upon us. A **categorical imperative** states that we ought to do something regardless of the consequences.

The categorical imperative is also a formal principle—that is, it lacks a specific content. It has been compared to the Tao, or the Way, in Eastern philosophy. Kant came up with two formulations of the categorical imperative. The first formulation states:

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Kant thought that all rational beings would agree with this formulation of the categorical imperative, even though there may be disagreement about the particular details of moral behavior. To illustrate what he meant by this, he drew an analogy between ethics and mathematics. To someone unskilled in mathematics, the three triangles at the top of page 305 all look different, just as at first glance different ethical systems can appear to be unrelated. However, through the application of reason, we can discover formal principles that govern all triangles. Similarly, by the use of reason, Kant argued, we would all come up with the categorical imperative as the foundation of morality.

As a formal principle, the categorical imperative provides a framework for deriving moral maxims or laws, such as “do not lie” or “honor your parents,” that can be applied in specific situations. When deciding whether a particular rule or maxim is moral, we need only ask ourselves whether what we are proposing has the formal character of law—that is, would we as a rational person will that it be a universal law? To illustrate his point, Kant considered a maxim



that would allow us to make "lying promises," promises that we do not intend to keep. In answer to the question "Does a lying promise accord with duty?" Kant wrote:

I have then to ask myself "Should I really be content that my maxim (the maxim of getting out of a difficulty by a false promise) should hold as a universal law (one valid both for myself and others)? And could I really say to myself that every one may make a false promise if he finds himself in a difficulty from which he can extricate himself in no other way?" I then become aware at once that I can indeed will to lie, but I can by no means will a universal law of lying; for by such a law there could properly be no promises at all . . . and consequently my maxim, as soon as it was made a universal law, would be bound to annul itself.⁷

Reason as the Foundation of Morality

Because reason, according to Kant, provides the foundation of morality, morality would not exist in the world without rationality. This makes humans, and other rational beings, very special beings. Whereas rational beings have free will, Kant maintained that everything else in nature operates according to physical laws. Furthermore, because autonomy is essential for dignity, only rational beings have intrinsic moral worth. As beings with intrinsic worth, rational beings can never be treated as expendable but must be respected with dignity as ends in themselves. This society of all rational beings, according to Kant, constitutes the "kingdom of ends." This ideal is summed up in the second formulation of the categorical imperative (also known as the practical imperative):

So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end in itself, never as a means only.

We have a duty to always respect people as ends in themselves; Kant was not implying by this that we could *never* treat another person as a means, however. Obviously, this would be impossible. We use our teachers as a means of furthering our education; we use bus drivers as a means of getting to school or to work; we use doctors as a means of healing our bodies. Kant was saying that we cannot treat a person *only* as a means. In other words, we cannot simply dispose of a person once we no longer need their services in the way we discard a pen or a tongue

Connections

What is an autonomous moral agent and how does it differ from a heteronomous moral agent? See *Chapter 1, page 12.*



For many young people the Internet and other forms of social media, such as mobile phones and ipads, are an integral way in which they conduct their personal lives. Even when in the same room with other people, they may communicate with each other using social media rather than talking face to face.



Discussion Questions

1. Is social media “depersonalizing” our interaction with other people and contributing to social isolation? One study found that “people are meaner online than in ‘real life,’” a phenomenon researchers blamed on anonymity and invisibility.⁸ Thinking about your own use of social media, are you less likely to regard the person you are communicating with as a person with intrinsic moral worth, than you would if you were interacting with that person face-to-face? Given this phenomenon of depersonalization, discuss whether you have a moral obligation to limit your use of social media and/or to engage in more face-to-face contact.
2. Relate your answer to the previous questions to Kant’s categorical imperative. Discuss what Kant, were he alive today, might think the moral issues involved in the use of social media and what suggestions he might have for how and when to use it.

depressor once it is no longer of use to us. Even though we may no longer have any use for these people, we still have a moral obligation to continue to treat them with respect and dignity.

In line with this honesty requires not just raw truth, but also stating the truth in a way that respects the dignity of people as ends in themselves. Telling someone who asks you how she looks that she is ugly shows a lack of

respect for her as a person. On the other hand, people deserve an honest answer. People who have lied, Kant claimed, no matter how well intentioned ("I didn't want to hurt her feelings"), have failed in their duty to the other person because the lie restricts their autonomy. To lie to other rational beings such as the wife in the opening scenario, is to offer them a profound insult regarding their ability to make decisions about their own life or their ability to handle the truth.

Deontology, with its emphasis on the intrinsic worth of rational beings, has been regarded as an important corrective to strict utilitarian theory where an individual may be sacrificed for the greater good of the community. On the other hand, Kant defined the moral community more narrowly than utilitarians. Utilitarians include all sentient beings, whereas Kant insisted that only rational beings are worthy of moral respect.

So far as animals are concerned we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man.

—IMMANUEL KANT, "Duties Towards Animals and Spirits" (1779)

Even though nonhuman animals lack intrinsic worth, according to Kant, he argued that cruelty to nonhuman animals is morally wrong except when such cruelty directly benefits humans, such as in science experiments. In other circumstances, cruelty to nonhuman animals is wrong because it often spills over into an attitude of meanness and hardness in our dealings with other humans.

Exercises

1. Apply the categorical imperative to the following scenarios:
 - a. Your roommate Beth has been depressed lately. She's not keeping up with her studies, and has even talked about committing suicide. One evening, she agrees to go to a party with you. As you're ready to leave, she asks you how she looks. She looks pretty awful. Her mascara is smeared, her hair is unkempt, and her clothes are dirty and unsuitable for the occasion. How do you answer her question?
 - b. Your best friend Grace just got engaged to Bob. Grace can only say how wonderful Bob is, but you have reason to believe otherwise. Every so often, she turns up in class with a black eye. When you ask what happened, she says she fell. Recently, you learned from a sorority sister, whom Bob had