

Rationality, Duty, and the Moral Dilemma: An Approach to Deontic Ethics

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate landscape of deontic ethics, a branch of moral philosophy grounded in duty and the inherent value of actions, independent of their consequences. Beginning with a compelling moral dilemma involving a couple and their children, the paper illustrates the critical stance deontic ethics takes against utilitarian approaches that prioritize the outcomes of actions over their moral correctness. Immanuel Kant's deontological framework, which posits that actions are morally right if they are done out of duty and respect for universal moral laws, serves as the foundation for the discussion. The paper navigates the evolution of deontic ethics from its pre-modern conceptions, where duty was seen as a societal imposition, to Kant's revolutionary idea that moral duties arise from rational autonomy and the intrinsic dignity of individuals. Furthermore, the examination extends to how deontic ethics responds to the challenges posed by consequentialist ethics, advocating for actions performed purely from a sense of duty. It further discusses the shortcomings of deontic ethics itself, addressing the moral dilemmas and the potential conflicts between duty and the consequences of actions.

Keywords: Ethics, Deontic, Consequentialism, Utilitarian, Kantian Ethics, Moral dilemma, Duty

Introduction:

The realm of ethics involves a complex array of moral principles, cultural norms, and philosophical ideas. Ethics is the foundation of morality and justice, allowing us to understand what is morally correct, fair, and best for humanity as a whole. Nevertheless, the ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, and fair and unfair, are not always as unambiguous and obvious as black versus white. Throughout history, many philosophers have elaborated on the delicacies of an ethical dilemma with the purpose of making a guide towards an explicit and detailed fulfillment of moral obligation. One key challenge in ethics is resolving conflicts arising when different ethical principles seem to collide. These moral dilemma scenarios are ones where two (or more) fundamental and seemingly conflicting ethical values

are observed, leaving the observing individuals and societies to struggle with complex choices that come with possibly profound impacts. This paper focuses on deontological ethics, which is a concept of moral theory based on duty and an action's worth, which ought to be taken independently of any consequences it might have on the outcome. We explore and aim to comprehend the fundamental principles underlying this ethical framework.

A Couple's Moral Dilemma:

Imagine a couple blessed with five offspring, where only one child is devoid of health issues, while the remaining four each struggle with a unique medical condition: cardiac, renal, hepatic, and pulmonary disorders. The family consults with a physician who presents a harrowing choice: the sacrifice of their healthy child could provide the necessary organs to remedy the afflictions of the siblings, rendering them healthy. The physician further explains that, due to peculiar medical constraints, only the organs from the healthy sibling are suitable for transplant, offering no alternative cure for the other four conditions. Faced with this grave decision, the couple contemplates whether the well-being of four children justifies the loss of one. Opting for the procedure promises a future where the four previously ill children thrive but at the cost of enduring a lifetime of remorse for the deliberate decision to end their healthy child's life. Conversely, refusing the procedure means the couple commits to a lifetime of care for their four ailing children, sparing themselves the guilt of sacrificing one child for the other's benefit.

To the question in the hypothetical example given above, Kant and his band of deontic ethicists would cry foul. They would maintain that it is immoral to take the life of an innocent child for the happiness of the other children. No matter how happy the other children and the couple are, at the end of the day, they can never justify the killing of one of the family members. What is morally good cannot be decided by the interest of the majority or the *happiness of the greatest number*. They will argue that each person is an end in herself, meaning no one can use another person as a means to serve her interest. Because a person can choose what is right and good for herself, her value is intrinsic and infinite. Therefore, the

dignity of each person must be respected and should never be compromised. Kant argues, “the human being and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its own discretion; instead [she] must in all [her] actions, whether directed to [her]self or also to other rational beings, always be regarded *at the same time as an end*”(Kant, 1996, p. 429).

An Introduction to Deontic Ethics:

Deontic ethics is traditionally known as deontological ethics, a term derived from the Greek word ‘*deon*,’ which may be simply translated as *ought* or *duty*. It is a normative ethical system based on duty. Hence, it is also associated with the phrase ‘*duty for duty’s sake*.’ An example of an ethical statement would be “Promises *ought* to be kept.” Given this moral statement or law, it becomes morally wrong to break a promise under any circumstances. For this reason, deontic ethics is indifferent to pain and pleasure (emotion) involved in performing an action. The moral worth of an action is also not related to the person who performs an action or the usefulness of the action. Central to the study of deontic ethics is action *per se*.

Duty in the Pre-Modern Context:

The name “Rousseau” (Jean Jacques Rousseau), a French philosopher and revolutionary writer, is familiar to many of his words: “*Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chain*” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 49). We may provide an arbitrary explanation for this expression in order to throw some preliminary ideas on deontic ethics. No one is born with a set of rules. However, as we grow and learn to be a part of society, we encounter more and more rules. We are constantly told what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. Over time, we get so accustomed to the rules of society that they begin to control even our thoughts and actions. Needless to mention that all rules are not explicit like the criminal or civil laws. Most come to us as part of our culture and tradition. We live as though our lives have been deprived of choice or freedom. In such a society, an action is considered good when performed in keeping with a rule or duty but bad when performed against a society's norms. If an action is performed for

which no norm exists, then it has no moral significance. In other words, life is defined by a set of duties. Such an ethical practice where the merit of an action is evaluated in relation to a duty or a set of obligations may be called deontic ethics in a loose sense of the term. Rousseau seems to have decried such an ethical life in a society in his own time.

From a modern liberal perspective, the above scenario is possibly the worst depiction of what may be termed a deontic system of ethics or, at best, the forerunner of modern deontic ethics. After all, who wants their life to be chained by a set of rules? If the above sketch can be considered a deontic ethical system even in its remotest or worst sense, one might be tempted to ask, “Why would anyone want or propose such an ethical system?” Here, it might be interesting or even apparently ironic to note that deontic ethics has come to be associated with a famous German Enlightenment philosopher by the name of Immanuel Kant. Coming back to the question, it is unlikely that no rational human being would want such an ethical system. At least, Kant would not want it in as much as Rousseau did not want it and went on to condemn it. However, it is true that Kant certainly is the champion of deontic ethics, an ethical system based on duty.

Duty based on Reason:

One may speculate that being frustrated by the kind of ethical practice that defined Rousseau’s society and the subsequent call of Rousseau for a revolution, Kant developed his deontic ethics to liberate moral practices, questions, and concerns from normative forces in the society. He reasons that if one merely performs an action because of social pressures or obligation, then such an action has no merit of its own. It may serve some purpose that is useful for an individual or the society but yet it cannot be considered a morally good action. Kant’s basic assumption is that human beings are essentially rational creatures with the faculty of freewill to make moral choices. This freedom to choose is not limited by any empirical condition. And so choosing what is good and what is wrong or bad originates from within and not caused from outside. If one simply does what others or society requires of him/her, he/she behaves and functions like a machine. This not only raises the question of

moral responsibility but also questions one's very nature as a rational human being who is endowed with a rational capacity to make choices.

Kant does not stop from rejecting external determination of moral choice and action but goes on to problematize certain other types of actions as well. These are actions performed or non-performed because of some personal interest, desire, or goal. He argues that if one performs an action for the sake of happiness or pleasure or the attainment of some reward or avoidance of punishment, such an action has no moral worth. For instance, to cite an extreme case, is it fitting to morally praise someone for enjoying her delicious food? This action does not require much reasoning to perform it after all. On the contrary, it seems to be determined by her 'natural' appetite. So, for Kant, action performed by natural inclination or desire is not morally praiseworthy. Let us consider the other type of action – the goal-oriented type. Suppose I do not steal for fear of punishment or study hard to get good grades, then my non-stealing or my studying (hard) is not morally praiseworthy. Kant opines that if one performs some action in anticipation of a result, like this example of studying hard to get good grades, then it is, in a sense, determined by some external condition. What if one fails to get good grades despite trying hard? Somehow, it seems unfair not to give any credit for the act of studying hard even if one fails to get good grades. In this way, he criticizes ethical systems that judge an action based on the usefulness or purposefulness of an action, for instance, utilitarian and teleological ethics. For our convenience, we may club these two together under a common head, namely, consequentialism, as opposed to deontology or deontic ethics.

Duty Against Utility and Happiness:

It may be a good idea to get some understanding of consequentialist ethics against the background of which deontic ethics has been worked out. A consequentialist will hold that the goodness of an action depends on its consequences; it depends on whether or not the purpose for which an action has been performed is served. Though the intention for performing an action is good, if it fails to produce desirable consequences, neither the intention nor the action counts. For instance, studying hard for exams is not praiseworthy if one fails to get

good grades. On the contrary, an action will be considered good if it has produced good results; accordingly, the best action will be the one that results in the highest possible pleasure. The broad principle or slogan that defines all variants of consequentialism may be summed up in the words of Jeremy Bentham, the great advocate of utilitarian ethics – “*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*” (Bentham, 1789, p. 393). Simply put, the principle aims to minimize pain and maximize happiness in life. So if an action produces more happiness than pain, then it is good; it is to be preferred to others, which are likely to produce more pain.

Of course, pain and happiness need not be limited by physical experience, but their meanings may be extended to include psychological experiences at the individual level and collective experiences at the social level as well. For deontic ethicists, pain and happiness cannot be considered a measure of morality. Even performing good actions, like giving alms to beggars, for the reason of wanting to go to heaven is devoid of any moral value. In this sense, one can even say that happiness is not the essential or primary concern of deontic ethics. Isn't this contrary to our commonsensical understanding of ethics? Why do deontic ethicists think there is no moral worth in pursuing education if the motive is to get a good job or fulfillment in life? To answer this kind of question, let us consider the moral dilemma at the beginning of the paper to problematize consequentialism, which will help us better understand and appreciate deontic ethics. A consequentialist is expected to accept the doctor's advice. Choosing to sacrifice one for the happiness of the others is thus morally obligatory and also praiseworthy on their part. It is the right thing to do.

Duty for duty's sake:

However, if the pursuit of happiness or a goal in life cannot be considered as the basis of judging a moral action, one may naturally ask a deontic ethicist, “What kind of action then is morally good or praiseworthy? And the immediate answer would be this: *An action performed with a sense of duty*. If so, how is it different from the one Rousseau condemned above? Isn't it the case that duty is the measure of an action for both? We will now try to

unpack this puzzle to show the dubiousness of Rousseau's society, where its members were chained by a set of duties. It can be noted by now that if an action of a person is determined by non-rational conditions, including social norms or personal desires, it lacks any intrinsic moral value.

In order to perform a morally acceptable action, one has to be the author and master of one's action and never to receive any direction from others. In other words, one should freely choose to perform an action. And whatever action one chooses to perform, it must be seen as an end in itself. Performing the action in question is the sole intention of the performer. The intention must be guided by objective and rational consideration, and so it must be free from emotion or other personal desires. In the words of Kant, it should be universal. He would also insist that goodwill or intention is necessary for moral appraisal. Only goodwill is good in itself. Let us consider an example: If I intend to steal something, I should first ask myself these kinds of questions: "Is it reasonable for me or anyone to steal?" "Is my intention of stealing characterized by goodwill towards the person whose thing I am going to steal?" "Is it reasonable for a person not to steal?" The first two questions are difficult to recommend. It would make life inconsistent – an important concept of rationality – besides insulting the dignity of the other person whose things I intend to steal. It does not make much sense to own anything if it is permissible or obligatory for everyone to steal from each other. However, the third question can be translated into a deontic duty or a kind of moral law: *One ought not to steal*. This law is a command one gives unto oneself, and Kant calls this *categorical imperative*. Refusal to obey the command or perform one's duty is, therefore, morally wrong; that is, stealing is wrong. It may be noted that the reason one provides for performing an action becomes the ground for demanding in the same person a duty to obey it. It does not come from outside.

Let us now try to delineate deontic 'ought' from the other uses of moral 'ought' with the help of the example above. Why is stealing morally wrong? Or why I ought not to steal? A deontic ethicist would reply, "Stealing is morally wrong, and I ought to refrain myself from stealing, not because stealing will result in some bad consequences or because my

parent or religion or society says so but because reason says so. Kant would provide the following justification: Non-stealing is universalizable. From it, one can legislate a moral law for everyone: "*One ought not to steal.*" Any self-respecting person would not defy a law which she herself has conceptualized. Though this law is a command or duty one gives to oneself primarily, it is not subjective. For Kant, duty is the requirement to perform or non-perform some action out of respect for the law. It comes forth from within by reflecting on an action. Reverence for law is the basis of moral duty. This sharply contrasts what Rousseau set out to condemn because the duty to perform an action is imposed from outside, the basis of which is a threat or sanction.

The Indian Ethics of Duty - *Nishkama Karma*:

We noted above that deontic ethics is popularized by the phrase "*duty for duty's sake.*" The same phrase is sometimes associated with an ethical concept in Indian traditional thought. It is called *Nishkama Karma*. It literally means 'disinterested action' or 'selfless action' (Mehta, 2005, p. 39). It is also commonly defined as performing one's duty without any element of desire or considering the fruit of the action in question.

Its origin can be traced to a long and beautiful dialogue between two central characters, Lord Krishna and Arjuna, in an epic called *Mahabharata*. Arjun is a leading warrior and a close friend of Lord Krishna. The dialogue takes place on a battlefield. Arjuna is reluctant to fight in a battle because his adversaries are his relatives. The killing of his relatives would bring him immense sorrow and shame. To this, Lord Krishna exhorts him to fight the battle, saying that it is his primary duty to fight as a warrior. A noble warrior has a duty to uphold the universal principles of justice and righteousness (*dharma*). More importantly, performing one's duty as a warrior is necessary for the realization of one's spiritual nature (*svabhava*). Krishna exhorts, "*To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction*" (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p.119).

It can be noted here that Lord Krishna is not trying to persuade Arjuna to perform his action based on its possible consequences like becoming a great and triumphal hero or saving his innocent friends and relatives. It has no emotional content or appeal. Rather, the basic ethical principle one gets from this text is that one should not be attached to the fruit of an action, neither the desirable nor the undesirable ones. The reason for negating the purpose of acquiring pleasure in performing an action is that pleasure can also lead to pain. Thus, empirical pain and pleasure are on the same ontological plane, like the two sides of a coin. However, from here, it does not follow that the concept of *Nishkama Karma* is against pleasure or happiness. If the performance of a certain action is pleasurable, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. What it negates is the attachment to pleasure and also the intention to perform an action for enjoyment of pleasure. Because *Nishkama Karma* is not interested in the consequences of an action, neither pain nor happiness, it can be said to be anti-consequentialism, a concept we have discussed above.

However, doubt arises about whether the concept of “*Nishkama Karma* is deontological in nature” (Pal, 2001). Though it teaches one to perform an action without attachment or desire, it is not devoid of purpose. On the contrary, the purpose of performing a ‘desireless’ action is to attain liberation (*moksa*) or realize the ultimate Truth (*Sat*). In this sense, it is teleological in nature. When an action is performed according to this principle of *Nishkama karma*, it is known as *karma-yoga*. Taken together, *Nishkama-Karma-yoga* is letting the universal or cosmic values override personal interests and desires by choosing a path that leads to realizing the ultimate Truth.

A Return to the Dilemma:

Deontic ethics has its own challenges and problems as well. In questioning the validity and rigor of utilitarian ethics – the happiness of the greatest number – we have considered a dilemma: a couple and their four ailing children. We noted that an advocate of deontic ethics can never sacrifice the life of one for the happiness of the other four. With some minor changes in the condition of the children, this same example can be used against the

proponents of deontic ethics. Suppose the condition of the five children is such that they are all going to die in 24 hours. In this case, all five children have defects; let us say that in addition to the four defects of the children mentioned earlier, the fifth child is suffering from a brain tumor. However, if the couple is willing to sacrifice the fifth child, the doctor assures that the body parts of that child can be used to save the other children. Should the couple accept the advice of the doctor? Which is better: to save the lives of four or lose all the five? However, if they sacrifice one for the sake of the other, they would be committing a grave moral wrong. The deontic ethicists would consequently encounter probably even a greater dilemma – is life more important or moral duty (law) more important? In attempting not to use one child merely as a means, do the deontic ethicist inadvertently deny all five children as ends to be respected and preserved?

Approaches to Deontic Ethics:

Following the problems encountered by Kantian deontological system, deontic ethicists have proposed various modifications to meet the challenges posed by others. In the process, some approaches to deontic ethics, or deontic ethical theories, have come about. A common way to distinguish between various deontological theories of ethics is to separate Agent-Centered Deontological Theories and Patient-Centered Deontological Theories.

Agent-Centered Deontic Ethics:

One of the basic criticisms of Kantian deontic ethics is that it ignores agency, the person who performs the action. However, it is very difficult to assess the moral worth of an action without considering the agent. This is because not all actions can be universally applied to everyone. Some are specific to the agents in question. For instance, the kind of obligation parents have towards their children cannot be imposed on everyone. Likewise, only mothers are required to breastfeed their babies. These types of actions are agent-specific, so they cannot be demanded of everyone. Accordingly, contemporary deontic ethicists are working to develop further this agent-centered deontic ethics.

Agent Centered can be further divided into Intent-focused and Action-focused theories. Intent-focused theories include obligations based on one's intentions and mental states, as they concentrate on the agent's thoughts and aims rather than the consequences for others in the world. On the one hand, action-oriented theories explore obligations that are linked to actions and the actual things that an agent does rather than their intentions. The third group of theories deems obligations to depend on the agent's actions as well as the intentions of the agent when performing these actions. These three types most frequently serve as the basis for agent-centered deontic theories centered on the obligations of the agent.

Critics, however, have voiced objections to these theories, contending that properly meant actions might induce unintended outcomes, and whether someone has good or bad intentions, they should not evade moral accountability. The opponents of the agent-centered theories argue that morality should prioritize humanity's greater good over individual obligations, from which one can simply avoid moral responsibility by being disconnected from the suffering of other people. Besides there is also criticism of the inconsistency or arbitrariness of the principles like the double effect doctrine and the fears that a person could develop alternative intentions in order to justify what is otherwise impermissible.¹

Patient-Centered Deontic Ethics:

An action is directional in nature, so it is difficult at times to study or evaluate an action *per se* without considering the other person or persons to whom the action is directed. Kant himself acknowledged the basic dignity of others, which cannot be violated (Kant, 1985, p. 429). This dignity, with its intrinsic worth, generates a notion of right. Because of this inherent right of everyone, an agent ought not to use others as a means to her end.

Similarly, it is due to this consideration of the right of all persons that would prohibit the couple in our first example to sacrifice their healthy child for the happiness of the other

¹The principle of double effect is commonly associated with moral philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, who first articulated it within the context of the Catholic Church's moral theology. It is an ethical concept used to justify actions that have both good and bad consequences. It states that an action may be morally permissible if it is intended to produce a good result, even if it also causes a foreseeable bad result, provided that certain conditions are met.

children. Such an approach to deontic ethics is based on the recognition of the rights of others and not on the obligations of the agent. The supporters of human rights generally advocate this approach.

The problem of competing rights is among the biggest problems deontology faces. Although it's difficult to decide who's right and who's wrong, it goes without saying that someone's rights will be sacrificed. Patient-centered deontologists may avoid violating the obligation by sitting idly if they feel they must let things happen. However, if a fair decision is taken not to use anyone, it's not clear why using a large group of people would be a worse decision than using a few people when both options violate this rule.

Reply to the Dilemma:

In what ways could these varied interpretations of Kantian deontological ethics respond to the moral dilemma that challenges Kant's ethical framework? In the first scenario, Kant and his adherents would be inclined to sacrifice the four children without wavering their adherence to moral duty. However, the second scenario presents a challenge to our moral intuition. Sacrificing all five children solely for adhering to an abstract "imperative" seems to undermine Kant's core principle of treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than merely as means. The idea of condemning five innocent children to death for the sake of an ethical maxim feels deeply unsettling and appears to violate the very value we place on human life and dignity; which Kant's ethics aims to uphold.

As a proponent of agent-centered theory, one may argue that the parents should put the safety of their children first in making such a decision, and this could mean that parents may have to sacrifice one child for the five children's sake, especially when they are left with no option but to lose all of them. However, for theories focused on the- agent, many strict conditions must be met to even remotely justify this action positively. So, for instance, this could be the desire to preserve lives instead of sacrificing them, and the harm done is much less than the factors that will benefit others.

Nonetheless, one could say that the action, the intent, would be to actively end the life of the fifth child, which would be seen as an inherently bad act, no matter the potential benefits of saving the other four children. The doctrine of double effect seems not to comply since the death of the fifth sick child is directly the matter which is responsible for the saving of others and not just a mere side effect.

On the other hand, Patient-centered ethical theories believe all individuals have equal moral worth and, thus, deserve equal consideration. Even though sacrificing the fifth child is considered unethical, one may argue that it may be the lesser violation, as sacrificing one to save four can be seen as giving equal weight to the rights of all five children rather than prioritizing the single child over the four rights, which would be an even greater violation of their collective right to life.

This stance also, however, faces similar challenges and criticisms. It may be viewed as compromising individual rights by allowing them to be overridden by group interests or a hierarchy of rights. This position aligns to a form of utilitarianism that Kant's ethics unreservedly rejects. It also raises questions about where to draw the line - if one life can be sacrificed to save four, what about two lives to save ten, and so on?

Whenever we encounter difficult ethical situations where morality and our natural instincts seem to contradict, we have reasons to re-evaluate the basis of ethical principles or the standpoint, acknowledging the subtleties involved in weighing various moral considerations. Theoretically, no single ethical theory can solve all the problems completely or adequately. However, the continuing discussion between different approaches helps expand the rich field of moral philosophy and our collective quest for ethical clarity.

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