

## Deontology

Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty (*deon* (Greek) means ‘one must’). We have moral duties to do things which it is right to do and moral duties not to do things which it is wrong to do. Whether something is right or wrong doesn’t depend on its consequences. Rather, it is something about any particular action that makes it right or wrong in itself. In order to make moral decisions, we need to consider our duties.

The syllabus connects deontology to ‘rights, duties and principles’. However, our discussion will focus only on duties. ‘Principles’ are not connected to deontology alone; for example, act utilitarianism has the principle of utility, while rule utilitarianism can claim that the rules we should follow are all principles. A deontological principle simply states that x (some act) is our duty.

We can also discuss rights in terms of duties. If someone has a right, say the right to life, then other people have duties, the duty to respect that right. However, people also have duties that go beyond rights. For example, many deontologists argue that we have a duty of charity; but this does not mean that the poor have the right to receive charity. Rights entail duties, but not all duties entail rights

### DUTIES

Most deontological theories recognise two classes of duties. First, there are general duties we have towards anyone. These are mostly prohibitions, e.g. do not lie, do not murder. But some may be positive, e.g. help people in need. Second, there are duties we have because of our particular personal or social relationships. If you have made a promise, you have a duty to keep it. If you are a parent, you have a duty to provide for your children. And so on.

We each have duties regarding our own actions. I have a duty to keep my promises, but I don’t have a duty to make sure promises are kept. Deontology claims that we should each be most concerned with complying with our duties, not attempting to bring about the most good. In fact, all deontologists agree that there are times when we should not maximize the good, because doing so would be to violate a duty. Most deontologists also argue that we do not have a duty to maximize the good, only a duty to do something for people in need. As this illustrates, many deontologists think our duties are quite limited. While there are a number of things we may not do, we are otherwise free to act as we please.

### Discovering our duties

If we need to consider our duties when making moral decisions, how do we find out what our duties are? Deontologists tend to appeal to moral reasoning and insight. For example, W. D. Ross argued that it was self-evident that certain types of actions, which he named *prima facie* duties, were right (*The Right and the Good*). He listed seven classes of *prima facie* duties: duties of fidelity (such as keeping a promise), reparation (when we

have done something wrong), gratitude, justice, beneficence (helping others), self-improvement, and non-maleficence (not harming others).

Aquinas started from insight into what is good and the nature of human flourishing. We have direct rational insight into what is good; and this informs our idea of what human nature is. It lays down that what is good is truly desirable, and what is bad is truly undesirable. Aquinas then argued that certain things, such as life, marriage, living in friendship and harmony with others, and practical reasonableness, are truly desirable, and that this is self-evident.

By contrast, contractarians believe that morality derives, in some way, from what people would agree to if making a contract with each about how to behave. Different theorists give different accounts of what the conditions for making the contract should be, and of how morality derives from this contract. One version, defended by Thomas Scanlon, argues that moral principles are principles of behaviour which no one can reasonably reject (*What We Owe to Each Other*). If an act is permitted by a principle that could be reasonably rejected, then it is wrong. How do we know what is 'reasonable'? Scanlon develops an intuitionist theory of moral reasoning.

### Conflicts of duties

A duty is absolute if it permits no exceptions. This causes problems in cases where it seems that two absolute duties conflict with each other: anything we can do will be wrong. Should I break a promise or tell a lie? Should I betray a friend to save a life? One response is to say that a real conflict of duties can never occur. If there appears to be a conflict, we have misunderstood what at least one duty requires of us. If duties are absolute, we must formulate our duties very, very carefully to avoid them conflicting.

Another response is that (most) duties are not absolute. For instance, there is a duty not to lie, but it may be permissible to lie in order to save someone's life. Duties can 'give way' – Ross argues that our usual duties are not absolute, but 'prima facie duties' – they are duties 'at first sight'. In cases of conflict, one will give way and no longer be a duty in that situation.

But how do we know how to resolve an apparent conflict of duties? Ross argued that there are no hard and fast rules about this; we have to use our judgment in the situation in which we find ourselves. But if we have no criteria for making these decisions, won't disagreements about what to do be irresolvable?

Deontologists may reply that this lack of guidance is a strength of the theory. Choices in life are difficult and unclear, a moral theory should not pretend to provide all the answers. A moral life calls for insight and judgment, not knowledge of some philosophical theory.

We may object that this is an unsatisfactory answer for a deontologist to give, because one of the two acts is wrong in itself while the other is not. If one act was good, but the other act better, the issue of not being able to tell which was which might not be so pressing.

## **RATIONALITY AND CONSEQUENCES**

Utilitarians object that deontology is irrational. If it is my duty not to murder, for instance, this must be because there is something bad or wrong about murder. But then if murder is bad, surely we should try to ensure that there are as few murders as possible. If I know that unless I kill someone deliberately, many people will die, how can I justify not killing them by appealing to duty? Surely it is only my duty not to kill because death is bad. So I should prevent more deaths. To insist that I don't do anything 'wrong' seems a perverse obsession with 'keeping my hands clean'.

Utilitarianism understands all practical reasoning – reasoning about what to do – as means-end reasoning: it is rational to do whatever brings about a good end. The utilitarian thinks it is just obvious that if something is good, more of it is better, and we ought to do what is better. The deontologist disagrees and offers an alternative theory of practical reasoning. Intuitionist versions are discussed in the handout 'Moral truth' and another account is discussed in the handout on 'Kant's ethics'.

## **ACTIONS AND INTENTIONS**

Deontology says that certain types of action are right or wrong. How do we distinguish types of action? For example, a person may kill someone else. A conventional description of the action is 'a killing'. But not all 'killings' are the same type of action, morally speaking. If the person intended to kill someone, i.e. that is what they wanted to bring about, that is very different than if the killing was accidental or if the person was only intending to defend themselves against an attack.

Actions are the result of choices, and so should be understood in terms of choices. Choices are made for reasons, and with a purpose in mind. These considerations determine what the action performed actually is. So deontology argues that we do not know what type of action an action is unless we know the intention. We should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention. This does not make moral judgment subjective. What matters is the real reason the person made the choice to act as they did. It may be difficult to know what the real reason is, but that is a different point.