# TWO VERSIONS OF DEONTOLOGY: KANT AND ROSS

Ethics: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

According to **deontological** theories of ethics, whether an action is right or wrong depends on factors besides (or in addition to) the consequences. Specifically, deontological theories emphasize the importance of what a person *intends* (or "wills") in the judgement of their action, and the "nature" of the action in question. Unlike the consequentialist, deontologists do NOT think that the "ends justify the means," at least in every case.

One simple form of deontological ethics with which most people are familiar is the **"Golden Rule,"** which mandates that you treat others in the way that you would like to be treated. Something like this appears in most ethical/religious traditions we know about. While this principle agrees with consequentialist ethics in many cases (for example, both would agree that it is wrong to torture people for fun), it can also lead to different results. In particular, the Golden Rule seems to say that it might not be OK to kill/harm people for the greater good (something consequentialists would be fine with), at least if we ourselves would object to this sort of behavior. While the Golden Rule can function as a good rule of thumb (hence its wide adoption across a wide range of traditions), it doesn't quite work as an ethical theory, primarily because it defines good/bad actions in terms of the *desires of the person acting*. So, for example, a sadomasochist (who enjoys both suffering pain and causing it) could apply the Golden Rule to show that he or she *ought* to hurt people.

In this lecture, we'll take a look at two of the more famous versions of deontology within philosophy: Kantian and Rossian deontology. However, it's important to remember that there are *many, many* versions of deontology. For example, just about every set of religious/social moral "rules" we know about might plausibly count as a separate version of deontology (since each will have a different set of rules). This is very different from utilitarian ethics, which is defined by the agreement on a single moral rule (maximize happiness).

## KANTIAN ETHICS

**Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)** was a German philosopher, and was perhaps the most influential writer on ethical issues since Plato and Aristotle. He held that actions are moral if and only if they conform to the **categorical imperative.** He formulated three different "versions" of this rule, and claimed that they were equivalent (it's not clear that he's right about this):

> **Universal Law Formula—"**Always act according to that maxim whose universality as a law you can at the same time will." Kant's example: If we lived in a world everyone lied, then there would be no longer be any point to lying, since no one would believe you anymore (so, lying is not "universalizable"). This means you can NEVER EVER lie, even to a murderer who has come to your door, and asks where your children are.
> **Humanity Formula (the "Formula of the End in Itself")—**"Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." We'll talk more about this formulation below.
> **Kingdom of Ends Formula--**"Act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends." While the wording here is a bit awkward, the basic idea is a simple one: You need to remember that each rational person (including yourself) has infinite moral value, precisely *because* you are the sort of person who can do things like understand and apply the Categorical Imperative. It is because of this that any violation of their **autonomy is** absolutely forbidden. (In Kant's words, we have a **strict duty** to respect the autonomy of others, which can never be overruled or ignored).

Kant argued that all three of these principles were equivalent ways of expressing the **"Good Will"** (the only fundamentally good thing in the universe, which consists in acting with the rights sorts of intentions toward *other* rational beings), but he didn't provide many examples showing how this was supposed to work.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TREAT PEOPLE AS MERE MEANS? AS ENDS IN THEMSELVES?

*"Now I say that 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 discretion; instead he must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end."* (Immanuel Kant)

The contemporary Kantian ethicist **Onora O'Neill** provides a good explanation of the Humanity Formula, which she argues can be an effective and easy-to-apply ethical principle. Here's how you can apply the formula in your own life.

1. **Figure out which "maxim" you are acting on.** A **maxim** is the policy/rule that you are acting by. It is very close to what you **intend** by an action. So, for example, if you regularly steal things that you want/need from people, you would be acting by the maxim "Whenever a person wants/needs stuff, they should steal it from someone else who already has it [and thus deprive that person of it]." It's important to make sure you describe your maxim honestly. For example, you couldn't make stealing OK simply by formulating your maxim as "Whenever you need/want stuff, do your best to obtain it" (and leaving out all *explicit* mention of using other people). This is bad because it ignores the obvious harm you cause other people when you take their stuff.
2. **Determine whether your maxim treats people as "mere means."** A maxim treats people as **mere means** if they could not (even in principle) consent to it. So, for example, a maxim of "stealing stuff from people when they are not looking" would use your listeners

as mere means, since your successfully stealing *depends on them not knowing what maxim you are using.* By contrast, "giving money to the cashier to get what I want" treats the cashier as a *means* (you are using him/her "to get what you want), but not as a *mere means* (since they know what maxim you are acting by, and can choose to go along with it or reject it). Any action that treats people as mere means is **unjust.** Kant holds that we should *never* do unjust actions, no matter what the consequences.

3. **Determine whether your action treats people as "ends in themselves."** It's important to remember that other people have ends (or goals) just like you do. Occasionally, you need to spend some time/effort helping them achieve *their* goals, even if this means sacrificing some of your own goals. Kant does NOT claim you try to make *everyone* happy all the time (after all, this would leave you with no time to pursue your own ends). However, he thinks that you have do this *sometimes,* and especially for people with whom you have relationships. An action that treats people as ends in themselves is **beneficent.** Kant holds that we have a duty to do *some* beneficent actions, but we have a fair amount of discretion in determining how we do these, and who we end up helping. It's plausible that we have stronger duties toward some people (family and friends) than to others (strangers).

## ROSSIAN PRINCIPALISM

In the 20th century, **W.D. Ross** proposed a somewhat more flexible version of deontology, which allowed for a bit more "wiggle room." Like Kant, Ross thought that the rightness or wrongness of actions depended on things like the person's intention and/or the nature of the action (i.e., doing the right thing wasn't simply a matter of utilitarian calculation). However, like many others, he found Kant's claim that consequences were utterly *irrelevant* to be too strong (so, for example, Ross would presumably say its OK to lie to save 1,000,000 people, unlike Kant). He opposed both Kant's AND Mill's ideas that there was only one "fundamental good." Instead, he thought there were least four fundamentally good things: **virtue, knowledge, pleasure,** and **justice.**

**Ross's Theory of "Right Action."** In place of Kant's strict duties, Ross offers a number of **prima facie** principles, which do NOT hold absolutely. Instead, they hold just so long as there isn't some *other* prima facie principle which is more relevant to the particular situation you happen to be in. Ross's principles include the following:

1. The **duty of fidelity,** which involves honoring one's promises and agreements.
2. The **duty of reparation** to make appropriate amends when one has done wrong.
3. The **duty of gratitude,** or the duty to do good for those who have done good things for us in the past.
4. The **duty to promote the aggregate good (or "beneficence"),** which is (roughly) the utilitarian idea that we ought to promote happiness and fight suffering for *everyone* affected by our actions.
5. The **duty of nonmaleficence,** or the duty not to physically or psychologically harm someone.
6. A responsibility to be **just,** and to distribute things (money, time, punishment, etc.) *fairly.*
7. A responsibility to engage in moral **self-improvement,** and to become better at doing one's duties.

In most cases, not every duty will be equally important or relevant. So, for example, according to many deontologists, the principle of nonmaleficence often "trumps" the other principle in many cases (e.g., it prohibits torture *even if this would allow us to fulfill other duties).*

**Strengths and Weaknesses.** The major strength of Ross's theory is probably it's flexibility, since it allows you to take into account ALL of things that the other major ethical theories say are relevant. This flexibility is also it's biggest weakness, according to critics: since Ross provides very little direction for how we are supposed to actually apply these principles in cases where they conflict, it seems like there is no way of determining what the "right answer" is. So, for example, a Kantian says "never lie", a utilitarian says "lie if and only if this lie will maximize overall well-being in the long run." A Rossian says something like "lies violate the principle of fidelity, so there's a prima facie rule against lying. However, that rule might sometimes be overruled by other considerations. You'll just have to consider the situation." The worry here is that two Rossians placed in the same situation might have *very* different ideas of what the right answer is, and there doesn't seem to be any way of deciding between them.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DEONTOLOGY

Both Kant and Ross are **deontologists,** who thinks that the morality of an action depends on the nature of the action itself, and not on the consequences of the action, the life history of the person doing the action, or whatever. Other versions of deontological ethics include rules-based versions of religious ethics ("follow the Ten Commandments"), and principles-based ethics ("Always follow the following principles…") Approaching ethics in this way has both advantages and disadvantages:

- **Advantage 1: Being ethical depends on you (and just you).** For Kant, the rightness or wrongness of action depends entirely on one's maxim/intention, which is *entirely within your own control.* By contrast, other ethical theories say that morality depends on things that might be outside of your control, such as the long-term consequences of the action, your psychological dispositions, or whatever.
- **Advantage 2: Protecting the innocent.** Many (though not all) deontologists hold that there are **side constraints** that forbid mistreatment of others, no matter how good/noble our goals might be. For example, they believe that NO government should kill innocents, deceive the public, or torture, even if the people doing it firmly believe that "this is for the greater good."

- **Advantage 3: Ethics to fit our lives.** Most versions of deontology hold that different people have fundamentally different obligations. For example, parents have obligations to take care of their *own* children, but not the children of others, while medical professionals have obligations to specific patients (and not just patients in general). By contrast, some other ethical theories ("Treat your neighbor as yourself" or "Maximize human happiness") are committed to the idea that everyone has the *same* (very demanding!) moral obligation.

Deontology also has a number of widely recognizes disadvantages:

- **Disadvantage 1: Inflexibility and "Moral Purity".** The deontologist idea that there are some things we should never, ever do has struck many people as overly demanding. For example, is it *really* the case that we can never kill one innocent person to save the lives of 1,000,000 others? The worry is that deontologists are overly fixated on keeping their own hands clean, as opposed to actually trying to make things better. In response to this, at least some contemporary deontologists have adopted so-called **"threshold deontology,"** according to which deontology only holds "most of the time" (when the numbers of people involved are relatively small). If/when we encounter cases where thousands of lives are stake, they recommend adopting utilitarianism.
- **Disadvantage 2: Children, animals, and incompetent adults.** Kantian Deontology identifies the heart of morality with respecting and supporting the ability of other rational creatures (e.g., most adult humans) to lead their own lives. However, it's not at all clear about what this means for our treatment of children, animals, or incompetent adults (those who temporarily or permanently lack the ability to make rational decisions). Kant seems to see animals and children as something like property, but this doesn't seem plausible to most modern readers (or even to many people of his day). However, once we give up on Kant's idea about the infinite importance of rationality, it's not clear *why* should accept his rejection of the utilitarian emphasis of happiness and suffering.
- **Disadvantage 3: Dealing with the "outsider."** Most cultures and religions (both traditional and modern) have some form of deontological ethics—e.g., a list of rules that need to be followed, but which don't always match up with utilitarianism. However, beyond some basic rules ("don't kill other members of our tribe without a good reason"), these rules don't agree with one another, and its not clear how a committed deontologist can decide which rules are right. Contemporary utilitarians have argued that many of the most fierce conflicts *between* cultures and groups are a result of these differing deontic systems. The solution, they suggest, is to abandon deontology, at least when it comes to dealing with people outside your own "circle."

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Kant argues that lying is always wrong, since it treats people as a "mere means." Do you agree with Kant? Why or why not? In your answer, be sure to explore different *types* of lies ("the malicious lie," "the white lie," "the lie to prevent a greater harm," "the lie for the person's own good").
2. To what extent do deontological considerations (e.g., acting according to a set of rules or principles) govern your own moral decision-making? To what extent do utilitarian/consequentialist ideas?
3. One well-known example of a side-constraint is illustrated in many action movies, when the hero refuses to kill the villain because "that would make me just like them…" Of course, the villain inevitably escapes, and goes on to cause more harm and chaos. What do you think the hero *ought* to do in these circumstances? What would Kant say? What do you say?

## CASE STUDY: KANT ON SUICIDE

Kant famously argues that suicide violates the categorical imperative. He gives two basic arguments:

- **Suicide treats *yourself* as a mere means, which is always wrong.** "Man can only dispose of things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human behavior, makes a thing of himself." In other words, Kant argues that suicide treats all of the parts of "yourself" (all of your hopes, loves, desires, emotions, etc.) as a *tool* to accomplish something else (such as the ending of suffering). Kant argues that this isn't "fair" to yourself, in just the same way it wouldn't be fair to coerce somebody else to do what you wanted them to.
- **Suicide means you can't fulfill your moral duties.** Kant thinks that the categorical imperative is *categorical*—that is, it applies to all of us, all of the time, both now and in the future. This means that (whether or not we realize it now), we have duties to do things 10, 20, or 30 years from now. Kant argues that suicide is an attempt to get out of these duties, and so violates the categorical imperative.

**What do you think of Kant's arguments here?** For what it's worth, many contemporary deontologists have struggled with this argument. Many of them disagree with Kant that suicide is *never* morally acceptable (e.g., think of people who are terminally ill, and are dying painfully). However, they have also been reluctant to say that Kant is completely off track, or that the moral/legal acceptability of suicide should simply be a matter of utilitarian calculus (e.g., they *reject* the idea that "suicide is OK if and only if your death leaves the world better off.")