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EXERCISE 2.4

Deontological Theory

Deontological theories are a subset of a larger group of ethics called normative ethics. The support for deontological theory is held by deontologists, who accept that the intention of decisions made defines the morality of the decisions. As long as a person intended to enact good rather than evil, the outcome is of less importance. Standing in opposition to the viewpoint of deontologists are teleologists, who prefer to gage what is moral based on the outcome of decisions, not the intention. Deontologists would argue against the virtue of judging decisions based on results-oriented morality. They would be of the opinion that an individual can control the intent of their choices, but not necessarily the consequences. Other factors might influence the outcome in a negative manner. Therefore, according to deontological theory, evaluation of a decision should be largely based on "certain features of the act itself other than the value it brings into existence." (Frankena, 1973, 15) To gage decisions based on results, individuals are required to adhere to consistent principles that may not apply to different situations. Deontologists denote that situations contain unique factors, which require them to be independently analyzed to determine morality. (Frankena, 1973, 17) For example, stealing is generally considered wrong by society. However, a deontologist would question whether all stealing is wrong. Robbing a bank is certainly morally wrong and criminal, but is stealing bread from a bakery to feed starving children morally wrong?

Each situation is different and suggests different moral standards, according to deontological theory. Such a conundrum is in the orbit of act-deontological theories, which support situation ethics. In this sub-discipline of deontological theory, which sets forth the idea that evaluation

of situations should be unique based on the gathering of information. In this manner, moral standards for right and wrong are invalid. Ideally, investigating a decision would yield certain facts that can be used to ascertain good and evil morally. Ironically, according to act-deontological theory, moral evaluations of decisions can serve as general rules that "can be built up on the basis of particular cases and may be useful in determining what should be done on later occasions. (Frankena, 1973, 17) In conjunction, moral judgments on particular situations always take precedent over the principles gleaned from general rules. Certain deontologists prefer rule-deontological theories, which does present morality based on rules. Those rules might be abstract in nature or they could be very exact in wording and principle. This sub-discipline of deontological theory is more closely related to teleological theory in that there are basic moral standards by which to judge decisions and situations.

An application of deontological theory could be witnessed in Case #2 of the Warner case studies. In this case, an experimenter wanted to study the social psychology of imprisonment by subjecting non-prisoners (college students) to the harshness of prison life. A deontologist would object to such an experiment taking place, because the intent is ethically immoral. To subject people, who are not criminals and have not been sent to prison, to this type of abuse is inhumane. The intent does not produce any good. If this experimenter wants to study prison life, logically he could do so at actual prisons.

Deontological theory could be applied to Case #3 of the Warner case studies. Here, a person is requesting that he or she be allowed to die on their own terms rather than suffering a painful end of life. The intent is morally just in that a person is deciding what they want to do with their own life. According to deontological theory, the intent is the focus on moral

judgment. While family and friends may want this individual to remain alive in the event that they recover, he or she is not intending to harm anyone. This person's wishes are morally right based on deontological theory. Regardless of what those around the individual desire, it is not their lives. To attempt to thwart this individual's intent would be morally wrong.

Case #9 of the Warner case studies could use deontological theory in making a moral judgment. In this case, an employee leaves work during the middle of the day and does not return to complete her shift. She knows that doing so will result in her being terminated. A rule preventing such behavior is in place, and her supervisor has given her fair warning. To be consistent, the rule should be enforced. However, a deontological approach would be to gather all of the facts surrounding the employee having left work and not returning in order to attend a school meeting. It is not entirely clear as to why the employee had to leave work. Obviously, with her perfect attendance thus far at work, she was reliable to show up for work every day. Was her need to go to the school meeting an emergency? Should the rule be changed to allow employees to deal with emergencies? Perhaps her child was in trouble and she had to meet with the teacher or principal. Deontologically, it is immoral to terminate this employee, because her situation is unique from anyone else's. In the case of other employees who have less-than-perfect work attendance records, termination might be justified. Thoroughly examining all the facts and making an individual judgment would be the moral course of action, according to deontological theory.

Like its counterpart, teleological theory, deontological theory is arguably a concept that lends itself to reality rather than only remaining theory. As discussed in the analysis of the case studies, deontological theory, or the intent to enact what is morally good, is a necessary component

of decision-making. If an individual or organization is weighing alternatives, disregard for intentionally moral choices would be unethical. Even if intentions are moral, decisions can be problematic. For example, much money is given to charitable organizations all the time. The donations are well-intentioned, but how do those who give know if their offerings actually make it to the intended parties? The answer is that they don't know, which is classic deontological theory. Money is given without regard for actual outcomes. Some large charitable organizations are incredibly bureaucratic and much of the donated money is used to sustain the organizations. Deontological theory can be helpful when properly applied. However, it can allow unintended consequences to happen when the potential outcomes are not considered. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the United States government provided financial aid and arms to Iraq, because the U.S. was very concerned about the Islamic Revolution in Iran. (Wikipedia) The amount of aid supplied to Iraq allowed the nation to grow to a strong military state. Consequently, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, which led to the 1991 Gulf War between the United States and Iraq. In helping Iraq to fight Iran, the United States government intended to do what it believed was the moral choice. It was using deontological theory rather than considering the potential outcomes, which would have been using teleological theory. The argument for deontological theory in this case is what would have happened in the Middle East had the United States not gotten involved? Would Iran have grown stronger and its Islamic Revolution become a much more dangerous force than Iraq was during the Gulf War? Perhaps deontological theory was the best option in this case.

References

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