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2. Deontological Ethics

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Introduction

Deontology is a way of thinking about what's right or wrong based on the idea of duty. The word comes from Greek, where "deon" means duty, and "logos" means the science or study of something.

In everyday moral choices, deontology is a type of theory that helps us decide what we should or shouldn't do. It's part of a group of theories that focus on guiding and judging our actions, unlike other theories that focus on the kind of person we are.

Deontologists are people who follow deontological theories. They believe in doing what's right because it's their duty, not just because of the consequences. This sets them apart from another group called consequentialists, who think the rightness of an action depends on its outcomes. So, deontologists and consequentialists have different views on how we should decide what's morally right.

Deontology vs. Consequentialism:

Deontology is a moral theory that guides us on what's right or wrong based on duty, while consequentialism judges actions solely by their outcomes. Consequentialists believe in maximizing what's considered "the Good," which could be pleasure, happiness, or other values. They may differ in defining the Good, and some believe certain actions, like respecting rights, are valuable in themselves.

Critiques of Consequentialism:

Consequentialism faces criticism for being either too demanding or not demanding enough. On one hand, it's argued that it leaves no room for moral permissions, personal choices, or showing favoritism to loved ones. On the other

hand, it's criticized for permitting actions that seem morally questionable if they lead to greater overall benefits.

Examples of Criticisms:

1. **Overly Demanding:** Consequentialism appears to require that all acts are either required or forbidden, leaving no room for personal preferences or projects. Critics argue it might be alienating and self-effacing.

2. **Over-Permissiveness**: Consequentialism permits actions that seem morally problematic, such as sacrificing one innocent person to save a greater number. Classic examples include the "Transplant" scenario where a healthy person is killed to save five others, or the "Fat Man" scenario where pushing a person in front of a trolley saves five others.

Defensive Responses by Consequentialists:

1. Satisficing:

- *Explanation:* Some consequentialists suggest moving away from the idea of maximizing the good and instead focus on "satisficing," which means achieving a certain level of good rather than trying to maximize it entirely. This allows for personal projects and relationships to be considered in ethical decision-making.

- *Example:* Imagine a business owner who, instead of aiming for maximum profits at any cost, sets a goal of making enough profit to sustain the business and provide fair wages to employees. This satisfies the ethical standard without pushing for excessive gain.

2. Positive/Negative Duty Distinction:

- *Explanation:* Another response is to introduce a distinction between positive duties (doing good) and negative duties (avoiding harm). This means having a duty not to make the world worse by actions with bad consequences, but lacking a corresponding duty to actively make the world better.

- *Example:* In the "Transplant" scenario, a consequentialist with this distinction would argue that there is a duty not to kill the healthy person (a negative duty), but there is no counterbalancing duty to actively save the five (a positive duty).

3. Assessing Rules or Character-Traits:

- *Explanation:* Some consequentialists propose moving from assessing individual acts to evaluating rules or character traits. This means judging actions indirectly by referring to general rules or the cultivation of certain character traits, rather than looking at each act on its own.

- *Example:* Consider a society that values honesty. Instead of evaluating every single lie on its consequences, indirect consequentialism would assess the general rule of honesty. So, even if a specific lie might have good consequences, the rule of honesty may still be deemed important.

Critiques of These Responses:

- While these responses aim to address criticisms of consequentialism, there are challenges. For instance, satisficing may lack clear motivation and might require additional constraints. The positive/negative duty distinction raises questions about how to consistently motivate restrictions on actions. Assessing rules or character traits could face challenges in defining universally applicable rules or traits.

Deontological Strengths:

Deontological approaches have strengths in categorically prohibiting actions like killing innocents, even if good consequences might result. This stance is seen as reflecting a more intuitive sense of morality. Deontologists also permit individuals to pursue personal projects without a constant demand to prioritize the well-being of everyone else.

In summary, deontology focuses on duty, while consequentialism emphasizes outcomes. Consequentialism faces criticism for being too demanding or permissive, and deontology provides an alternative by categorically prohibiting

certain actions and allowing for personal freedom in pursuing individual projects. The examples of the Transplant and Fat Man scenarios illustrate the moral dilemmas posed by consequentialist thinking.

Deontological Theories

Deontological theories are a way of deciding what's right or wrong that's different from consequentialism. While consequentialists judge actions based on their outcomes, deontologists focus on whether an action conforms to certain moral norms, regardless of the consequences.

1. Moral Norms Over Consequences:

- Deontologists believe that certain choices are morally forbidden, no matter how good the outcomes might be. In contrast to consequentialism, the morality of an action is not solely determined by the states of affairs it brings about.

- Example: Imagine a deontologist who believes that lying is always wrong, regardless of the situation or the potential positive outcomes. Even if lying could prevent harm, the deontologist would argue against it.

2. Priority of the Right Over the Good:

- For deontologists, the "Right" (following moral norms) takes precedence over the "Good" (achieving positive consequences). This means that an action might be morally wrong if it goes against a moral norm, even if it leads to a better overall outcome.

- Example: Consider a deontologist who believes in the moral norm of not stealing. Even if stealing could result in more overall happiness (Good), the deontologist would argue against it because it violates the moral norm.

3. Non-Consequentialist Permissions:

- Deontologists allow for certain actions to be right, even if they don't maximize good consequences. This includes actions that are not only not obligated but are also not required to produce the best outcomes.

- Example: Think of a situation where helping a friend move is a non-consequentialist permission. Even if there might be other actions that would lead to greater overall happiness (like volunteering for a charity event), helping your friend move is considered right because it conforms to a moral norm, even if it's not the most beneficial choice overall.

Conclusion:

Deontological theories emphasize following moral norms, even if the consequences might suggest a different course of action. The Right, based on adherence to these norms, is considered more important than achieving the greatest overall Good. This approach allows for certain actions to be considered right, even if they don't maximize positive outcomes.

Agent-Centered Deontological Theories

1. Agent-Relative Reasons:

- Agent-centered theories propose that individuals have unique permissions and obligations based on their roles and relationships. These are called agent-relative reasons, and they are specific to each person.

- Example: Parents may have special obligations to their children that others don't share, like protecting them at any cost.

2. Focus on Agency:

- The core idea is that morality is personal, emphasizing the importance of keeping one's own moral conduct in check. It's not about how our actions affect others but about maintaining our own moral integrity.

- Example: Instead of worrying about the consequences for others, an agent-centered deontologist would prioritize the individual's adherence to moral norms.

3. Intentions and Actions:

- Agent-centered theories differ on whether they emphasize intentions or actions in defining morally relevant agency. Some argue that our intended ends and means are crucial, while others focus on the actions themselves.

- Example: If someone intends to harm others, that intention is central to their moral evaluation according to some agent-centered views.

4. Doctrine of Double Effect:

- This doctrine states that certain actions are forbidden, even if they might minimize future similar wrongful actions by others. It distinguishes between intending to cause harm and merely foreseeing harmful consequences.

- Example: If sacrificing one innocent person could save many, the Doctrine of Double Effect might permit sacrificing one to save the others, but it forbids intentionally causing harm.

5. Doctrine of Doing and Allowing:

- This doctrine makes distinctions between causing harm and allowing harm to occur, as well as other nuanced scenarios. For instance, it suggests that allowing a death might be different from causing it.

- Example: Allowing a death (by not preventing it) might be seen differently from actively causing a death, even if the outcome is the same.

6. Control Theory of Agency:

- Some versions of agent-centered deontology propose a "control theory of agency," stating that our agency is involved whenever our choices could have made a difference.

- Example: If your choices could have prevented harm, but you chose not to act, this theory would argue that your agency is still involved.

Critiques:

- Critics argue that agent-centered deontology can be morally unattractive, emphasizing self-interest over the greater good.

- Distinctions like the Doctrine of Double Effect and the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing are criticized as either morally unattractive or conceptually confusing.

- Some worry about "avoision," a manipulative legalistic approach to transform prohibited intentions into permissible predictive beliefs.

In summary, agent-centered deontological theories focus on individual moral obligations and permissions based on personal relationships and roles, either emphasizing intentions, actions, or both. Critics argue that the focus on self can be morally unattractive, and distinctions drawn by these theories may be problematic.

Patient-Centered Deontological Theories

These theories focus on people's rights, specifically the right not to be used as a means for producing good consequences without their consent. This includes avoiding the use of another person's body, labor, and talents without their agreement.

- Patient-centered deontology suggests a core right against being used without consent. It limits strong moral duties to respecting others' rights and excludes resources that contribute to the greater good.

Classic Hypothetical Cases: Trolley and Transplant:

- **Trolley Problem:** In this scenario, a runaway trolley is headed towards five workers. Most people find it permissible, even mandatory, to divert the trolley to a siding where it kills only one worker. The key here is that the doomed victim is not being used; their presence is not necessary for saving the others.

- **Transplant (or Fat Man):** In this case, a surgeon can kill one healthy patient and use their organs to save five dying patients. The universal reaction is condemnation. The crucial difference is that the doomed person is used to benefit the others; they couldn't be saved without the sacrifice.

Focus on Means vs. Intentions:

- Patient-centered deontology looks at whether the victim's body, labor, or talents are used as means, rather than focusing on the agent's mental state or intentions.

- In the Trolley problem, switching the trolley is permissible even with the intention of killing one worker, as long as the victim is not used as a means to achieve the good consequences.

Handling Other Examples: Acceleration Cases:

- Patient-centered deontologists differ from agent-centered ones in cases where causing harm is permissible if it accelerates a greater good. However, patient-centered deontology prohibits such actions if they involve using someone's body.

- **Lifeboat Scenario:** Imagine a lifeboat where all will die unless one person is killed and eaten. Patient-centered deontologists would find this impermissible because it involves using the person's body as a means.

- **Siamese Twins**: If Siamese twins are conjoined, and one must be sacrificed to save the other, patient-centered deontology would prohibit this action because it involves using one person's body to benefit another.

Challenges and Solutions:

Patient-centered deontology faces challenges in accounting for wrongs like killing or injuring that aren't done to use others as means. The solution involves supplementing patient-centered deontology with consequentialist-derived moral norms when actions are justifiable based on consequences. Deontologists are actively working to resolve challenges related to the

significance of numbers without compromising deontological principles. The focus is on finding ways to account for the moral implications of numbers without resorting to consequentialism.

Contractualist-Centered Deontological Theories

Imagine making rules for a game. Contractualism is like figuring out what rules everyone would agree on for playing together. People argue if contractualism is about setting rules (like game instructions) or just understanding why we have moral rules (like studying the game's history). Contractualism says that breaking rules agreed upon in a hypothetical social contract is morally wrong. It's like saying, "If we all decide on these rules, breaking them is not okay." If you think of contractualism as setting rules (normative), it's like making rules that focus on respecting each other's rights and only doing things with everyone's agreement. However, there's a problem. How realistic is it to believe everyone agrees on every rule? It's like wondering if everyone playing a game actually likes all the rules. Today's versions of contractualism often seem more interested in understanding why rules exist (metaethical). It's like studying why certain game rules became popular rather than making new ones. One person, Harsanyi, thinks if we all decided on rules, we might choose to maximize happiness (utilitarianism) instead of other principles. It's like saying, "Let's make rules that make everyone happiest." We're not sure if understanding the origin of rules (metaethical) means focusing on individual actions or respecting everyone's rights and agreements (patient-centered or agent-centered).

In a Nutshell:

- Contractualist deontological theories explore how we might agree on moral rules. The debate is whether it's about making specific rules or understanding why we have rules in the first place. It's like deciding fair game rules that everyone can get behind.

Deontological Theories and Kant

Three Deontological Branches:

- Deontological ethics has three branches: agent-centered, patient-centered, and contractualist. All of them are influenced by Kant.

Agent-Centered Deontology - Kant's Influence:

- In agent-centered deontology, the focus is on the person doing the action. Kant said the moral goodness of an action lies in the principles (or rules) guiding the person, not just the outcomes. Think of it like judging a superhero by their code of conduct, not just the heroic acts.

Patient-Centered Deontology - Kant's Idea:

- Patient-centered deontology, focusing on people's rights, loves Kant's idea of not treating others as mere tools for personal gain. It's like saying, "We should respect others and not use them just for our benefit."

Contractualist Deontology - Kant's Touch:

- Contractualists find inspiration in Kant's idea that our actions should be universal laws, accepted by everyone. It's like agreeing on rules for a game that everyone can follow.

Kant's Golden Rule:

- Kant's ultimate thing in deontology is his emphasis on a "good will" as the best thing ever. It's like saying, "Doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not just for rewards or avoiding punishment."

Advantages

Special Concern for Relationships:

- Deontological theories allow individuals to prioritize their families, friends, and personal projects. This flexibility contrasts with consequentialism, which might demand universal actions without considering personal connections.

Avoidance of Overly Demanding Obligations:

- Deontological morality, in contrast to consequentialism, doesn't impose excessive duties on individuals. It avoids being overly demanding and alienating, aligning more with common beliefs about moral duties.

Recognition of Morally Praiseworthy Acts:

- Deontologists can go beyond basic moral obligations and perform acts that are morally praiseworthy. Unlike consequentialism, which often deems actions either right or wrong, deontology acknowledges a spectrum of moral goodness.

Consistency with Shared Moral Intuitions:

- Deontological theories align with widespread moral intuitions better than consequentialism. Examples like the Trolley problem demonstrate how people's natural sense of right and wrong fits well with deontological principles

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Explanation for Moral Complaints:

Deontological theories can clarify why individuals have the right to complain when moral duties are violated. Deontological duties are often tied to specific individuals, providing a basis for holding others accountable.

Weaknesses

Making the World Morally Worse:

- **Issue:** Deontological theories can be criticized for permitting actions that seem to make the world morally worse.

- **Explanation:** Deontologists lack a non-consequentialist model of rationality, leaving their approach seemingly paradoxical.

- **Example:** Imagine a scenario where adhering to a deontological norm results in a significant moral catastrophe, such as sacrificing one innocent person to save many.

Challenges in Formulating General Texts:

- **Issue:** Defining moral norms as general texts can be complex, raising questions about the practicality of strict adherence.

- **Explanation:** Simple moral commands may oversimplify the nuanced nature of moral reality.

- **Example:** Consider the command "thou shalt not murder." In real-life situations, determining what constitutes murder can be intricate.

Question of Authority:

- **Issue:** Deontologists must justify the authority of moral texts without relying on a divine source.

- **Explanation:** Deferring to a text without a clear rationale is paradoxical, especially for those who don't accept religious explanations.

- **Example:** If asked why a specific moral text should guide decisions, deontologists may struggle to provide a convincing secular justification.

Preserving Moral Agency vs. Consequences:

- **Issue:** Deontology may require preserving individual moral agency, even if it leads to a morally worse outcome.

- **Explanation:** Balancing the importance of individual agency against consequences can create a moral paradox.

- **Example:** A patient-centered deontologist might argue against violating a moral norm, even if doing so prevents a significant overall harm.

Handling Conflicts Between Duties and Rights:

- **Issue:** Deontologists face challenges in resolving conflicts between certain duties and rights.

- **Explanation:** Existing distinctions may not completely eliminate conflicts, questioning the assertion that a conflict of duties is inconceivable.

- **Example:** Imagine a situation where fulfilling one duty conflicts with another, creating a moral dilemma that deontologists find challenging to resolve.

Threshold Deontology:

- **Issue:** Determining the threshold beyond which consequences override deontological norms poses theoretical challenges.

- **Explanation:** Threshold deontology attempts to address extreme cases but raises questions about how to establish and justify the threshold.

- **Example:** If a deontologist suggests that torture is permissible to save a certain number of lives, determining the specific threshold becomes crucial and contentious.

Paradox of Relative Stringency:

- **Issue:** Balancing the assertion of categorical duties with varying stringency appears paradoxical.

- **Explanation:** Relative stringency helps in conflicts but raises questions about the nature of wrongness and the consistency of punishment.

- **Example:** If two violations have different levels of wrongness, determining an appropriate punishment becomes a challenge for deontologists.

Moral Catastrophes and Dire Consequences:

- **Issue:** Deontologists struggle to provide a satisfactory response to situations where following moral norms leads to disastrous outcomes.

- **Explanation:** Approaches like absolutism or threshold deontology may create counter-intuitive results or philosophical challenges.

- **Example:** Imagine a scenario where adhering strictly to a deontological norm results in a catastrophic outcome, forcing deontologists to grapple with the implications.

Fusion

Some thinkers want to improve deontological theories while keeping their strengths. They suggest combining aspects of both deontology and consequentialism. However, this is tricky because these theories have different ideas about what is rational. Balancing the focus on individual reasons (deontology) and overall outcomes (consequentialism) is challenging without losing their unique features.

An old method to reconcile these theories involves assigning them to different areas or perspectives. For example, one viewpoint could consider overall outcomes (consequentialism), while another takes into account individual reasons (deontology). However, this approach raises questions about how to merge these perspectives into a coherent ethical system.

A simpler way to combine deontology and consequentialism is to let each have its own territory. In this setup, overall outcomes guide decisions when there are no specific individual reasons to follow. However, when individual reasons (like permissions or obligations) apply, they take precedence over overall outcomes. This allows for a systematic integration of both perspectives.

For instance, in situations without specific individual rules, overall outcome considerations (consequentialism) take the lead. Yet, for some thinkers, even when there are specific rules to follow (deontology), overall outcomes might influence decisions if the negative consequences cross a certain threshold. This allows for a flexible and context-dependent use of both deontological and consequentialist ideas.

Climax

Deontologists are now grappling with how to handle situations where there's uncertainty about whether a deontological rule will be violated. Take, for example, a scenario where detonating dynamite in a mining operation might have an uncertain outcome – it could potentially save lives by diverting a trolley, but there's also a chance it could cause harm.

Similarly, imagine deciding whether to take a scenic drive, knowing there's a slightly increased chance of missing a promised lunch due to traffic. In these cases, where deontological constraints consider factors like intentions, beliefs, or the use of others as means, deontologists are questioning how to factor in the uncertainty of outcomes. It's a challenge for them to

determine the right course of action when the consequences are uncertain within the framework of their rule-based approach.