Deontology

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Deontology refers to a general category of ethical or moral theories that define right action in terms of duties and moral rules. Deontologists focus on the rightness of an act and not on what results from the act. Right action may end up being pleasant or unpleasant for the agent, may meet with approval or condemnation from others, and may produce pleasure, riches, pain, or even go unnoticed. What is crucial on this view is that right action is required, and that the goal of moral behavior is simply that it is performed. The slogan of much of deontology is that the right is independent of the good. Deontology is opposed, therefore, to consequentialist or teleological theories in which the goal of moral behavior is the achievement of some good or beneficial state of affairs for oneself or for others. For deontologists, the end of moral action is the very performance of it. For consequentialists, moral action is a means to some further end.

There are three central questions that any deontological theory of ethics must answer. First, what is the content of duty? Which rules direct us to morally right action? Second, why must we follow exactly those duties and rules, and not others? That is, what grounds them or validates them as moral requirements? Third, what is the logic of these duties or rules? Can their claims on us be delayed or defeated? Can they make conflicting claims on us?
The relevance of deontological ethics to issues in science and technology is not immediately obvious. Typical duties or rules in these theories are often quite abstract and sometimes address personal morality; hence they seem ill suited to broad and complicated questions in technical fields. As a matter of personal morality, deontologists might require us never to lie or steal, to give to charity, and to avoid unnecessary harm to people and animals. These rules are already internalized in most of us, and are supported by religious, social, and civil institutions, and in some cases by enlightened self-interest. But is there a duty to support open source software, or to reject nanotechnology, or to avoid animal experimentation for human products? What list of rules is relevant to moral quandaries over cloning or information privacy?

Though the connection between duties and our practices in science and technology may be hard to grasp, it is also clear that deontology can and should play an important role in evaluating these practices. To await an accounting of the consequences of activities in these areas is perilous, since these consequences are often impossible to anticipate and very difficult to repair. As Edward Tenner has pointed out, modern technology seems to exact a kind of revenge in the scope and severity of unintended consequences.

Two deontological theories, from the works of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and W.D. Ross (1877-1971), serve as the foundations for much work in deontological ethics. Since they differ significantly in the content, grounds, and logic of duties, it will be useful to examine them in greater detail.
KANT’S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The ethical theory of Immanuel Kant is regarded as the most important deontological ethic in Western philosophy. Scholars now agree that Kant provided not so much a list of duties as a procedure for determining duties. The procedure that specifies the content of duty is the categorical imperative or “unconditional command” of morality. Kant explained the categorical imperative in several distinct forms. Even though these forms give us several ways of generating duties, Kant maintained that his systematic ethic of duties was rigorous—that no duties would conflict, in practice. The two forms that are most often called “the” categorical imperative go as follows:

“Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” (Formal version)

A maxim in Kant’s theory is a plan of action, so here he gives us an ethical test for our intended actions, presumably to be used before we commit them. The point of the test is that we ought to be able to endorse the “universal” acceptability of the plans or intentions behind our actions. We should not be partial to our plans simply because they are ours; they must be acceptable from any point of view. Maxims that cannot be universalized will produce logical contradiction or “disharmony” when they are run through the test of the categorical imperative. The grounding or validation of this principle lies in the universality of practical reason. For Kant, our ethical duties arise from what is common to us as rational beings. Humans have a kind of freedom which is gained in “creating”
universal moral laws in our intentional behavior—a kind of self-legislation or autonomy that allows us to transcend our animal nature.

The ability of humans to act from freely chosen moral rules explains the special moral status we enjoy; humans are, according to Kant, “ends-in-themselves.” Consequently, this status gives rise to another formulation of the categorical imperative:

”Act in such a way that you always treat humanity [yours or another person’s] never merely as a means but always at the same time as an end-in-itself.”

This special moral status or intrinsic value implies that humans ought never to be valued as less significant than things that have merely instrumental value. Things of instrumental value are mere tools, and though they can be traded off with one another, they can never be more important than intrinsically valuable things. Significantly, all technology is in some sense a mere tool; no matter how many resources our society pours into technologies, the moral status of humans is supposed to trump the value of mere tools. Kantian duties are designed to protect that status.

The application of Kant’s theory to issues in the ethics of technology produces some intriguing questions. Do some technologies help persons treat others as mere means? To investigate this question, we would have to turn our ethical attention to aspects of the technologies themselves. These aspects might include the anonymity of online communities, the distributed effects of computer viruses, and the externalizing of costs by
polluting corporations. Further, we might ask whether some technologies **themselves** treat persons as mere means? Such a worry is similar to Heidegger’s view that, under modern technology, humanity becomes a “standing reserve” to be exploited, and to Marcuse’s claim that such a technological society debases humans by providing a “smooth comfortable unfreedom.” While these critics of technology do not identify themselves as Kantians, the influence of Kant’s humanistic account of duties has been so deep and broad that it is almost inescapable. Still, there are deontologists who have parted ways with the Kantian tradition.

**PRIMA FACIE DUTIES**

According to the British philosopher W.D. (Sir David) Ross, our moral duties are not universal and unconditional constraints of universal practical reason. Rather, they are conditional or **prima facie** obligations to act which arise out of the various relations in which we stand to others: neighbor, friend, parent, debtor, fellow citizen, and the like. It is through moral reflection that we apprehend these duties as being grounded in the nature of our situated relations. Duty is something that, for Ross, arises between people, and not merely within the rational being as such. What exactly these prima facie duties are is not infallibly known until the problematic situations present themselves. Nonetheless, Ross thinks, we can sketch some obvious basic forms of duties. Fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence are what he identifies as non-reducible categories of duty—he admits that there may be other categories. Ultimately, these duties are known by moral intuition and are objectively part
of the world of moral relations and circumstances that we inhabit. Much as we know, in the right moment, what word “fits” in a poem, so too can we know what to do when duty makes demands on us. Sometimes we will intuit that more than one duty applies, and in these cases we must judge which duty carries more weight in order to resolve the conflict.

HANS JONAS AND THE IMPERATIVE OF RESPONSIBILITY

While Kant and Ross argued specifically against consequentialist theories in explaining their respective deontological views, other theorists are motivated by concerns over consequences in ways that influence the content of duties. Such is the case with the “imperative of responsibility” put forward by Hans Jonas. Jonas calls for a new formula of duty because he thinks that traditional ethical theories are not up to the task of protecting the human species in light of the power of modern technology. His worry relates directly to the irreversible damage that modern technology could do to biosphere, and hence to the human species. Since we can now radically change nature through technology, we must change our ethics to constrain that power.

In language intentionally reminiscent of Kant’s categorical imperative, Jonas gives his formula of duty as follows: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life” or so that they are “not destructive of the future possibility of such life.” Referring to Kant’s first or formal version of the categorical imperative, Jonas criticizes its reliance on the test of logical consistency to establish duties. There is no logical contradiction, he notes, in preferring the well-being of the
present generation to that of future generations, or in allowing the extinction of the
human species by despoiling the biosphere. The imperative of responsibility, as a
deontological ethic, differs from the ethics of Kant and Ross because it claims that we
owe something to others who are not now alive. For Jonas, our rational nature or our
particular, situated relations do not exhaustively define our duties. Indeed, we will never
be in situated relationships with people in far-off generations, but our remoteness in time
does not absolve us of responsibilities to them.

ARE ALL DUTIES DEONTOLOGICAL?

Most professional codes of ethics in science and engineering consist of duties and rules.
Does it follow that their authors tacitly accept the deontological orientation in ethics?
That is does not provides an important lesson about the choice between deontology and
other ethical orientations. The primary difference between professional codes and
deontological ethical theories is that, in the former, the duties or rules are put forth as
instrumental for competent or even excellent conduct within the particular profession.
Some duties are directed towards the interests of clients or firms, but ultimately the
performance of these duties supports the particular profession. The grounding of duties
in professional codes resembles the function of rules under rule utilitarianism. (See
Consequentialism)

These rules would not be morally required for the general public, as would the rules of a
deontological ethic. Professional codes are tools to improve the profession; the end of
right action, in this case, is dependent upon the good of the profession, and the content of
duties will depend on the particular views of the authors concerning that good.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Duty ethics have been applied with some success in technical fields where
consequentialist or utilitarian reasoning seems inappropriate. In biomedical ethics we
generally accept the argument that do-not-resuscitate orders and living wills are to be
respected, even where doing so means death for the patient and possibly great
unhappiness for loved ones. In computer ethics, the argument for privacy of personal
data does not generally depend on the use to which “stolen” data would be put. It is the
principle, and not the damage, that is at issue. There also seem to be lines of a
deontological sort that “cannot be crossed” when it comes to some forms of
experimentation on animals and treatment of human research subjects. For some
emerging technologies, there are well-grounded deontological reasons for opposing
research and practices that eventually could yield great benefits. No one denies the good
of the end, but they do deny that the end justifies any and all means. Where the claims of
duties are not well grounded, a deontological approach to ethics runs the risk of sounding
reactionary and moralistic.

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