

# Duty-based ethics

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## About duty-based ethics

### Duty-based or Deontological ethics

Deontological (duty-based) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions.

- Do the right thing.
- Do it because it's the right thing to do.
- Don't do wrong things.
- Avoid them because they are wrong.

Under this form of ethics you can't justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences, which is why it's sometimes called 'non-Consequentialist'.

The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means 'duty'.

Duty-based ethics are usually what people are talking about when they refer to 'the principle of the thing'.

Duty-based ethics teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced.

Some kinds of action are wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the consequences.

Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules, such as:

- It is wrong to kill innocent people
- It is wrong to steal
- It is wrong to tell lies
- It is right to keep promises

Someone who follows Duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm (or less good) than doing the wrong thing:

People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result.

So, for example, the philosopher Kant thought that it would be wrong to tell a lie in order to save a friend from a murderer.

If we compare Deontologists with Consequentialists we can see that Consequentialists begin by considering what things are good, and

identify 'right' actions as the ones that produce the maximum of those good things.

Deontologists appear to do it the other way around; they first consider what actions are 'right' and proceed from there. (Actually this is what they do in practice, but it isn't really the starting point of deontological thinking.)

So a person is doing something good if they are doing a morally right action.

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## Good and bad points

### Good points of duty-based ethics

- emphasises the value of every human being
  - Duty-based ethical systems tend to focus on giving equal respect to all human beings.
  - This provides a basis for human rights - it forces due regard to be given to the interests of a single person even when those are at odds with the interests of a larger group.
- says some acts are always wrong
  - Kantian duty-based ethics says that some things should never be done, no matter what good consequences they produce. This seems to reflect the way some human beings think.
  - Rossian duty-based ethics modified this to allow various duties to be balanced, which, it could be argued, is an even better fit to the way we think.
- provides 'certainty'
  - Consequentialist ethical theories bring a degree of uncertainty to ethical decision-making, in that no-one can be certain about what consequences will result from a particular action, because the future is unpredictable.
  - Duty-based ethics don't suffer from this problem because they are concerned with the action itself - if an action is a right action, then a person should do it, if it's a wrong action they shouldn't do it - and providing there is a clear set of moral rules to follow then a person faced with a moral choice should be able to take decisions with reasonable certainty.
  - Of course things aren't that clear cut. Sometimes consequentialist theories can provide a fair degree of certainty, if the consequences are easily predictable.
  - Furthermore, rule-based consequentialism provides people with a set of rules that enable them to take moral decisions based on the sort of act they are contemplating.
- deals with intentions and motives
  - Consequentialist theories don't pay direct attention to whether an act is carried out with good or bad intentions; most people think these are highly relevant to moral judgements.
  - Duty-based ethics can include intention in at least 2 ways...

- If a person didn't intend to do a particular wrong act - it was an accident perhaps - then from a deontological point of view we might think that they hadn't done anything deserving of criticism. This seems to fit with ordinary thinking about ethical issues.
- Ethical rules can be framed narrowly so as to include intention.

## Bad points of duty-based ethics

- absolutist
  - Duty-based ethics sets absolute rules. The only way of dealing with cases that don't seem to fit is to build a list of exceptions to the rule.
- allows acts that make the world a less good place
  - Because duty-based ethics is not interested in the results it can lead to courses of action that produce a reduction in the overall happiness of the world.
  - Most people would find this didn't fit with their overall idea of ethics:

...it is hard to believe that it could ever be a duty deliberately to produce less good when we could produce more...

**A C Ewing, The Definition of Good, 1947**

- hard to reconcile conflicting duties
  - Duty-based ethics doesn't deal well with the cases where duties are in conflict.

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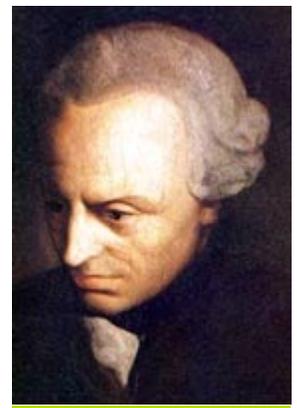
## Kantian duty-based ethics

### Kantian duty-based ethics

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was arguably one of the greatest philosophers of all time.

Kant thought that it was possible to develop a consistent moral system by using reason.

If people were to think about this seriously and in a philosophically rigorous manner, Kant taught, they would realise that there were some moral laws that all rational beings had to obey simply because they were rational beings, and this would apply to any rational beings in any universe that might ever exist:



Immanuel Kant ©

The supreme principle of morality would have an extremely wide scope: one that

extended not only to all rational human beings but to any other rational beings who might exist - for example, God, angels, and intelligent extraterrestrials.

**Samuel J. Kerstein. Kant's Search for the Supreme Principle of Morality, 2002**

Kant taught (rather optimistically) that every rational human being could work this out for themselves and so did not need to depend on God or their community or anything else to discover what was right and what was wrong. Nor did they need to look at the consequences of an act, or who was doing the action.

Although he expressed himself in a philosophical and quite difficult way, Kant believed that he was putting forward something that would help people deal with the moral dilemmas of everyday life, and provide all of us with a useful guide to acting rightly.

## **What is good?**

Although Kantian ethics are usually spoken of in terms of duty and doing the right thing, Kant himself thought that what was good was an essential part of ethics.

Kant asked if there was anything that everybody could rationally agree was always good. The only thing that he thought satisfied this test was a good will:

It is impossible to conceive anything in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without limitation, save only a good will.

**Immanuel Kant. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals**

All Kant means is that a good will alone must be good in whatever context it may be found.

It is not good in one context and bad in another.

It is not good as a means to one end and bad as a means to another.

It is not good if somebody happens to want it and bad if he doesn't.

Its goodness is not conditioned by its relation to a context or to an end or to a desire.

**H J Paton. The Categorical Imperative, 1948 (layout by BBC)**

Other things that we might think of as good are not always good, as it's possible to imagine a context in which they might seem to be morally undesirable.

Kant then pondered what this meant for human conduct. He concluded that only an action done for 'a good will' was a right action, regardless of the consequences.

But what sort of action would this be? Kant taught that an action could only count as the action of a good will if it satisfied the test of the Categorical Imperative.

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## Kant's Categorical Imperative

### The Categorical Imperative

Kant's version of duty-based ethics was based on something that he called 'the categorical imperative' which he intended to be the basis of all other rules (a 'categorical imperative' is a rule that is true in all circumstances.)

The categorical imperative comes in two versions which each emphasise different aspects of the categorical imperative. Kant is clear that each of these versions is merely a different way of expressing the same rule; they are not different rules.



Immanuel Kant ©

### Moral rules must be universalisable

The first one emphasises the need for moral rules to be universalisable.

Always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become a universal law.

To put this more simply:

Always act in such a way that you would be willing for it to become a general law that everyone else should do the same in the same situation.

This means at least two things:

- if you aren't willing for the ethical rule you claim to be following to be applied equally to everyone - including you - then that rule is not a valid moral rule. I can't claim that something is a valid moral rule and make an exception to it for myself and my family and friends.

So, for example, if I wonder whether I should break a promise, I can test whether this is right by asking myself whether I would want there to be a universal rule that says 'it's OK to break promises'.

Since I don't want there to be a rule that lets people break promises *they* make to *me*, I can conclude that it would be wrong for me to break the promise I have made.

- if the ethical rule you claim to be following cannot logically be made a universal rule, then it is not a valid moral rule.

So, for example, if I were thinking philosophically I might realise that a universal rule that 'it's OK to break promises in order to get one's own way', would mean that no-one would ever believe another person's promise and so all promises would lose their value. Since the existence of promises in society requires the acceptance of their value, the practice of promising would effectively cease to exist. It would no longer be possible to 'break' a promise, let alone get one's own way by doing so.

## **Moral rules must respect human beings**

Kant thought that all human beings should be treated as free and equal members of a shared moral community, and the second version of the categorical imperative reflects this by emphasising the importance of treating people properly. It also acknowledges the relevance of intention in morality.

Act so that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means.

...man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end...

### **Immanuel Kant, The Categorical Imperative**

Kant is saying that people should always be treated as valuable - as an end in themselves - and should not just be used in order to achieve something else. They should not be tricked, manipulated or bullied into doing things.

This resonates strongly with disapproving comments such as "he's just using her", and it underpins the idea that "the end can never justify the means".

Here are three examples of treating people as means and not ends:

- treating a person as if they were an inanimate object
- coercing a person to get what you want
- deceiving a person to get what you want

Kant doesn't want to say that people can't be used at all; it may be fine to use a person as long as they are also being treated as an end in themselves.

## **The importance of duty**

Do the right thing for the right reason, because it is the right thing to do.

Kant thought that the only good reason for doing the right thing was because of duty - if you had some other reason (perhaps you didn't commit murder because you were too scared, not because it was your duty not to) then that you would not have acted in a morally good way.

But having another reason as well as duty doesn't stop an action from being right, so long as duty was the 'operational reason' for our action.

If we do something because we know it's our duty, and if duty is the key element in our decision to act, then we have acted rightly, even if we wanted to do the act or were too scared not to do it, or whatever.

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## Rossian duty-based ethics

### Rossian duty-based ethics

Kantian ethics seems pretty uncompromising and not really suited to the untidiness of many moral choices that people have to make.

The 20th Century philosopher W. D. Ross [Sir David Ross] (1877-1971) suggested that it would be helpful to look at two kinds of duty:

- Prima facie duties
- Actual duties

### Prima facie duties

- are self-evident and obvious duties (*prima facie* is a Latin expression meaning 'on first appearances' or 'by first instance')
- can be known to be correct if a person thinks about them and understands them:

when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself

**W D Ross, The Right and the Good, 1930**

- should be promoted, "all things considered"
- can be outweighed by other prima facie duties.

### Actual duties

This is the duty people are left with after they have weighed up all the conflicting prima facie duties that apply in a particular case:

the ground of the actual rightness of the act is that, of all acts possible in the circumstances, it is that whose prima facie rightness in the respects in which it is prima facie right most outweighs its prima facie

wrongness in any respects in which it is prima facie wrong.

**W D Ross, The Right and The Good, 1930**

Ross listed seven prima facie duties:

- Fidelity
- Reparation
- Gratitude
- Justice
- Beneficence
- Self-improvement
- Non-maleficence (avoiding actions that do harm)

Calling these 'duties' may be a bit misleading, as they are not so much duties as "features that give us genuine (not merely apparent) moral reason to do certain actions".

Ross later described prima facie duties as "responsibilities to ourselves and to others" and he went on to say that "what we should do (our duty proper [our actual duty]) is determined by the balance of these responsibilities."

### **Problems with the Rossian approach**

Ross's idea still leaves some problems:

- How can we tell which prima facie duties are involved in a particular case?
- How can we compare and rank them in order to arrive at a balance which will guide us as to our actual duty?

Ross thought that people could solve those problems by relying on their intuitions.