

Deontological Ethics

David McNaughton, Piers Rawling

Philosophical Concept

Deontology is often defined by contrasting it with one of its chief competitors, consequentialism. In its simplest form, consequentialism claims that we only have one moral duty: to do as much good as possible. Deontology (the word comes from the Greek *deon* meaning 'one must') denies this, and asserts that there are several distinct duties, not all of which depend for their status as duties on considerations of value alone.

Deontological duties are divided into two classes: constraints and duties of special relationship. The former govern the way we treat others regardless of our relationships to them. Some ways of treating people, such as torturing them, are ruled out, even to prevent others doing worse deeds. The latter govern our actions toward those to whom we stand in special relations such as friendship. You are required to do certain things for your friends, even if you could make the world better by abandoning them.

In addition to constraints and duties of relationship, some deontologists claim that there is a requirement to do good whenever there is no other duty more pressing. Others are less demanding, requiring only that we do some good in addition to fulfilling our other obligations. The least demanding deontology would incorporate no moral requirement to do good, and claim that provided we breach no duty we are permitted to live as we see fit.

Some deontologists attempt to justify the various duties they propose by appeal to some more fundamental and unifying principle(s). Other deontologists deny that such unifying justification is available. Deontologists, then, may agree about surface features, such as the extent of our duties, while disagreeing about the possibility of an underlying rationale.

1. Constraints

Deontologists characteristically hold that we must not harm people in various ways. We should not lie, kill innocent people, or torture anyone. These prohibitions *constrain* us in what we may do, even in pursuit of good ends. Deontologists differ in how stringent these constraints are. Some think them absolute. Roman Catholic moral theology, for example, has traditionally held that one may never intentionally kill an innocent person. Other deontologists have held that although constraints are always a significant consideration they may be overridden, especially if that is the only way to avoid catastrophe. Either way, deontology sometimes *requires* agents not

to maximize the good. While, of course, any moral requirement restricts us in what we are permitted to do, the term ‘constraints’ refers to moral restrictions that may require one not to maximize the good, where these restrictions do not stem from our special relationships to others.

2. Duties of special relationship

Many of our duties do, however, stem from special commitments to others. Some commitments are explicitly undertaken, such as promising. Some are tacit – as in commitments to friends. Some are not voluntarily acquired – consider commitments to parents. Like constraints, the responsibilities that come with relationships can curtail our freedom of action even when we could maximize the good by shirking them. According to many deontologists there will be cases in which you should, say, keep a promise even though you could do more good if you broke it. Duties of special relationship differ from constraints in that they are owed, by their very nature, only to those to whom we stand in such relationships, whereas there are constraints against torturing or unjustly killing *anyone*.

3. Permissions

Some deontologists, such as W. D. Ross, claim that there is an unlimited duty of beneficence – you are required to do as much good as possible provided it does not breach any of your other duties (see Ross 1930). However, given the amount of suffering in the world and the disparities in wealth, to do this would require enormous sacrifice from anyone with more than a minimal standard of living. Ross’s duty of beneficence may thus seem too demanding. It is open to other deontologists, however, to claim that our duty to help others is limited. There is some point, though its location is hard to determine, at which agents have done all that duty demands. At that point they are permitted to decline to do more. We admire those who make the extra sacrifice, but it is supererogatory – more than morality requires. Ross’s view leaves no conceptual space for supererogation (see Supererogation).

No deontologist denies that morality can be demanding. We may be obliged to make significant sacrifices – even of our lives – rather than breach a serious constraint or betray a friend. But, contra Ross, many deontologists see the duty to do good as limited.

4. Agent-relativity and agent-neutrality

Consequentialism, one of the main alternatives to deontology, comes in several varieties. These varieties are united, however, by their common claim that all our moral duties stem, ultimately, from considerations of value alone. One particularly simple form, which we will dub ‘simple consequentialism’, maintains that we have only one duty: unlimited beneficence. (Like Rossian deontology, then, simple consequentialism is very demanding.) Traditionally, simple consequentialism and deontology are distinguished by their differing accounts of the relation between the right and the good. Simple consequentialism holds that the good determines the right – the amount of goodness produced by an action is the sole determinant of its rightness –

whereas the deontologist denies this, holding that other considerations are relevant. More recent writers, however, distinguish between the two in terms of *agent-relativity* and *agent-neutrality*, claiming that simple consequentialism is an agent-neutral theory whereas deontology incorporates agent-relative elements.

The distinction between the agent-neutral and the agent-relative may be introduced by reference to reasons for acting. Roughly, someone's reason is agent-relative if, at base, there is reference within it to the agent. For example, egoists hold that each of us has reason to promote only *their own* welfare, whereas certain simple consequentialists believe each of us has reason to promote the general welfare. Note that each theory offers reasons that apply to all agents, but agent-neutral reasons incorporate an added element of universality: to say that each of us has reason to promote the general welfare is to say that each of us has reason to pursue the *common* aim of promoting the general welfare (and this requires that any person sacrifice their welfare if that will increase the general total), whereas according to egoism, each of us has a *distinct* aim: I have reason to pursue my welfare, you yours.

How does this distinction mesh with that between simple consequentialism and deontology? Simple consequentialism holds that all moral reasons are agent-neutral, whereas deontology denies this. According to simple consequentialism we each have reason to maximize the good, and morally speaking this is all we have reason to do. We have one common moral aim: that things go as well as possible. Deontology, by contrast, maintains that there are agent-relative moral reasons. Duties of special relationship are obviously agent-relative. That she is *your* daughter gives you special moral reason to further her interests. On this view, I am required to care for *my* family, you for *yours*: we have distinct aims. Simple consequentialists might maintain that parental care is valuable. But if so, they would claim that we have the common aim of promoting parental care – which requires that I neglect my own children if I can thereby increase the total amount of parental care.

Constraints are also agent-relative. Suppose I can only prevent you killing two innocents by killing one myself. Those deontologists who advocate an absolute constraint against killing the innocent forbid my killing the one (they also forbid, of course, your killing the two, but we are assuming here that you will ignore this proscription): I have overriding moral reason (a distinct moral aim) not to kill anyone *myself* (as you should aim not to kill anyone *yourself*). Thus although you will do wrong in killing the two, I should not kill the one in order to prevent you. Simple consequentialism, by contrast, holds that, *ceteris paribus*, I should kill the one: killing innocents is bad, so I have an agent-neutral moral reason to contribute to the common aim of minimizing the killing of innocents.

Permissions need not be agent-relative in their formulation. They simply permit us not to maximize the good. But their standard rationale is agent-relative. Each of us is morally permitted

to give special weight to *our own* interests. Simple consequentialism denies this: no one is allowed to give more weight to their own interests than is compatible with their doing their part to maximize the good.

There seem to be two ways of distinguishing agent-relative and agent-neutral moral theories. On the one hand, theories prescribe aims, and these can be common or distinct. By this criterion, a moral theory is agent-neutral exactly if it prescribes only common aims, and is agent-relative otherwise. On the other hand, a theory is agent-neutral just in case it countenances *only* agent-neutral moral reasons, and is agent-relative otherwise. Simple consequentialism is agent-neutral, and deontology agent-relative, on either account.

Common-sense morality acknowledges special obligations, constraints and permissions. Thus a deontology that incorporates all three of these elements is closer to common-sense morality than simple consequentialism in this regard. Those advocates of simple consequentialism who are radical reformers claim that common sense is mistaken here. But many moral theorists hold that we cannot ignore our common-sense moral intuitions, seeing them as a key source of evidence.

5. The framework problem

The account of deontology given so far has, in standard contemporary fashion, defined it within a consequentialist framework. But advocates of this approach might be accused of tacitly adopting consequentialism as the default position, and then framing deontology as a departure, making it harder to defend -- the deontologist must face the question: why not maximize the good? The simple consequentialist, for example, finds constraints irrational: what could justify, for example, a constraint against killing the innocent? Only the fact that killing is bad. So surely what we should do is minimize such killing. Thus if you can kill one to save two from being killed, that is (*ceteris paribus*) what you should do. But we have now undercut the very constraint we sought to defend.

Alternatively, we could have begun with the idea that the default is the pursuit of self-interest, and seen deontology (and morality more generally) as imposing restrictions on what we may do in that pursuit. But this paints deontology (and morality in general) as akin to a legal system – a system of directives imposed by society to maintain order. And just as we can question whether to obey the law, so we can raise the question: why obey the dictates of deontology, or, more generally, why be moral? On this view, if the answer is positive, then it must be that it is in your self-interest.

6. Justification and Ross's list

There is another approach, however, that takes the notion of a practical reason as primitive and then asks what kinds of reasons there are. It does not define deontology relative to a backdrop,

and does not attempt to justify morality in general, or deontology in particular, in extra-moral terms – such justification is seen as neither possible nor necessary.

We have practical reasons to act in various ways, some of which are moral and some not. You have reason to spend your extra cash at a restaurant (you would enjoy the meal). But you may have more reason to use it to buy a gift for someone who has done you a good turn. In the latter case you have a reason of gratitude to buy the gift – a moral reason. But the question of why you have reasons of gratitude is, on this account, on a par with that of why you have reason to enjoy yourself. And neither question is answerable by appeal to something more fundamental.

In regard to moral reasons, at least, Ross can be interpreted as adopting an approach along these lines. He offers a list of what he terms ‘*prima facie* duties’, each of which may have a bearing on the rightness of an action. These are duties of fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement and nonmaleficence (not injuring others). These ‘duties’ can be seen as categorizing types of moral reasons – in the previous paragraph, for instance, we appealed to the duty of gratitude.

In any particular circumstance there may be more than one duty that beckons – more than one moral reason present. For example, a third option for your cash would be to give it to Oxfam, in accord with your duty to be beneficent. How does Ross propose that we work out which duty is the most stringent in a given circumstance? He denies that there is an algorithm for doing this – all you can do is contemplate your various courses of action and think about the various considerations in their favour.

(Reasons of self-interest are never, however, among these considerations, according to Ross – or, at the least, self-interest always lies idle in the sense that it should never be acted upon: on his account, if no more stringent moral duty beckons, the duty of beneficence requires that you do good.)

7. Kantianism

Ross, then, offers no single principle that can serve to unify morality, nor does he think that morality can be justified from without. But Ross’s view is not the only deontological option: Kant’s categorical imperative (CI), for example, can be seen as an attempt to unify and justify morality (see Kant, I. §§9; Kant 1785).

The CI proposes a test, and actions that fail this test are, Kant claims, wrong. Crucial to the test is the notion of a maxim. We act with certain aims, and these can be specific or general. Maxims are general aims. Thus my maxim may be: make lying promises (i.e. ones I intend not to keep) whenever it benefits me. The CI test asks first on what maxim I propose to act, and then enquires whether this maxim is one that I could will to be a universal law. Here is a rough illustration: the

maxim to make lying promises whenever it benefits me cannot be universally willed because its universal adoption would lead to the demise of the very practice on which it relies – namely the practice of promising. Hence making lying promises for my own benefit is wrong.

How exactly the CI test is to be understood and what it would rule out are matters of scholarly dispute. But there is general agreement that Kant's ethics has a deontological structure. We have just seen, with our example of a lying promise, something of how the Kantian approach might give rise to duties of special relationship. And the test also yields constraints, for agents are forbidden, on an alternative formulation of the test, to treat others *merely* as a means. Exactly what this entails is again in dispute, but it is intended to rule out such things as lying and killing the innocent even to minimize such behaviour by others. To kill an innocent yourself to prevent other killings, for example, would be to use your victim as a means to minimize victimization. Finally, provided we do not violate the CI, Kant's system also appears to permit the pursuit of, say, personal projects, since, according to him, we have only a limited duty to help others.

The rationale for Kant's test lies in a certain conception of rationality. If something is a reason for one agent then it must be capable of being a reason for all. Thus a maxim is not a good reason for action unless it is one on which all agents can act. Any maxim that could not consistently be followed by all, or could not consistently be willed as one that all should follow, is not rationally acceptable – it fails to show respect for the autonomy of all other rational agents. Hence, if the Kantian approach works, morality is justified by appeal to something outside itself, namely, rationality; and we also have, in the CI test, a single unifying criterion of wrongness.

References and further reading

Broad, C. D. (1930) *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, London: Routledge.
(Contains useful chapters on Butler and Kant, who are in the deontological tradition, and on Sidgwick, who is a consequentialist. Chapter 7 discusses various options for ethical theory and briefly describes Broad's own deontological view.)

Broad, C. D. (1971) 'Self and Others', in *Broad's Critical Essays on Moral Philosophy*, ed. D. Cheney, London: George Allen & Unwin, 262–282.

(A clear discussion of the merits and demerits of Ethical Egoism, Ethical Neutralism (which is Broad's name for consequentialism) and what Broad calls self-referential altruism, which stresses that there are duties of special relationship.)

Butler, J. (1736) 'A Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue', appendix to *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, London: George Bell & Sons, 1902.

(A short and pithy summary of Butler's broadly deontological position..)

Dancy, J. (1993) *Moral Reasons*, Oxford: Blackwell, chs 10–12.

(A challenging, idiosyncratic defence of a particularist form of deontology that incorporates permissions, duties of special relationship, and constraints, but denies (as against Ross and Kant) that there are any moral principles. A tough read in parts.)

Darwall, S. (1986) 'Agent-centered Restrictions from the Inside Out', *Philosophical Studies* 50: 291–319.

(A lucid and stimulating attempt to defend the broadly Kantian project of showing that constraints can be justified if we start with the considerations that should weigh with a person of good character.)

Darwall, S. (2003) *Deontology*, Oxford: Blackwell.

(A very useful collection containing extracts from Kant, Ross, Nagel, and Nozick, and Darwall(1986).)

Davis, N. (1993) 'Contemporary Deontology', in P. Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 205–218.

(An accessible discussion of deontologists, such as Fried, who believe in absolute constraints.)

Finnis, J. (1983) *Fundamentals of Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A defence of a broadly Roman Catholic approach to ethics.)

Foot, P. (1985) 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues', *Mind* 94: 196–209.

(Defends constraints by attacking the idea, at heart of consequentialism, that we can make sense of the idea that there is always some state of affairs that is the best.)

Fried, C. (1978) *Right and Wrong*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(A readable and vigorous defence of a deontology that incorporates absolute constraints.)

Gert, B. (2005) *Morality*, New York: Oxford University Press.

(A broadly deontological theory that maintains that there is no obligation to be beneficent, although beneficence is a moral ideal..)

Hill, T. (2006) 'Kantian Normative Ethics', in D. Copp (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 480–514.

(A helpful exploration of both the attractions and the difficulties of Kant's moral theory.)

Kant, I. (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. with notes by H. J. Paton, New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

(A classic work of moral philosophy, which defends absolute constraints. Some deny that Kant is a deontologist, but he certainly qualifies as a member of the tradition. Difficult but rewarding.)

McNaughton, D. (1988) *Moral Vision*, Oxford: Blackwell, chs 11, 13.

(Defends a particularistic version of deontology.)

McNaughton, D. (1996) 'An Unconnected Heap of Duties?', *Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (185): 433–437.

(Argues against the common objection that deontology, in the form advocated by Ross, cannot offer a systematic account of our duties.)

McNaughton, D. and Rawling, P. (1991) 'Agent-relativity and the Doing–Happening Distinction', *Philosophical Studies* 63: 167–185.

(Discusses some difficulties in defining the difference between agent-neutrality and agent-relativity in terms of reasons. Suggests a formal way of making that distinction and then argues that consequentialism is an agent-neutral theory and deontology an agent-relative one. Slightly technical in parts.)

McNaughton, D. and Rawling, P. (2006) 'Deontology', in D. Copp (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 424–458.

(A full-length discussion of the varieties of deontology, with an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.)

Nagel, T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 9.

(A fascinating attempt to find a place for constraints by appeal to the importance of the personal point of view.)

Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell.

(Argues that no-one can be required to help others, and defends constraints, which he calls 'side-constraints'.)

Ross, W. D. (1930) *The Right and the Good*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(The classic defence of a pluralist deontology is to be found in ch. 2.)

Scheffler, S. (1982) *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Argues that permissions can be defended, but not constraints.)

Scheffler, S. (1985) 'Agent-Centered Restrictions, Rationality, and the Virtues', *Mind* 94: 409–419.

(Denies that Foot (1985) has shown that constraints (which he calls 'agent-centered restrictions') are not paradoxical.)

Scheffler, S. (1988) *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A very useful collection of seminal papers, including the articles by Foot, Railton and Scheffler, and extracts from Parfit and Williams.)

Scheffler, S. (1997) 'Relationships and Responsibilities', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26: 189–209.

(Tries to meet two concerns about duties of special relationship, which he terms 'associative duties'. First, how can they be binding when, as is the case with some, they are not voluntarily entered into? Second, are they not unfair, since they require people to give priority to the needs of their nearest and dearest, even though others may be in greater need?)