

Deontology and utilitarianism



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Deontology, from the Greek word *deon* meaning ‘one must’ typically holds that there are several irreducibly distinct duties, such as promise-keeping and refraining from lying. It is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of intentions or motives behind action such as respect for rights, duties, or principles, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions. In the case of Lt. Col. Frank Slade’s attempt to kill himself, deontology finds such an act as clearly unacceptable since killing is intrinsically wrong in itself.

Deontology would claim that Lt. Col. Slade’s main duty is not to kill, and as his case, not to kill himself. Deontologists do not look at how much good might be caused by an action. They look at the action itself, deciding whether it is prohibited or made obligatory by one of their rules. Usually, the rules are expressed negatively: do not lie, do not steal, do not harm the innocent. In a few cases, the rules are expressed positively: keep your promises; treat all persons as beings with rights, tell the truth.

Though some deontologists could be moral absolutists, or those that believe some actions are wrong no matter what consequences follow from them; and some non-absolutists, those that claim that consequences of an action such as lying may sometimes make lying the right to do. Immanuel Kant is one of the world’s great deontological thinkers. He established what are called the categorical imperatives. These are rules he feels all people must follow, and while there are only a few, imagine trying to follow them all the time.

The first Categorical Imperative is act only in such a way as to treat people as ends and never as means. His other rule is: act only in ways that you are willing to see everyone in the world do. This rule applies Lt. Col. Slade’s

attempt to commit suicide. Kant perhaps would ask Lt. Col. Slade, 'What if the whole world committed suicide. " Would you be willing to see that happen? Hopefully, his answer would be, " No", and therefore the action of suicide would be forbidden. This is what makes his attempt as an act which is morally wrong. However, utilitarians would see Lt. Col. Slade's case in a different light.

Utilitarianism is the idea that the moral worth of an action is determined solely by its contribution to overall utility: that is, its contribution to happiness or pleasure as summed among all persons. Utility, the good to be maximized, has been defined by various thinkers as happiness or pleasure (versus suffering or pain), although preference utilitarians like Peter Singer define it as the satisfaction of preferences. It may be described as a life stance, with happiness or pleasure being of ultimate importance. Suicide, from the utilitarian perspective is something acceptable.

Looking at Lt. Col. Slade's case, as his belief was that he was hopeless and useless, suicide is the only way to solve or end his suffering, his blindness. The principle of utility would claim that an action is right right if it produces as much or more of an increase in happiness of all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not. The main basis for this is the idea that pleasure and happiness are intrinsically valuable, that pain and suffering are intrinsically disvaluable, and that anything else has value only in its causing happiness or preventing suffering.

There is great suffering if one begins to see his uselessness, when one is lost and blind, life loses sense, when it's not worth living anymore. Lt. Col Slade may well justify his case in the utilitarian sense. There are two types of

utilitarianism, first is act utilitarianism, it simply states that, when faced with a choice, we must first consider the likely consequences of potential actions and, from that, choose to do what we believe will generate most pleasure. The second type, rule utilitarian, on the other hand, begins by looking at potential rules of action.

To determine whether a rule should be followed, he looks at what would happen if it were constantly followed. If adherence to the rule produces more happiness than otherwise, it is a rule that morally must be followed at all times. The bottom line, it is argued that rule utilitarianism collapses into act utilitarianism, because for any given rule, in the case where breaking the rule produces more utility, the rule can be sophisticated by the addition of a sub-rule that handles cases like the exception.

This process holds for all cases of exceptions, and so the 'rules' will have as many 'sub-rules' as there are exceptional cases, which, in the end, makes an agent seek out whatever outcome produces the maximum utility. I would most agree with the deontological approach but not in the absolutist sense of the approach, there would always be right and wrong in every action we do. Suicide is, as stated earlier, by nature intrinsically wrong.

Deontological ethics dismisses killing as a moral wrong, all the more with suicide. It goes against man's duty to preserve his according to God's will. I believe in Kant's notion of what is truly good: ' Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will. ' It is therefore not the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of our actions, but the rightness or wrongness of intentions or motives behind those actions.