

The strengths and weaknesses of deontology essay sample



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Deontological ethical theories are those which advocate that to evaluate the morality of an action we should seek to focus not on the consequences of such an action, but on its intrinsic moral value. This is in direct contrast to teleological theories, such as Utilitarianism which hold that moral value is based on the outcome of an action alone. Kantian ethics is one example of such a theory, and it is this approach to deontology that I will examine.

Kant attempted to establish a moral code based on what he called the “categorical imperative”, which is derived from the principle of duty and is formulated in various ways. The first involves formulating a universal maxim for every ethical decision (for instance, a dilemma on whether to lie to someone for whatever reason would lead to formulating the maxim ‘it is right to lie when you want to’) and then universalising that maxim: “Always act according to that maxim whose universality as a law you can at the same time will”.

To use the example of lying again, ‘it is right for everyone to lie when they want to’. We must then use our powers of rationality to evaluate whether this would lead to self-contradiction when universalised. Kant postulated that in a world where everyone thought it was ethically permissible to lie, the concept of telling the truth would carry no meaning, since no one would be able to rely on anyone else not to lie at any given point. Hence, the very meaning of the word ‘lie’ would lose all practical value, and it is therefore contradictory to propose using the rule ‘it is right for everyone to lie when they want to’ in such a world. If a maxim cannot be rationally universalised, it is intrinsically wrong and whatever the supposed pragmatic values of such

an action in a certain situation, it is ethically impermissible. It is a person's duty to always follow the categorical imperative.

However, JS Mill has claimed that Kant was contradicting himself in first evaluating the consequences of universalising a maxim, and then declaring that this action was therefore good or bad in and of itself. This surely is merely another form of teleology masquerading as deontology, as it is only through assessing the consequences of a certain type of behaviour that Kant reaches a moral conclusion. RM Hare supported this and went so far as to say that the categorical imperative is “ simply Utilitarianism put into different words”. He maintained this by arguing that a moral commandment such as “ do not lie” is effectively evaluating the consequences for society of no one lying whilst giving each person's wellbeing equal weight. By not allowing exceptions the categorical imperative is in effect saying that the occasional suffering of individuals as a result of this rule is permissible due to the consequences on the greater good for the majority that following such a commandment would have.

Hence, it is understandable how Hare came to the conclusion that in actuality Kant's supposed deontology is similar to JS Mill's Utilitarianism. Logically this argument appears quite convincing, as Kant does indeed rely on consequences rather more than he would like to admit. If we take this to the extreme, can any theory be truly deontological without relying on eschatological claims unless its commandments are purely arbitrary? As Barbara Herman argues, what value would there be in following your duty if it did not lead to any good at all? Would there be worth in a theory that placed no value on the pragmatism of actions or their effect on society?
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Common sense suggests not; after all ethics is essentially for the good of society and it would be illogical to implement a system that did not benefit us in some way. Therefore, it is entirely possible to view Kant's theory in a teleological light.

Having said this, it is in the practical application of the categorical imperative that we can see the contrast to teleological ethics. This is best exemplified in Kant's story of the inquiring murderer. In such a situation Kant maintained that due to the universal maxim, one should always tell the truth regardless of consequences. Essentially, it is this distinction of bypassing the situational nature of ethics that sets it apart from teleology, as even a proponent of rule utilitarianism would permit the breaking of a moral rule in such circumstances, whereas for Kant the rule must always take precedence.

He maintained that this was due to pure reason, and the necessary illogicality of a world where lying was morally permissible, so was justified by a priori reason rather than that of an a posteriori nature which teleological theories intrinsically have. Therefore, it is not emotion that dictates morality but pure reason, the product of a rational mind. However, we are then left with the conclusion that a good action is propelled by cold logic, which is somewhat at odds with the more traditional ideal that a good action is done for reasons such as compassion or for the good of humankind, and we are still left to answer Herman's question of what is it then that makes this illogicality 'bad' or 'good' if not its consequences for a hypothetical society? This is a question which I am not sure the theory answers.

Mary Warnock criticised Kant's theory for attempting to divorce morality from such values as compassion, and argued that "separation of reason from all other human faculties and propensities" was wrong as it ignored many of the other valuable responses to an ethical dilemma. This view may be argued to be guilty of GE Moore's naturalistic fallacy ; just because something is the case or because human nature is a certain way, does not give moral justification to such a state of affairs. It is not obvious, apart from intuitively, why we should not divorce emotion from moral decisions.

However, Kant removes much of the feeling that his theory is uncompassionate with his second formulation of the categorical imperative, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end."

This has clear appeal as a wish for welfare for fellow humans and basic human rights is something that is recognised especially in today's society as absolutely essential to morality. It is taken as self-evident that every person deserves these rights, and this following these principles would indeed lead to a more just society, and is therefore of pragmatic and idealistic value to humankind.

Also, by removing an initial reliance on God, Kant loses some of the ability to justify his theory as a deontological one, because actions are inevitably contained and judged within the parameters of this world which is based on our experience. However, this can be seen as a great strength of Kant's theory as by relying on logic it is technically incontestable, and therefore

more convincing than those which rely on unverifiable eschatological claims which depend largely on faith. I would contest the idea that Kant hinges his theory on; that his claims are based on logic alone. It is clear that they are not analytically true, and it is necessary to hypothesise on what would happen if everyone followed a certain rule. However, since it is obvious that in this world not everyone does follow that certain rule it is not logically impossible to advocate lying in a particular situation, seeing as this does not lead to any self-contradiction within this world, merely the afore-mentioned hypothetical one. Therefore, it is not clear why lying in this world is self-contradictory.

Here however, Kant attempts to strengthen his theory by postulating a 'merely possible' Kingdom of Ends, which is the third formulation of the categorical imperative: "that all maxims which stem from autonomous legislation ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends as with a realm of nature." - a world in which universal maxims were prescribed by a universal legislator.

This implies the existence of God, which although Kant conceded there was no grounds for proving the existence of from a logical point of view, he regarded as necessary to justify morality. He stated that God was "necessary from a practical point of view". One rather feels that Kant is not justifying the existence of such a being through his argument, but rather using God to help support his argument, which is a very different thing. He has already stated that God is not objectively supportable through argument, so he is speaking from personal conviction rather than academic reasoning.

In any case, Kant considered that attempting to move from the world of phenomena (the spatio-temporal state of existence which we are now in) to that of 'things-in-themselves' was futile. However, he did feel that the existence of a moral law (which he firmly believed existed, and was realised hypothetically in the Kingdom of Ends) implied a God, as the manifestation of "the highest good". However, due to Kant's reliance on a theory of God which even he admits is merely a proposal and not verifiable, it is difficult to see where this leaves us with his ethical theory. If God is necessary for it to be entirely convincing, as Kant's idea that the universe must be just, and therefore God is needed as this life clearly does not offer justice, seems borne from emotion rather than reason, then the argument appears to be weakened and his ethical theory is not fully completed.

However, it is difficult to see how one can justify a deontological theory without resorting to some sort of supranatural figure, as without any 'higher aim' a lack of pragmatism which Kantian ethics undoubtedly displays at times for lofty and theoretical principle can seem meaningless.