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deontology

The term "deontology" is a modern combination of Classical Greek terms, and means the study or science (*logos*) of duty, or more precisely, of what one ought to do (*deon*). In contemporary moral philosophy, "deontology" is used most commonly to refer to moral conceptions which endorse several theses regarding the nature of duty (the right), the nature of value (the good), and the relationship between the primary ethical concepts of the right and the good.

I. The Right: Right Conduct is Not what Maximizes Ultimate Good

It seems a truism that, given the means, we ought to maximally realize our ends, and given the ends, we ought to take the means that best promote them. Traditionally, philosophers have agreed that, however complex the idea of rationality, it involves, in part, these maximizing imperatives. Many have found the maximizing account of rationality also to be sufficient: to be rational is simply to maximize something. Assuming that ethical conduct is subject to rational assessment, this leads to the idea that conduct is morally right if and only if it maximizes the Ultimate good inhering in states of affairs. Given the means, total good is to be maximized; and given the good, right conduct is any means that most effectively promotes it. A moral conception incorpo-

rating these prescriptions into its basic principles is consequentialist.

"Deontology" is commonly used in moral philosophy to refer to nonconsequentialist moral conceptions. The most distinctive feature of deontological moral conceptions is that they define fundamental principles of right and justice in terms other than taking the most effective means to promote maximum good. KANT's (1724–1804) moral philosophy is a primary example of a deontological moral conception. His Categorical Imperative implies: (1) a strong deontological thesis, that duty is discernible without reference to any particular end, but rather by reference to prior and independent principles (which Kant held to be implicit in practical reason); (2) an "overridingness thesis," that moral reasons outweigh all other reasons; and (3) an inescapability thesis, duty applies to all rational agents and gives them reasons, whatever their particular ends. [(2) and (3) are not peculiar to deontological views, and (3), and perhaps (2), need not be endorsed by all of them.] Other familiar deontological theories are the pluralistic intuitionisms of W. D. ROSS (1877–1971) and H. A. PRICHARD (1871–1947), John Rawls's "Justice as Fairness," Robert NOZICK's account of "side-constraints," and T. M. Scanlon's contractualism.

To say deontological theory does not characterize right or justice as conduct promoting the greatest overall good does not mean deontology is oblivious to consequences. Any moral conception which either formulated its principles of right and justice, ignoring their consequences, or which held that individuals are to obstinately observe MORAL RULES without regard to the consequences of actions, "would simply be irrational, crazy" (Rawls, p. 30). Nothing intrinsic to deontological views excludes means–end reasoning. What they hold, rather, is that the rightness of actions and INSTITUTIONS cannot *simply* be defined instrumentally, as what maximizes some (nonmoral) good; among the most basic moral principles are nonmaximizing principles. In this sense, deontological theories cover a wide range of moral conceptions; they include all nonconsequentialist views.

In addition to moral conceptions, "deontology" is also used to refer to moral principles, or to moral rules, at all levels of generality. Deontological *principles* are fundamental to deontological conceptions; they specify certain basic moral reasons governing

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ACTION (RIGHTS, duties, distributions, moral ends, and the like), and do so other than in terms of what promotes the greatest (nonmoral) good. Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative—"Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"—is an example (Kant, Ak. 421). Other examples are many of W. D. Ross's *prima facie* duties (the duties of FIDELITY, reparation, justice, GRATITUDE, and perhaps nonmaleficence). Ross also lists two *prima facie* consequentialist duties, BENEFICENCE and self-improvement, requiring agents to promote the greatest good (others' INTERESTS, and one's own self-perfection). Endorsing these consequentialist principles does not make Ross's moral conception consequentialist, since he holds that to decide one's duty all things considered, the *prima facie* duties are to be balanced against one another, not by reference to what best promotes ultimate good, but by intuition of their weights under the circumstances (Ross, pp. 21–27).

As deontological conceptions (like Ross's) may include consequentialist principles, so too might consequentialist views include deontological principles, so long as these are subordinated to the fundamental consequentialist principle of right. One example is JOHN STUART MILL's (1806–1873) indirect UTILITARIANISM. Mill held that the principle of LIBERTY—that people should have a basic right of equal liberty to act as they choose, so long as they do not harm the basic interests of others—should govern political constitutions and social conventions without exception. Mill conjectured it to be empirically true that, by realizing this and other principles in its social institutions, a society would best promote the greatest overall utility.

A deontological *rule* or *constraint* is a moral imperative that commands action or inaction of a specific type in appropriate circumstances without reference to reasons, ends or consequences. (Examples: "Do not kill, lie, cheat, or steal." "Keep your promises and commitments." "Honor thy father and mother.") Most ordinary moral rules are deontological in form, which is only to say that they are formulated as unqualified imperatives without reference to reasons or specific ends they may realize. The reasons or ends that justify moral rules, or the qualifications rules are subject to, may be understood as implicit within them. The most important role of moral rules and constraints lies in MORAL EDUCA-

TION. While commonsense moral rules appear to command actions (or inactions) categorically, it is difficult to formulate a sensible and learnable moral rule that is without qualification. For example, "Do not lie," if taken as absolute or exceptionless ("Never lie, whatever the consequences") conflicts with other moral rules and moral ends of equal or greater importance (*e.g.*, our deontological duty to protect the innocent, or to rescue others in distress).

Consequentialists often take the fact that no moral rule is without exception as evidence of the truth of CONSEQUENTIALISM. The dire consequences of following entrenched moral rules under extreme circumstances are imagined, which challenges our intuitions regarding prohibitions against killing or violence to persons (*e.g.*, lifeboat examples: throwing one overboard to save five). It is not clear what these examples prove (especially when people disagree on their resolution), except that no ordinary moral rule is absolute, and that consequences of action often do matter in deciding what is the right thing to do. Deontological conceptions can account for standard exceptions to moral rules by incorporating exceptions into the rule; and most, if not all, deontologists can avoid the implications of dire consequences of action on the basis of their first principles of right and the moral reasons these principles incorporate. What deontological conceptions do not do, however, is accommodate consequences in the way consequentialists do, by maximizing overall good as ascertained from an impersonal point of view.

For example, if it is reasonable to reject a rule ("never torture the innocent") as applying to the most extreme circumstances (when one's nation is facing nuclear destruction), then contractualism provides a justification for this exception on the basis of nonconsequentialist principles and reasons; namely, it would be unreasonable to expect people to agree to this rule as absolute, observing it under the most extreme circumstances, and reasonable for them to reject it, when following the rule means that nearly all that people value is to be obliterated. No appeal is made in contractualist argument to the greatest overall good impersonally construed as a reason for rules, since it is unreasonable to expect contractualist agents to sacrifice their interests to aggregate good. Instead decision is based on reflection on the consequences for each individual of action according to rules, and asking whether, in light of

these consequences, it is reasonable to expect each to accept or reject a proposed moral rule.

II. The Good: Basic Moral Values are not Maximizable

A second feature endorsed by deontological conceptions is also best understood by way of contrast with consequentialism. Characteristic of consequentialism is an optimization thesis: value (the good) is maximizable, and total good is to be optimized. On this account, (1) goodness is a property of states of affairs that is scalar, admitting of quantitative judgments (or at least judgments of more or less); (2) what is ultimately good ought to be promoted as the end of all action; and (3) to promote value is to maximize its total.

For many, the optimization thesis seems apt, if not compelling, in the case of certain goods, especially PLEASURE and avoidance of pain. The values of HAPPINESS, knowledge, creativity, LOVE and FRIENDSHIP, and (more controversially) desire-satisfaction have also been seen as maximizable. It is not so clear that all these goods sensibly allow maximization. For example, while love and friendship are goods each person ought to experience, it cheapens these goods to maximize the number of one's loves and friends; moreover, given the importance of pursuing other goods, it is questionable whether we ought even to maximize love and friendship toward particular persons. More importantly, even if some goods are sensibly conceived as maximizable, others clearly are not. Consider the intrinsic value of human life, or of persons, their DIGNITY, and their autonomy. To say human life has intrinsic value does not imply that we ought to maximize population growth—quite the contrary. It means that we are under a duty to respect the lives of existing (and future) persons, by recognizing (among other things) that all are owed basic moral duties, and by affording all certain basic HUMAN RIGHTS. Consequentialism, it is sometimes argued, stems from the misconception that all value is maximizable (*c.f.* Anderson, ch. 2; Scanlon, ch. 2–3). As a result it misconceives the value of human life (*c.f.* Dworkin), of persons (Kant), and other values fundamental to morality.

The thesis that the fundamental values providing reasons for morality are not maximizable is implicit in Kant's second formulation of his Categorical Imperative—"Always act in such a way that you never

treat humanity merely as a means, but always as an end-in-itself" (*Groundwork*, K 429). This prescribes the final end of moral action—the "humanity" of persons. For Kant, the value of (the humanity of) persons is incomparable, "beyond all price"; because of their humanity, persons have a kind of value, their dignity, which puts them beyond the domain of value optimization. Moral principles and rules affecting persons should then be formulated, not to maximize personality or even personal interests, but in order to respect the kind of value that persons possess. To respect the value of persons is to respond appropriately to their dignity, which Kant deemed persons have by virtue of their moral and rational capacities for PRACTICAL REASONING and autonomy. These values (the humanity, dignity, and autonomy of persons) provide the basis for understanding Kant's deontological principles and clarifying the moral duties we owe to one another. That these values are not to be maximized by right conduct (whatever this might mean) is evident from Kant's claim that the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative has the same content as the first (cited above); to respect the humanity of persons as an end-in-itself is realized when agents act as if the rule of their action were a universal law.

Kant is only one example of how a deontological conception conceives of the basic values providing ultimate moral reasons as nonmaximizable. Many deontologists (*e.g.*, Rawls, Scanlon, DWORKIN, Nozick) resemble Kant in maintaining that the basic moral attitude toward these values is respect, not maximization. Others may advocate different nonmaximizing views of value (*e.g.*, divine command theories).

III. The Priority of Right over the Good

The third essential feature of deontological conceptions follows on the first two; it describes the relationship between principles of right (stating abstract duties, rights, fair distributions, and other moral reasons) and the pursuit of (nonmoral) goods. In the course of practical or social reasoning about what we (as individuals or as representatives of groups) ought to do, principles of right have priority over considerations of (nonmoral) value (*e.g.*, happiness, efficiency, or human EXCELLENCE). Considerations of right have priority over the good in two ways. First, principles of right limit the goods

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that may be pursued: they rule out certain ends as unworthy of pursuit (*e.g.*, dominating others, or harming them for pleasure), rendering them entirely impermissible. Second, principles of right are instrumentally regulative: they constrain the means that it may otherwise be rational (optimal) to adopt to achieve permissible or obligatory ends (*c.f.* Rawls, pp. 30–32, 564–66). The priority of right enables a deontological moral conception to provide an account of permissible conceptions of the good. It is especially important to conceptions that value agents' rational autonomy, or freedom to determine their good.

The priority of right does not necessarily mean that particular moral reasons (*e.g.*, having made a promise) always outweigh reasons of PRUDENCE, or other reasons of individual or social good. It may well be permissible to breach relatively unimportant commitments (*e.g.*, to visit grandmother) for the sake of realizing one's own good (*e.g.*, to realize a crucial job opportunity), so long as there are other moral reasons that excuse one from commitments when important occasions or emergencies intervene. The priority of right should not then be confused with the more general claim that moral reasons override all other reasons (reasons of law, ETIQUETTE, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, and social custom, as well as value). This claim, the *finality* or "overridingness" thesis, says that moral reasons have priority over all other considerations in practical reason, so that once moral considerations have been taken into account, practical reason has reached its conclusion and is final—there are no higher reasons to appeal to. Deontologists also generally affirm the finality of moral reasons, but then so too do most consequentialists. Utilitarians, for example, contend that we are obligated to revise our aims and restrict our actions, to bring them in line with the demands of promoting aggregate utility. But this does not mean that utilitarians affirm the priority of right. For notice what overridingness implies within the context of consequentialism's maximizing understandings of the right and the good. Consequentialism does not see its principles simply as having regulative priority over other legitimate practical principles; for strictly speaking there are no other legitimate practical principles that the duty to maximize could have priority to. In effect, consequentialist principles occupy all of deliberative space. To do anything except take the most effective means to maximize ultimate good, or

to pursue a lesser end that is not a means to this dominant good, is morally impermissible. It conflicts with the controlling duty to always adopt means and ends that maximize the one rational good. Since this injunction *always* applies, there is no room left for the free adoption of permissible ends or the pursuit of particular interests, no place for a plurality of intrinsic goods, or for the free activity of practical reasoning.

Because deontological views do not understand the right and the good in maximizing terms, their structure is quite different. Morality is conceived, not as a constantly controlling injunction, but as constantly *regulative* of deliberation and action according to other legitimate principles (of prudence, law, custom, etiquette, or instrumental rationality generally) as one pursues permissible or obligatory ends. Conjoined with the finality thesis, the "priority" of the priority of right means that *deontological* principles of right have priority in the course of practical reasoning and judgment over all other considerations of value and the principles and reasons instrumental to promoting them. Moral principles are then *supremely limiting and regulative conditions* on an agent's pursuit of values. The priority of right is characteristic of deontological moral conceptions in so far as they constrain the adoption of ends, means–end reasoning, and maximizing conduct by prior nonmaximizing principles of right.

IV. The Independence of Moral Reasons and the Moralization of Value

A moral conception, to be convincing, needs to address such questions as why people should care about doing what is right and just, whether doing one's duty is a valuable activity, whether morality is compatible with human nature, and how it advances human interests. Any moral conception lacking a conception of the good would seem to have no answer to these questions, and is at best incomplete. Consequentialism, in part, is designed to respond to these sorts of issues. Deontology is often depicted as, and criticized for, being devoid of any conception of the good. This criticism stems from many deontologists' rejection of a prior and independent conception of value, or persons' (nonmoral) interests, as necessary to the definition of principles of right (*c.f.* Prichard, Ross, Scanlon, and perhaps Kant). This position is not common to all deontological

views (e.g., Rawls relies on a “thin theory” of the good to define principles of justice). Still, deontologists agree that morality is not simply a matter of promoting prior nonmoral interests (see thesis I). Moral reasons carry their own justification. This suggests a fourth feature of deontological conceptions, *the independence of moral reasons*: moral reasons apply independently of the good caused, and are themselves sufficient to provide REASONS FOR ACTION.

If moral principles are not definable as what best promotes the good, what are the reasons deontological theory provide for agents doing their duty? This is one of the most controversial areas of deontology. W. D. Ross argued that agents already have sufficient reason to do their duty, simply because it is right. But this only prompts a restatement of the initial question: what reason do agents have for doing what is right? Simply because acts are right is not sufficient reason for doing them, or for caring about morality. Without such a reason, many contend, morality seems arbitrary and irrational. More generally without an account of morality’s relation to the human good, morality, if not irrational, is still nonrational, and rational people cannot consistently be motivated to do what is right.

Most deontologists recognize these issues, and contend that a moral conception does not need to define moral principles in terms of what best promotes nonmoral values or interests in order to provide sufficient reasons for acting, or to afford a conception of the good. Morality itself is a good, not just for others, but for the agent; for without it a person’s life is severely diminished. We have reason to do what is right for its own sake, not “simply because it is right” (as Ross maintained), but because acting for moral reasons expresses an important part of ourselves and our relations with others.

Scanlon’s contractualism provides one approach to the independence of moral reasons. He argues that we have sufficient reason to care about morality for its own sake, since the desire to do what is right is the same as the desire to justify ourselves to others on terms that it would be unreasonable for them to reject. By acting on rules it would be unreasonable for others to reject, we act for reasons they can see to be justified (insofar as they are reasonable), and respect others as independent persons with the capacities to govern their lives according to reasons (Scanlon [2], chapter 4). Similarly, Rawls insists the

will to do justice for its own sake is not arbitrary or irrational, since morally motivated agents act from principles all would agree to from an impartial position where all are equally represented (Rawls, pp. 477–78). Acting for these moral reasons is nonarbitrary, since by doing so we respect others as moral persons with the rational and moral capacities for practical reasoning, and treat them in ways moral persons can see to be justified (Rawls, p. 586). Here respect for persons is not a separate nonmoral value that is promoted or “maximized” by acting on reasons and principles. Instead people manifest respect for others as (moral) persons by acting morally for the sake of principles reasonable persons could agree to. Respect for persons, like human dignity, is a moral value that can only be described by reasons which justify independently of nonmoral good.

This suggests another thesis held by many (if not all) deontologists, *the moralization of value*: the concept of the good (human or social) cannot be fully characterized in nonmoral terms, without reference to prior, independent moral reasons and principles. Kantians again provide good examples of moralized conceptions of the good. They maintain the essential human good can only be characterized in terms of acting on and for the sake of moral principles. Kant says, “The only thing good without qualification is a Good Will.” A Good Will for Kant is a steadfast proclivity to act on and for the sake of the Moral Law. Since moral principles for Kant are not empirically given, but are implicit in our (pure) practical reasoning, to act from a Good Will is to act from a law we “give to ourselves” out of our reason, and this is to be autonomous. Somewhat analogously, Rawls argues that having an effective sense of justice is essential to a person’s good, since by consistently acting justly for the sake of justice, persons exercise and realize the moral powers of practical reasoning. These powers constitute moral agents’ nature as free and equal, and reasonable and rational. When agents realize the moral powers by acting for the sake of principles of justice, they achieve the good of moral autonomy (Rawls, sect. 86).

Finally, to relate this fourth feature of deontology to the first mentioned: if the complete good cannot be described without referring to antecedent moral principles, then basic moral principles cannot be defined, as consequentialists contend, simply in terms of what maximizes the good. For prior moral prin-

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ciples are already implicit in the good, and stand in need of a different (nonmaximizing) specification and justification. This indicates a flaw in so-called rights-consequentialism as a moral conception, which holds that it is right to maximize respect for persons and their rights, and/or minimize violations of rights (the implication being that we are obligated to violate the rights of the few whenever this leads to greater respect for others' rights). While a moral conception might incorporate this as a subordinate consequentialist principle, it is difficult to see how a moral conception could coherently have this maximizing norm as a basic principle. For prior nonmaximizing moral principles, which specify people's rights and imply duties of respect, are already part of the maximand that is to be promoted.

A number of philosophers recently have questioned the classification of moral conceptions as deontological. (See, e.g., Herman; or Korsgaard on Kant in this encyclopedia.) Their general concern is that nonconsequentialist views differ in so many ways that the deontology classification is confusing and often misleading. Particularly it is objected that traditional deontological views are unconcerned with questions of value, or are incapable of accommodating the moral good. In this section, I have suggested ways deontological views might meet this objection.

See also: ACTS AND OMISSIONS; AUTONOMY OF MORAL AGENTS; CONSEQUENTIALISM; CONTRACTARIANISM; DELIBERATION AND CHOICE; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; DWORKIN; ENTITLEMENTS; FINAL GOOD; FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM; GOOD, THEORIES OF THE; GRATITUDE; HUMAN RIGHTS; INSTITUTIONS; INTUITIONISM; KANT; LIBERTY; JOHN STUART MILL; MORAL ABSOLUTES; MORAL EDUCATION; MORAL REASONING; MORAL RULES; MORAL SAINTS; NOZICK; OUGHT IMPLIES CAN; PRACTICAL REASON[ING]; PRACTICAL WISDOM; PRESCRIPTIVISM; PRICHARD; RATIONALITY VS. REASONABLENESS; RAWLS; RIGHT, CONCEPTS OF; RIGHTS; ROSS; TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS; UTILITARIANISM; VALUE, CONCEPT OF.

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1993. Esp. chapter 3. Rejects maximizing conception of value as appropriate for the values of human life and personhood; argues that equal concern and respect is the appropriate attitude toward persons.

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Descartes, René (1596–1650)

French philosopher and mathematician whose epistemological and metaphysical inquiries radically altered the history of Western philosophy. Descartes