

Deontology has many strengths but it is justifiable to reject it.
Clarify and assess this claim.

Derived from the Greek '*deon*' meaning "duty" or obligation", deontology refers to a general category of ethical or moral theories, and literally means "the study of duty or obligation". Deontological ethics, (sometimes described as "duty" or "obligation" – based ethics), therefore focus on the concept of duty with its correlative notions of rights and permission. Deontology posits the existence of *a priori* moral obligations, suggesting that people ought to live by a set of permanently defined principles that are not subject to change, and are concerned with the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of actions in themselves, as opposed to that of the consequences they produce. In this way, deontology is in direct opposition to consequentialist theories.

There are many kinds of deontological theories. All of them have their own respective strengths; however there are some positive attributes which they all share. Perhaps the most obvious common asset is that all deontological ethics provide clear cut rules. This characteristic means that deontologists have the advantage of being able to take very strong moral positions on certain actions, as illustrated by anti-abortion campaigners. By declining to accept exceptions to the maxims they posit, deontological theories produce a very appealing consistency.

Another reason why such theories still find such success in modern day society is that they place a very high value on human life, and thereby encourage the creation of laws which protect the sanctity of life. In this way, the theories will not allow "necessary evils", for example the sacrifice of one to save the many. This prevents certain moral boundaries from being crossed, and avoids so-called "slippery-slope" ethics, which lead to a fall in morality.

One of the best-known deontological theories is William Ockham's Divine Command Theory, which holds that morality is all about doing God's will, and therefore God's commands are the source of ethics. The theory states that God has issued certain commands to his creatures, which we can find in the Bible, or by asking religious authorities, or perhaps even by consulting our moral intuition. According to Divine Command Theorists we should always respect God's moral authority, thereby obey his commands, irrespective of the consequences of doing so, and even if we do not understand. As the old saying goes, "Our lord works in mysterious ways"

The Divine Command Theory is an appealing ethical theory, because it follows logically that, if we accept God to be the creator of all things including morality, then we ought to do what he tells us to do. The Bible contains a consistent message that we should obey God's commands.

The most famous argument against the Divine Command Theory, however, is the Euthyphro Dilemma, named from Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue which inspired it. The Euthyphro dilemma poses the question: "Does God command the good because it is good, or is it good because it is commanded by God?" This challenge casts doubt on whether following the Divine Command Theory is really how God wants us to live.

In regards to practicality, this form of deontology is not workable for atheists who, as they do not believe in God, see no reason to follow His commandments, and therefore do not find this argument persuasive. If they are to be persuaded by a deontological ethical theory it would have to be a secular one. In this respect, Kantian Ethics may present a more suitable candidate.

Immanuel Kant's Formalism, another well-known deontological theory of ethics, has been characterised as "a Divine Command Theory without the Divine", because of the similarities between the two theories.

Kantian ethics replaces the idea of God with the idea of rationality. Firmly based in reason, the theory argues that we can derive moral laws from rational precepts. According to Kant, anyone who behaves immorally is also acting irrationally. Kant formulated the Categorical Imperative, which in many ways resembles the biblical injunction to "do unto others as you would that they should do unto you". He argued that we ought to act from duty, and this means doing the right thing because we ought to, and for no other reason.

Kantian ethics shares its chief strengths with most other deontological theories, as it gives humans intrinsic worth, thereby promoting equality and prohibiting acts that are commonly seen as immoral (e.g. theft, murder, sexual abuse). Kant argued that every person has an inestimable worth, or dignity, that cannot be traded off against other values, and this argument finds popular support among society.

John Stuart Mill, however, criticised Kant's Categorical Imperative in his book *Utilitarianism*, noting that it does in fact use consequential logic; if the ends of a formulated maxim logically supported the maxim, then the maxim could be offered as a rule under which society should live. Mill criticised Kant for avoiding saying what the Imperative essentially reduced to – that the ends justify the means, a primary tenet of consequentialism.

It is also argued that Kantian Ethics are unworkable in modern society because Kant's refusal to allow exceptions to a maxim is not continuous with modern politics. For example, in war, the sacrifice of the few for the many is sometimes seen as necessary, however Kantian ethics would not condone this. A morality in which results are left out of account seems detached from reality and ultimately impractical.

Another high profile deontological theory is Natural Moral Law, put forward by Aristotle but championed by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, and is based around the idea that what is 'natural' is good.

According to Bishop Robert McManus from Massachusetts, "The recognition of Natural Moral Law provides the common ground between believers and non-believers about the fundamental moral issues affecting the common good and our living together." This is perhaps the greatest strength of this theory, and the reason that it has stood the test of time as well as it has; both theists and atheists can easily agree on the basic principles it promotes, i.e. education, preservation of life etc.

However, it has been argued that deontological ethics actually contest the opinions of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, Jesus opposed legalistic morality in the New Testament, and debated sharply with the moral legalists of his time, the Pharisees.

In addition, G.E. Moore claimed that Natural Moral Law was guilty of committing Naturalistic Fallacy, a term he described in his 1903 book *Principia Ethica* as the mistake of identifying moral good with any natural property. In other words, Moore denied that it was possible to derive what something “ought to be” by studying what “is”.

William David Ross agreed with G.E. Moore’s claim in terms of the naturalistic fallacy committed by Natural Moral Law; however he rejected Moore’s consequentialist ethics. He formulated a system of *prima facie* duties, which is, perhaps, the simplest form of deontology.

Ross’ deontology may be summarised in the following principle: *An action is morally right if and only if no alternative to this action is a more stringent prima facie duty.* Ross gives a list of seven *prima facie* obligations, which he does not claim is all-inclusive: fidelity; reparation; gratitude; non-maleficence; justice; beneficence; and self-improvement. In any given situation, any number of these *prima facie* obligations may apply, and in the case of ethical dilemmas, they may even contradict one another. Nonetheless, according to Ross, there can never be a true ethical dilemma because, when conflicts occur between duties, our actual duty becomes that which “intuitive judgment” discerns as the right thing to. For example, it could be permissible to lie in order to save the life of an innocent person. In this way one of the duties overrules all the others; this is thus the *absolute obligation*, the action that the person ought to perform.

The main problem for Ross’ theory is that it seems to have relativistic implications. If various “competent” people have radically different intuitions about what we should do, Ross’ theory gives us no practical guidance on how to resolve such issues. In addition, while the principles may be deontic in nature, a resolution of conflicts of principles could appeal to probable consequences.

In addition we can pose the question: how similar do moral dilemmas have to be in order to be covered by the same maxim? Are murder and self-defence to be covered by one maxim about taking human life, or should there be different rules? Covering both murder and self-defence by one maxim seems illogical given that they are completely different things, however created sub-clauses for maxims equally seems to be illogical, and damaging to the credibility of this theory.

A further challenge to deontological ethics comes from aretaic theories, which often maintain that neither consequences nor duties but “character” should be the focal point of ethical theory. Virtue Ethics, which takes its inspiration from the Aristotelian understanding of character, criticises the theories on the grounds that they do not place

enough emphasis on the importance of development of virtues, and therefore a moral character.

In response to this criticism, a deontologist may argue that deontological theories do in fact encourage virtues such as modesty, honour and selflessness amongst others, yet the challenge remains that a truly virtuous person should act in accordance to these characteristics in order to develop them, instead of the characteristics being a by-product of duty. Ultimately it is argued that deontological theories do not provide an accurate account of human motivation.

Although deontological ethics have many redeeming features, they are often seen as impractical by many for several reasons. In contrast to the opinion that the clear cut rules deontology offers enables people to make easier decisions, the inherent inflexibility of this characteristic is frequently claimed to be a shortcoming. It is seen to cause problems in that it does not respond to changes in ethical evaluations through time, and cannot take into account special circumstances.

We have to ask the question: How much of deontological ethics is culture bound? In other words, in what ways have they been influenced by the subjective opinions of those who formulated them? Some people maintain that it is impossible to defend the view that there exists an objective moral law as issues such as euthanasia and homosexuality are accepted in some cultures and rejected completely in others.

Seeing as most deontological ethics base themselves around this idea, the challenge damages their standing as workable ethics. Jeremy Bentham, an early Utilitarian philosopher, criticised deontology on the grounds that it was essentially a dressed-up version of popular morality, and that the unchanging principles that deontologists attribute to a universal law or reason are really a matter of subjective opinion.

It seems as though no deontological theory is without fault, and although they all have attractive features, their criticisms always seem to render them unworkable in modern day society, and therefore it is justifiable to reject deontology.

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