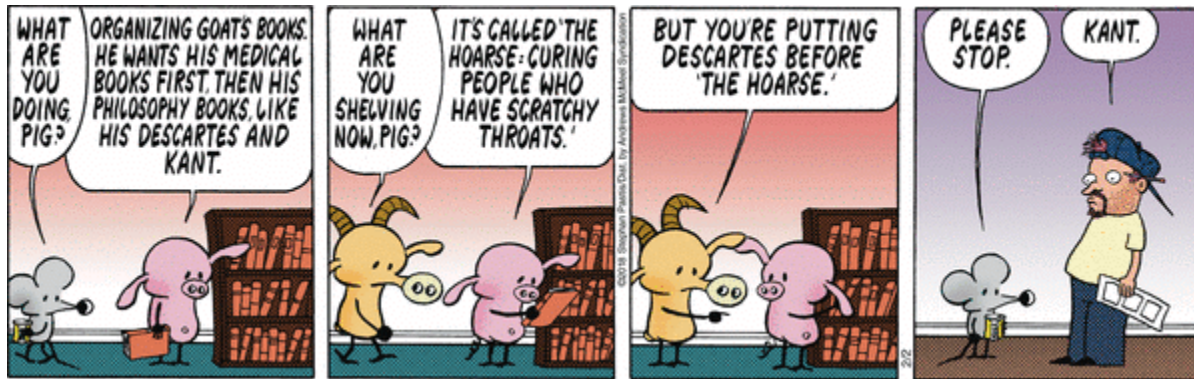


CBC Sunday School
Christian Ethics: Deontology
November 28, 2021



I. Discussion Question – Moral Dilemma Hypothetical

A family member needs to be rushed to the hospital, and time is of the essence. Do you break the speed limit? Why or why not? How do you justify your course of action?

II. Basics of Deontological Ethics

A. Definitions

1. Deontology – originates from Greek roots of deon (duty, obligation) and logos (study of, word). Thus it is the “ethics of duty.”
2. “The view that ethical standards consist of universal and necessary duties.” John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, p. 748
3. From Wikipedia: “the normative ethical theory that the morality of an action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong under a series of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action.”
4. Deontological ethical systems dictate that actions are good or bad according to a clear set of rules.
5. Duty must be done for duty’s sake.
6. “For example, the Stoics believed that people had duties to virtue and reasonable action quite apart from any calculation or expectation of human happiness.” P. De Vries, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 358
7. A subset of deontological ethics states we should act according to divine command.

B. Contrast of Deontological and Consequentialist/Teleological Systems

1. Actions are to be taken regardless of consequences. Duty supersedes results.
2. Rightness is intrinsic with the action itself, not on consequence.
3. People have intrinsic value, and are not just valuable because of what they produce.
4. Past events can place moral obligations on people. For example, a previously made promise can have bearing on a decision. In consequentialism, only present and future outcomes matter.
5. Deontological systems are referred to as “non-consequential ethical systems.”

C. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

1. Wrote two works with telling titles: “Foundation of Metaphysical Morals” and “Critique of Practical Reason.”
2. “There is only one thing that is good without reason and that is a good will.” Kant placed goodness in the will of the one acting, not in the consequence. He argued that we should not seek to acquire happiness, but be worthy of acquiring it through a good will.
3. Kant’s Imperatives
 - a. Hypothetical Imperative
 - i. Imperatives are actions we ought to take, but only toward a specific goal. An action is necessary only to achieve a particular end.
 - ii. We can think of hypothetical imperatives as resting on conditions. For example, if you want to lose weight, then exercise and eat less. Or, if you desire go home for Christmas, then make travel arrangements now.
 - b. Categorical Imperative
 - i. Imperatives are actions we ought to take, regardless of whether doing so would get us what we want, or we would benefit from it.
 - ii. An example of a categorical imperative would be “keep your promises,” whether you want to or not, or whether it benefits you or not. You should keep your promises because it is right to do so.
 - iii. “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law.” In other words, we should always act in such a way that the rule of my action should or could become a universal law. Or, act upon principles that should be universally right, and should be followed by others. Not that we wish to impose our rules on others, but rather we should not see ourselves as exceptions or special cases.
 - iv. Requires that we act in accordance with a universalizable maxim (or principle). This maxim may be followed in many different ways by different people, but it must be universal nonetheless. For example, husbands have the universal maxim to love their wives. How each husband does that may be different. But the universal maxim applies.
 - v. The categorical imperative is only a “formal” or “abstract” principle. It does not actually specify and particular maxims or principles upon which we must act as our duty.
 - vi. For Kant, there are only four examples of actual, universal maxims. The duty to not make false promises, to not commit suicide, to not indulge in laziness, and to reject selfishness.
4. Kant’s ethical system requires a “higher power.”
 - a. Kant argued that in order to understand our ethical duty, we must believe in a Supreme Judge who observes and weighs our actions.
 - b. He also argued that some afterlife is required if we are to be able to receive the rewards for our actions.

D. “Faith-Based” Deontological Ethics

1. Natural Law Ethics

- a. Built into the structure of things, by a “designer,” is a set of laws governing conduct.
- b. All should be able to discern moral law through observing the natural order of our world.
- c. What people know through their conscience will be consistent with what is reasoned by reflecting on natural order.
- d. Biblical revelation of moral norms is important, but even without revelation all people can know the basic principles of right and wrong.
- e. Thus, moral law is binding on all, not just those who believe.

2. Divine Command

- a. The standard of right and wrong is determined by the commands or prohibitions of God.
- b. What ultimately makes an action right or wrong is whether or not God commands or forbids it.
- c. God does not command or forbid an action because it is right or wrong. Rather, an action is right or wrong because God commands or forbids it. Rightness or wrongness lies in God Himself, not in the rule.

E. Conflict of Absolutes?

1. Some deontologists have dealt with the problem of what happens when categorical imperatives conflict; i.e. “moral dilemmas.”
2. To get around such conflicts, some have distinguished between exceptions and exemptions.
3. An exception would be a situation where the categorical imperative, or absolute law, would for some reason not apply. But in that case, the rule effectively disappears, which is impossible in a deontological system.
4. An exemption, however, occurs when the absolute rule is “overridden” by a weightier duty. In an exemption, the rule doesn’t disappear, and still stands and is relevant. But a weightier imperative is given greater priority.

III. Strengths of Deontology

A. Jesus lived by the command of God.

1. If any ethical system approximates the ethics of Jesus’ life and ministry, the deontological system might seem to be closest.
2. John 14:31 – “³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.”
3. John 4:34 – “³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”
4. John 5:30 – “³⁰ “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.”
5. Matthew 26:39 – “³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus sought the rule of the Father, regardless of “personal benefit.”

- B. Deontology is founded on a concept of absolute good that accords with divine command.
 - 1. It accords with our understanding of a Divine Judge who makes divine commands.
 - 2. Jesus says if we love Him, we will obey His commands. See John 14:33.
 - 3. Any universal or transcendent law in Scripture will resonate with or reinforce a deontological ethical system.
 - 4. It should be taken for granted that our morality must ultimately be determined by God's law and command.
 - 5. The consequences we must be concerned about are the consequences administered by God, in response to our righteous or sinful actions. Consider the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28.
 - 6. The sufficiency of Scripture tells us we do indeed have sufficient, binding moral norms that are adequate to govern our actions.
 - a. We have indeed been given a divine command, providing us all we need to know to live in conformity with God's will and to please Him.
 - b. We are not morally obligated to follow any command we have not been given in Scripture, or which is not a necessary entailment of a command we have been given.
- C. Accounts for ethical responsibility when "no one is watching."
 - 1. Consequentialist and relativist ethics only have value when in the context of others.
 - 2. Deontological ethics call for morality, even if you cannot perceive that anyone will care or be impacted by your actions.
 - 3. Because we believe in God, we know none of our actions are unseen, and all have moral value.
 - 4. Luke 8:17 – "¹⁷For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."
- D. God is sovereign, so all consequences are in ultimately in His hand.
 - 1. We are not called to be concerned ultimately about consequences, for that is God's realm.
 - 2. We are called to obedience to His Word, and ultimately to faith in Him, not in our ability to produce the best results.
 - 3. Matthew 6:33 – "³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."
 - 4. James 4:14 – "¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

IV. Weaknesses of Deontology

- A. Is there room for redemption and grace in deontological ethics?
 - 1. It may be possible to be "too concerned" with doing right, such that we don't trust that God will be gracious with us if we err, believing He is a cruel master waiting to punish us when we make a mistake.
 - 2. Alternatively, deontological ethics may lead to legalism, wherein we begin to think our merit is found in obedience to the law.
 - 3. Our ultimate good is found not in being obedient to the law (which we cannot do on

- our own), but in seeking God's help and power to first receive mercy, and then receive grace us to do what is right before Him.
4. Overall, there seems to be little "room for error" in deontological thought.
- B. Deontological ethics can lead to paralyzing impracticality.
1. Can lead to theorizing and idealism, to the extent it is utterly impractical.
 2. While we theorize about what is the "most right" action to take, sometimes we simply must take action.
- C. Scripture doesn't give divine commands about every life situation.
1. If you wait for a divine command or law to guide every decision, you will end up frustrated and clueless as to how to live.
 2. Therefore, we must consider data outside of God's explicit divine commands in making ethical decisions. For example, to make the best, most ethical decision regarding how you vote, or whether or not you participate in the military, you must know something about how our nation and its laws work.
 3. Divine commands must guide you, but they cannot be relied upon exclusively. We need additional data, which may belong to the realm of relativism or consequentialism (i.e. what will be good for and to others).
- D. It seems Christians should be concerned about consequences, at least to a certain extent.
1. Consider Paul's words on eating idol food in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 10:19-22. Paul clearly considers the consequences and reception of our actions.

VI. Discussion: Deontology Applied

- A. Imagine a life consciously ruled by deontological ethics. What does that life look like?
- B. What additional perspectives, if any, are needed to "round out" a deontological ethic?