

On the Necessity of Normative Ethics: Deontologism in Perspective

Emmanuel Adetokunbo OGUNDELE

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Augustine University, P.M.B. 1010, Ilara-Epe 106101,
Lagos State, Nigeria.
emmanuel.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

The moral values of a society are greatly influenced by the moral rules that guides such society. Hence, what is acceptable as morally right in one society may be said to be morally bad in another society. There are also instances whereby there are no universally accepted moral rules. The implication of this is that there will be inconsistency when it comes to identifying morally right or wrong actions. Deontologism is an ethical theory that emphasizes that morality be based on following rules and duties and not the end result of an action. It asserts that actions are innately wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the rewards or consequences of such actions. There are actions that are intrinsically right or wrong regardless of their outcome, such actions are therefore universally binding on moral agents. This study is therefore an attempt to investigate the theory of deontologism and argues for its indispensable role in preserving normative morality. Deontologism plays this role through its principle of basing morality in duty, and universal principles. The categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant and Ross is used, emphasizing the necessity of a normative morality, whose moral standards can be universally applied in order to bring about justice, ethical responsibility and social order.

Key words: Deontologism, Normative Morality, Duty, Ethical Theory, Universal.

Introduction

The moral values of a society are greatly influenced by the moral rules that guides such society. Hence, what is acceptable as morally right in one society may be said to be morally bad in another society. There are also instances whereby there are no universally accepted moral rules. The implication of this is that there will be inconsistency when it comes to identifying morally right or wrong actions. Deontologism is an ethical theory that emphasizes that morality be based on following rules and duties and not the end result of an action. It asserts that actions are innately wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the rewards or consequences of such actions.

Normative morality refers to the set of moral standards or principles that prescribe how individuals ought to act, outlining what is considered right or wrong, good or bad, and just or unjust in human behavior. It involves evaluating actions, choices, and beliefs based on ethical theories or moral frameworks to determine how people should behave. Normative morality is concerned with guiding human conduct according to certain values, such as fairness, honesty, respect, and justice, rather than merely describing or observing people's behavior.

Deontology becomes a necessity in a society given the fact that the society consist of people from different backgrounds and the possibility of having various ideas on what is morally right or wrong. For instance, a group of people may hold that murder is not bad if it is beneficial to a large group of people. This becomes a problem; the challenge now is how a line can be drawn to show when murder is right or wrong. If murder is considered right in this instance, what then makes it wrong in another instance? Deontology as a moral theory tends to provide an answer, a solution to this problem.

This study will therefore examine the necessity of normative morality, using deontology as a panacea to the problem of evaluating or addressing moral dilemmas. This paper argues that a rule-based normative morality, which sets universal moral standards, is essential to ensure consistent, ethical behavior that upholds justice and fairness in society.

Normative Morality

Normative morality is also known as normative ethics, it is one of the essential branches of ethics. Normative morality concerns itself with the ought. It deals with the principles and standards that should govern human conduct. Williams Frankena describes normative morality as asking what is right, good or obligatory and then give normative judgement about it. It implies that normative morality is concerned about developing a set of rules that guides the conducts of humans. It includes a set of rules that ought to be held by humans to be right and wrong. It is different from descriptive ethics, in that while descriptive ethics deals with what humans believe to be right and wrong which can be relative, normative morality prescribes what ought to be believed as right and wrong. The implication of this is that normative morality is objective, unlike the descriptive morality.

Thus, normative morality refers to the set of moral standards that guide how individuals ought to behave. It goes beyond describing what people do and instead focuses on what people should do based on principles like justice, fairness, rights, or the common good. It raises questions such as: What is the right thing to do? Why should we act this way? What ought we to do? What kind of person should one be? What actions are morally right or wrong? What makes an action right or wrong? What actions should an individual engage in?

Viola Schiaffonati holds that "Normative ethics is the branch of ethics judging morality and trying to formulate normative recommendations about how to act or live." Normative morality inquires into the rightness or wrongness of an action. It is that branch of moral philosophy or ethics, concerned with criteria of what is morally right and wrong. It includes the formulation of moral rules that have direct implications for what human actions, institutions, and ways of life should be like. Wilson Jose holds that "Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. It is a more practical task. It is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviour; ..." In a nutshell, normative ethics is essentially concerned about how

ethical theories are formed and how they are justified. The goal of normative ethics is to guide humans in making ethical decisions. It is important to note that normative morality does not describe or dictate actions that should be carried out, it only guides humans in choosing actions. The various ethical theories – deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics are the result of normative ethics.

Teleology is also known as consequentialism. It is a normative ethical theory just like deontology and virtue ethics. It is derived from 'teleo', Telos is a Greek word which is translated to mean end or purpose. According to Lawhead, "teleological ethics or consequentialism, which claims that the goal or outcome of an action is what determines its moral value." Teleology just as its name states, places the rightness or wrongness of an action on the end, purpose or outcome of the action. The implication of this will be that actions are neither good nor bad in themselves, it is the outcome of the action that determines the rightness or wrongness of an action.

Virtue ethics, unlike consequentialism which is concerned with ends, is an ethical theory that is concerned with character. It is overly interested in the performer of the action than the action itself. Aristotle is often referred to as the major proponent of virtue ethics based on his position in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* which is primarily on ethics and virtue. Aristotle believes that humans are naturally not good and so are incapable of good actions. Aristotle holds that, "from this it is plain that none of the moral excellences or virtues is implanted in us by nature; for that which is by nature cannot be altered by training." This influenced the distinction between being good and performing a good action. For him, only a good person can perform a good action, so when a bad person performs a good action, this does not make him or her a virtuous person. According to Abidemi Ogunyomi and Emmanuel Ogundele, "Aristotle belongs to the category of scholars who uphold the view that man acquires his goodness through teaching and conscious self-development." So virtue has to be learnt,

we learn an art by doing that which we wish to do when we have learned it; we become builders by building, and harpers by harping. And so by doing just acts we become just, and by doing acts of temperance and courage we become temperate and courageous... It is our conduct in our intercourse with other men that we become just or unjust and training ourselves to feel fear or confidence, that we become courageous or cowardly.

So, for Aristotle, virtue goes beyond performing good actions, it is more of a habit of choice. The implication of this is that, only a virtuous person can carry out a morally right action; and one can be a virtuous person only through training.

One fundamental problem with this theory is how to determine the length of time necessary for one to be trained to become virtuous. What is the parameter for judging or classifying an individual as virtuous? This theory, like consequentialism, poses a challenge to having an objective ethical theory. Hence, this study, will examine deontology as a necessity for normative morality.

Deontological Ethics

Deontologism and consequentialism are basic principles of ethics. Unlike consequentialism, deontologism belongs to the group of moral theories which claim that it is not only the outcome of an action that determines whether it is morally right or wrong. Williams Frakena holds that:

Deontological theories deny what teleological theories affirm. They deny that the right, the obligatory, and the morally good are wholly, whether directly or indirectly a function of what is non morally good or of what promotes the greatest balance of good over evil for self, one's society, or the world as a whole . . . For them the principle of maximizing the balance of good over evil, no matter for whom, is either not a moral criterion or standard at all, or, at least, it is not the only basic or ultimate one.

Deontologism is a word that was derived from two Greek words, “deon” and “logos”. “Deon” means duty, while “logos” means study. It is therefore a moral theory that is concerned with following moral rules and duties, regardless of the consequences. Deontologism as a moral theory posits that some actions are inherently good or bad in themselves. This will mean that the rightness or wrongness of an action is not dependent on the outcome of act, but on the act itself. For instance, actions such as kidnapping, murder, and lying, are considered as morally wrong actions. Hence, one cannot claim that lying is morally right, on the basis that he or she lied to save lives. The implication of this is that an action does not have dual identity. Lying cannot be morally right in this instance and be morally wrong in another instance. If it is wrong, then moral agents have the responsibility to avoid indulging in it.

Olson Robert opines that, deontologism “is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions.” Deontologism is basically defined as an ethics of duty or obligation, due to the fact that advocates of deontologism are of the belief that ethical rules make individuals to be bound to their duty. So, an individual is bound to obey the ethical laws even when their consequences are not pleasant. Christine Korsgaard reiterated the position of Immanuel Kant who argued that it is always wrong to lie, even when a murderer is asking for the location of a potential victim.

C. D. Broad was the first to use the term in 1930 in his book 'Five Types of Ethical Theory'. In an attempt to define deontologism Broad contrasted it with teleologism: he holds that,

Theories which hold that there is some special connexion between [Moral Obligation and Moral Value]....might take the following forms. The concepts of obligation are fundamental and the concepts of value are definable in terms of them. Thus it might be held that the notion of fittingness is fundamental, and that “X is intrinsically good” means that it is fitting for every rational being to desire X. Such theories might be called Deontological. The concepts of value are fundamental, and the concepts of obligation are definable in terms of them. Such theories may be called Teleological. E.g., it might be held that “X is a right action” means that X is likely to produce at least as good consequences as any action open to the agent at the time.

Rightness or wrongness of an action given does not depend on the circumstances or outcome. Barbara Mackinnon and Andrew Fiala opine that:

[D]eontological ethics focuses on duties and obligations: things we ought to do regardless of the consequences. One way of describing this is to say that deontological theories emphasize the right over good, by which we mean that deontology focuses on right actions and right intentions, while downplaying the importance of the goods or benefits that are produced by these actions.

There are no variables in deontology, only constants. In consideration of the story of Robinhood, consequentialists would adjudge the action of stealing from the rich to feed the poor as morally right, because for them, the end justifies the means. However, deontology considers such an action as morally wrong because stealing is morally wrong irrespective of the rationale.

Deontology has been propounded by different scholars, hence the tendency of having varying positions as to what deontology is about. D. W. Ross proposed a pluralistic deontology. Ross contends that there are seven essential features that should be considered before an action is executed and they are: Duty of beneficence: A duty to help other people (increase pleasure, improve character); Duty of non-maleficence: A duty to avoid harming other people; Duty of justice: A duty to ensure people get what they deserve; Duty of self-improvement: A duty to improve ourselves; Duty of reparation: A duty to recompense someone if you have acted wrongly towards them; Duty of gratitude: A duty to benefit people who have benefitted us; Duty of promise-keeping: A duty to act according to explicit and implicit promises, including the implicit promise to tell the truth. Ross refers to these features as *prima facie* on the basis that each of the duties has to be considered by an individual when he or she is in the process of deciding on executing an action. The question however is: In a situation whereby one is faced with more than one of these duties which takes priority? For instance, an individual made a promise to his friend to buy a car for him. This promise is now *prima facie*. However, as the individual was going to get the car a family member was involved in a ghastly accident that needs the exact sum of money s/he intended for the purchase of the car for surgery. What should be done in this situation? For Ross, the duty of beneficence overrides that of promise keeping. It means that the individual is to give the other duty top priority. This does not mean that in all cases, the duty of beneficence must override promise keeping. There are situations whereby promise keeping ought to be prioritized over beneficence. This leads to a critical concern; Ross's position presents a pluralistic deontology which makes actions to have dual identities. This is somewhat similar to consequentialism that Ross criticized.

Given the above, this study will examine the deontological theory of Immanuel Kant. Immanuel Kant is considered as one of the major proponents of deontology based on his postulation of the categorical imperative. Kant is famous for the maxim "duty for duty sake", which means that acting in morally acceptable way is acting according to duty. Kant also believes that the outcome of an action does not determine the rightness or wrongness of that action, but the motive with which the action was carried out. For instance, an individual who

does good to another so that he or she can be rewarded, though he or she is doing something right, the act is however morally wrong because the motive is wrong. So, for Kant, for one to act in a morally acceptable way, one ought to act from duty, and the act must be good in itself, that is must be good without qualification.

What does it mean, for an action to be good in itself? An action is good in itself if it does not need any qualification outside of itself to be good. Kant noted that concepts such as intelligence, perseverance and pleasure are not intrinsically good, because they need qualifications to be good. For instance, there are people who find pleasure in watching others suffer. Rapists for instance, derive pleasure in hurting others. It means that pleasure is not intrinsically good. Kant went on to say that, the only thing that is truly good is goodwill; "Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a goodwill."

The consequences of an act done willingly is not the determinant of goodwill, this is because there is the tendency of good consequences emanating from an action that was instigated by the desire to harm another. So, Kant claims that an individual has goodwill on the basis that s/he acts based on the moral laws. An individual is to act out of respect for the moral law because s/he has a duty to do so. Kant's deontological theory is referred to as categorical imperative and it can be summed up into three maxims; Act only according to that maxim by which you can also will that it would become a universal law; Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end; Act as though you were, through your maxims, a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.

Kant holds that, "There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." It implies that for Kant, morality exists universally and is not dependent on human experience. The first law of the categorical imperative is the universal law, and it states that "Act only on that maxim whereby which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." The second one is the principle of humanity as an end not a means "So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only." The third which is the principle of the universal kingdom of ends "Act according to the maxims of a member of a merely possible kingdom of ends legislating in it universally." These three principles are universally binding on moral agents.

The Necessity of Normative Morality in Deontology

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is a form of deontology that emphasizes on the rightness or wrongness of actions based on their alignment with rules and duty and not on the results the actions produce. Normative morality provides an ethical framework for deontology through its distinctly stated system of rules, duties and obligations that guide actions. It implies that, normative morality provides the structure that prevents deontology from falling into the pit of ethical relativism. Relativism makes it difficult for specific actions to be classified as right or wrong.

Normative morality serves as the standard against which actions are judged. The Categorical Imperative of Immanuel Kant is an example of deontologism that provides a universal principle, that guides individuals to act only according to maxims they can will to become universal laws. The emphasis is therefore on the fact that morality is not subjective or relative, but one that is generally or universally binding on all. This is an indication that normative morality, by ensuring that moral duties are objective, consistent, and binding on all moral agents, is protecting the very core principle of deontologism. This is to say that normative morality is an indispensable element in deontologism. Normative morality provides the required framework that deontologism needs by putting forth a universally applicable set of rules and principles.

Kant's categorical imperative which is hinged on the maxim to "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" exemplifies the necessity of having universally accepted rules binding on all moral agents regardless of location and nationality. What is applicable in Nigeria, ought to be the case in Ghana. For instance, murder is considered to be universally wrong given the categorical imperative of Kant and so it ought to be binding on all moral agents. So, normative morality acts as the pillar of deontologism, by ensuring that claims are not mere expressions of personal preference but objective demands of reason as Kant's categorical imperative, and Ross's theory of *prima facie* shows the essentiality of normative morality. Although, Ross presented several self-evident duties that have the tendencies of eliciting conflicts, they however possess intrinsic moral status.

Christian Tarsney defines Deontological moral theories,

as those that endorse constraints: option types, characterized non-relationally (and more particularly, without reference to the consequences of alternative options), whose tokens are *prima facie* prohibited, and for which the presumptive prohibition cannot be rebutted merely by the fact that all alternative options would have worse consequences.

Importantly, deontologism seems to shift the focus away from the outcome of the action but on the motive itself. Overtime, humans have come to justify actions based on the results and not why it was done. Hence, the reason for the rapid increase in crimes rate in human society today. Imagine a young boy with no job riding a car and living a luxurious lifestyle, there is the tendency of the society applauding him based on his results, compared to a young boy who is hardworking, follows moral rules but not wealthy. Deontologism such as Kant's categorical imperative attempts to change the narrative by paying attention to the motive of an action. According to Freeza and Freeza.

Kant was suggesting that even if the things we do go wrong, but the motivation was for the goodwill of all they are still moral. We can practice good or bad will inside or outside the law. Therefore, what should be pushing us towards an action is the motive, the good will and not duty to authority.

With deontologism, immorality and vices will reduce, because people will act just as they want others to act, they will perform actions because it is right not because someone is policing them or will punish them if they act otherwise. As Amadi, Nwinya and Ogbu hold “Kant's deontology is a panacea to the several morality challenges in Nigeria.”

The necessity of normative morality in deontologism also protects it from the pit of moral relativism and consequentialist thinking. In the absence of firm moral laws, actions could be judged primarily by their results, and so hinders the flow between right and wrong. Deontologism resists this by stating that certain actions, such as lying, breaking promises, and murder are wrong in themselves, regardless of the consequences they might produce. Normative morality thus acts as an anchor, preserving the integrity and categorical force of moral obligations.

Challenges of Deontologism

Deontologism, according to Xu and Ma, “emphasizes the obligation of an individual to adhere to universal moral rules, principle to determine moral behaviour”. It on this basis it is often criticized for its rigidity and inflexibility particularly in dicey moral instances. Picture this scenario, a man is obligated to tell the truth at all times regardless of the circumstance, but on a certain day, he was at home with his wife and son and of sudden some hired assassins broke into house demanding for his son who is in the room hiding. Knowing fully well that telling them the truth about his son will result in them killing him, the man is in a dilemma on whether to tell the truth and lose his son or tell a lie and save him. What is he expected to in such a situation? Deontologists like Kant would suggest that he tells the truth regardless of the outcome.

The rigidity of deontologism is therefore a major challenge to its acceptance in society. There are moral dilemmas where moral agents will ask if it is morally acceptable to kill to save others, or just stick to the rule of not killing and having others die. Joshua Greene holds that deontologism, specifically Kant's categorical imperative, used “manual-mode thinking to justify our automatic settings.” He is of the opinion that it is merely a rationalized emotional response. Nora Heinzelmann noted that Greene's

claims that utilitarianism is superior to rival ethical theories, notably deontology. He justifies this, very roughly, as follows: whilst a universal psychological system of cost-benefit reasoning produces utilitarian judgments, non-utilitarian judgments are heavily affected by emotional processes, which are relative to culture and personal experience.

This means that for Greene deontological theories like categorical imperative are based on emotions and cultural affinity and not through reasoning process. The rigid sense of duty that tends to be overly concerned with duty makes deontologism a major target for critics. This also informs the challenge of judging which duty supercedes the other. Is it the case that a duty to one's family supercedes the duty to one's job? Does a duty to save someone in danger surpass a duty not to lie? Responding in either way poses a problem to the theory. Brandon Roby asserts that the problem with Kant's deontological theory is in danger of falling into a kind of

consequentialism, meaning setting certain duties as more important than others, implies weighing them based on circumstances outside the scope of duty or rationality. This is close to relative stringency, i.e., weighing various duties, which is almost forced on deontologists in the case of when conflicts arise between duties. This challenge is referred to as conflict of duties.

Conflict of duties arises based on the fact that deontologism is majorly concerned with moral rules and pays little attention on how to guide moral agents when the rules conflict. For instance, an individual has the duty to always tell the truth and a duty to protect innocent lives. If telling the truth would result in someone being harmed or killed, deontologism provides no vivid answer to this moral dilemma. Kant is said to have been unable to resolve this problem. The deficiency in the application of deontologism particularly in dicey situations or conflicting duties leaves a moral agent morally impotent in situations that demand immediate moral judgment. For Edward Freeman and Patricia Werhane

However, most of us think that moral standards have exceptions; there are times when one cannot respect all moral rules or respect them equally. For instance, when one's life is threatened, one often must kill in self-defense. However, one can override a rule or standard (e.g., that everyone has a right to life) only when one has good reasons, reasons that other reasonable people would accept as being sound (e.g., self-defense) because they appeal to another standard (e.g., equal rights include my right to life and freedom).

Christian Tarsney also holds that “We are often uncertain about what we morally ought to do. Such uncertainty can arise from uncertainty about the empirical facts: for instance, is this substance that I am about to put in my friend's coffee sweetener, or is it arsenic?” The argument has been, overtime, that morality is relative or context dependent and not rule based. As such in a situation where one finds one's self in a moral dilemma, the rule can be ditched and then informed decision is made in that instance. However, critics argue that the normative, rule-based system (deontologism) challenges moral relativism and pluralism. Alexander and Moore noted also that a “crucial problem with which deontologists must grapple is the problem posed by the conflicts that seem to exist between various deontological obligations.”

There is also the challenge of an action which is morally right according to the principle of deontologism producing a negative moral outcome. Deontologists are big on the fact that morality is not judged based on the outcome of an action. There is, however, the possibility of such actions resulting into morally troubling outcomes while trying to preserve the integrity of moral duty. Deontologists' refusal to consider consequences is argued to have the tendency of being detached from the real-world impact of moral decisions, thus reducing its practical relevance in disciplines such as healthcare, politics, business, where outcomes can have remarkable human significance.

Kant's deontological formulation of the categorical imperative demands that one acts only on maxims that can be universally applied. Critics however argue that determining whether a maxim can be universalized is often ambiguous and not objective. This is because, what an individual considers universally acceptable might not be to another. Critics argue that deontologism claims to be objective, but the flexibility in interpretation of moral rules limits the

objective and universal character that deontology aims to uphold. It also raises concerns about moral relativism, which deontology explicitly seeks to avoid.

Deontology, inspite of its challenges identified, is an essential normative moral theory that is overly concerned about the dignity of humans and rule-based actions. Not to overlook the challenge that comes with its application, it however has shown that it is a necessity for justice and order in a society. A major problem with deontology is the conflict of duties. Although, Kant was not able to provide an answer to this problem, the *prima facie* of Ross is a rebuttal to the problem. According to Alexander,

the other well known approach to deal with the possibility of conflict between deontological duties is to reduce the force of such duties to that of only “*prima facie*” duties. Then one can claim that all apparent conflicts of duties are in reality conflicts between merely *prima facie* duties, which is unproblematic so long as it does not infect what one is categorically obligated to do as one's concrete, over-all duty on some occasion.

Tohaneanu also noted that adopting the *prima facie* when there is conflict of duties, makes the situation to be unproblematic.

Applications of Deontology as a Normative Morality

The necessity of a normative morality such as deontology in society today cannot be overemphasized. One basic reason is because unlike other normative theories, deontology focuses on the right more than the good. The action of an individual can be said to be good and at the same time not be right. Hence, the good is not the primary concern of deontologists, but the right that aligns with duty. A moral agent has the responsibility to simply be familiar with the rules and then act in accordance to them. Additionally, deontology provides a more concise and direct account of action that is based on duty and not an ambiguous account that is based on complex moral intuition. For instance, murder is intrinsically wrong in itself, a moral agent does not need to start thinking of under which circumstance they ought to avoid murder or not. It is pretty straightforward, murder should be avoided in every instance, regardless of its outcome or perceived good. It means that deontology helps a moral agent to make moral decisions at the spur of the moment. In consequentialism, for instance, what is considered morally right in one instance, may not be in another instance. Every instance, requires an improvement, which is not the case in deontology.

Deontology can be applied in virtually every sphere of human endeavor. Its universal nature, helps to inform legal systems and the fact that it focuses on duty, rights, and justice makes it essential to the legal systems.

Conclusion

Deontology states that actions ought to be judged according to their adherence to duty and moral law, rather than by their consequences. In defending the necessity of normative morality, this study emphasizes the intrinsic value of ethical actions based on universal obligations. The categorical imperative of Kant which is a deontological theory places

emphasis on treating individuals as ends in themselves and respecting the moral right of individuals, deontologism provides a foundation for ethical consistency and moral accountability.

Deontologism is a necessary normative morality that has the tendency of addressing the moral decadence in today's society. This rule-based theory that is not dependent on the outcome of an action, but on the intrinsic nature of actions will help to reduce the vices in the society. It is greatly rooted in the morally "right", and not the outcome. Its position is not merely theoretical but profoundly practical in shaping responsible citizens, ethical leaders, and just institutions. Hence, the necessity of normative morality is most convincingly upheld through the lens of deontologism. It demands that we act not merely in pursuit of good outcomes, but in alignment with what is right because it is right. In doing so, it preserves the integrity of moral philosophy and the dignity of human action in an ever-changing world.

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