

About duty-based ethics

## **Duty-based or Deontological ethics**

***Deontological (duty-based) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions:***

- ***Do the right thing.***
- ***Do it because it's the right thing to do.***
- ***Don't do wrong things.***
- ***Avoid them because they are wrong.***

Under this form of ethics you can't justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences, which is why it's sometimes called 'non-Consequentialist'.

The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means 'duty'.

Duty-based ethics are usually what people are talking about when they refer to 'the principle of the thing'.

***"Duty-based ethics" teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced.***

Some kinds of action are wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the consequences.

***Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules, such as:***

- ***It is wrong to kill innocent people***
- ***It is wrong to steal***
- ***It is wrong to tell lies***
- ***It is right to keep promises***

Someone who follows Duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm (or less good) than doing the wrong thing:

People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result.

***So, for example, the philosopher Kant thought that it would be wrong to tell a lie in order to save a friend from a murderer.***

If we compare Deontologists with Consequentialists we can see that **Consequentialists begin by considering what things are good, and identify 'right' actions as the ones that produce the maximum of those good things.**

**Deontologists appear to do it the other way around; they first consider what actions are 'right' and proceed from there.** (Actually this is what they do in practice, but it isn't really the starting point of deontological thinking.)

So a person is doing something good if they are doing a morally right action.

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## Good and bad points

### Good points of duty-based ethics

- emphasises the value of every human being
- Duty-based ethical systems tend to focus on giving equal respect to all human beings.
- This provides a basis for human rights - it forces due regard to be given to the interests of a single person even when those are at odds with the interests of a larger group.
- says some acts are always wrong
- Kantian duty-based ethics says that some things should never be done, no matter what good consequences they produce. This seems to reflect the way some human beings think.

### Bad points of duty-based ethics

- absolutist
- Duty-based ethics sets absolute rules. The only way of dealing with cases that don't seem to fit is to build a list of exceptions to the rule.
- allows acts that make the world a less good place
- Because duty-based ethics is not interested in the results it can lead to courses of action that produce a reduction in the overall happiness of the world.
- Most people would find this didn't fit with their overall idea of ethics:

...it is hard to believe that it could ever be a duty deliberately to produce less good when we could produce more...

**A C Ewing, The Definition of Good, 1947**

- hard to reconcile conflicting duties
- Duty-based ethics doesn't deal well with the cases where duties are in conflict