

## Absolute Deontology (Immanuel Kant)

**1. Absolute Deontology:** Utilitarians deny that any particular KIND or TYPE of action is just plain wrong, or indeed has any wrongness whatsoever attached to it. Rather, the ONLY thing that makes an action wrong are its CONSEQUENCES. It NEVER matters morally HOW those consequences are achieved.

But, most of us have the irresistible moral intuition that this is mistaken. For instance, recall Organ Harvest, where a doctor murders one patient in order to save four others. The utilitarian will say that this is permissible, because the choices are between one death and four deaths—and one death is better. But, most of us think it matters, morally, that the result of one death rather than four is achieved via MURDER!

Contrast this with the following case

**Pill Distribution:** You, a doctor, have only four doses of a life-saving medication, and five ill patients. One patient's illness is advanced, and will require four doses to be saved. The other four patients each need only one dose. You save the four patients. Sadly, the fifth patient dies.

Here, as in Organ Harvest, you ALSO have a choice between two consequences: (a) one patient dies, or (b) four patients die. Yet, NOW it DOES seem permissible to select the option that results in one death rather than four. What changed? Answer: HOW the consequences were brought about. Namely, in Pill Distribution, you did NOT achieve the result by murdering someone!

This seems to suggest that certain KINDS of actions are inherently wrong, regardless of whether performing them would bring about an overall balance of good results (e.g., murder). Whereas, on Utilitarianism, murder, rape, lying, stealing and so on are ALL morally permissible whenever they produce good consequences, to most of us it seems that there is a moral prohibition against these sorts of actions, independent of the results that they would produce.

This was Immanuel Kant's view, and specifically he endorsed a moral system called:

**Absolute Deontology:** The view that we have certain moral duties, and these duties are ABSOLUTE (that is, they admit of NO exceptions).

Absolute Deontologists ("Absolutists") believe there are certain things that you should or should not do. Furthermore, they are "absolute." In other words, they have no exceptions. You should fulfill these duties no matter what, at all costs. For example, Kant believes that "You should not lie" is an absolute duty. Since it admits of no exceptions, this means that it is *never* morally permissible to lie.

**[Side Note On HOW Kant Derives Our Moral Duties:** Kant believed that what you “ought” to do (i.e., an imperative) falls into one of two categories:

(1) **Hypothetical Imperative:** Something that you ought to do, conditional on some other factor (such as desire).

For instance, if you WANT to go to medical school, then you OUGHT to study for the MCAT. It is something you should do, but ONLY IF you want to go to med-school. This sort of “ought” is non-moral.

(2) **Categorical Imperative:** Something that you ought to do, end of story.

These are the moral oughts, which govern human conduct, independent of our desires (or any other condition, for that matter). For instance, even if you WANT to kill someone, you should NOT do this. You OUGHT to refrain from killing, end of story. Thus, this sort of ought—unconditional on anything else—is ABSOLUTE; i.e., exceptionless.

Kant believed that we could figure out what the categorical imperatives (i.e., the moral duties) were by REASON alone. That is, we could just sit down, and think about it for a while, and the truth would come to us. Namely, they are derived by applying the following rule:

*“Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”*

This means that, whenever we wonder whether an action is morally permissible or not, (1) First, we figure out what sort of principle would tell us to perform that action, and (2) Then we check to see if a contradiction would result if we were to will that EVERYONE guide their actions by that same principle. If a moral principle cannot be coherently universalized, it is impermissible.

For instance, someone who lies is essentially acting according to the following moral principle: “Whenever you feel like it, you should lie.” But, if *everyone* acted by this maxim, lying would no longer be possible; for, in order to lie to or deceive others, you need them to trust you. But, in a world where everyone lied, no one would trust anyone else, and so deception would not even be possible. So, this principle cannot be coherently universalized. Therefore, we should NOT lie.]

Kant believed that all of the moral imperatives could be reduced to this one simple rule:

*“Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”*

What does this mean? Roughly, people are not just “things” to be used, or tools to be bent in service to our own wills, without any regard to the fact that they are an autonomous agent with their OWN will, and goals, desires, etc. For instance, consider the Organ Harvest case again. By killing the innocent patient, the doctor is treating him as a mere object—no differently than a cooler full of donated organs. The patient is used merely a MEANS to saving the other three patients, without any regard for HIS preferences or interests; without any respect for the fact that he is an autonomous human being.

*[Note: This is not to say that we can't EVER permissibly use people; it's just that we can't ONLY or MERELY use them. That is, if we DO use them, we must ALSO at the same time treat them as an "end." For instance, imagine that I call an electrician to do some work for me. He gives me a price for the work, I agree to pay it, and he completes the job for me. In this case, though it is true that, in some sense, I "used" him to do some electrical work for me, I didn't ONLY use him. I did not "merely" treat him as a means, but also as an end, since he AGREED to do the job for a certain fee. I respected the fact that HE had his OWN desires, and we worked together to decide on a course of action that we could both agree on, in accordance with BOTH of our wills.]*

**2. An Objection to Absolute Deontology:** Consider the following case:

**Crazed Murderer:** A stranger knocks on your door. When you answer, they explain that they are being chased by a crazed murderer and they need to hide quickly. You hide them in your closet. A moment later, a crazed murderer shows up at your door. He asks if you are hiding anyone inside. You say yes, and lead him to his victim in your closet, whom he then murders.

It seems that Kant would say that you act RIGHTLY in this scenario. (gasp!) Recall that “You ought not lie” is one of the moral imperatives, and that these moral imperatives are ABSOLUTE—they have no exceptions. In that case, it is NEVER morally permissible to lie. So, when you tell the crazed murderer the truth, you are doing the morally right thing. You have done nothing wrong, according to Kant. But, it is obvious to most of us that you *have* done something wrong in the Crazed Murderer case. You SHOULD HAVE LIED to the murderer. So, Kant's view must be mistaken.

**3. Moral Dilemmas:** Perhaps the Absolutist's view is not really that simple? For, it seems like “You ought not aid a murderer” is ALSO a plausible moral duty. If so, then in Crazed Murderer, you have no choice but to violate one of two competing moral duties. Either you (a) violate the imperative, “**Do not aid a murderer**” by telling the truth and leading the murderer to his victim, or else (b) you violate the imperative, “**Do not lie**” by lying to the crazed murder, telling him that you have not seen anyone. Either way, you have done something morally wrong.

So, while a Kantian COULD respond to the Crazy Murderer objection in this way, now they have a DIFFERENT problem on their hands: Namely, their moral system is now susceptible to generating “**moral dilemmas**”; i.e., scenarios where there is no permissible course of action. Sort of a “Damned if you do; damned if you don’t” case.

This is typically seen as a bad feature of any moral theory. Typically, we think that “ought implies can”; i.e., if you ought (morally speaking) to do something, then it had better be possible for you to do it. But, it seems like you OUGHT to refrain from acting wrongly. On this version of Kantian moral theory, however, in the Crazy Murderer situation, you CAN’T avoid acting wrongly. [*Do you agree that this is a bad feature of any moral view?*]

## Moderate Deontology (W. D. Ross)

**1. Three Intuitive Claims:** Utilitarians believe that, morally, you ought to murder one innocent person to save four others. Why? Because the consequences are all that matter, morally. But, this seems mistaken. **There is more to morality than mere consequences.**

Absolutists conclude that, morally, you ought to tell the truth to a murderer who asks you where his victim is. Why? Because certain actions (such as lying) are absolutely wrong, regardless of the consequences. But, this too seems mistaken. **Morality is not simply a list of exceptionless rules.**

Furthermore, a refined version of Absolutism suggests that there are absolute moral duties which sometimes conflict with one another. In such cases, every choice is the wrong choice. But, this also seems mistaken. **When moral duties conflict, we should be able to adjudicate between them.**

If you agree, then the Moderate Deontology of W.D. Ross is right for you.

**2. ‘Prima Facie’ Duties:** Like Kant, Ross believed that certain types of action (such as lying) have some wrongness attached to them—but not *absolute* wrongness. Ross believed that our moral duties were not ‘absolute’ duties but ‘*prima facie*’ duties.

**‘Prima Facie’ Duty:** When I have a prima facie duty to do X, this means that I have *some moral reason* to do X, but this reason can be overridden by other competing moral reasons.

Ross identified 7 types of action which we have some moral reason to do (though, he admits that this list may be incomplete). These are:

### **Prima Facie Duties**

- (1) *Non-Maleficence* – the duty to not harm others
- (2) *Beneficence* – the duty to help others, or benefit them
- (3) *Fidelity* – the duty to be honest; i.e., tell the truth, keep promises, etc.
- (4) *Reparation* – the duty to compensate those whom you have wronged
- (5) *Gratitude* – the duty to acknowledge those who have benefited you
- (6) *Justice* – the duty to be fair (e.g., regarding the distribution of goods)
- (7) *Self-Improvement* – the duty to improve your own virtue, intelligence, etc.

**3. Adjudicating Between Duties:** Because each of these duties is not ABSOLUTE, but rather can be OVERRIDEN when it conflicts with another duty, Ross's system is not susceptible to moral dilemmas. To see how this works, consider some conflicts:

Beneficence vs. Fidelity: In *Crazed Murderer*, you have a duty of fidelity to tell the truth to the murderer. But, you ALSO have a duty of beneficence to help save the hiding victim. These two prima facie duties are in conflict. Ross thinks that you will agree that it is obvious that your duty of beneficence is SO much stronger in this case—because SO much is at stake. The victim's LIFE is on the line! In such a case, your duty to tell the truth is overridden by your competing—and, in this case, MUCH STRONGER—duty to help the victim avoid death.

So, when beneficence vs. fidelity go head to head, beneficence wins! Not so fast...

Imagine that you made a promise to meet someone for lunch at noon. Now, if on your way to lunch you witnessed a traffic accident and saw a person trapped under a burning car, you ought to break your promise and save that person (even if this causes you to fail to keep your lunch promise). But, now, imagine that fulfilling your promise will give your friend a certain amount pleasure, or happiness—but, by breaking your promise, you could give a stranger SLIGHTLY MORE happiness. Should you break your promise to achieve THIS benefit? Ross writes,

Suppose ... that the fulfilment of a promise to A would produce 1,000 units of good for him, but that by doing some other act I could produce 1,001 units of good for B, to whom I have made no promise, the other consequences of the two acts being of equal value; should we really think it self-evident that it was our duty to do the second act and not the first? I think not.

So, our duty to help others only overrides our duty of honesty when it is VERY STRONG. When it is very weak, beneficence loses to fidelity.

[*Note: A utilitarian would say exactly the OPPOSITE. Do you see why?*]

Beneficence vs. Non-Maleficence: Consider a case where these two duties conflict:

**Crowded Cliff:** You are standing at the edge of a cliff with a crowd of people. The crowd surges, and someone next to you begins to slip over the edge. At the last second, you shove someone else off the edge in order to make room for the slipping person, thus saving their life.

Was this morally permissible? Most of us have a strong intuition that this was morally WRONG. But, notice: You had a duty of beneficence to help save the falling person, but a competing duty of non-maleficence not to harm the innocent bystander. In this situation, it seems that non-maleficence wins. Our prima facie duty to do no harm overrides our prima facie duty to help. Ross agrees, writing,

We should not in general consider it justifiable to kill one person in order to keep another alive, or to steal from one in order to give alms to another.

*[Note: A utilitarian would say it doesn't matter what you do in this case. Do you see why?]*

Now, when we upped the stakes in beneficence vs. fidelity, EVENTUALLY beneficence beat fidelity (as in Crazy Murderer). What happens when we increase the stakes with respect to beneficence vs. non-maleficence? Well, Organ Harvest is exactly such a case. Rather than kill one or save one, it's kill one or save FOUR. Nevertheless, it STILL seems wrong to kill. Thus, our duty of non-maleficence is apparently MUCH stronger than our duty of beneficence.

*[Question: How strong must the duty of beneficence get before it DOES override the duty of non-maleficence? Imagine a scenario—which I'll call 'Blood Harvest'—where a deadly virus has infected a thousand people. One patient is immune. I realize that I could create a cure by using their blood to create 1,000 vaccines. Unfortunately, I need ALL of their blood, so the process will be fatal, and they will not agree to the procedure willingly. So, I kill them and take the blood anyway, saving 1,000 others from death. Was THIS morally permissible? If not, is there ANY number of lives saved which would justify the murder of one? If not, you might be an absolutist about the prohibition against murder.]*

**4. Objections:** Here are some worries:

**(1) The Utilitarian Objection:** According to Ross, contrary to Utilitarianism, there is obviously no connection between "rightness" and "optimization." But, in effect, what he is saying then, is that, if everyone acts rightly then the result will be a world that is less than the best. For, as we have seen, deontology entails that it is sometimes morally right to perform the action that would result in WORSE consequences.

By contrast, utilitarianism entails that, if we all acted rightly, we would achieve the best world possible. The world would be as happy as it could possibly be. Shouldn't THAT be what ultimately guides our actions? Utilitarians say 'yes', and think it is obvious that 'morally right action' and 'optimization' are synonymous. *[Do you agree?]*

**(2) The Firmness of Moral Intuition:** Ross states that we recognize the prima facie duties because each one is "self-evident"—that is, "without need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself." He thinks that it is just OBVIOUS that the duties on his list are things that we ought to do. (Though, it is not always clear what our overall duty is when two or more prima facie duties conflict—in such cases, the best we can do is consult our gut.) This is a form of 'ethical intuitionism', which says that we have an intuitive grasp of moral truths, with no need for any evidence except the intuition itself. (Just as you "just see" the truth of  $2+2=4$  by contemplating it, via an intellectual faculty of *mathematical* intuition, you can also "just see" that, say, torturing someone for fun is morally wrong, via an intellectual faculty of *ethical* intuition.)

But, some challenge this method of doing ethics. First, do we even HAVE a faculty of 'ethical intuition'? What does that even MEAN? Second, even if we DO have such a faculty of perceiving moral truths, how do we know that they're RELIABLE? Perhaps such intuitions often deliver the WRONG moral verdict. Often, throughout history, there have been LOTS of things that were "obvious" that turned out to be false. For instance, it once seemed "obvious" to everyone that the Earth was flat, and that the Sun went around the Earth. It also seemed "obvious" to lots of people that men were superior to women, or that slavery was morally permissible. Way to go, "ethical intuition"!

*[What do you think? If we don't answer moral questions by consulting our moral faculty within, how DO we answer them? Do you agree with Ross when he wrote that, in the discipline of science, the evidence for the scientist's conclusions is:*

*sense-experience itself, which furnishes his real data. [But] In ethics no such appeal is possible. We have no more direct way of access to the facts about rightness and goodness and about what things are right or good, than by thinking about them; the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science.]*