

Moral Rules and Duties (Deontological Ethics)

Summary

In this perspective the focus is on the nature of an ACT itself, and not what happens as a result of that action.

The emphasis is on being motivated by moral duties and acting in accordance with them. Respect for persons is also stressed in this view.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a major proponent and developer of this approach to ethics. Kant formulated a 'categorical imperative' (a command that is absolutely binding, without exceptions), and stated it in several ways:

1. *"One must act only in such a way that one could will one's act to become a universal law or rule (maxim)".*

One should act only in ways that would be acceptable if everyone else acted that same way.

2. *"Act in such a way that always the action treats humanity never simply as a means, but at the same time as an end".*

One should not treat persons as a means to an end only, where the outcome is the only concern.

Kant distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties. Perfect duties must always be done – do not commit suicide, do not kill innocents, do not lie, etc. Imperfect duties must only sometimes be done – develop our talents and ourselves, contribute to the welfare of others.

Contributions

- Offers consistent principles or rules
- Treats persons as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end
- Recognizes individual rights

Challenges

- Does not offer a way to deal with conflicting obligations
- Perfect duties permit no exceptions, which can sometimes be morally difficult to reconcile
- Does not offer much guidance about forming and applying moral rules in a real life setting

*Adapted with permission from Laura Bishop, Ph.D.,
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