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Teleological and Deontological Ethics

When evaluating morality, there are two principals of ethical theories that can be contrasted. These theories are deontological ethics and teleological ethics. While teleological ethics focuses on moral acts in order to achieve some sort of end, deontological ethics argues that morality is an obligation and is not reducible to a creation of good consequences. Given these distinctively opposite characteristics, it is obvious that when viewing morally relevant situations that the methods of approaching them will conflict as well. Not only will these differences depend on the deontological or the teleological ethicist point of view, but opinions will also vary when surreptitiously observing the egoist, the altruist, and the universalist.

Teleological ethics (coming from the Greek word “telos” meaning “goal or orientation”), states that all morality is simply reducible to the creation of either the good or the best consequences. For example, given the moral issue of killing, a teleological ethicist would claim that killing for a promotion at work or for revenge on an in-law is wrong or immoral, whereas killing in self-defense would be condoned and considered as moral. It is a decision made based on the best consequences, not a universal law.

Aristotle was one of the philosophers who used teleological explanations, which he called “final causes”. For example, he would say that an acorn is there to grow into an oak tree, and a human being is born in order to become a rational animal, etc. This concept was later taken over to Christianity as divine purpose, but while Aristotle and Christians would easily accept the question ‘What are armadillos for?’ (They would argue that everything has a purpose based on the belief that

there is a Creator and he had a purpose for everything he created), modern biology would totally reject the question and argue that “Armadillos are not *for* anything; they just evolved along with countless other species of living things and managed to survive against competitors in the struggle for existence.”¹

Deontological ethics (the Greek word “deon” meaning “duty”) states that moral rules and principals have a unique moral meaning, content, and cannot be reduced to a calculation of production (or the best consequences). A deontologist would believe that “some kinds of acts are wrong even if they do sometimes have good consequences. Deontologists do not always agree on which kinds of acts are bad in spite of having good consequences, but only that there are such acts.”² Deontology focuses on and insists that *how* people accomplish their goals is usually (or always) more important than *what* they accomplish.

Immanuel Kant was a deontological ethicist and believed that there was a principle of human conduct that is universal and applicable to all rational beings, without any exceptions. For example, Kant would argue that telling the truth is a universal principle and that one should never lie. If telling the truth was not universal, everyone would lie and no agreements could be made or taken seriously. Kant insists that “The consequences of our actions are to a large extent out of our hands, and we can never be sure what they will be. The general wrongness of lying is more certain than what the consequences of this particular act of lying will be.”³ Clearly, Kant’s ethics is not based on consequences, contrary to the belief of the teleological ethicist.

When comparing teleological and deontological ethics, it is obvious that each method opposes the other, and can possibly be argued that each embraces their own unique flaws. In the example of killing, a teleological approach to morality could be said to be a little too far on the flexible side. For if all people were able to make decisions based on their own evaluation of different circumstances, a

question would arise as to who decides when exceptions can be made and when they can't.

On the contrary, when debating the views of the deontological ethicist, one might say that this approach is too extreme. Going back to the example of killing, it is highly unlikely that a rational being would view killing in self-defense as immoral. For if you were being held hostage by a renowned serial killer whom you knew had no family or friends to miss him and that he himself did not even value his own life (and you could conclude this one hundred percent), could one rationally argue that killing him before he takes your life would be wrong and immoral? Depending on which view you approach this moral dilemma with will determine your standpoint.

In such a situation, an egoist (one who believes that the right act, or our duty, is the act that best promotes our long-term self-interest) would be categorized as a teleological ethicist, where they could assess each experience individually and make moral decisions accordingly. The egoist would easily determine that it is in his best interest is to kill the murderer and preserve his own life.

An altruist (one who looks out for the welfare of others) approach would also be categorized into the teleological view because of its flexibility. If the altruist believed that killing his captor would save others lives then he would most likely not have any trouble shooting him. However if the altruist could see that killing his captor would in no way benefit the lives and well being of others, he would probably be completely selfless and allow the murderer to kill him.

A universalist is one who believes that some system of ethics applies universally. By this definition, the universalist would appeal to the qualities of deontological ethicist. He would argue that killing is always wrong, no matter what the situation,

and he would not make any defensive actions against the murderer, even if that meant allowing the killer to take his life.

When examining both the teleological and deontological ethics, it can become difficult to determine which approach to follow. Certainly the teleological approach seems to be the most appealing among the two because it allows for flexibility and qualified morals, but what if everyone were to live by these flexible morals? Would we all be able to live orderly together going off what we each individually thought to be the moral thing to do? What justifies killing or cheating in my mind could be completely different from the mind of a psychopath. Who or what determines what is acceptable? And what is crossing the line in each unique scenario? It is moral dilemmas like these that people often turn to the belief in a Creator.

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1. John Hospers, Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics (p.84)
 2. John Hospers, Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics (p.157)
 3. John Hospers, Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics (p.96)