

Act Deontological Theory (A-B)

Another rather extreme reaction to the ethics of traditional rules, but one which remains on the deontological side as against egoists and other teleologists, is act-deontologism. The main point about it is that it offers us no standard whatsoever for determining what is right or wrong in particular cases, it tells us that particular judgements are basic and any general rules are to be derived from them, not the other way around. It presents a kind of method for determining what is right, namely, by becoming clear about the facts in the case and then forming a judgement about what is to be done, either by some kind of "intuition" as intuitionists would call it or by a "decision" of the kind that existentialists talk about. Act-deontologism, however, offers us no criterion or guiding principle, but at most only rules of thumb.

faculty which perceives with a clear
wrong, and speaks with a tolerable. But
matters might still be tolerable. But
archaeological and psychological evidence
seem to be against the existence of such
a faculty, as does the everyday experience
of disagreement about what is right in
particular situations.

The other kind of act-deontolo-
-gical theory, which makes "decision" rather
than "intuition" central, is even less satisfactory.
It leaves our particular moral judgement
wholly up in the air, as existentialists think
they are subject to the "anxiety" of which
they make so much. It does, indeed, tell
one to take the "situation" one is in
as his guide, and this must mean that
one must look carefully to see just what
his situation is, that is, one must be careful
to get the facts about one's situation straight,
but beyond that it has nothing to say,
and it even insists that there is nothing
else to guide one — one must simply
"choose" or "decide" what to do, virtually
making one's acting action right by choosing it.
In effect, this gives us no guidance whatsoever.
For merely looking at the facts does not tell
one what to do if one does not also have
some aim, ideal, or norm to go by. Just
knowing that a car is coming tells me
nothing about what to do unless I want to

The main argument for act-deontologism is the claim that each situation is different and even unique, so that no general rules can possibly be of much help in dealing with it, except as mere rules of thumb. Now, it is true that each situation has something new or unique about it, but it does not follow that it is unique in all respects or that it cannot be like other situations in morally relevant respects. After all, events and situations are alike in some important respects, otherwise we could not make true general statements of a factual kind, as we do in ordinary life and in science. Therefore, there is no reason for thinking that we cannot similarly, make general statements of a moral kind, eg: many situations are certainly alike in including the fact that a promise has been made, and this may be enough to warrant applying a rule to them.

On the other side, two lines of argument may be advanced against act-deontological theories. The first counts most against the more extreme ones, the other against them all. The first is that it is practically impossible for us to do without rules. For one thing, we cannot always put in the time and effort required to judge each situation anew. For another thing, rules are needed in the process of moral education.

that the only rule arrived at on the basis of past experience, but this means rule arrived at on the basis of past intuitions or decision and we have already seen reason to question generalizations reached on such bases. In any case, it seems clear that the rule passed on in moral education must be perceived by the younger generation, at least for a time, as something stronger than rules of thumb that they may use or not use at their discretion.

The other line of argument is more technical. It holds that particular moral judgements are not purely particular as the act-deontologist claims, but implicitly general. For the act-deontologist, "This is what X ought to do in situation Y" does not entail anything about what X or anyone else should do in similar situations. Suppose that I go in to Jones for advice about what to do in situation Y, and he tells me that I morally ought to do Z. Suppose I also recall that the day before he had maintained that ~~what~~ what was the right thing for Smith to do in a situation of the same kind. I shall then certainly point this out to Jones and ask him if he is not being inconsistent. Now suppose that Jones does not do anything to

show that the two cases are different, but
simple says, "No, there is no connection bet,
the two cases. Sure, they are alike, but
one was yesterday and involved Smith. Now
it's today and you are involved", surely,
this would strike us as an odd response
from anyone who purports to be talking
the moral point of view or giving moral advice.
The fact is that when one makes a moral
judgement in a particular situation, one implicitly
commits oneself to making the same judgement
in any similar situation, even if the second
situation occurs at a different time or place,
or involves another agent. Moral and value
predicates are such that if they belong to
an action or object, they also belong to any
other action or object which has the same
properties. If I say I ought to serve my
country, I imply that everyone ought to
serve his country. The point involved here is
called the Principle of Universalizability.

~~Reasons and reasons~~
Moral and value judgements imply
reasons, and reasons cannot apply in a
particular case only. If they apply in one
case, they apply in all similar cases.
Moreover, in order to give a reason in
a particular case, one must presuppose a
general proposition.

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