

Advantages and Shortcomings of Kantian Deontology

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be looking at the strengths and weaknesses of Kantian deontology. In particular, we will look at the ways that this position fits with what makes sense to us. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Advantages and Shortcomings

To begin with, recall that Kantian deontology is a form of deontology that places absolute moral value in the agent's intent. Circumstances outside an agent's control therefore don't matter for this ethical theory.

In this view, if someone does something good or bad accidentally or unintentionally, then they shouldn't be praised or blamed for it. In other words, Kantian deontology doesn't give any weight to moral luck.

Another problem with privileging intention in ethics is that it seems to make ignorance a good thing. That's because you can do bad things and still be a good person, as long as you are unaware of the moral impact of your actions.

There are many things to say in favor of Kantian deontology. One is that it fits with our ideas about what morality should be like. For instance, it agrees with our views that:

1. Some things are simply just the right thing to do (and some simply wrong).
2. These are like rules that can't be broken, no matter what.
3. They apply to all people without exception.

But the strictness of this ethical theory can also lead to some problems. Sometimes it seems like you should do something even though it goes against certain (Kantian) duties. For instance, it might be the case that saving human life requires stealing.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps a homeless person needs to steal medicine from a drug store to treat a chronic illness.

A Kantian deontologist seems to be unable to resolve the conflict between the duty to save life and the duty to not steal. Therefore, it seems like an unrealistic account of how we are to act.

2. Intuitiveness of Kantian Deontology

As we have seen, Kantian deontology provides ethical evaluations that sometimes make sense to us, but sometimes don't. In other words, it can give us both intuitive and counterintuitive results.

One way this position is intuitive is that it says intention is important for moral judgment.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine two people, each driving in their own car. One respects human life, but accidentally hits a pedestrian, killing them. The other is evil and intentionally uses their car to murder someone.

In both cases someone died. But the intent of each driver was different. For this reason, the one that didn't intend to kill anyone isn't morally blameworthy, whereas the person that did intend to kill someone is morally blameworthy.

We intuitively think that the person that purposely killed someone is much worse than the person that accidentally killed someone.

A counterintuitive aspect of Kantian deontology is found in its lack of concern with outcomes or consequences.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A Kantian will say that you should tell the truth no matter what, even when telling the truth brings great harm to people.

Most of us would think twice about telling the truth if the consequences were so damaging.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of advantages and shortcomings** of Kantian deontology, focusing on the drawbacks of basing ethics on intention and the attractiveness of the fact that it fits our view of what a morality should be. Finally, we considered the **intuitiveness of Kantian deontology**, looking at examples of intuitive and counterintuitive results of this ethical theory.