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APPLYING DEONTOLOGY TO DETERMINE WHAT OUGHT TO BE DONE

Logos II-Ethics

Thalia Raymond

1. Introduction

In this paper I will be applying the study of deontology to a given moral issue to determine what I ought to do. I will be explaining the theory of deontology with a specific focus on the categorical imperative principle, and show how it can be used to make good moral decisions. After that, I will apply the theory to the issue to show what course of action the theory will require, and how the principles of deontology justify that course of action. I will then go on to describe two strengths and two weaknesses that can be found in the literature of the theory. I will conclude with how I can use deontology in my future teaching career to make ethical decisions, and why I would use this theory.

2. The Moral Issue

You are required to submit an essay for a compulsory subject in an area that is not clearly related to your degree or future career. You put off doing the research for the essay and then eventually find yourself with only a day left to write the essay. Because the essay is not in your chosen discipline you know that you don't really understand the content and will find it quite difficult to write the essay. You know that it is possible to purchase essays online. You also know lots of other students who might lend you an old essay on the same topic. It would also be possible to just take text off the internet and rewrite them a bit – hoping that you don't get caught for plagiarism. In this circumstance, what would your selected ethical theory suggest you should do?¹

¹ School of Philosophy and Theology - Sydney Campus, "Logos II Ethical Case Study – Assessment Task Scenario/Case Study 1," *Course Outline Semester Two, Core Curriculum, Core 1002 – Ethics Logos II* (Sydney, NSW: The University of Notre Dame Australia, 10 July, 2019), 13. Online.

3. An Outline of the Theory of Deontology for Moral Decision Making

3.1 *The Categorical Imperative*

Deontology has one principle, according to Kant: he calls it ‘the categorical imperative’. The ‘categorical imperative’ incorporates several formulas which, when used in unison, allow a person who has a good will to decide upon and action a course of action that is morally good (Hill, 2005, pp. 9-10). The main formulas within the ‘categorical imperative’ are the Universal Law Formula, the formula of Humanity as an End in Itself, the Formula of Autonomy and the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends.

The ‘categorical imperative’ is an expression of a true virtue demonstrated through choices made upon pure practical reason (Brook, 2015, p. 147), ‘it expresses in the form of an imperative an unconditional basic requirement of practical reason’ (Hill, 2005, p. 3). It is aiming to determine if an action fits objectively into ‘the supreme principle of morality’ that all people should follow, and how a person can make that determination (Hill, 2005, p. 3). All the formulations within the ‘categorical imperative’ are used to determine if a proposed action would be morally right.

3.2 *The Formula of Universal Law*

The formula of Universal Law as described by Kant is used to judge the maxim, also known as the ‘subjective principle of which we act’ (Hill, 2005, p. 3), of the act in question (Hill, 2005, p. 17). This formula asks the question: if everyone held this maxim as right and acted upon it universally would the maxim still hold? An example of a maxim that doesn’t hold using this method is the idea of slavery. If everyone was a slave, there would be no masters. As the maxim wouldn’t hold for everyone, the idea of slavery could not become a universal law. If the maxim was to love your neighbour, then everyone could conceivably love their neighbour simultaneously, so that maxim would hold within universal law. ‘Kant’s test-procedure consists not in finding out whether the universalized maxim by itself is contradictory, but whether it in conjunction with other true statements about the world is logically impossible’ (Körner, 1955, p. 139). This formula, however, merely ascertains if a maxim will hold by itself; it does not determine whether the proposed action is morally right. To determine if an act is morally right, the other formulations within the ‘categorical imperative’ are required.

3.3 The Formula of Humanity-as-an-End-in Itself

Once it has been determined that the maxim can, in itself, be a universal law, it then needs to be determined whether or not all people could adapt it to their own ends. The second formulation within the ‘categorical imperative’ is treating humanity as an end-in-itself. ‘Kant says that an end-in-itself in his sense is a “self-sufficient” or independently existing end, rather than an end to be produced’ (Hill, 2005, p. 10). The end is what people use to base their reasoning around whether or not they decide they should act (Hill, 2005, p. 10). It is not looking at what they are wanting to achieve for themselves, but at what the outcome of their action or inaction will be. This formula looks at humanity, not so much as a whole, but as a group of individuals. An end-in-itself requires the person who is determining whether or not to act to take humanity into consideration; both their own, and that of those their action or inaction will affect. Part of this is ensuring that people are not used as a way to achieve an end but can work alongside each other to achieve the ends of each individual. This process requires the decision maker to look objectively at the ends of each individual and determine the best course of action that promotes each individual’s humanity. Like the Formula of Autonomy, the Humanity-as-an-End-in-Itself Formula utilises rational law.

3.4 The Formula of Autonomy

Rational law is not motivated by inclinations or desires, but a will to legislate universal law (Hill, 2005, p. 17). The Formula of Autonomy is motivated through the same desires that the will of all rational beings is to have the will to legislate universal laws. Rational agents with autonomy are lawmakers. This means that they hold for themselves laws and moral principles that govern the way they choose to act. These laws are not legally enforced, but are individually governed. As these lawmakers base their individual laws upon moral principles, it stands to reason that they would also align within the universal law framework. This Formula of Autonomy also leads into the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends.

3.5 The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

Within the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends, laws and rules are general, so they can be applied to everyone. This means that a law or rule is, in essence, universal as it applies to all. It is a system of individuals all following the same law or rule. Ideally the rules are made by all for all (Hill, 2005, p. 17). However, the alternative is when a sovereign creates a rule that everyone but him are subject to (Hill, 2005, p. 17).

4. Applying Deontology to the Issue

All of these formulas work in unison within the 'categorical imperative' to determine if an action or inaction is morally right. Deontology uses the 'categorical imperative' principle to determine the ethically right course of action within every situation. In case study one, I am presented with a situation that is already bad; however, through the application of deontology, I will identify the best path forward. I will use the 'categorical imperative' principle to examine the different moral and ethical possibilities in this case, and through this process, choose the morally right course of action. Through universal law you can ask firstly, if everyone chose to purchase an essay online, would that hold? The answer to that would be 'no'; within a university the staff are trying to ascertain whether or not a student has grasped the concepts that they are trying to teach, if everyone was to purchase an essay online the staff will not be seeing what the student has understood. Therefore, purchasing an essay online cannot be held as a universal law, so that will not stand as an ethical course of action within deontology. The second possibility can be asked in the following way; what if everyone borrowed someone's essay? If everyone was to borrow an essay there would be no essay to borrow as none would be written because they have to borrow first. Again, under universal law this course of action is not viable. The third option presented in the case study can be asked in the following way, would everyone copying off the internet be a plausible universal law? The answer again would be no for the same reasons the first option wasn't able to fit within a universal law.

The way that is morally right within the framework of deontology is to research as much as you can and write the essay to the best of your ability within the time remaining. When applying this response to the case study to the formulation of universal law, it would work if everyone were to research and try their best. The end-in-itself is to submit an essay of your own work. Even though it is rushed, it is still your own work, presented in essay form. The Formula of Autonomy and the Kingdom of Ends are also reached within this action. The moral principle that we do not steal, or in this particular case, plagiarise, is upheld. We present our own understanding of the subject and work as part of the ends which govern the university and the world outside of it. Deontology suggests that this is the right moral and ethical action to take.

One of the strengths deontology has is that it focuses on the rationally consistent, which is unchanging, so it can be trusted (Brook, 2015, p. 147). One criticism directed towards deontology that is commonly found is when you are generalising principles to fit them into universal law, a problem arises when trying to word the principle action descriptively (Hales,

2012, p. 49). I think deontology can overcome this criticism because it only considers the first formula, and as I stated earlier, all the formulas need to be used in unison for the categorical imperative to assist in discerning what is morally and ethically right.

5. Conclusion

I believe that deontology will help me make ethical decisions in teaching in my future as it looks at humanity and universal law. Within teaching you are not only making decisions for yourself; the actions you choose to do or not do impact on the students, staff, school and community you are in. Deontology takes them all into account which allows me to consider all who will be affected by my action or inaction, to help me work out the most moral and ethical course of action to take.

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