

Deontologists insist on moral rules, does this mean they can't be particularists?

By Michelle Hogan

Deontologists base their system of ethics on doing one's duty, according to rules. Immanuel Kant, probably the best-known deontologist, set out his theory in his *Groundwork*.¹ Kantian principles, derived from reason, have an unchangeable authority whatever the circumstances; they are unconditional, objective and absolute. This means that actions must be right in themselves, regardless of any consequences. Kant insists that the most moral actions are determined by a person's reason, not by any inclination they might have. A moral particularist like Jonathan Dancy, on the other hand, denies that there are moral principles, and argues that 'reasons are sensitive to context' when making moral decisions.² W. D. Ross, by contrast, claims that we have *prima facie* duties, which become actual duties when we deliberate on the characteristics of a situation. Initially, it looks as though deontologists probably cannot be particularists, although I intend to show that the two viewpoints might not be all that far apart.

In Kant's view, a sense of duty guided by reason can lead us to universal moral laws. For him, the only thing which can be considered as good without limitation is a good will, and reason produces a will that is good in itself. If an agent acts in conformity with duty but not from duty – perhaps from 'a selfseeking purpose' – it 'has no inner worth and their maxim has no moral content.'³ An agent's intention is important, not the consequences; Kant is concerned with moral actions, not examples of moral behaviour. He is clear that although it is a duty to be beneficent where one can, actions which arise from inclinations alone, however amiable, have no true moral worth. Kant asserts that the categorical imperative is an *a priori synthetic* practical proposition. This means that not only is it rationally deductive and independent of experience, but also that it is not analytically true; it tells us something about the world. Contingent matters are dealt with separately by the hypothetical imperative, so if you wanted to reach London by a certain time for instance, then you would have to catch a particular train.

There are four formulations of Kant's categorical imperative, of which I will mention two. The first is '*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law*'.⁴ The example Kant gives is that of not making a false promise. It might get one out of a difficult situation, but the point of making true promises a rule would not simply be to avoid a future loss of trust in the agent, it would be because if making false promises became a universal law, then 'there would properly be no promises at all'.⁵ Kant affirms that as soon as the maxim were made a universal law, it would have to destroy itself. The second, the humanity formulation, is a practical imperative, which says you should use humanity '*always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*'.⁶ This means acknowledging the inherent value of other people, and treating them with respect.

Dancy argues against atomism, which 'holds that any feature that is a reason in favour of action in one case will always be a reason in favour of action wherever it occurs'.⁷ He claims this is false and that it all depends on the circumstances, so in his view, the same feature does not always make the same reason. He puts forward the opposite view, which he calls holism. According to Dancy, most people think that moral reasons are based on principles but if atomism is false, there can be no useful or defensible moral principles. He affirms that people are convinced that atomism is true of moral reasons, even if not of other sorts of reason, but says that this moral generalism seems implausible. He explains that this is because there are all sorts of counter-examples, such as telling lies when it is preferable to do so. However, he does admit that there might be 'some features that constitute the same moral reason wherever they occur', such as the torture of a baby, which can be called 'invariant reasons'.⁸ Dancy says that it would always be wrong to do this, 'even if in

1 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Ethical Theory*.

2 Dancy, "An Unprincipled Morality", *Ethical Theory*, p.772.

3 Kant, *op. cit.*, p.487.

4 Kant, *op. cit.*, p.493.

5 Kant, *op. cit.*, p.489.

6 Kant, *op. cit.*, p.496.

7 Dancy, *op. cit.*, p.772.

8 Dancy, *op. cit.*, p.773.

terrible circumstances that might be the thing we should do'.⁹ In Kantian ethics, this would never be the thing that we should do, because we could not universalise such a maxim.

The deontological system of W.D. Ross gives prominence to seven *prima facie*, or conditional duties, which include fidelity, reparation, self-improvement, gratitude and justice.¹⁰ Ross discusses exceptional cases in which the consequences of fulfilling a promise, for example, 'would be so disastrous to others that we judge it right not to do so'.¹¹ Sometimes breaking a promise is justified if one could 'prevent a serious accident or bring relief to the victims of one.'¹² Ross states that when these *prima facie* duties conflict, he has to form the considered opinion of which is the more incumbent on him, and that one becomes his actual duty in the situation. Ross points out that in Kant's ethics there are duties of perfect obligation, like telling the truth, which admit of no exception, and imperfect duties, such as relieving distress, although he does not rank his own duties, except by saying that non-maleficence is 'a duty of a more stringent character' than that of beneficence.¹³

Ross admits that his catalogue of the main types of duty is an unsystematic one, resting on no logical principle and 'makes no claim to being ultimate'.¹⁴ They are deemed to be self-evident basic duties. For Ross, duty is of a highly personal nature, which is markedly different from Kant's more general notion of universalisability. Ross points to another difference between his ethics and Kantian ones, by stating that 'almost all moralists except Kant are agreed, and as most plain men think, it is sometimes right to tell a lie or break a promise'.¹⁵ Ross distinguishes between *prima facie* and actual or absolute duty, whereas for Kant there is no such distinction; we must do our duty according to the categorical imperative. David McNaughton defends the 'deontic pluralism of an ethical intuitionist such as Ross' by saying that such intuitionism seeks to 'systematize common-sense morality', and although he concedes that Ross does not explicitly state that his theory has this explanatory structure, he says it is implicit.¹⁶ He also points to Ross's basic duties as being underivative, meaning that they are morally fundamental.

The *synthetic a priori* rational thinking in Kantian ethics does not apply in pluralism or particularism. Dancy claims that we learn about morality as we would learn a musical instrument, until we operate as 'competent practitioners'.¹⁷ He asserts that there is no difference between moral and non-moral thinking, and that both are subject to variability. Kant's categorical imperative does not allow for moral conflict, whereas Dancy's particularism is adaptable in any circumstances, although one's moral judgement would have to be good to decide on the relevant reasons in a situation. Consistency is essential for Kant, although Ross's approach is not necessarily inconsistent. It is also debatable whether consistency always leads us to more moral decisions, because sometimes breaking a principle can lead to a less harmful outcome, such as telling a lie to prevent a murder. Further, it is apparent that treating people as ends in themselves is a significant part of morality with each of these philosophers.

When we compare Kant's categorical imperative with Dancy's unprincipled morality there seems to be little common ground, but a consideration of Ross's pluralism brings the rules of deontology and the holism of particularism considerably closer together. Ross 'appears to be a generalist about *prima facie* duty, but a defender of particularism about overall duty', so his view looks as though it is one in which a deontologist could also be a particularist, even though the approach of each is different.¹⁸ Moral principles provide us with

9 Dancy, *op. cit.*, p.773.

10 Ross, in "What Makes Right Acts Right?", *Ethical Theory*, argues against the theory of "ideal utilitarianism", which seems to simplify unduly our relations to others. Further, it does not do full justice to the highly personal character of duty.

11 Ross, *Ibid.*, p.756.

12 Ross, *Ibid.*, p.756.

13 Ross, *Ibid.*, p.757.

14 Ross, *Ibid.*, p.758.

15 Ross, *Ibid.*, p.758.

16 David McNaughton, "An Unconnected Heap of Duties?", *Ethical Theory*, pp.763-4.

17 Dancy podcast: https://traffic.libsyn.com/philosophybites/Jonathan_Dancy_on_Moral_Particularism.mp3

18 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-particularism-generalism/>

guidelines when making ethical decisions but, as they can sometimes become hindrances, they do not always help us to reach better ethical outcomes. If moral rules are defeasible in exceptional circumstances rather than absolute, then deontologists can be regarded as particularists.

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