Ethics Script: Deontology

{Introduction to the Theory of Deontology and Mr. Kant}

The leading ethical theory for looking at moral right and wrong-ness based on one's actions is known as "deontology." Deontology (the study of duty) originally emerged in the 18th century, thanks to German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Because of his clear and (somewhat controversial) views on the subject of moral acceptability, deontology is also alternately referred to as "Kantianism."

{How it Works… and Doesn't Work}

According to Kant, your duty is to follow principles: rules you give yourself, rather than the ones imposed upon you from outside sources. However, it's not quite that simple—just following "principles" doesn't make your actions moral. The principles themselves have to be determined by your practical reason (your ability to step back and reflect rather than simply acting on urges). According to Kant, person's moral choices are wrong if they account for their self-interest, self-preservation, laws (yes, laws because sometimes you are legally allowed to do things you shouldn't and following a rule or law for fear or reward isn't pure either), feelings (because sympathy and happiness can lead you astray), and even character traits (bravery, calmness, intelligence, etc., because they can be used for immoral or unjust purposes).

{Hypothetical Imperative}

Kant believed there were two types of internal mandates (or imperatives) you give yourself when you're forced to make a moral decision. The first choice is a hypothetical imperative. This is when someone chooses the option that creates the most benefit for themselves. They have a personal interest and a goal in mind.

{Categorical Imperatives}

According to Kant, the moral imperative is the second choice, a categorical imperative. It focuses on the "rightness" of an action, rather than the consequences of that action.

There are three indisputable criteria of a categorical imperative. First, decisions must be centered on the "universalizability principle" (meaning it applies to everyone, not just you). Second, it must be general enough to apply to all actions (if you have to make exceptions, it's not general). And third it must be self-imposed (you should be following it from duty not fear of punishment, a goal or reward).

{How to apply Deontology}

Let's put the categorical imperative to work. Start with your principle. (I will work as a volunteer with the primary purpose of helping others.) Then begin by recasting it as a universal law for all (Everyone should work as a volunteer with the primary purpose of helping others). Next, determine if the principle is conceivable for all actions and could rationally act on the principle (Could you get yourself to work as a volunteer with the primary purpose being to help others? For the sake of discussion, let's say yes). So here you have a morally defensible principle in action.

{Now apply it to the dilemma… so we really get it}

You need to borrow money for your tax bill. Even though you have no reason to believe you will be able to pay it back, you make a promise to your friend that you will. And you take the money and hope it will all work out. Are you morally wrong?

Let's start with the principle: when I think I am in need of money, I will borrow the money and promise to pay it back, even if I do not plan to do so. Now let's recast it as universal law. Anyone believing himself to be in a difficulty could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it. Reason quickly tells us that this would be terrible premise. If this was a universal law everyone acted on, the idea of a promise would become meaningless.

{Things to Remember}

To recap: deontology is action-oriented. A deontologist defends their ethical choices based on principles formed from practical reason. The best way to detect any exceptions is to cast it as universal law using the categorical imperative. According to deontology, once an individual has his or her principles outlined, he or she sees it as duty to follow their principles for "good will"—regardless of personal or other consequences.