

Ethics at a Glance

Deontological and Teleological Assumptions in Normative Ethics

When examining various normative theories, a distinction is often made between deontological and teleological perspectives. **Deontology** (from the Greek *deon*, meaning “duty”) refers to an ethical theory or perspective based on duty or obligation. A deontological, or duty-based, theory is one in which specific moral duties or obligations are seen as self-evident, having intrinsic value in and of themselves and needing no further justification. Moral actions are evaluated on the basis of inherent rightness or wrongness rather than goodness or a primary consideration of consequences. Holmes (1993) distinguishes between strong deontological theories, in which goodness is irrelevant to the rightness of an act, and weak deontological theories, in which goodness is relevant but not the primary determinant of moral rightness. Kantianism, divine command theory and some rights-based theories are generally categorized as deontological theories.

In contrast, **teleology** (from the Greek *telos*, meaning goal or end) describes an ethical perspective that contends the rightness or wrongness of actions is based solely on the goodness or badness of their consequences. In a strict teleological interpretation, actions are morally neutral when considered apart from their consequences. Ethical egoism and utilitarianism are examples of teleological theories.

While these descriptions appear to draw a clear distinction between theoretical perspectives, the two categories are not mutually exclusive. Alternatively, the terms consequentialist and non-consequentialist are sometimes used. Some rights-based theories and theories of justice are consequentialist in their concern for outcomes while also claiming the inherent rightness of obligations related to human rights and justice. Likewise, virtue ethics and formulations of natural law both seek goals of human happiness and fulfillment, but in relation to deontological assumptions about human character and/or rationally derived obligations.

For more on deontology and teleology see:

New Advent. Teleology. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14474a.htm>

Wikipedia. Deontology. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deontology>

Wikipedia. Teleology. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleology>