
UNIT 4 HUMAN DUTIES

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall focus on the moral importance of duties. In order to do so, we shall briefly study the ethical theory called deontology which gives importance to norms over values in matters of Ethics because norms are directly related to duties than values are. A brief discussion on different types of norms and the relatedness to norms and values is undertaken in order to show how understanding of norms are linked to duty-based ethics. Finally, we shall study the Prima Facie duties of Ross and the Theory of Justice according to Rawls, both upholding human duty to commit to some ethical principles.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The word duty is etymologically traceable to the Latin word, *debitum*, a debt, that which is owed to another. Duty is thus the obvious correlative of right. If I have a well-founded claim (right), then others are morally bound to at least not hinder me from having access to it. On the other hand, as a member of the human community, I find myself side by side, shoulder to shoulder and cheek by jowl with other persons who – if the right we are concerned with is genuinely rooted in human nature – may also claim the same right. Now, this would lay on us the “duty” to respect their rights too. Each of us has certain duties to oneself, to other persons, to nature (the environment) and to God, all in which are firmly rooted in our common human nature.

4.2 DEONTOLOGY

It is common to say that the scope of ethics is to tell us what is to be done or not to be done, of obligation and of prohibition. The term of deontology comes from the Greek *deon*, meaning duty or obligation. Whereas values are expressed as evaluative statements in the indicative, norms are expressed as prescription such as “do this” or prohibition in the imperative: “Do not steal”. It is necessary to distinguish various types of norms.

The most well-known deontological ethics are religious laws, which set out a code of rules that must be followed. Put simply, deontology is about following the rules. The most influential philosophical deontological ethics are those of Immanuel Kant. Kant doesn't ground morality in God's will, or in the seemingly arbitrary moral codes of particular cultures. Morality is grounded in reason itself, and the demands of morality can be discovered through rational reflection. Reason enables us to be free from self-imposed immaturity. The principle of duty forces us to be willing to do something and impulses the autonomous will. There is an autonomous will that is intrinsic value. This intrinsic value proceeds from the principle of duty. That I have a duty towards something alone activates me towards that autonomous will, that is, in the case of a mother and a child, be a good mother is a principle of duty that is intrinsically self-imposed that leads to the autonomous will to be loving and caring. Autonomous will is dependent on the rules.

Norms are given as imperatives – categorical and hypothetical imperatives. While speaking about reason in the sense of duty Kant introduces the notion of good will. Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, judgments and other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many aspects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good. Reason is imparted to us as a practical faculty, that is, as one which is to have influence on the will. We have to then develop the notion of will which deserves to be highly esteemed for itself and is good without a view to anything further, a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding, requiring rather to be cleared up than to be taught, and which in estimating the value of our actions always takes the first place and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do this we will take the notion of duty, which includes that of a good will, although implying certain subjective restrictions and hindrances.

To secure one's own happiness is a duty, at least indirectly, for discontent with one's condition, under a pressure of many anxieties and amidst unsatisfied wants, might easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty. But here again, without looking to duty, all human persons have already the strongest and the most inclination to happiness, because it is just in this idea that inclinations are combined in one total. If the general desire for happiness did not influence one's will, and supposing that in one's particular case was not a necessary element in this calculation, there yet remains in this, as in all other cases, this law, namely, that one should promote one's happiness not from inclination but from duty, and by this would one's conduct first acquire true moral truth.

4.3 DIFFERENT TYPES OF NORMS

Just as there are positive, negative, and neutral values, there are obligatory, prohibitive and permissive norms. An obligatory action is one which obliges us to do: it is an *obligation*. An action is prohibited or proscribed if we should not do it. An action is permissible if it is neither obligatory nor prohibited: it is allowed to do it. In English there are two adjectives to express the obligatory or

prohibitive character of actions: *right* and *wrong* (to be distinguished from the adjectives *good* and *bad* which express values): an action is right if it is in conformity with the obligation and wrong if it is not in conformity with it or violates a prohibition.

Just as there are ethical values and non-ethical values, there are ethical norms and non-ethical norms. Thus “do not suck your thumb,” “keep left when you drive” are respectively prohibitive and prescriptive statements in imperative form expressing norms but not *de facto* ethical. Here again, the distinction between ethical and non-ethical norms is not obvious to demarcate. What is essential is to retain that not all norms are *sensu stricto* ethical.

A *fundamental* ethical norm is one that is not derived from any other, but from which other norms can be derived. For example, “it is bad to divert funds,” depends on a more fundamental norm according to which “it is bad to steal” (which itself can be derived from yet another norm more fundamental to this). On the basis of an ethical value according to which it is bad to steal and of a non-ethical proposition, according to which diverting funds is a form of stealing, it can be concluded that it is bad to divert funds. Similarly, on the basis of a value according to which it is forbidden to kill, other norms of the same type can be inferred: “it is forbidden to decapitate others,” “to dissolve him/her in the acid,” etc. It is to be remarked that to derive an ethical value from a more fundamental ethical value, it is necessary to integrate into reasoning a *non-ethical* proposition whose gravity would depend on a particular context. Thus to infer “it is forbidden to dissolve others in the acid” from a more fundamental normal “it is forbidden to kill others”, it is necessary to add a non-ethical proposition, namely “to dissolve others in the acid amounts to kill them”. This may seem trivial, but by a stretch of imagination, it is not difficult to conceive a passionate scientist inventing a means of surviving dissolution: in such a context, the prohibition to kill others does not imply the prohibition to dissolve them in the acid.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is Duty?

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2) Explain Deontology of Kant and its implications.

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4.4 DISTINCTION BETWEEN VALUES AND NORMS

It seems *prima facie* that norms flow from values: what is to be done comes from what is good. If we have values, then we have norms. For example, if we can make an evaluative statement “it is good to help the most deprived”, then naturally follows the prescriptive statement “we should help the most deprived”. Conversely, it seems that if we should not do something, the necessary implication would be that this something is bad: “It is forbidden to lie” would imply that lying is bad. This can suggest that in the last analysis there is equivalence between values and norms: an action is good if and only if it should be done. If such is the case, why do we distinguish values from norms? Do we need really both two concepts? Are they not two ways of expressing the same idea? This is not as simple as it may appear at least for three reasons if not more.

Firstly, all evaluative statements are not related to actions, whereas all normative statements are related to actions. Only actions are prohibited or obligated. We cannot prohibit the Mount Everest, nor can we prohibit suffering, but on the contrary we can be stupefied at the sight of the former and we can deplore the latter. The applicability of values is broader than that of norms. There is thus a vital distinction between the two. How can we pass from values to ethical norms? If an action is good, then it should be done, but if a state of affairs or an agent is good, then what is to be done? For example, what should be done once we know that happiness is good? There is a consequentialist response according to which our moral action should be such that it paves way to the maximum of intrinsic values. Accordingly, consequentialism is an ethical theory which enables us to establish a link between axiology and deontology. For consequentialist philosophers, if a state of affairs *S* is good, then it follows that we ought to promote *S*, simply in virtue of the meanings of these two words: ‘good’ and ought are logically related (McGinn considers it a fallacy). We find then equivalence between values and norms: *x* has a positive *value* if it *must* to be promoted, and *x must* to be promoted if it has a positive *value*. However, consequentialism has been disputed (That being said, certain philosophers hold this version of consequentialism as a common sense thesis accepted by everyone). In addition to this, even if there is a reciprocal implication between values and norms, that does not justify their identification: once again, a statement that something is beautiful in no way expresses an obligation.

Secondly, certain non-ethical factors prevent us from drawing norms from values. “It is good to clean the floor” implies that “it is an obligation to clean the floor,” but only if it is possible to do so. Such a possibility depends on certain conditions like if there is a vacuum cleaner, if the agent in question has the physical abilities to do it, etc. The idea that the ability to carry out an action is a necessary condition to the obligation of that action can be justified as follows: there is a close connection between concepts of duty and fault: not to achieve one’s duty is to expose oneself to blames, legitimate reproaches, reprimands, punishments or remorse. However we cannot reproach someone not to have done something that is not within his ability. Nor can we reproach him/her for an action which he/she could not but do. If we must act, then not to act implies being exposed to reproaches (duty to blame). We are exposed to reproaches only if had the ability and still did not do it (blame to ability). Therefore, we are obliged only if we

have the ability to act (duty to ability). It then follows that norms are not directly derived from values: we *should* do what is good in so far as we *can* do it. Equivalence between norms and values is therefore objectionable.

It is clear enough that a genuine destitute, one who has been unjustly refused opportunities for a decent job and a living wage – for himself/herself and the family – must be provided for, as per the demands of strict justice, not “benevolent charity” and if we know of such a person – whether that person comes to us begging or not, we have a duty and obligation to provide for him or her from our resources, obviously as long as we and our family members are not grossly incapacitated by that. Indeed, we should ally with some service group that reaches out to such unprivileged people. Our real responsibility is to help such persons find some means of employment so that, as a responsible human beings endowed with human dignity, they would be able to provide for themselves and their families by their own independent efforts.

4.5 ROSS AND PRIMA FACIE DUTIES

Several values can enter in conflict. D. Ross thus admits three intrinsic values (the fact of admitting several intrinsic values is called pluralism): virtue, knowledge, and pleasure. But he also admits seven duties *prima facie*: fidelity (hold your promises), reparation (repair the evil you have done to others), gratitude (return the goodness you have got from others), justice (changes the distributions of pleasure and happiness which do not go with the merit), generosity (make good out of others), self-improvement (improves your virtues and your knowledge), no ill will (do not do evil to others). Three values, seven duties: there is no direct and immediate correlation between the two. Mulligan in his book *From Appropriate Emotion to Value* mentions three other reasons in order not to confuse norms and values on the basis of the differences between normative statements and axiological statements. 1. There are comparative expressions for values (“better than,” “worse than”, but no comparative expression for norms. 2. There is a distinction between determinable axiological predicates (good, bad) and determinate axiological predicates (courageous, cowardly), but no such distinction exists in normative expressions. 3. Determinate properties imply determinate natural properties: Thus, to be courageous would imply to be put into test by fear and to surmount it. Normative properties do not seem to imply natural properties (except that “ought” implies can). Normative properties are only indirectly related to natural properties and this relation is mediated through axiological properties.

The reason for which equivalence is objectionable here is that since several values are allowed (pluralism), they can, in certain circumstances, enter in conflict with one another. Thus, it can be necessary to lie to avoid the death of somebody. If so, then one cannot derive the normative statement “it is forbidden to lie” directly from the evaluative statement “it is bad lie”: A third statement has to be added, “on condition that no other value is injured.” In short, there are at least three obstacles to the derivation of norms from values: 1. Values are related only to actions, 2. A good action is obligatory only if it is possible and 3. An action having a positive value is obligatory only if it does not have any other negative value. Thus the implication of values in norms does not seem to be convincing. However it seems reasonable to say that ethical values are more fundamental

than ethical norms: It is necessary to promote *X* because *X* is good. The opposite seems absurd: It is not *X* is good because it is necessary to promote *X*. Therefore intuitively there is a priority of axiology over deontology, even if one cannot necessarily deduce deontology only from axiology. This thesis of the priority of values over the standards has sometimes been disputed, for example, by Kant and by other philosophers known as prescriptivists. This thesis, however, was clearly defended by Max Scheler, in opposition to Kant, the former reproaching the latter for having reversed this order of priority: “anything of positive value ought to be, and anything of negative value ought not to be. The interconnection set up in these axioms is not reciprocal but *unilateral*: every *ought* has its *foundation in values*, but values are *not* founded in the ideal ought.”

The distinction between values and norms that we have just presented allows us to understand why we can define ethics neither as a discipline dealing with values, nor as a discipline dealing with norms for duties. This is because on the one hand, ethics is related to both values and norms, so we cannot restrict it to a simple theory of values or of norms and on the other hand, there are some values (“Julie is pretty”, “This melody is superb”) and some norms (“Do not suck your thumb”) which are not ethical. In short, ethics is not limited only to a study of what one must do, and in some cases what one must do does not concern ethics. Nor can it be resumed as a study of values since ethic is partly related to norms and not all values are of ethical significance.

4.6 JOHN RAWLS’ THEORY OF JUSTICE

John Rawls is an American philosopher. He raises the question, what is the principle of justice? Principle of justice is that which brings satisfaction to all both in quality and quantity and so it is not challenged. For instance, the grading system of examination brings out this principle of justice. It brings satisfaction to all the students. Each one is rewarded based on his or her hard work. In some tradition this kind of principle exists but is not accepted because the tradition itself is unjust. An example for such an unjust society is the one where the principle of slavery is dominant. By principle, a slave should go back to his owner and serve him till the end of his life. In India too we have caste system where certain people are considered as low caste servants of the society and are obliged to perform all menial jobs.

Rawls says that we have to possess a new method besides these two positions. He brings in a novel idea that is based on self-interest and rationality. We are not sufficiently enlightened because of the influence of the society, so we are restricted. All traditions are potentially unjust in some way or the other; we live under the veil of ignorance. The more you are out of ignorance the more the principle of selection will come closer to justice.

How to be enlightened out of ignorance? The general facts of human nature, for example, nobody wants to be abused or insulted. It is a fair procedure so the principle is fair; no person wants to be a part of a handicapped group because we want to be on the safer side. Principle is that every generation should have equal resources in order to bring justice to all.

Two general principles of justice of Rawls:

- 1) Principle of equal liberty: each person should have equal right to everything. Egalitarianism where equality is practised to the full extent.
- 2) Principle of difference: here the greatest benefit to the least advantaged section. For example, reservations for the deprived sections of the society.

Both these principles seem to be contradicting but they are related. Though the first principle allows everyone to get involved in all fields, the second principle helps the less privileged to compete equally with the more privileged because the former lack the resources to achieve what they want, while the latter have the means and resources in plenty. This second principle is called positive discrimination and this type of justice is called distributive justice as different from the retributive justice.

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Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Explain fundamental norms and Derived norms.

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- 2) Explain John Rawls Theory of Justice.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

The “ought” represents a fundamental experience of moral conscience. This is the principle that guides human behavior. Duty is an imperative: “one ought to do what is to be done.” This reflects the absolute form of the imperative of morality. Taken in this sense, duty is synonymous to moral obligation. However, this obligation is distinct from strict necessity, because what is obliged can be done or not.

In his famous “Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals” (1785), Kant tries to show that duty, far from being born out of experience, is an ideal of pure reason and an a-priori value. Indeed, experience as such does not provide universal and necessary norms. If we were to base morality on experience and facts from within a particular cultural group, it would not be valid for all rational beings. But for Kant a categorical imperative is such that it is valid for all human beings. Kant

thus makes a distinction between categorical imperative hypothetical imperative. The moral sense of duty is a categorical imperative, that is, it is not dependent on any “ifs” and “buts” unlike the hypothetical imperative, an action is to be done to achieve an end: “if you want to get this, do that.” The categorical imperatives are given in the form of norms. Hence Kant and other deontologists give priority to norms over values. This is why Ross speaks of prima facie duties and Rawls speaks of justice as an imperative.

4.8 KEY WORDS

- Deontology** : a school which holds that rules or norms are more important than values.
- Axiology** : school of thought which says that values are more important than rules or norms.
- Imperatives** : a thing that is very important and needs immediate attention or action.
- Autonomous will** : means a self-imposed freedom, that is a intrinsic value and which prompts one to act.

4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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