

# Ethical theories

All boards A2:  
deontology, natural law

## Deontology and NML

In exam questions on ethical theories, choose one or two to focus on but make sure you are aware of all of them

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### Deontology

#### What it is

##### A01 material

- From the Greek *deon* ('duty'), deontology sets fixed moral duties.
- Deontology may be regarded as an *absolutist* approach, since generally it does not allow rules to be bent/broken.
- By contrast with consequentialist systems, deontology is concerned with the *intrinsic* properties of actions, not their end results.
- Nancy-Ann Davis argued that deontological statements tend to be *negatively formulated* (don't do this or that...), *narrowly framed* (specific) and *narrowly directed* (consequences don't matter).

#### Strengths of deontology

##### A02 material

- Kant is probably correct to distinguish between morality and inclination: what is *right* is not always what we *want* (contrast Bentham's hedonism).
- Deontology safeguards the rights of individuals, because it treats them as ends in themselves. It is not possible to use someone 'for the greater good'.
- Appealing to reason is sane and constructive; surely we should be expected to give rational reasons for our ethics.
- It draws support from leading moral philosophers (Thomas Nagel) who would argue that we *assume* real duties in daily life.

#### Weaknesses of deontology

##### A02 material

- Ignoring consequences altogether seems perverse and unnatural.
- Deontology gives the individual no flexibility or choice: what if we need to tell a white lie to protect others?
- Peter Singer has criticised Kant for removing emotion and sympathy from ethics. Surely what we feel actually matters?

### Immanuel Kant and deontology

##### A01 material

- Immanuel Kant: eighteenth-century German philosopher who thought that being moral requires *rational behaviour* (not just following our feelings).
- Humans seek the *summum bonum* (the highest good), which is where the highest virtue and happiness meet. Morality leads to this goal.
- According to Kant, the moral law is *objective* (true for everyone) and is expressed as '*synthetic a priori*', meaning that it may be true or false, but is not directly known from our experiences (it is part of a rational mind).
- Kant claimed that moral statements are '*categorical imperatives*', which means that they are binding for their own sake (not depending on anything else).
- To work out what makes a good moral rule ('*maxim*'), Kant also introduced *the* categorical imperative, which he formulated in three tests: (1) for a maxim to be true, you must be able to allow that it could be a law for everyone, (2) never treat a person as a means, but only as an end, (3) live as in 'a kingdom of ends', assuming that everyone else will follow the moral law.
- Ultimately, Kant argued that being moral means *freely* choosing to follow duty for its own sake alone.

### Natural moral law (NML)

#### What it is

##### A01 material

- *Absolutist* and *deontological*, NML prescribes fixed moral laws and real duties.
- It can be traced back to ancient ideas on natural morality: Aristotle, Cicero.
- Associated with Christianity: St Paul argued that people have a natural sense of right and wrong.
- The key theorist is Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*.

#### Strengths of NML

##### A02 material

- Being an absolutist system, it is a source of clear values and *certainty*.
- Its focus on reason allows it to be *universal* and focus on common moral ideas.
- Its emphasis on *purpose* gives humans positive structure in their lives.

#### Weaknesses of NML

##### A02 material

- Relativists argue that the world is full of different rules. There is *no agreed moral law*.
- Philosopher Kai Nielsen argues that there is *no common human nature*. We cannot claim that humans all have the same goals and drives.
- The unbending absolutism of NML makes it *legalistic and inflexible*.

### Aquinas' theory

##### A01 material

- The destiny of humans is to achieve *union with God*, following the basic law: 'good is to be pursued and evil avoided', everything else is based on this.
- God's law is perceived in two ways: through *reason* and *revelation*. So, being irrational is just as bad as ignoring God's commands in the Bible.
- To explain why humans sin, Aquinas distinguishes between '*real and apparent goods*'. Humans sometimes do things wrong because they mistakenly suppose that they have made a good choice (apparent good). Really, they haven't.

- Aquinas also distinguishes the '*interior and exterior act*', meaning that an action is only moral if the interior intention is good, as well as the act itself.
- By studying God's purpose in creation, Aquinas is able to set out five primary precepts: the key ideas of ethics. These include: (1) self-preservation, (2) reproduction, (3) education, (4) live in society and (5) worship God.
- The more specific rules we then make are known as secondary precepts: rules which are derived from the primary precepts. For example, if I observe self-preservation, then we could have a secondary precept that suicide is immoral.