Normative Ethics

Lecture 1
Deontology
The plan for today...

1. What is deontology?

2. Why not deontology?

3. Double effect

4. Permissible harm
§1. What is deontology?
What is deontology...?

First used by Jeremy Bentham to refer to the science of what we are morally required to do...

On this definition even act utilitarianism is a deontological theory...
‘...what makes actions right [i.e. morally obligatory]...

...is that they are productive of more good than could have been produced by any other action open to the agent.’

(David Ross, The Right and the Good, p.16)
Weak non-consequentialism...

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory...

...is at least partly determined...

...by something other than the quantity of good that it produces...

...compared to other actions open to the agent.
**Strong non-consequentialism**...

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory...

...is *wholly* determined...

...by something other than the quantity of good that it produces...

...compared to other actions open to the agent.
What else could partly determine whether or not an action is morally obligatory...?

The fact that it is the keeping of a promise to another person...

The fact that it is a returning of services to another person who has done us a good turn...

The fact that the failure to perform this action would harm another person...
Prima facie duties...

There is a *prima facie* duty to keep your promises...

...whether or not an action is the keeping of a promise is one of the things that counts towards its being morally obligatory...
Monistic non-consequentialism...

There is ultimately *just one thing* that determines whether or not an action is morally obligatory...

...and it *isn’t* the quantity of good that it produces compared to other actions open to the agent...

What could this one thing be...?
What determines whether or not an action is morally obligatory...

...is whether or not God has commanded it...

...is whether or not the Queen has commanded it...
‘...an act is wrong [i.e. not performing it is morally obligatory] if and only if...

...it could not be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject.’ (Tim Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, p.4)
‘There is… only a single categorical imperative and it is this…

...act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.’

(Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, p.73)
Pluralistic non-consequentialism...

There is an *irreducible plurality* of things that determine whether or not an action is morally obligatory...

...one of which could be the quantity of good that it produces compared to other actions open to the agent...

...although it need not be...!
The following things count *against* an action’s being *morally permissible*...

- Its being adultery...
- Its being theft...
- Its being the taking of the Lord’s name in vain...
- Its being the dishonouring of a parent...
- Its being the bearing of false witness...
- Its being the killing of a person...
- Its being the coveting of another person’s stuff...
'Nonconsequentialism is a normative ethical theory which denies that the rightness or wrongness of our conduct is determined solely by the goodness or badness of the consequences of our acts...

...or the rules to which those acts conform...

( Frances Kamm, Nonconsequentialism, )
§2. Why not deontology?
Suppose I am faced with the choice of either keeping a promise or not keeping a promise...

Suppose that the quantity of good produced by my action will be exactly the same whether or not I keep my promise...
P1  If the only thing that counts in favour of an action’s being morally obligatory is the quantity of good that it produces, then it is not morally obligatory to keep my promise.

P2  It is morally obligatory to keep my promise.

C  Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is at least partly determined by something other than the quantity of good that it produces.
Suppose that you have entrusted me with a large sum of money on the understanding that I will pass it on to your relatives after your death...

...your relatives are rich, uncharitable, and wasteful, and they don’t know about this arrangement...

My family is virtuous but poor...
Suppose you have now died...

Is it morally permissible for me to keep the money...?

‘[If] we submit this case even to a child some eight or nine years old... [they] will undoubtedly answer, No!’

(Immanuel Kant, *Theory and Practice*, p.288)
P1 It is a consequence of non-consequentialism that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.

P2 We should reject any ethical theory a consequence of which is that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.
P1  It is a consequence of pluralistic non-consequentialism that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.

P2  We should reject any ethical theory a consequence of which is that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.

C  We should reject pluralistic non-
P1  It is a consequence of pluralistic consequentialism that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.

P2  We should reject any ethical theory a consequence of which is that we can only decide whether an action is morally obligatory by means of intuitive weighing.

C  We should reject pluralistic
‘Loyalty to the facts is worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplicity.’

(David Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p.23)

Ross doesn’t deny that symmetry and simplicity matter...

He just thinks it matters more that our theory should not conflict with our moral convictions...
P1 It is a consequence of *non-*consequentialism that breaking a promise is never morally permissible.

P2 Breaking a promise is sometimes morally permissible.

C *Non-consequentialism* is false.
Absolutist non-consequentialism...

Some of the things that count towards an action’s being morally obligatory...

...other than the quantity of good that it produces...

...count decisively...

...i.e. some prima facie duties take absolute
Non-absolutist non-consequentialism...

None of the things that counts towards an action’s being morally obligatory...

...including the quantity of good that it produces...

...counts decisively...

...i.e. no prima facie duties take absolute priority.
§3. Double effect
You see a runaway tram hurtling towards five workmen...

If you pull a lever, the tram will be diverted on to a branch line towards one workman...

Is it morally permissible to pull the lever...?
You see a runaway tram hurtling towards five workmen...

If you push a fat man off a bridge into the path of the tram, it will be stopped...

Is it morally permissible to push the fat man...?
P1  If the only thing that counts in favour of an action’s being morally obligatory is the quantity of good that it produces...

...then either both the pulling and the pushing are morally permissible...

...or neither the pulling nor the pushing is morally permissible.
P2 Pulling the lever is morally permissible.

P3 Pushing the fat man is not morally permissible.

C Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is at least partly determined by something other than the quantity of good that it produces.
Pushing the fat man is a case of *intentionally* harming a person...

...as a means to an end...

Pulling the lever is a case of *unintentionally but foreseeably* harming a person...

...as a side effect of your action.
The Weak Doctrine of Double Effect...

The fact that an action is a case of intentionally harming people...

...counts *more strongly* against its being morally permissible...

...than the fact that it is a case of unintentionally but foreseeably harming people...
The Strong Doctrine of Double Effect...

The fact that an action is a case of intentionally harming people...

...counts *decisively* against its being morally permissible...

...whereas the fact that it is a case of unintentionally but foreseeably harming people does not...
In one case you intend to *kill the fat man* in order to save the lives of five other potholers...

In another case you intend to *blast the fat man’s body into small pieces* in order to save the lives of five other potholers...

...and you merely foresee that this will also result in the fat man’s death...
P1 If the Doctrine of Double Effect is true, then the considerations against your action in the first case are stronger than the considerations against your action in the second case.

P2 The considerations against your action in the first case are no stronger than the considerations against your action in the second case.

C The Doctrine of Double Effect is false.
Perhaps P1 is false for the following reason...

If X and Y are *sufficiently close* then I cannot intend X without also intending Y...

Blasting the fat man’s body into small pieces is *sufficiently close* to killing him that I cannot intend to blast his body into small pieces without also intending to kill him...

But how are we supposed to measure *closeness*...
Even if you just intend to blast the fat man’s body into small pieces...

...this is still an incredibly harmful action...

Is killing a person more harmful to them than blasting them into small pieces...?

Perhaps in the two cases you just intend different but equal harms...
Next time...

Kant