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PH201 Philosophical Ethics  
Paper 3: Deontology

Whereas most ethical systems and theories popular in today's world fail because they allow too much room for relative opinions, Immanuel Kant's Deontology seems to often err in precisely the opposite direction. Kant's ethical system can be best seen at work in the ethics of duty and orders within militaries and, specifically, as a defense for various actions that are held as war crimes. One specific example can be seen in the defense of actions by the United States military in the My Lai massacre in 1968. In that event, somewhere in the vicinity of five hundred Vietnamese civilians were killed by forces from the United States military. The defense for this event was, to a great extent, an assertion that those soldiers were merely following orders.<sup>1</sup> It must be understood that, since it is possible to justify or reject nearly any behavior based on a perceived duty, Kant's approach to ethics, here and elsewhere, is untenable.

Immanuel Kant's ethical system, Deontology, can be summarized by the categorical imperative that one should "always act so that the maxim of actions can simultaneously be willed as universal law." Kant also asserts that a morality must be based on a strict and unwavering sense of duty to these moral rules. Indeed, Kant goes so far to assert that, if an act is done for any reason other than duty, that act cannot be claimed as a moral act. In that case, the act is being performed from desire rather than the sense of duty that is a prerequisite for a moral act.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "My Lai Massacre," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=My\\_Lai\\_Massacre&oldid=515375924](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=My_Lai_Massacre&oldid=515375924) (accessed October 5, 2012).

Simply put, Kant's ethics can be broken down into four movements. First, the only absolutely good thing is a good will. Next, Kant asserts that a good will is one that acts on duty rather than desires or expectation of gain. Duty, in this usage, refers to acting out of respect for the law. Therefore, one should always act out of duty, that is, in a law-like fashion. Each action we take, when judging its morality, must be universalized as a test. If an action can be asserted to be allowable and expected by all people without leading to a contradiction, then it can be said to be moral. If not, it is immoral.

Deontology can be effectively refuted in several ways. Applied to the example in this discussion, the clearest failures are in the fact that Deontology does not provide a solution to conflict between duties, context is disallowed from the discussion of duty, the framing of a given action, separate from the action itself, can determine if it can be morally universalized, and, finally, the rejection of any examination of consequences in favor of a discussion solely of motives.

The first issue is that Deontology provides no means to resolve conflicting concurrent duties. In this example, a soldier ordered to attack a civilian town has a clear duty to follow orders he is given since, if extended to a universal, disobeying orders would undermine the basic construct of a military force. It is understood, in this case, that the idea of lawful orders versus unlawful orders is being set aside for the sake of this discussion. At the same time, a soldier has a clear duty to avoid killing innocents in battle lest war become an entirely unfocused killing spree. Deontology does not provide any resolution for such a situation.

Next, when using Kant's method to test the moral character of an act, context is inadmissible, and the framing of the maxim can be set forth in a way to either allow or disallow an action depending on the inclination of the person creating the test. This means that, in this example, the question could either be set up as "Would

it be acceptable if all soldiers at all times disobeyed orders?" yielding the clear answer of no or "Would it be acceptable if soldiers in the Vietnam Conflict ordered to attack a village of noncombatants to disobey orders?" to which the answer would clearly be yes.

Finally, since the idea of consequences does not enter the discussion, but only the question of the duty being performed by the actor, the force being used in this event cannot be questioned. If, in fact, there were combatants in the hamlet of My Lai, then military action may have been justifiable in suppressing them. In that case, it would be necessary to examine the possible consequences of such an attack on noncombatants and weigh that against the need to attain a tactical or strategic advantage. Unfortunately, since Kant's approach admits only of the soldiers' duty to follow the orders they have been given, those considerations are inadmissible.

In the end, Kant's Deontology, while in some ways coming closer to a workable ethical system, cannot withstand scrutiny when applied to any number of real world situations. Among the most direct applications under which it falls is the question of a soldier's duty to obey orders that would be considered, in military ethics, unlawful orders. Deontology easily falls to one of two extremes, allowing anything or rejecting anything, and it fails to offer a workable solution for the nuances of human interaction and ethical questions. Therefore, Deontology, in this example and others, is insufficient as an ethical system.