1. Introduction

The teleological/deontological distinction was introduced in 1930 by C.D. Broad,¹ and since then it has come to be accepted as the fundamental classificatory distinction for moral philosophy. I shall argue that the presupposition that there is a single fundamental classificatory distinction is false. There are too many features of moral theories that matter for that to be so. I shall argue furthermore that as it is usually drawn the teleological/deontological distinction is not even a fundamental distinction. Another distinction, that between theories that make the right depend solely on considerations of goodness (axiological theories) and those that do not, is significantly more important.

2. Deontological theories

Act utilitarianism is a paradigm teleological theory, and The Divine Command Theory and Kant’s moral theory are paradigm deontological theories. It is unclear, however, which of the many features of these theories are the defining characteristics of teleological and deontological theories respectively. In order to assess the importance of the teleological/deontological distinction, we need first to clarify the nature of the distinction. Let us start therefore by examining some of the different characterizations that have been given.

Often authors (e.g., Rawls²) characterize deontological theories simply as theories that are not teleological. So characterized, the nature of deontological theories depends on how teleological theories are characterized. In a later section we shall examine some of the characterizations of teleological theories. In this section we shall examine some of the characterizations of deontological theories that are independent of the characterization of teleological theories.

It is often claimed that deontological theories — but not teleological theories — are rule-based, i.e., assess the permissibility of actions in terms of whether they conform to some specified set of rules. The problem with this characterization of deontological theories is that all theories other than those that merely specify prima facie considerations are rule-based. Act utilitarianism, for example, is rule-based, since it assess the permissibility of actions in terms of whether they conform to the rule “Maximize the goodness of consequences!”.

Both deontological
and teleological theories may be (and generally are) rule-based. The difference between the two lies in the kinds of rules that they invoke.

In a similar vein it is sometimes claimed that deontological theories, or at least one type thereof, are absolutist in that they claim that there are certain kinds of actions that are absolutely obligatory or forbidden (i.e., such that all actions of that type are obligatory or forbidden respectively). There are two problems with this claim. First of all, without some restriction on the admissible action-types all theories are absolutist in this sense, since all theories hold that all actions of the type "is permissible" are permissible. Secondly, even if an appropriate restriction is placed on the admissible action-types to avoid this trivialization (perhaps allowing only non-normative action types), the claim is still false. Act utilitarianism, a paradigm non-deontological theory, is absolutist in this sense. This is because any action that falls under the description "does not have consequences that contain as much happiness as is feasible" is judged forbidden — no matter what its other characteristics are. Furthermore, Ross's intuitionist theory, a paradigm deontological theory, is non-absolutist, because it provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the permissibility of action, but only prima facie considerations that must somehow be weighed together. The characterization of deontological theories as absolutist is thus inadequate.

A closely related characterization of deontological theories is as theories for which there are certain kinds of actions that are always (or never) forbidden, where whether or not a given action is of the specified kinds does not depend on what its outcome is.

The distinction between theories that base the permissibility of actions on their outcomes and those that do not is an important distinction. The outcome of an action is a state of affairs that would be realized if the action were performed. It is objectively determined in that its determination is independent of what the agent, or anyone else, believes (e.g., about what would happen if the action were performed). Theories that do not base the permissibility of actions on their outcomes generally base it on their intended, anticipated, or reasonably anticipatable outcomes. Unlike (objective) outcomes, neither intended nor anticipated outcomes are objectively determined, since what they are depends only on the agent's mental state (what he/she intends or believes), and not on what would happen if the action were performed. And the reasonably anticipatable outcome is neither objectively determined, nor determined on the basis of the agent's mental state, but rather on the basis what it would be (intersubjectively) reasonable to anticipate happening.

Characterizing deontological theories as theories for which the permissibility of actions does not depend on their outcomes, however, is intuitively inadequate. The Ten Commandment Theory — a paradigm deontological theory, according to which an action is permissible just in case it conforms to the Ten Commandments — contains the injunction "Do not kill!", and therefore grounds the permissibility of actions in their outcomes. Whether or not an action is a killing depends on what its outcome is, and not, for example, on what its anticipated or intended outcome is. The above characterization mistakenly classifies The Ten Commandment Theory