13 Kantian ethics

You are sheltering a political dissident whom the repressive ruling regime has vowed to hunt down and execute. The secret police bang on your door and ask if you know the whereabouts of the dissident. You are in no doubt that if you tell them, your charge will be arrested and shot. What should you do? Tell the truth or tell a lie?

The question hardly seems worth asking. Of course you should lie – a very white lie, you may think, given the terrible consequences of telling the truth. But it has not seemed so simple to all moral theorists, at least not to the 18th-century German theorist Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential philosophers of the past 300 years. In his view, telling the truth is a duty that is absolute and unconditional: lying contravenes a fundamental principle of morality – what he calls a 'categorical imperative'.

HYPOTHETICAL AND CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

Kant explains what a categorical imperative is, first, by contrasting it with a *hypothetical* imperative – a non-moral prompting to which you should respond if you wish to achieve some further end. Suppose I tell you what to do by issuing an order (an imperative): 'Stop smoking!' Implicitly, there is a string of conditions that I might attach to this command – 'if you don't want to risk your health', for instance, or 'if you don't want to waste your money'. Of course, if you don't care about your health or your money, the order carries no weight and you need not comply.

TIMELINE

4th–13th century BC

God delivers Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai

1775–83

System of rights and duties is established in the USA by the American Revolution

Moral dilemmas

The question of whether lying is morally unacceptable, whatever the consequences, was put to Kant in his lifetime, and he unfalteringly stuck by his categorical guns, insisting that it is indeed one's moral duty to be truthful on all occasions, even to a murderer. But in fact the situation is not as simple as it seems. For is it not inevitable that categorical imperatives will clash? 'Help innocent people avoid arbitrary execution' looks like a good candidate as a categorical imperative: we could surely will this to be a universal maxim. And if it is a moral law, it clashes – in the case of our fictional political dissident – with the absolute duty not to lie. We are in a moral dilemma in which we have no choice but to violate one or other of what appear to be categorical imperatives. Disquiet with an ethical system that apparently results in duties that are both absolute and contradictory has encouraged some to take a more flexible, less absolutist approach towards the notion of duty (*see chapter 14*).

In the case of a categorical imperative, by contrast, there are no ifs attached, implicit or otherwise. 'Don't lie!' and 'Don't kill people!' are injunctions that are not hypothesized on any aim or desire that you may or may not have; they must be followed as a matter of duty, unconditionally and without exception. Indeed, according to Kant, it is only actions performed purely from a sense of duty that have moral worth. Actions prompted by some external motivation – a desire to help a friend, for instance, or to achieve a particular goal – are not distinctively moral actions at all. In contrast to hypothetical imperatives, categorical imperatives constitute moral laws.

UNIVERSAL MAXIMS

Kant believes that beneath every action there is an underlying rule of conduct, or maxim. Such maxims may have the *form* of categorical imperatives, but they do not qualify as moral laws unless they pass the test of universality,

God-given duty

Kant's system of absolute duties may be the most influential of such *philosophical* theories, but for the most important influence in this area we must look elsewhere. 'Duty cannot exist without faith,' wrote Benjamin Disraeli in 1847. For most of humanity, for most of its history, the ultimate authority for the responsibilities or obligations that we call duties has been divine and hence absolute. Usually passed down through scripture and mediated by priesthood, the wishes and commands of a god or gods impose obligations on humans, whose duty it is to meet these obligations, by adopting certain codes of conduct, for instance, and performing various services and sacrifices in honour of the deity/deities. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the most familiar example is the Ten Commandments, a set of divine prescriptions that impose a number of absolute duties on mankind: a duty not to kill, another not to covet your neighbour's wife, and so on.

which is itself a supreme form of categorical imperative:

> Act only in accordance with a maxim that you can at the same time will to become a universal law.

This test ensures that an action is morally permissible only if it accords with a rule that you can consistently and universally apply to yourself and others. For instance, to test whether lying qualifies as a universal law, we might suppose some such maxim as 'Lie whenever you feel like it.' What happens when this principle is universalized? Well, lying is possible only in a context in which the general expectation is that people are telling the truth. But if *everyone* lied all the time, nobody would trust anybody else, and lying would be impossible. The idea of lying as a universal law is thus incoherent and self-defeating. Likewise, stealing presupposes a culture of property ownership, but the whole concept of property would collapse if *everybody* stole; breaking promises presupposes a generally accepted institution of promise-keeping; and so on.

While the requirement of universality rules out certain kinds of conduct on logical grounds, there seem to be many others that we could universalize, yet would not wish to count as moral. 'Always look after your own interests', 'Break promises where you can do so without undermining the institution of promising' – there doesn't appear to be anything inconsistent or irrational in willing that these should become universal laws. So how does Kant head off this danger?

PURE REASON AND AUTONOMY

The genius of Kant's ethical system is how he moves from the purely rational structure imposed by the categorical imperative to actual moral content – to explain how 'pure reason', stripped of inclination or desire, can inform and direct the will of a moral agent. The answer lies in the inherent value of moral agency itself – value based on the 'single supreme principle of morality', the freedom or autonomy of a will that obeys laws that it imposes on itself. The supreme importance attached to autonomous, free-willed agents is mirrored in the second great formulation of the categorical imperative:

> Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.

"TWO THINGS MOVE THE MIND WITH EVER-INCREASING ADMIRATION AND AWE, THE OFTENER AND MORE STEADILY WE REFLECT ON THEM: THE STARRY HEAVENS ABOVE AND THE MORAL LAW WITHIN."

Immanuel Kant,
Critique of Practical Reason, 1788

Once the incomparable value of one's own moral agency is recognized, it is necessary to extend that respect to the agency of others. Treating others merely as a means to promote one's own interests is to destroy their agency, so maxims that are self-serving or damaging to others contravene this formulation of the categorical imperative and so do not qualify as moral laws. In essence, there is a recognition here that there are basic rights that belong to people by virtue of their humanity and that may not be overridden – and hence that there are duties that must be obeyed, come what may.

The condensed idea

Thou shalt not ... come what may?