The Right to Lie:

Immanuel Kant’s Inefficiencies in Contemporary Times

In the book Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant theorizes that we should act out of duty according to its moral worth, not out of preference and fear of consequences. He builds upon the importance of acting out of duty throughout his writing by introducing the categorical imperative. Kant’s categorical imperative ideology binds you to act morally in any case. This means that as beings of reason, we should follow the laws of society and refrain from lying. Though an entirely lawful and truthful society is idealistic for all reasonable beings, it is unrealistic and unachievable. Bending societal laws and lying are often required for reasonable beings in dire situations. By cross-analyzing Kant’s apparent necessity to remain lawful and truthful continuously and Michael Sandel’s contemporary example of an SS guard looking for Jews, we will assert the necessity for unlawfulness and untruthfulness in dire situations.

Though Kant recognizes that we often lie in dire situations, he continually insists that we must stay truthful to maintain the law for the general population. Kant asserts his insistence on truthfulness in dire situations, writing

“When I am in distress, may I make a promise with the intention of not keeping it?...

The most direct and infallible way, however, to answer the question as to whether I

would really be content if my maxim (of extricating myself from difficulty by means of a

false promise) were to hold as a universal law for myself and for others, and could I

really say to myself that everyone may promise falsely when he finds himself in a

difficulty from which he can find no other way to extricate himself. Then I immediately

become aware that I can indeed will the lie but not at all will a universal law to lie.“ (Groundwork, p. 15)

In this statement, Kant persuades those in dire situations to use diversion and half-truths to refrain from lying. Kant, however, fails to recognize the direct relationship between the specificity of a question and the ability to use diversion and half-truths. If a question is intensely specific on every minute detail of a situation, it is nearly impossible to use diversion or half-truths. It must be a simple question to implement diversion and half-truths effectively.

In Michael Sandel’s book “Justice,” he uses a simple yet complex scenario to build upon Kant’s acceptance of diversion and half-truths. You live in Nazi Germany, where you hide your Jewish friend in your house. You have two noble intentions: to protect your friend and to uphold the law. One day, an SS guard knocks on your door and asks if you are hiding a Jew. Using diversion and half-truths would allow you to uphold the law and protect your friend. However, if the SS guard narrowed the specificity of his question and asked you if you were currently hiding the Jew named John Doe in the attic of your house, it would be nearly impossible to use any form of diversion or half-truths. In this situation, you would be forced to choose between remaining truthful, upholding the law, and protecting your friend.

If we are to continue to fulfill our duties and act morally, we must preserve human life at all costs. Dire situations often require reasonable beings to bend societal laws and lie. This example is one of many contradictions to Kant and Sandel’s justification of using diversions and half-truths. Their failure to understand the relationship between the specificity of a question and the ability to use diversion and half-truths lies behind the root of many of these contradictions. Though we generally promote lawfulness and truthfulness in society, achieving this goal without being untruthful and unlawful when a situation is dependent on it is impossible.

Kant, Immanuel, and Allen W. Wood. Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. Yale University Press,2018. WorldCat Discovery Service

Sandel, Michael J. Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do? 1st ed, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.