



What if Everyone Did That?

IMMANUEL KANT (2)

There's a knock at your door. Standing in front of you is a young man who obviously needs help. He's injured and is bleeding. You take him in and help him, make him feel comfortable and safe and phone for an ambulance. This is obviously the right thing to do. But if you help him just because you feel sorry for him, according to Immanuel Kant, that wouldn't be a *moral* action at all. Your sympathy is irrelevant to the morality of your action. That's part of your character, but nothing to do with right and wrong. Morality for Kant wasn't just about *what* you do, but about *why* you do it. Those who do the right thing don't do it simply because of how they feel: the decision has to be based on reason, reason that tells you what your duty is, regardless of how you happen to feel.

Kant thought that emotions shouldn't come into morality. Whether we have them or not is largely a matter of luck. Some people feel compassion and empathy, others don't. Some are

mean and find it difficult to feel generous; others get great enjoyment from giving away their money and possessions to help other people. But being good should be something that any reasonable person should be able to achieve through their own choices. For Kant, if you help the young man because you know it is your duty, then that is a moral action. It's the right thing to do because it is what everyone in the same situation should do.

This may sound strange to you. You probably think that someone who felt sorry for the young man and helped him because of that would have acted morally and was perhaps a better person for feeling that emotion. That's what Aristotle would have thought too (see Chapter 2). But Kant was certain. If you do something just because of how you feel that is not a good action at all. Imagine someone who felt disgust when they saw the young man, but still went ahead and helped him out of duty. That person would be more obviously moral in Kant's eyes than someone who acted from compassion. That's because the disgusted person would clearly be acting from a sense of duty because their emotions would be pushing in the completely opposite direction, encouraging them not to help.

Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan helps a man in need he sees lying by the side of the road. Everyone else just passes by. What made the Good Samaritan good? If the Samaritan helped the man in need because he thought it would get him into heaven, in Kant's view that wouldn't have been a moral action at all. It would be treating the man as a way of getting something – a means to an end. If he helped him simply from compassion, as we've seen already, that would be no good in Kant's eyes. But if he helped him because he recognized that it was his duty, and the right thing for anyone in those circumstances to do, then Kant would agree that the Good Samaritan was morally good.

Kant's view of intentions is easier to accept than his view of the emotions. Most of us do judge each other by what each of us is trying to do, rather than just by what we succeed in doing. Think of how you would feel about being accidentally knocked over by a parent rushing to stop his young child from running into the road. Compare that with how you would feel if someone else had deliberately knocked you over for fun. The parent didn't intend to hurt you. The thug did. But, as the next example shows, having good intentions isn't enough to make your action moral.

There's another knock at the door. You answer. It's your best friend who looks pale, worried and out of breath. She tells you someone is chasing her, someone who wants to kill her. He's got a knife. You let her in, and she runs upstairs to hide. Moments later there is yet another knock on the door. This time it is the would-be killer and he has a crazy look in his eyes. He wants to know where your friend is. Is she in the house? Is she hiding in a cupboard? Where is she? In fact she is upstairs. But you tell a lie. You say she has gone to the park. Surely you've done the right thing by sending the would-be killer out to look for her in the wrong place. You've probably saved your friend's life. That must be a moral act, mustn't it?

Not according to Kant. Kant thought that you should never lie – not in any circumstances. Not even to protect your friend from a would-be murderer. It's always morally wrong. No exceptions. No excuses. That's because you couldn't make a general principle that everyone should always lie when it suited them. In this case if you lied and, without you knowing it, your friend *had* gone out to the park, you would have been guilty of helping the murderer. It would have been to some extent your fault that your friend died.

This example is one Kant himself used. It shows how extreme his view was. There were no exceptions to truth-telling or to any

moral duty. We all have an *absolute* duty to tell the truth or, as he put it, a Categorical Imperative to do so. An imperative is an order. Categorical imperatives contrast with hypothetical imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives take the form 'If you want x , do y '. 'If you want to avoid prison, don't steal' is an example of a hypothetical imperative. Categorical imperatives are different. They instruct you. In this case the Categorical Imperative would simply be 'Don't steal!' It is an order telling you what your duty is. Kant thought that morality was a system of categorical imperatives. Your moral duty is your moral duty *whatever the consequences and whatever the circumstances*.

Kant believed that what makes us human is that, unlike other animals, we can think reflectively about our choices. We would be like machines if we couldn't do things on purpose. It almost always makes sense to ask a human being, 'Why did you do that?' We don't just act out of instinct, but on the basis of reasons. Kant's way of putting this is in terms of the 'maxims' we act from. The maxim is just the underlying principle, the answer to the question, 'Why did you do that?' Kant believed that the maxim underlying your action was what really mattered. He argued that you should only act on maxims that were universalizable. For something to be universalizable it has to apply to everyone. This just means that you should only do things that would make sense for anyone in the same situation as you to do. Always ask the question: 'What if everyone did that?' Don't make a special case for yourself. Kant thought what this meant in practice was that you shouldn't use other people but should treat them with respect, recognizing other people's autonomy, their capacity as individuals to make reasoned decisions for themselves. This reverence for the dignity and worth of individual human beings is at the core of modern human rights theory. It is Kant's great contribution to moral philosophy.

This is easier to understand through an example. Imagine you own a shop and you sell fruit. When people buy fruit from you, you are always polite and give them the correct change. Perhaps you do this because you think it is good for business and will make people more likely to come back to spend their money in your shop. If that's the only reason you give them the right change, then that is a way of using them to get what you want. Kant believed that because you couldn't reasonably suggest that everyone treated everyone else in this way, it wasn't a moral form of behaviour. But if you give them the correct change because you recognize that it is your duty not to deceive others, then that is a moral action. That's because it is based on the maxim 'Don't deceive others,' a maxim he thinks we can apply to every case. Deceiving people is a way of using them to get what you want. It can't be a moral principle. If everyone deceived everyone else all trust would break down. No one would believe anything anyone ever said.

Take another example Kant used: imagine that you are completely broke. The banks won't lend you money, you don't have anything that you can sell, and if you don't pay your rent you will be out on the street. You come up with a solution. You go to a friend and ask to borrow some money. You promise to pay him back even though you know that you won't be able to do so. This is your last resort, you can't think of any other way of paying your rent. Would that be acceptable? Kant argues that borrowing from a friend without intending to return the money *must* be immoral. Reason can show us this. It would be absurd for everyone to borrow money and promise to pay it back even though they knew they couldn't. That, again, isn't a universalizable maxim. Ask the question, 'What if everyone did that?' If everyone made false promises like this, promises would become completely worthless. If it isn't right for everyone, it can't be right for you. So you shouldn't do it. It would be wrong.

This way of thinking about right and wrong based on cool reasoning rather than emotion is very different from Aristotle's (see Chapter 2). For Aristotle, a truly virtuous person always has the appropriate feelings and does the right thing as a result of that. For Kant, feelings simply cloud the issue, making it more difficult to see that someone is genuinely doing the right thing, rather than just seeming to. Or to put a more positive spin on this: Kant made morality available to every rational person, whether or not they were fortunate enough to have feelings that motivated them to act well.

Kant's moral philosophy stands in stark contrast to that of Jeremy Bentham, the topic of the next chapter. Where Kant argued that some actions are wrong whatever consequences follow from them, Bentham claimed that it was consequences, and only consequences, that mattered.