Grounding of metaphysics of morals philosophy essay

Experience, Human Nature

Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals by Immanuel Kant argues for a priori basis for morality. Kant states that an action is moral only if it is good in itself. Our actions cannot be moral if we have external purposes or goals. One action that Kant believes that is morally wrong is lying. Kant says that it is never morally permissible to lie. This paper will defend Kant's claim that lying is never morally acceptable and argue against common justification of lying.

Kant's theory of the categorical imperative states that human is the ultimate value and should be regarded as an end in itself. The basic idea for Kant's categorical imperative is to do the right thing because the idea of it being right is the reason for doing it. An action is not right or wrong based solely on the reason by which it was performed, but our intent which makes all the difference. Kant only cares about our ethical motivations and actions. Intentionally stating statements as anything but the truth, is lying. Always do the right thing because it is right and that is the morality of it. As such, we do not lie because it our duty to not lie. If we lie because we want to save ourselves from a difficult situation, we would have violated this moral law. Even if we don't lie, for the reason that it might cause more troubles in the future, we also have violated this moral law. We cannot have external motivations to our duty to not lie, except the motivation to not lie because it is our duty.

Whether our action is good or wrong depends on whether the " act such that the maxim of your action could become a universal law." (Kant, 30) and " act such that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of

another, always as an end and never as a means only." (Kant, 36). When a liar lies, he is treating his victim as a means to an end, hoping that the victim was not able to know the truth. Lying can't be ethically acceptable because when a liar lies to his victim, he uses the victim as a mean. This would be the case regardless of the consequences or the circumstances of the lie. Lying also can't be ethically acceptable because it can't become a universal law, it would not make sense for you to tell a lie and expect others to not lie, because that would be contradictory. By these rules, Kant has shown that lying is not morally acceptable.

There are two examples used to counter Kant's moral system, stating that there are times that you should be allowed to lie. Suppose a murderer is in front of your house and asking for the location of the victim who happens to be in your house. According to Kant, since it is our duty to not lie, we should not lie to the murderer and tell him where the victim is (Kant, 63). Another example is of a daughter who lies about granting the dying father's last wish. The girl wants to reassure the dying father that she will grant his wish so he is given happiness on his dying moments.

Kant agrees with the fact we should not lie to the murderer. " Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise therefrom for him or for any other" (Kant, 64) If we lie to the murderer, that means we are treating the murderer as a mere means to another end, but that would deny the rationality of another person. We should also regard human as the ultimate value and as an end in itself, and since the murderer is a human, we must

respect him as such, or we would have had " wrong done to mankind" (Kant, 64). Regardless of the consequences for not lying to the murderer, because you did not lie for the sake of not lying, you are morally right.

Another Kant's argument for this is that, there can be unexpected consequences, even if we told the murderer the location of the victim, the victim might not die. But if you lie and the victim still dies, you are then responsible for his death. We cannot hope to predict the outcome of any given situation. So by telling the truth to the murderer, you have still done the morally right action, because it doesn't guarantee the murderer will kill the victim. So at the end, no matter what the consequences are, performing the right action is always the right thing to do.

While there are criticisms to Kant's thought on not lying to the murderer, there is a difference between not lying and telling the truth. One has no duty to help a murderer by telling him the truth. Saying nothing is not the same as lying. So, one may refuse to answer the murderer, or close the door and run away. Those are two options that are feasible, and preferred, according to Kant. Some might say that would lead to the murderer getting angry and killing you too, but there is no proof that murderer won't kill you even if you told the truth.

Regarding the dying father scenario, Kant does not think the daughter should lie to a dying person to reassure him of his insecurities. Just because he is dying does not give the daughter permission to lie to him. Since you are suppose to treat human beings as equal, the impending death does not

lessen the father as a human being. If the daughter lies to him, that means she is treating her dying father as less of a rational being than her, and that does not work with Kant's system.

Some might criticize Kant's moral requirement of treating human as ends and to never lie is overly demanding and not practical. But the idea of having a moral law is having it to be an ideal to work toward to. If we lower the standards of moral law in agreement with the human nature, that would nullify the idea of morality. Some might say that never lying is impossible to achieve and it would be unjust to ask human to follow an expectation that is never possible to achieve. While never lying is improbable, it is not impossible. There is a just moral duty to follow the law if the moral standard is possible.

Some claim that that there are different kind of lies, helpful lies and lies with intent to harm. It should not be wrong to lie if you are trying to lie with the intent to helping others. A utilitarian would agree with that fact that the consequences of the lies is what important. If you can save a person's live by lying to the murderer, it would increase the general happiness overall. But doing morally wrong things for the sake of happiness seems to be counter-intuitive. You are not suppose to murder the murderer just so you could save the lives of others.

Kant's thoughts on humanity having equality is why he thinks that lying is always wrong. Moral imperatives are supposed to be ideals that helps develop your character. Morality demands that we, as human beings, have a

duty to acknowledge the rationality of every human and refuse to think of one's rationality as any less than another, regardless of their circumstances. When one views the rationality of another as lesser to his own, it is what makes it morally wrong. You must see other human beings as equals in order to act morally. Kant does not make that claim that never lying is easy. Kant says when you are tempted to lie, there are other better alternatives. He claims that saying nothing is ethically permissible and preferable to lying. Duties are moral responsibilities, and though Kant's ethic are very harsh, he does not ask of you to follow his duty to never to lie to the ethical extreme of the absolute truth. Silence is able to fill in the ethical gaps between the absolute truth and lies. Although the truth could possibly create harm, that consequence could also occur because of lying, so you can't justify one action without justifying the other without contradicting yourself. While some may believe that lies make it easier to get through life with lesser problems, Kant would prefer to live in a society where everyone told the truth and also expects truth from others.