

# Korsgaards position about lying to the murderer



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In this paper I will discuss Christine M. Korsgaard's position about lying to the murderer at the door in response to Immanuel Kant's view regarding the matter. I will then give two objections to her view and explain why I don't find her account to be very persuasive. Then, I will argue why I believe that lying to the murderer at the door is permissible in my opinion.

I will start off by explaining Kant's view. Kant believes that his moral theory forbids lying under all possible circumstances, even those where there is a murderer at the door wondering if an innocent victim is hiding in your house. After all, if everybody lied, even just to murderers at the door enquiring about the whereabouts of their victims, then the lying could not succeed since no murderer would believe what one says, and therefore lying violates the first form of the Categorical Imperative, which Kant calls the Formula of Universal Law. Similarly, the lie violates the second form of the Categorical Imperative, which Kant names the Formula of Humanity. The lie fails to respect the rationality of the murderer, since by lying we manipulate the murderer into actions directed at our own intentions and ends. Since the liar's end is opposed to the end that the murderer has willingly chosen for themselves, the liar fails to treat the murderer with respect and dignity and therefore treats the murderer merely as a means to get what they want.

Lying even in such an extreme case as the murderer at the door is a

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violation of the Categorical Imperatives according to Kant. Korsgaard goes against Kant's assertion that it is wrong to give the murderer at the door the wrong answer arguing that it does not violate the Categorical Imperatives to

lie in these circumstances. She further discusses that it is a duty to lie to the murderer at the door and expands on her reasoning. Korsgaard comes up with a two level theory on which the first form of the Categorical Imperative would apply under all circumstances and the second only when one is defending oneself or another against evil.

In order to defend Kant's first Categorical Imperative, Korsgaard argues that it is in fact permissible from a Kantian point of view to universalize the maxim, or principle that governs action, when lying to the murderer at the door. She argues that the first form of the Categorical Imperative is not violated in the case where the murderer makes a secret of their murderous intentions. She explains that if the murderer at the door does not know that the recipient knows they are murderers, that the murderer will think that the recipient will believe that they are just a "friendly neighbor trying to find out where their friend is" for example. In other words, she believes you can universalize a maxim in which you respond to evil with an effort to frustrate evil through deception, where the evil person is unaware that you are aware of his plan. The evil person, or murderer, does not realize that you are in the position in which you would use this maxim; therefore you would be able to use this without frustrating your purpose to successfully get away with your lie.

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In order to defend Kant's second Categorical Imperative, which explains that we must respect each other's rational nature by always treating others with respect and dignity and never merely as a means, Korsgaard argues that it is permissible to not abide by this formula due to the fact that the murderer is

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not respecting your rational nature by lying to you in the first place.

Korsgaard argues that we are permitted and also have a duty to mutual aid one another and lie to the murderer at the door out of self-defense. She believes that in order to protect yourself you may respond to a lie with a lie. The murderer is not offering you the grounds to consent to his activity with him, so Korsgaard believes that you are not obliged in response to offer transparency. Part of her argument is that you are being lied to, and you have a duty of self-respect, not to allow yourself to be used as a tool for evil. Korsgaard explains that this makes it possible to lie back to the murderer. She also makes a point that we must protect one another, especially if the person you are protecting is innocent. Korsgaard also believes this in this case you would not be abusing communication by the lie.

Korsgaard relates more with the non-ideal Kantian view versus the ideal Kantian view in which Kant takes. Ideal Kantian theory is how we are permitted and obliged to behave if we lived in a society where we all followed the rules and we were of good will and good faith. This theory explains how flawed and imperfect but good human beings would be required to behave in respect to one another. Non-ideal Kantian theory on the other hand is relevantly different. It explains how we are required to behave when many of us are of good will but

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many of us are also not of good will. Korsgaard relates non-ideal Kantian theory to this case, the murderer is not acting on a good will. She believes that in non-ideal circumstances we have justifications for treating each other in such ways that we wouldn't treat each other in ideal circumstances.

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Although I think Korsgaard has made some interesting claims, I believe her arguments have not been fully persuasive. My first objection to Korsgaard's argument is that I believe she misunderstands how Kantian universalization is supposed to work. Korsgaard's account will not defend Kant successfully because it only works under certain circumstances. This is Korsgaard's main flaw in her assertion Universalization does not work when the murderer is transparent about their evil intentions. Korsgaard's argument only works when the murderer does not know that you know of their intentions. Lying maxims fail to be universalized when both parties know the situations they are in causing a major gap in Korsgaard's argument.

I believe that regardless of whether you can universalize lying to a murderer, it should almost always be permissible to do so in order to save a life. For example, if you were hiding Ann Frank in your basement and the Nazi Police came to your door and asked you if you were hiding any Jews, you would have to tell the Nazis the truth under Korsgaard's universalization claim. The Nazis know that everybody knows of their murderous intentions, so they know that you know that they will kill Ann Frank if you told them where she was hiding, therefore the Nazis will know that you will lie to them in order to save her life. So you will not

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be able to universalize this maxim and get away with lying in this particular situation. This example proves that Korsgaard's assertion is in very weak, since it only works under a certain scenario.

After discussing this material with my partner, Corine Machalani, we went over some objections that Korsgaard might offer to this assertion. I believe Korsgaard would argue against this claim by stating that in a scenario where the murderer is not trying to deceive, the only thing you could do is refuse to answer his question. This is absolutely ridiculous because I think if you told a murderer that you would be putting your life in danger. By telling someone that you are not going to tell him, you have practically admit that you are hiding something from them. So in the case of the murderer you are admitting that you know the whereabouts of their victim but refuse to tell them. This would be a very dangerous situation that I would altogether try and avoid. When dealing with an evil person such as a murderer, you must protect your life.

I believe lying to the murderer at the door is permissible out of self-protection and because it is the morally right thing to do. You know that by hiding Jews in your house you are breaking the law, so in order to protect yourself against the Nazis you should be allowed to lie out of self-defense. Even where the Nazis tell you that if you tell them the truth that you will be rewarded instead of personally prosecuted or injured, I still believe you should lie. You should help one another and to protect an innocent person's life because it is the right thing

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to do. Life is the most precious thing and should be guarded in any way possible, whether your life or another individuals.

Although I believe Korsgaard has made a good point regarding the duty to aid an innocent person against evil, I believe some of her reasoning is incorrect. Korsgaard's argues that if someone lies to you, you can lie back to them. Korsgaard argues that since the murderer is lying to you about their motives, you may respond to a lie with a lie. I believe this is not a strong argument. A lie is an intentional invitation of trust and a breaking of faith, and the fact that the murderer is lying to you doesn't justify you lying to them back, and it definitely is not a reason that makes lying moral in any way. My reasoning regarding this matter is the eye for an eye argument, I believe two wrongs don't make it right. Just because someone lies to you doesn't make it right to lie back, and if our world operated this way there would be nothing but chaos.

I believe when deciding whether lying is right or wrong, it all comes down to the intentions of the parties involved. The Nazis have evil intentions of murdering innocent people for no reason, and you have good intentions of protecting yourself and others. Even though in Germany back in those days it was the law to hand over the Jews, that society was corrupt and flawed. The only time I would argue that it is permissible not to lie to the murderer at the door would be if the person you were hiding in your house were also a murderer. I believe lying is acceptable when saving an innocent life.

Korsgaard has not successfully justified in pointing to Kant's view of lying

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as a refutation of the Categorical Imperatives. I believe a Kantian needs to bite

the bullet and agree that there are some serious flaws in their argument.

There are lies that Kantians believe are impermissible even though such lies are actually a duty in my eyes. Korsgaard has not successfully proven that Kant's Categorical Imperatives actually work in difficult situations concluding that her argument is not very strong.