

Are There Absolute Moral Rules?

You may not do evil that good may come.

SAINT PAUL, *LETTER TO THE ROMANS* (ca. A.D. 50)

9.1. Harry Truman and Elizabeth Anscombe

Harry S. Truman will always be remembered as the man who made the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When he became president in 1945, following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman knew nothing about the bomb; Roosevelt's advisors had to fill him in. The Allies were winning the war in the Pacific, they said, but at a terrible cost. Plans had been drawn up for an invasion of Japan, but that battle would be even bloodier than the D-Day assault on Normandy had been. Using the atomic bomb on one or two Japanese cities might bring the war to a speedy end, making the invasion unnecessary.

Truman was at first reluctant to use the new weapon. The problem was that each bomb would obliterate an entire city—not just the military targets, but the hospitals, schools, and homes. Women, children, old people, and other noncombatants would be wiped out along with the military personnel. The Allies had bombed cities before, but Truman sensed that the new weapon made the issue of noncombatants more acute. Moreover, the United States was on record as condemning attacks on civilian targets. In 1939, before America had entered the war, President Roosevelt had sent a message to the governments of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Great Britain,

denouncing the bombardment of cities in the strongest terms. He had called it an “inhuman barbarism”:

The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians . . . which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity. If resort is had to this form of inhuman barbarism during the period of the tragic conflagration with which the world is now confronted, hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings who have no responsibility for, and who are not even remotely participating in, the hostilities which have now broken out, will lose their lives.

Truman expressed similar thoughts when he decided to authorize the bombings. He wrote in his diary that “I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. . . . The target will be a purely military one.” It is hard to know what to make of this, since Truman knew that the bombs would destroy whole cities. Nonetheless, it is clear that he was worried about the issue of noncombatants.

It is also clear that Truman was sure of his decision. Winston Churchill, the wartime leader of Great Britain, met with Truman shortly before the bombs were dropped, and he later wrote, “The decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never even an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table.” After signing the final order, thus sealing the fate of Hiroshima, Truman later said that he “slept like a baby.”

Elizabeth Anscombe, who died in 2001, was a 20-year-old student at Oxford University when World War II began. At that time, she co-authored a controversial pamphlet arguing that Britain should not go to war because countries at war inevitably end up fighting by unjust means. “Miss Anscombe,” as she was always known—despite her 59-year marriage and her seven children—would go on to become one of the 20th century’s most distinguished philosophers, and the greatest woman philosopher in history.

Miss Anscombe was also a Catholic, and her religion was central to her life. Her ethical views reflected traditional Catholic teachings. In 1968, after Pope Paul VI affirmed the church’s

ban on contraception, she wrote a pamphlet explaining why artificial birth control is immoral. Late in her life, she was arrested while protesting outside a British abortion clinic. She also accepted the church's teaching about the ethical conduct of war, which brought her into conflict with Truman.

Harry Truman and Elizabeth Anscombe crossed paths in 1956. Oxford University was planning to give Truman an honorary degree in thanks for America's wartime help, and those proposing the honor thought it would be uncontroversial. But Anscombe and two other faculty members opposed the idea. Although they lost, they forced a vote on what would otherwise have been a rubber-stamp approval. Then, while the degree was being conferred, Anscombe knelt outside the hall, praying.

Anscombe wrote another pamphlet, this time explaining that Truman was a murderer because he had ordered the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Truman, of course, thought the bombings were justified—they had shortened the war and saved lives. For Anscombe, this was not good enough. "For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends," she wrote, "is always murder." To the argument that the bombings saved more lives than they took, she replied, "Come now: if you had to choose between boiling one baby and letting some frightful disaster befall a thousand people—or a million people, if a thousand is not enough—what would you do?"

Anscombe's example was apt. The bomb blast at Hiroshima, which ignited birds in midair, did lead to babies being boiled: People died in rivers, reservoirs, and cisterns, trying in vain to escape the heat. Anscombe's point was that *some things may not be done, no matter what*. It does not matter if we could accomplish some great good by boiling a baby; it is simply wrong. Anscombe believed in a host of such rules. Under no circumstances, she said, may we intentionally kill innocent people; worship idols; make a false profession of faith; engage in sodomy or adultery; punish one person for the acts of another; or commit treachery, which she describes as "obtaining a man's confidence in a grave matter by promises of trustworthy friendship and then betraying him to his enemies."

Anscombe's husband, Peter Geach (1916–), agreed with this. Anscombe and Geach were the 20th century's foremost philosophical champions of the doctrine that moral rules are absolute.

9.2. The Categorical Imperative

The idea that moral rules have no exceptions is hard to defend. It is easy enough to explain why we *should* break a rule—we can simply point to cases in which following the rule would have terrible consequences. But how can we defend *not* breaking the rule in such cases? It is a daunting assignment. We might say that moral rules are God’s inviolable commands. Apart from that, what can be said?

Before the 20th century, there was one major philosopher who believed that moral rules are absolute. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that lying is wrong under any circumstances. He did not appeal to theological considerations; he held, instead, that reason always forbids lying. To see how he reached this conclusion, we need to look at his general theory of ethics.

Kant observed that the word *ought* is often used nonmorally:

- If you want to become a better chess player, you *ought* to study the games of Garry Kasparov.
- If you want to go to college, you *ought* to take the SAT.

Much of our conduct is governed by such “oughts.” The pattern is this: We have a certain desire (to become a better chess player, to go to college); we recognize that a certain course of action will help us get what we want (studying Kasparov’s games, taking the SAT); and so we follow the indicated plan.

Kant called these “hypothetical imperatives” because they tell us what to do *provided that* we have the relevant desires. A person who did not want to improve her chess would have no reason to study Kasparov’s games; someone who did not want to go to college would have no reason to take the SAT. Because the binding force of the “ought” depends on having the relevant desire, we can escape its force by letting go of the desire. So, for example, I can avoid taking the SAT by deciding that I don’t want to go to college.

Moral obligations, by contrast, do not depend on having particular desires. The form of a moral obligation is not “*If* you want so-and-so, then you ought to do such-and-such.” Instead, moral requirements are *categorical*: They have the form “You ought to do such-and-such, *period*.” The moral rule is not, for example, that you ought to help people *if* you care about them

or *if* you want to be a good person. Instead, the rule is that you should help people *no matter what* your desires are. That is why moral requirements cannot be escaped simply by saying “But I don’t care about that.”

Hypothetical “oughts” are easy to understand. They merely tell us to do what is necessary to achieve our goals. Categorical “oughts,” on the other hand, are mysterious. How can we be obligated to behave in a certain way regardless of our goals? Kant has an answer. Just as hypothetical “oughts” are possible because we have *desires*, categorical “oughts” are possible because we have *reason*. Categorical oughts, Kant says, are derived from a principle that every rational person must accept: the Categorical Imperative. In his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant expresses the Categorical Imperative as follows:

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

This principle provides a way to tell whether an act is morally permissible. When you are thinking about doing something, ask what rule you would be following if you actually did it. This rule will be the “maxim” of your act. Then ask whether you would be willing for your maxim to become a universal law. In other words, would you allow your rule to be followed by all people at all times? If so, then your maxim is sound, and your act is acceptable. But if not, then your act is forbidden.

Kant gives several examples of how this works. Suppose, he says, a man needs money, but no one will lend it to him unless he promises to pay it back—which he knows he won’t be able to do. Should he make a false promise to get the loan? If he did, his maxim would be: *Whenever you need a loan, promise to repay it, even if you know you can’t.* Now, could he will that this rule become a universal law? Obviously not, because it would be self-defeating. Once this rule became a universal practice, no one would believe such promises, and so no one would make loans based on them.

Kant gives another example, about giving aid. Suppose, he says, I refuse to help others in need, saying to myself, “What do I care? Let each person fend for himself.” This, again, is a rule that I cannot will to be a universal law. For at some time in the future, I myself will need the help of others, and I will not want them to turn away.

9.3. Kant's Arguments on Lying

According to Kant, then, our behavior should be guided by universal laws, which are moral rules that hold true in all circumstances. Kant believed in many such exceptionless rules. We'll focus on the rule against lying, which Kant had especially strong feelings about. He said that lying under any circumstances is "the obliteration of one's dignity as a human being."

Kant offered two arguments for an absolute rule against lying.

1. His main argument relies on the Categorical Imperative. We could not will a universal law that allows us to lie, Kant said, because such a law would be self-defeating. As soon as lying became common, people would stop believing each other. Lying would then have no point, and in a sense would be impossible, because nobody would pay attention to what you say. Therefore, Kant reasoned, lying cannot be allowed. And so, it is forbidden under any circumstances.

This argument has a flaw, which will become clearer with an example. Suppose it was necessary to lie to save someone's life. Should you do it? Kant would have us reason as follows:

- (1) We should do only those actions that conform to rules that we could will to be adopted universally.
- (2) If you were to lie, you would be following the rule "It is okay to lie."
- (3) This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self-defeating: People would stop believing one another, and then it would do no good to lie.
- (4) Therefore, you should not lie.

Although Anscombe agreed with Kant's conclusion, she was quick to point out an error in his reasoning. The difficulty arises in step (2). Why should we say that, if you lied, you would be following the rule, "It is okay to lie"? Perhaps your maxim would be: "I will lie when doing so would save someone's life." *That* rule would not be self-defeating. It could become a universal law. And so, by Kant's own theory, it would be all right for you to lie. Thus, Kant's belief that lying is always wrong does not seem to be supported by his own moral theory.

2. Many of Kant's contemporaries thought that his insistence on absolute rules was strange, and they said so. One

reviewer challenged him with this example: Imagine that someone is fleeing from a murderer and tells you that he is going home to hide. Then the murderer comes by and asks you where the man is. You believe that, if you tell the truth, you will be aiding in a murder. Furthermore, the killer is already headed the right way, so if you simply remain silent, the worst result is likely. What should you do? Let's call this the Case of the Inquiring Murderer. Under these circumstances, most of us think, you should lie. After all, which is more important: telling the truth or saving someone's life?

Kant responded in an essay with the charmingly old-fashioned title "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," in which he gives a second argument against lying. Perhaps, he says, the man on the run has actually left his home, and by telling the truth you would lead the killer to look in the wrong place. However, if you lie, the murderer may wander away and discover the man leaving the area, in which case you would be responsible for his death. Whoever lies, Kant says, "must answer for the consequences, however unforeseeable they were, and pay the penalty for them." Kant states his conclusion in the tone of a stern schoolmaster: "To be truthful . . . in all deliberations, therefore, is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency."

This argument may be stated in a general form: We are tempted to make exceptions to the rule against lying because in some cases we think the consequences of honesty will be bad and the consequences of lying will be good. However, we can never be certain about what the consequences will be—we cannot *know* that good results will follow. The results of lying might be unexpectedly bad. Therefore, the best policy is to avoid the known evil—lying—and let the consequences come as they may. Even if the consequences are bad, they will not be our fault, for we will have done our duty.

A similar argument would apply to Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombs were dropped in the hope that the war could be swiftly concluded. But Truman did not know for sure that this would happen. The Japanese might have hunkered down, and the invasion might still have been necessary. So, Truman was betting hundreds of thousands of lives on the mere hope that good results might ensue.

The problems with this argument are obvious enough—so obvious, in fact, that it is surprising that a philosopher of Kant’s caliber was not more sensitive to them. In the first place, the argument depends on an unreasonably pessimistic view of what we can know. Sometimes we can be quite confident of what the consequences of our actions will be, in which case we need not hesitate because of uncertainty. Moreover—and this is more significant, philosophically—Kant seems to assume that we would be morally responsible for any bad consequences of lying, but we would *not* be responsible for any bad consequences of telling the truth. Suppose, as a result of our telling the truth, the murderer found his victim and killed him. Kant seems to assume that we would be blameless. But can we escape responsibility so easily? After all, we aided the murderer. This argument, then, is not convincing.

Thus, Kant has failed to prove that lying is always wrong. The Case of the Inquiring Murderer shows what a tough row he chose to hoe. While Kant believes that any lie “obliterates one’s dignity as a human being,” common sense says that some lies are harmless. In fact, we have a name for them: white lies. Aren’t white lies acceptable—or even required—when they can be used to save someone’s life? This points to the main difficulty for the belief in absolute rules: shouldn’t a rule be broken when following it would be disastrous?

9.4. Conflicts between Rules

Suppose it is held to be absolutely wrong to do X in any circumstances and also wrong to do Y in any circumstances. Then what about the case in which a person must choose between doing X and doing Y? This kind of conflict seems to show that moral rules can’t be absolute.

Is there any way that this objection can be met? One way is to deny that such conflicts ever actually occur. Peter Geach took this view, appealing to God’s providence. We can describe fictitious cases in which there is no way to avoid violating one of the absolute rules, he said, but God will not permit such circumstances to arise. Geach writes:

If God is rational, he does not command the impossible; if God governs all events by his providence, he can see to it that circumstances in which a man is inculpably faced by

a choice between forbidden acts do not occur. Of course such circumstances . . . are consistently describable; but God's providence could ensure that they do not in fact arise. Contrary to what nonbelievers often say, belief in the existence of God does make a difference to what one expects to happen.

Do such cases actually occur? There is no doubt that serious moral rules sometimes clash. During World War II, Dutch fishermen smuggled Jewish refugees to England in their boats, and sometimes they would be stopped by Nazi patrols. The Nazi captain would call out and ask the Dutch captain where he was going, who was on board, and so forth. The fishermen would lie and be allowed to pass. Clearly, the fishermen had only two options: either they lie, or they let everyone on their boat be killed. No third alternative was available; they could not, for example, remain silent or outrun the Nazis. Thus, Geach appears to have been naïve. Terrible dilemmas do occur in the real world.

If such dilemmas occur, then doesn't this disprove the existence of absolute moral rules? Suppose, for example, the two rules "It is wrong to lie" and "It is wrong to facilitate the murder of innocent people" are both taken to be absolute. The Dutch fishermen would have to do one of these things; therefore, a moral view that absolutely prohibits both is incoherent.

This type of argument is impressive, but it is also limited. It can be levied only against *pairs* of absolute moral rules; two rules are needed to create the conflict. The argument won't stop someone from believing that there is just one absolute rule. And, in a way, everyone does. "Do what is right" is a moral principle we all believe in, which admits of no exceptions. We should always do what is right. However, this rule is so formal that it is trivial—we believe it because it doesn't really say anything. It is not the kind of absolute moral rule that Kant, Geach, and Anscombe wanted to argue for.

9.5. Kant's Insight

Few contemporary philosophers would defend Kant's Categorical Imperative. Yet it might be wrong to dismiss it too quickly. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–) observes, "For many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly

what Kant said it was”—that is, a system of rules that one must follow from a sense of duty. Is there some basic idea underlying the Categorical Imperative that we might accept, even if we don't believe in absolute moral rules? I think there is.

Remember that Kant viewed the Categorical Imperative as binding on rational agents simply because they are rational; in other words, a person who rejected this principle would be guilty not merely of being immoral but also of being irrational. This is a compelling idea. But what exactly does this mean? In what sense would it be irrational to reject the Categorical Imperative?

Note that a moral judgment must be backed by good reasons—if it is true that you ought (or ought not) to do such-and-such, then there must be a reason why you should (or should not) do it. For example, you may think that you ought not to set forest fires because property would be destroyed and people would be killed. The Kantian twist is to point out that *if you accept any considerations as reasons in one case, you must also accept them as reasons in other cases*. If there is another case in which property would be destroyed and people killed, you must accept this as a reason in that case, too. It is no good saying that you can accept reasons some of the time, but not all the time; or that other people must respect them, but not you. Moral reasons, if they are valid at all, are binding on all people at all times. This is a requirement of consistency, and Kant was right to think that no rational person may deny it.

This insight has some important implications. It implies that a person cannot regard herself as special, from a moral point of view: She cannot consistently think that she is permitted to act in ways that are forbidden to others, or that her interests are more important than other people's interests. As one commentator remarked, I cannot say that it is all right for me to drink your beer and then complain when you drink mine. Moreover, it implies that there are rational constraints on what we may do: We may want to do something—say, to drink someone else's beer—but recognize that we cannot consistently do it because we cannot at the same time accept the implication that he may drink our beer. If Kant was not the first to recognize this, he was the first to make it the cornerstone of a fully worked-out system of morals.

But Kant went one step further and said that consistency requires rules that have no exceptions. One can see how his insight pushed him in that direction; but the extra step was not necessary, and it has caused trouble for his theory. Rules, even within a Kantian framework, need not be absolute. All that Kant's basic idea requires is that when we violate a rule, we do so for a reason that we would be willing for anyone to accept. In the Case of the Inquiring Murderer, this means that we may violate the rule against lying only if we would be willing for anyone to lie in the same circumstances. And most of us would readily agree to that.

President Truman could also say that anyone in his position would have been justified in dropping the bomb. Thus, even if Truman was wrong, Kant's arguments do not prove it. One might say that dropping the bomb was wrong because Truman had better options. Perhaps he should have shown the Japanese the power of the bomb by dropping it onto an unpopulated area—negotiations might then have been successful. Or perhaps the Allies could have simply declared victory at that point in the war, even without a Japanese surrender. Saying things like that, however, is very different from saying that what Truman did violated an absolute rule.