

# The Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics

Third Prize - 1991

*Ethics*

Jason Hodin

Wesleyan University

Middletown, CT

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## Ethics

Immanuel Kant defines ethical duties as those “which one cannot be (physically) forced by others to observe.”<sup>1</sup> Ethical duties are then sub-divided into duties towards oneself and duties towards others. All duties towards oneself involve striving for self-perfection, while all duties towards others concern facilitating the happiness of others. One could easily imagine a conflict developing between duties towards oneself and towards others. For example, a student who spends four years in a university may be increasing his/her understanding (a necessary element of self-perfection); however, spending these four years in the Peace Corps would undoubtedly accomplish more with respect to the happiness of others. Obviously, the problem of balancing these two duties is a difficult one. Perhaps an analysis of Kant’s ethical philosophy will provide some useful clues to solving this dilemma.

Self-perfection is understood by Kant to be “nothing but the cultivation of one’s capacities.”<sup>2</sup> This contains an implicit notion indicative of Kant’s egalitarianism: namely, that a person’s worth is not determined by the (uncontrollable) circumstances of his life. The argument for the duty of promoting the happiness of others is more subtle, indirectly invoking the “categorical imperative.” One formulation of the categorical imperative is: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law.”<sup>3</sup> If we accept Kant’s notion that the promotion of one’s own happiness is an instinct in humans<sup>4</sup>, and that it is a duty only in so far as it is considered “moral happiness,” then by the categorical imperative, one ought to will that others should cultivate their own capacities. Therefore, promoting (or, at least, permitting the cultivation of) happiness in others becomes a duty. Since it is up to each person to decide “what they count as belonging to their happiness,”<sup>5</sup> we cannot decide for another person if what they consider

“happiness” is of the physical or moral kind. Thus one promotes the happiness of others out of duty, for it preserves “the integrity of [one’s] morality.”<sup>6</sup>

Kant proceeds to consider the implications of promoting one’s own perfection; specifically, to what extent should one promote one’s own happiness? Kant’s prescription is as follows:

“Cultivate your powers of mind and body so as to be able to fulfill all the ends which may arise for you, uncertain as you may be which ends might become your own.”<sup>7</sup> The question which immediately arises is how does one proceed according to these principles? Kant’s answer<sup>8</sup>:

...apart from the necessity of self-preservation, which in itself can establish no duty, man owes it to himself to be a useful member of the world, because being one belongs also to the worth of the humanity in his own person, which he should not degrade.

Therefore, the question which remains to be solved is what constitutes a “useful member of the world”?

If we return to our original example of student *versus* peace corps volunteer, it is apparent that the topic is in need of some elaboration. For instance, the student may be pursuing studies in medicine, allowing him/her to become a doctor and save countless lives. This student would be on very solid Kantian moral grounds: not only is (s)he promoting his/her perfection (through an increase in understanding), but (s)he is also undoubtedly promoting the happiness of others.

Let us consider some more difficult examples. What of the research biologist studying yeast genetics? We must conclude that, at the very least, this person should feel that his/her findings may eventually (albeit after his/her lifetime) contribute to the discovery (for example) of a cure for cancer. It doesn’t matter whether or not this actually occurs; merely that (s)he is acting with this end in mind. Furthermore, if this biologist is only concerned with the intellectual stimulation involved in yeast genetic research, and inadvertently discovers a cure for cancer, this person appears to be non-moral!<sup>9</sup> This is so because the end (a cure for cancer) was not an intended end.

A qualification is in order: namely, that one's occupation may in itself have no apparent benefit for the happiness of others, but can still be considered moral if it creates a situation through which others might benefit. For example, if this same research biologist was receiving grant money for his/her work which (s)he donates to charity<sup>10</sup>, it would seem that (s)he is satisfying both of our duties: self-perfection and the happiness of others.

We can also allow for the laborer who only earns enough to support his/her family. We must remember that the circumstances of one's life do not factor into one's moral worth. This laborer may be working so that his/her child can proceed to study yeast genetics. In this way, the parent is indirectly promoting the happiness of others through his/her child.

In conclusion, the cultivation of one's talents (as seen through their choice of occupation) need only be directed by the goal of the happiness of others as an intended end. The extent to which this end is attained is irrelevant with respect to the ethical duties of self-perfection and the promotion of the happiness of others.

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Now let us turn to a more general question concerning one's duties as a "useful member of the world." Namely, what are one's duties towards others with regard to beneficence? The distinction between benevolence and beneficence is an important one: "benevolence is the satisfaction one takes in the happiness (well-being) of others. But beneficence is the *maxim* to make the happiness of others an end for oneself, and the duty of beneficence involves the subject's being constrained by his reason to adopt this maxim as a universal law."<sup>11</sup>

Kant proceeds to examine the manner in which one is to be beneficent to others. Specifically, "the benefactor must express himself as being obligated by the other's acceptance, treating the duty merely as a debt he owes..."<sup>12</sup> The problem with which Kant is concerned is a fundamental one: Kant's moral philosophy is based upon the notion that all individuals are to be

treated as ends in themselves, and never simply as means to some end. One result of this notion was discussed earlier, namely that each person has a right to decide for oneself in what one's happiness consists. Therefore, "would there not be resentment in not being able to put oneself in complete equality (which concerns relations of duty) with one's benefactor?"<sup>13</sup> Kant fails to respond, although his answer might be along the lines of his example of the rich man: namely, that one's means dictate the extent to which one should act beneficently. However, this notion seems problematic: I would imagine that a recipient of an act of beneficence feels ashamed to need charity, even when the recipient considers the small (relative) cost incurred by the beneficiary. Since this ashamedness (and the subsequent inability to put oneself in "complete equality" with the benefactor) results from the act of beneficence, would it not be preferable to refrain from beneficence?

The core of the matter is in determining which is more important: "the merit of the beneficence...[or] the rights of humanity."<sup>14</sup> The simplest (albeit unsatisfactory) solution to this problem is that it must remain the choice of the recipient whether or not (s)he is to receive the act of beneficence.

The corollary to this problem concerns the anonymity of the benefactor. At issue is the conflict between the ashamedness felt by the recipient of beneficence and the realization that the benefactor is more likely to perform acts of beneficence if (s)he knows (s)he is appreciated. Perhaps an analysis of Kant's theory of gratitude will produce a solution to this dilemma.

According to Kant, "Gratitude is a duty. It is not merely a maxim of prudence...in order to move [the benefactor] to greater beneficence...[it] must be regarded...as a duty whose violation...can destroy the moral incentive for beneficence in its very principle."<sup>15</sup> While this notion seems reasonable, one might question whether or not the recipient will *actually* show gratitude out of duty in this manner. In other words, will this theory apply in practice. Kant would undoubtedly respond that it does not matter whether or not this notion of gratitude exists; or, indeed, if it has ever existed

in the minds of the recipients of beneficence. It is only important that it “is in fact merely an *idea* of reason, which nonetheless has undoubted practical reality.”<sup>16</sup> Besides, “If we...consider the *welfare of the people*, theory is not in fact valid, for everything depends on practice derived from experience.”<sup>17</sup> Where does this notion leave us with respect to performing acts of beneficence? This question is apparently insoluble.

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The final problem to be considered, while being quite specific in scope, generates some interesting questions with wider applicability. The issue is whether or not one may lie from benevolent motives. This problem exposes a striking disparity between the maintenance of one’s moral integrity and the promotion of the happiness of others.

Kant proceeds: “the *first* question is whether a man...has the *right* to be untruthful. The second question is whether, in order to prevent a misdeed ...he is not actually bound to be untruthful in a certain statement to which an unjust compulsion forces him.”<sup>18</sup> For Kant, the negative definition of “right” concerns an action (for example) which does not limit another human’s freedom. If another human’s freedom is restricted, the action is not right. The doctrine of right is the basis for the contract upon which society is founded. Therefore the first question asks if lying violates this contract. The second question involves duty, asking if an individual can be duty-bound to be untruthful. Kant will argue that in both cases, with respect to right and to duty, one must always be truthful.

The argument proceeds as follows: “although by making a false statement I do no wrong to him who unjustly compels me to speak, yet I do wrong to men in the most essential point of duty...that is...declarations in general find no credit, and hence that all rights founded on contract should lose their force.”<sup>19</sup> In order for the contract to have a significant element of compulsion, so Kant argues, it cannot have been based upon a false declaration. Two objections immediately come

to mind. First, why can the appropriate maxim not be stated in the following way in order to account for lying: “lie only when you can be fairly certain that it is to the benefit of mankind in general for you to lie”? It appears that willing that this statement become a universal law would not destroy the fabric of society. We will return to this point. The second objection is merely a point of confusion: namely, with the following passage in mind, “The problem of organizing a state...can be solved even for a race of devils, if only they are intelligent,”<sup>20</sup> it seems that Kant is allowing for untruthful individuals (as devils would undoubtedly be) to enter into a contract. One can imagine the following situation: while a devil would realize that it would be in his/her best interest to promote truthfulness in the society (honor among thieves), (s)he would also realize that if one could get away with lying without being found-out, this would yield an even greater advantage. While this attitude would undoubtedly be a regression with respect to ethical perfection, it represents a case in which lying would be consistent with the formation of a society. This objection remains unsolved.

Let us, instead, return to the first objection, and consider Kant’s example of the murderer arriving on your doorstep. The situation is as follows: the murderer<sup>21</sup> asks you if there is a certain person in your house. This person had just come to your home telling you that the murderer planned to kill him/her, and (s)he is hiding out in your basement. What is your answer to the murderer’s question? Kant’s answer is in three parts: 1) try shrugging your shoulders in order to avoid lying; if this fails, 2) tell him/her the truth, since “if you lied and said he was not in the house, and he had really gone out (though unknown to you), so that the murderer met him as he went, and executed his purpose on him, then you might with justice be accused as the cause of his death.”<sup>22</sup> However, the most important point is 3) that you should tell the truth, because even if the lie saves the intended victim, it hurts “mankind generally, since it vitiates the source of justice.”<sup>23</sup>

The first two points are striking, to say the least. Concerning the first point, to claim that simply not lying (as opposed to telling the truth, which is known<sup>24</sup>) is somehow morally superior to

lying appears somewhat questionable, for in either case you are failing to allow the murderer the respect (s)he deserves as a member of the human race (even though (s)he is an acknowledged murderer) by withholding information. Admittedly, there is a distinction between lying and not telling the truth; however, the latter is not morally equivalent to truth-telling. The second point is also suspect, since the moral imperative involved in saving an innocent's life should outweigh any considerations of assessment of legal responsibility.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore, only the third point with which we are here concerned. Thus I raise the question again: why can the maxim of one's action not be "lie only if one can be fairly certain that it will increase the happiness of others (in general) to do so?"

Now the conflict is apparent between duty to oneself and duty to others: Kant argues that it is "the greatest violation of man's duty to himself" to lie,<sup>26</sup> and that "even [if] a really good end may be intended by lying...to lie even for these reasons is through its mere form a crime of man against his own person... [since] in so far as he is a moral being... [he] cannot use himself ...as a mere means."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the issue is whether or not a person does, in fact, use oneself merely as means when one lies.

There is no doubt that by lying to save the murderer, one adopts both a moral and legal responsibility for the person in hiding, and is therefore using oneself as means. However, the question is whether or not, by so doing, one uses oneself *merely* as means. I would contend that since there is a moral imperative involved in saving an innocent's life, that purpose is adopted as the end of the person harboring the fugitive. For example, I believe it shows a high degree of moral courage to have harbored Jews in hiding during the Second World War. If we imagine a situation in which an individual harboring Jews lied about their whereabouts to an SS officer, it seems that Kant would argue that in so doing, these individuals relinquished their humanity. However, if we consider "humanity" as it is generally understood<sup>28</sup>, one would surely conclude just the opposite.

Where does this inquiry leave us? Unfortunately, with no particularly helpful solutions to the problem of being a useful member of the world. While we have developed some amended formulae for one's choice of occupation and for acting out of benevolent motives, the crucial question of beneficence remained unsolved. Perhaps the best we can do is to keep in mind the balance between attainment of one's own perfection and promotion of the happiness of others, while remembering the words of Baruch Spinoza<sup>29</sup>: "Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that all together should aim at the common advantage of all."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Victor Gourevitch and my father for their comments and suggestions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Metaphysical Principles of virtue*, AA 381 [note - all page numbers preceded by “AA” are references in the Royal Prussian Academy Edition (*Akademie Ausgabe*), which are notated in the margins of the translations used]

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, AA 387. Perfection, as it is understood by Kant, involves the promotion of “moral” rather than “physical” happiness. The latter proceeds from satisfying basic (natural) desires. The former, however, proceeds from the cultivation of one’s capacities.

<sup>3</sup> *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AA 421

<sup>4</sup> This is precisely the reason why Kant does not attribute the promotion of one’s own happiness to a duty: it is only a duty to act through self-constraint. Therefore, acting according to a natural impulse would never be considered a duty.

<sup>5</sup> *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, AA 395

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, AA 392

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, AA 445-6

<sup>9</sup> The fine distinction here is between immoral and non-moral. For example, an immoral person **consciously** hinders another’s happiness, while a non-moral person fails to **will** that another’s happiness is to be promoted (by ignoring others).

<sup>10</sup> Assuming that donation to charity was not an “afterthought” -- this idea is discussed below with respect to beneficence.

<sup>11</sup> *Metaphysical Elements of Virtue*, AA 452, my italics

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, AA 453

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, AA 458

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, AA 454

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, AA 455

<sup>16</sup> “On the Common Saying: ‘This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice’,” page 79, Kant’s italics

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, page 86, Kant’s Italics

<sup>18</sup> “On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives,” page 362, Kant’s italics

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* [both questions are apparently considered together in this context]

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<sup>20</sup> “Perpetual Peace,” in *On History*, AA 366

<sup>21</sup> Let us imagine, for the sake of this discussion, that the individual is a known murderer.

<sup>22</sup> “On a Supposed Right...”, page 363

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, page 362

<sup>24</sup> Namely, that the intended victim is in your house

<sup>25</sup> This point will be discussed in more detail below (following page)

<sup>26</sup> *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, AA 429

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, AA 430

<sup>28</sup> Although this is not precisely the way in which it was understood by Kant

<sup>29</sup> *Ethics*, IV p18 sch. page 165

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