

## Kantian Trust

By Alison Hills

Mistrust and suspicion are on the increase in our society; and confidence in our institutions is in decline. To understand why a “crisis of trust” is so serious, we must take account of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who placed honesty and trustworthiness at the heart of his theory of how we should live.

Kant (1724-1804) spent his whole life in Königsberg, in Prussia, and taught at the local university. He produced some of the most profound works of philosophy ever written, in metaphysics and aesthetics as well as in ethics, and is generally regarded as the most important philosopher since Aristotle. He wrote several works of moral philosophy, but the best-known is the short but enormously influential *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785), which has inspired many contemporary philosophers, including Onora O’Neill. His influence can also be seen in the wider world, in the everyday recognition of the moral importance of informed consent and of human dignity.

The most important features of Kant’s ethical theory are his conceptions of human worth, and of the ideal moral community. Kant believes that all people have absolute value, or dignity, because they can be autonomous and rational, and that they should be treated in ways that recognize these capacities. Kant gives two accounts of how to treat other people. First, he thinks that when you decide what to do, you should act on a principle that others could adopt and act on; you should not treat yourself as an exception to the rule. This is Kant’s version of the Golden Rule, “do as you would be done by” that is found in many different religious and ethical systems.

Secondly, Kant thinks that you must not use other people in ways to which they could not consent. You ought to respect others; you should not use or manipulate them simply as a means to benefit yourself. People should be treated as having dignity, as “ends”, not merely as means. Kant develops a picture of the ideal moral community using this conception of how people should be treated. The ideal community is a “kingdom of ends” in which people are never merely used by others, and no one acts on principles to which others could not consent.

According to Kant’s system, there are certain ways of acting that are always wrong, categorically wrong for any person, at any time, in any society. For example, it is always wrong to make a false promise, a promise which you do not intend to keep. When you make a false promise, you are acting on a principle that could not be adopted by everyone. It is absolutely impossible for everyone to adopt and act on a principle of making false promises; if everyone did, no one would trust anyone else, or believe that they would honour their promises. False promising would be impossible, because no one would accept your promise. When you make a false promise, you are relying on other people honestly keeping their promises; you are treating yourself as an exception.

If you lie to someone, or make a promise that you do not intend to keep, you treat others as means, not as ends. You may be lying to that person to benefit yourself, in which case you are certainly using him as a means. But for Kant, lying is wrong whatever reason you have for the lie. Kant is deeply opposed to utilitarian theories, according to which lying to someone to make him happier is entirely justified. Even if you are trying to benefit the person to whom you are lying by shielding him from the harsh truth, you are treating that person in a way to which he could not give consent. Lying to someone is trying to deceive them, trying to give them false beliefs about what you are really doing. On Kant's view, that cannot be right.

Trusting relationships are important to Kant's theory in several ways. Trust between people is indispensable as a means of acquiring other things of value. If we never trusted anyone, we could never learn anything useful from anyone else; after all, they might not be telling us the truth. Nor could we cooperate with other people in joint ventures; after all, they might fail to honour their side of the deal. But in Kant's theory, trust has a crucial role, too, in expressing our respect for ourselves and others. We treat people with respect when we refuse to lie to them, and when we refuse to make promises that we do not intend to keep. We treat them with respect when we place our trust in them, and expect them to deal honestly with us. Trust is fundamental to the relationships of respect between the members of the kingdom of ends, the ideal moral community.

Kant's theory tells us to act on principles that could be adopted in the kingdom of ends, an ideal community, in which no one lies or breaks their promises, and everyone trusts everyone else. But in our society, which is so far from this ideal, isn't Kant's theory hopelessly impractical? At times, Kant is indeed too idealistic: he says that we should not lie even to a murderer who is looking for our friend, his intended victim. In the real world, we have to appreciate that not everyone is trustworthy, and that some people will take advantage of our honesty. We have to learn to recognize those people with whom we will never be able to achieve relationships of respect and of trust. But when such relationships are possible, we must do our best to create and sustain them. We simply cannot afford not to. As Kant shows us, when trust breaks down, not only do we miss out on the benefits of cooperation, but we also lose something less tangible, but no less important: respect for one another.