

could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.

This is the famous Categorical Imperative, or more accurately, the Categorical Imperative in its first form, the so-called Formula of Universal Law. Later on Kant glosses it in other ways. One is 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a *universal law of nature* (the Formula of the Law of Nature). Another, possibly the most influential, is 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (the Formula of Humanity). It is not at all clear that these different versions can be derived one from the other, but Kant regarded them as somehow equivalent.

#### Ethics

The promise is that we have here both quite substantial moral principles, or versions of the one principle, and principles that have been proved by reason alone. This last claim is hard to make good, but perhaps the idea goes like this.

As Hume illustrates, we might suppose that there are no Reasons in the area of ethics - just the desires or wills of particular persons, not necessarily shared or respected by anyone else. But Kant replies that the very formal nature of the Categorical Imperative gives it a universal authority. You cannot flout it and defend your principle in doing so. If you do flout it, you declare yourself to be un-Reasonable. If this is right, we have the required foundation: ethics comes from Reasons alone.

Unfortunately, when it comes to applications of the principle, things become a little stickier. The most persuasive examples of the Categorical Imperative doing some real work are cases where there is an institution whose existence depends on sufficient performance

by a sufficient number of people. Suppose, as is plausible, that our ability to give and receive promises depends upon general compliance with the principle of keeping promises. Were we to break them sufficiently often, or were promise-breaking to become a 'law of nature', then there would be no such thing as promise-giving or promise-breaking, because no words could any longer have the required force. So, Kant considers somebody whose principle of action is, 'Let me, when hard pressed, make a promise with the intention not to keep it.' Then, says Kant, I could will the lie, but I could *not* will the universal law to lie, for in accordance with such a law there would be no promises at all. It would be willing a kind of contradiction. So we have a Reason against the lying promise.

That's all very well, but consider a person who is against the whole business of giving and receiving promises. Why shouldn't he try to undermine the institution from within: by giving false promises, with one of his aims being the breakdown of trust and cooperation? Of course, a nice or benevolent or even a prudent person wouldn't have that goal, but if Kant appeals to these virtues, the purely formal appearance of his theory begins to vanish. We only have a reason against giving the lying promise, not a Reason.

#### Foundations

An example I like here is the institution of credit cards. These depend on enough people not paying them off each month in order to keep profits coming in to the issuing banks. So there is a kind of contradiction in imagining a world with credit cards, but where everybody pays them off each month. Suppose my principle is, 'Pay off your card whenever you feel like it.' Can I 'universalize' this, willing it to govern people in general? Surprisingly, perhaps, yes. Even in a world where people can always afford to pay off their cards, we might have it that everyone pays off their card when they feel like it. This could be true provided they don't often feel like it, for instance because for most people most of the time the urge to consume is greater than the urge to save. So on the rare occasions when someone feels like paying the card off in full, she can go ahead