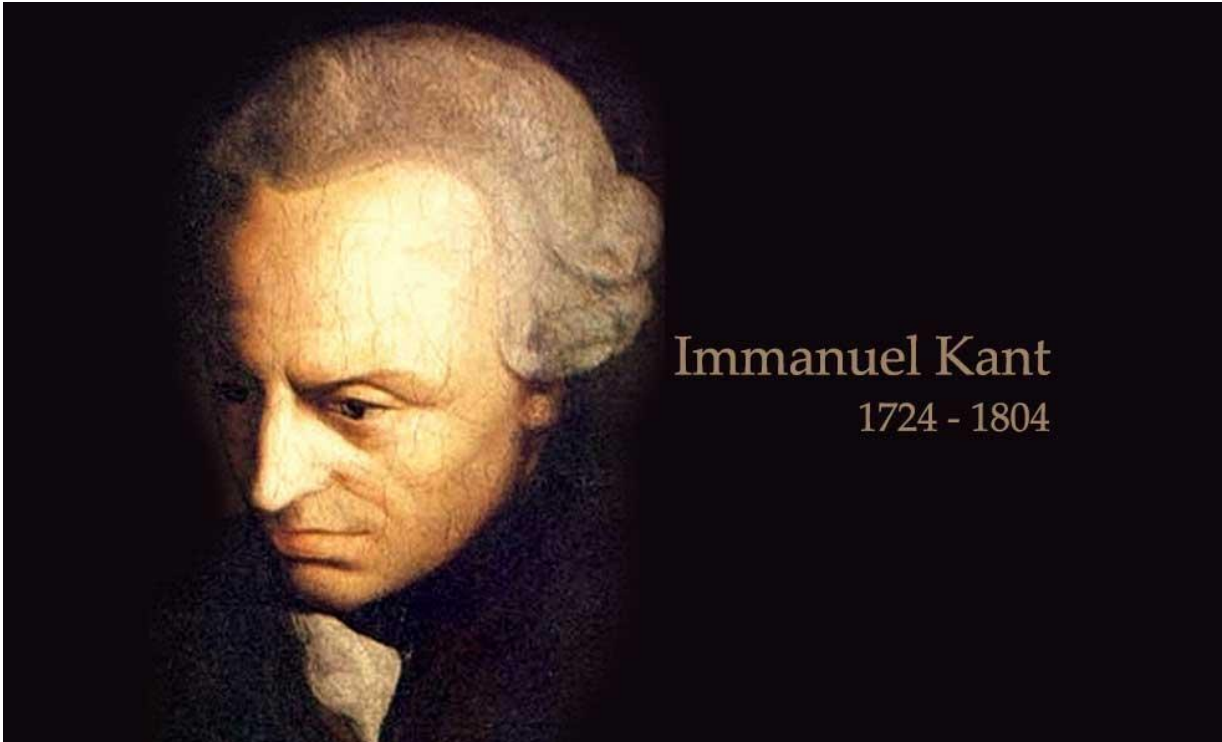


Self-Possession

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Immanuel Kant
1724 - 1804

In September, we published “On Honor, Courage, and Commitment.” The piece was written in two parts: the first describes the natures of honor, courage, and commitment, identifying them as virtues, and the second discusses the nature of virtue in general, how virtues may be acquired, and how they guide conduct. This is a first step in pursuit of a central goal of the Marine Leadership Forum at Carolina Museum of the Marine, which is to assist individual American men and women in developing their abilities to take full possession of their lives, living them with direction and purpose, and thus acquiring also the ability to contribute to the well-being and growth of their families, friends, and co-workers. Certainly, we will concern ourselves with leadership more popularly understood, that is, guiding others in a military unit or other kind of organization to the successful completion of a mission, but good leaders must also be well-developed human beings, and so we will pay significant attention to this important concern.

What we are calling self-possession is the quality of governing oneself out of the inner resources one has developed over time. It has long been observed that the basic elements of human nature are intellect and will. Some people familiar with the writings of Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.) will say that he often described human beings as rational animals, but in fact his position was that we are beings *capable* of rational thought, but that skill has to be developed. So, our nature is intellectual because we have minds, and moral because we have wills, and thus the virtues, as we will discuss later, are moral and intellectual. But for this writing, we want to focus on a most important element of self-possession: a commitment to speak truthfully at all times. If a people are to enjoy a healthy society having a cultural tradition in which individual human beings, with sufficient effort, can flourish as human beings, people must be able to trust one another. In the absence of trust, the behavior of people becomes distorted because they feel unsafe, and thus the first motive in acting with others is self-protection rather than healthy cooperation. Where, however, there is an expectation that in conversation people are to tell the truth, the atmosphere of social trust that emerges makes for a well-working society in all its aspects.

Some people have objected to this contention that we should each be committed to speaking the truth at all times arguing that this is not desirable because it can lead to bruised feelings and tension, even conflict, in one's relations with others. If, for example, a beloved aunt seeks praise for a hat that elicits laughter, even derision, one should give her the praise she seeks and not the laughter for this will hurt the aunt's feelings. Yet, praising the aunt's hat, which one thinks does not deserve it, would not be to speak truthfully. Is bluffing in poker culpably dishonest? Is it morally blameworthy to open a running play in football by faking a pass (which may not involve speaking, but it is deceptive)? More seriously, is deception in warfare morally permissible? The examples of poker, football, and even warfare, are not difficult to explain. In any activity in which people engage where there are rules involved, the rules may permit behavior that under normal circumstances would not be permissible. When someone agrees to a boxing match, he agrees to allow the other guy to punch him in the face in exchange for counter-punches, but this is no way to greet someone on the street. In poker, the rules allow bluffing. In football, one expects attempted trickery. But these behaviors would be out of place in our daily interactions with neighbors and others in society. In the case of warfare, the importance of deception is self-evident.

Regarding the beloved aunt, we may recognize that it is possible for two apparent obligations to conflict. This is the definition of a moral dilemma, that is, a situation in which it appears that no matter what one does, an obligation will be violated.[i] We accept the duty to speak honestly, but we accept also the duty to be gentle and protective of those we love. In a situation like this, one is called upon to exercise practical judgment to determine which obligation is the stronger. We can gain greater clarity about this question of truth-telling by considering the core concepts of the moral philosophy of the 18th century German thinker Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant was born on April 22, 1724 in the Prussian city of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia) and died there on February 12, 1804. He lived in the 18th century which was a century that witnessed such important thinkers as Adam Smith, David Hume, Edmund Burke, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and important historical events including the American War for Independence, the French Revolution, and the invention of the steam engine. Kant is best known today for his analysis of reason and its operations in *Critique of Pure Reason*, and his moral

philosophy, most easily examined in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Put briefly, Kant agreed with medieval Scholastic thinkers that there is a moral law, but sought to place that law on a foundation of reason, rather than divine revelation.[ii] Kant's theory is complex, but for our purpose here (establishing the importance of truth-telling to self-possession) we need look only at his famous Categorical Imperative.

The Categorical Imperative is Kant's test for identifying rules of the moral law. It is categorical because it applies to the entire category of rational beings. It is imperative because it commands by identifying the rules of the moral law to which we are obliged. It may be found perhaps most easily in the first section of the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*: "Transition from the common rational knowledge of morals to the philosophical." The title of this first section suggests that the terrain will be difficult, however, once one completes the task of drawing from the text the argument Kant lays out, it can be explained in a way that is much easier to understand. To start, we will set aside the discussion of the will and of reason's function in perfecting the will, and consider only the Categorical Imperative, for this is the part of Kant's ethics that can illuminate for us the importance of truth-telling to self-possession.

The idea of the innate moral dignity of each human being enters western thought through Christian theology, and this idea is central to Kantian ethics, captured in the Categorical Imperative. Kant's language may be put this way: always treat humanity, whether in yourself or another, as an end in itself and never as a mere means. Each person is an end in him- or herself, which means that no one comes into the world for the service of another without consent, for then that person's life is expropriated by others. This idea was captured beautifully by Englishman Richard Rumbold in the 17th century at the occasion of his execution in Scotland for unsettling the established order in pursuit of the rights of individual liberty. In his final statement before death, Rumbold said in part: "No one comes into the world with a saddle on his back; nor any booted and spurred to ride him." There are many ways in which one person can use another without consent, and important among them is lying. One way to express this is that when someone lies to another, he causes the other to believe to be true what the liar knows is not true so that the other's actions will be beneficial to the one telling the lie. In Kantian language we may say that the liar treats the humanity in the one lied to as a mere means, and not as an end in itself.

However bracing this element of Kant's Imperative might be, it doesn't tell us enough to be of use in the great variety of circumstances in which people must act. Does this mean, for example, that any use of others is morally unjustified? When friends gather for drinks and conversation, does the pleasure of discussion amount to using one another as means? Yes, clearly, but the enjoyment which may be called "use" arises from that particular kind of love that is friendship, and within which friends naturally wish what is best for one another. In other words, the pleasure taken from the conversations of friends is not exploitative. Avoiding exploitation of some by others is the purpose of Kant's second element of the Categorical Imperative: follow that maxim (rule) which you can, without contradiction, will to become universal law. Here is where many people encountering Kant's ethics for the first time may become confused, but the problem is not the idea but the language in which it is expressed. The language is a bit clumsy, but if we think about it from the end of the sentence toward the beginning, we can become clear on what is being said. The moral law, according to Kant, arises from reason and is therefore binding on all creatures having a rational nature.

Therefore, when one chooses to follow what he thinks to be a moral rule, that rule must be one that if all people followed it, the result would be that no human beings would be used as instruments to the ends of others, for this would be the contradiction Kant rejects. Thus, any rule that may be followed by everyone with the result that the moral dignity of each person is treated with respect is, for Kant, a rule of the moral law. Each person who follows the moral law thus understood is for Kant an autonomous person, that is, he is his own moral legislator, and so truly is free.

We have acknowledged the moral permissibility of deception in games and other activities in which the people involved understand that deception is part of the activity. We have acknowledged also the need at times to balance goods when it appears that not all can be accommodated equally. An important part of what is at work here is the role of motive in human action. Kant's ethics holds that the motive to follow the moral law because it is the law and for no other reason alone is morally pure. Critics have argued with some reason that this motive is too austere for most people to hold steadily in view. The argument here, however, is not that Kant has it right at all points, but that his insistence that there is a moral law according to which human beings are to be treated one by another with respect for the moral dignity of each is perfectly defensible. Central to this practice is the determination to be truthful with others and to hold to this whether or not it serves one's interests in the moment. Someone who does this has the necessary moral discipline of a leader; someone like this is self-possessed.

[i] Much has been written on the question whether genuine moral obligations actually can come into conflict. Edmund Pincoffs has argued that moral dilemmas are apparent rather than real since they arise as a result of having insufficient information to form an unambiguous decision. However comforting this suggestion may be, it happens that sometimes decisions must be taken in the discomfort of apparently conflicting obligations. See Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1986.

[ii] Scholasticism is the form of study, writing, and debate that was dominant in western Europe in the Middle Ages. Focus was on the writings of the Latin Church fathers and to a lesser extent the Greeks, Aristotle and his commentators, and certain Arab philosophers. St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) is arguably the greatest of the scholastic thinkers who taught that the natural moral law is established by God but, because He placed that law within us, it can be known by reason, even by those who do not know the God who gave it to us.