

Title: “Duty and Desolation”

Author: Rae Langton

Readability: Easy-Moderate (very readable, but some of the Kantian stuff might be a bit dense)

Thesis: Langton uses the correspondence between Kant and Maria von Herbert to discuss the value of friendship, the moral significance of deception, along with the different standpoints we may occupy.

Best line that also summarizes the whole article: “Kant is unaware that he has received a letter from a Kantian saint” (p. 499)

Key Definitions:

Price: The worth of objects can be captured in their price, i.e., how objects compare to other objects. “Some rocks are better than others at serving human ends, and their price is higher” (486). Things with a price we may use as mere means to our own ends.

Dignity: “Human beings are ends in themselves, who have a dignity, and not a price” (487). Things with dignity—i.e., persons—we ought not to use as mere means, but must also at the same time treat as an end.

Involved/Interactive Standpoint: How we relate to other persons when we treat them as responsible.

Objective/Strategic Standpoint: How we relate to other objects and persons when we do not consider their ends to matter to our own ends.

Summary:

I. Friendship and Strategy

Tells the story of a young woman—22-year-old Maria von Herbert—who sent Kant a letter asking for some moral advice. She had revealed a secret to a close friend (and likely lover) and this then ruined their relationship. Distraught, she thought about killing herself, but having studied Kant knew that this was morally unacceptable. She implores Kant to give her some counsel.

In Kant’s reply he tells her that the deception was indeed immoral, and perhaps losing her friend is a cost she must pay for such a vice. However, he notes that coming clean was the right thing to do, and so she mustn’t feel (morally) bad about that—though perhaps prudently. He also notes a distinction between telling a lie and failing to tell the entire truth that he takes to be morally important.

Langton uses this as a springboard to discuss Kant’s views on the immorality of lying/deception, along with the value of friendship. Specifically, Langton uses to examine the difference between two standpoints—the strategic, and the human—and how lying is wrong because of its strategic use of other beings with dignity. For Langton, this means, in part, that the difference between lying and reticence is of no moral significance, despite what Kant says in his letter. She also does an excellent job of explaining the main ideas of Kant’s categorical imperative, along with Kant/Strawson’s ideas of involvement.

Langton ends the section by briefly discussing Kant’s take on the value of friendship. In brief, friendship is “involvements at its best” (p. 493). That is, it is where the involved standpoint can be most encompassing, and two (or more) persons can share with another their (usually) private selves.

II. Duty and Desolation

Langton continues the story of Maria von Herbert, who replied to Kant and expresses her feelings of depression and her desire for her life to end. Here, her letter—and her life—captures some deep problems for Kantian philosophy, according to Langton.

That is, Herbert says that morality is bound up with sensuality, in that something is only morally praiseworthy if it is done in opposition to some (immoral) passion. Since she no longer has any passions, duty comes easy, but that makes it no longer morally praiseworthy. Langton uses this to discuss Kant's complicated relationship with inclinations (e.g., desires, passions). For Kant, right action cannot merely conform to duty, but must be done for the sake of duty. In this way, Herbert appears to be living her life as a Kantian saint, acting only for the sake of duty, unencumbered by distracting inclinations.

Langton then discusses Kant's ideas of respect, and his lesser-known *duty of apathy*. The way Kant describes these aspects of the moral life—as completely free from all inclinations—suggests a rather one-sided approach to moral life: it is purely a matter of reason, and sentiments have no place. Yet this is out of step with some of his other writings—notable *The Doctrine of Virtue*—where the cultivation of moral sentiments/virtues has a central role. Also, this rigid conception of respect and moral apathy seems, as demonstrated in the life of Herbert, to constitute an “intolerable emptiness.” Langton suggests a better relation between reason and emotion in morality includes both.

III. Shipwreck

Kant learns, from a third party, what the supposed cause of Herbert's affliction is. According to this mutual friend, Herbert “has capsized on the reef of romantic love.” In other words, she suffers from hysteria, and is at the whim of irrational passions. Kant, having ‘learnt’ this, doesn't respond to Herbert, but to another party, and in Langton's words, shifts from the interactive stance to the objective. To Kant, Herbert is no longer a person to converse and philosophize with; rather, she is a thing, to be pitied and managed. He shifts from viewing Herbert as a friend and person, to an object whose ends are irrelevant.

IV. Strategy for the Kingdom of Ends

Langton here returns to the topics of friendship and deception. She returns to the murderer-at-the-door example, as well as Kant's notion of the Kingdom of Ends. Langton uses this to discuss the difference between ideal and non-ideal theory. On a non-ideal reconstruction of Kant—which owes much to Korsgaard—it may be permissible, even a duty, to lie to the murderer. Similarly, in friendships where honesty might threaten the friendship—such as in Herbert's case—it may be permissible to lie; there may sometimes be a duty to lie, once we think about what other duties may be present.

Langton closes by bringing out the sexist context of Herbert's situation, against which all her actions would have been interpreted. In particular, in the sexual marketplace of the 18th century, women are taken to have a price—not a dignity—and a price that depends in part on whether one is a virgin. This context, Langton suggests, are “evil circumstances, evil by Kantian lights (though Kant himself never saw it)” (504). Given these circumstances as well as Herbert's other duties, Langton says she likely has a duty to lie.

V. Coda

Sorry. No spoilers.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Possible Prerequisites:

- 1) Knowledge of Kantian Normative Theory
- 2) Knowledge of Kantian Moral Psychology

Possible Applications:

- 1) General Ethics
- 2) Ethics of Privacy,
- 3) Conversational Ethics (e.g., repeating a private conversation)
- 4) Kantian perspectives on prejudice.
- 5) Free Will.
- 6) Friendship.
- 7) Discursive Injustice.
- 8) Kantian analysis toolkit.
- 9) Suicide.
- 10) Limits of the Modern worldview.

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- 1) Kant
- 2) Korsgaard
- 3) Anita Allen: "Mental Disorders and the System of Judgmental Responsibility."
- 4) Aristotle on Friendship.
- 5) Robin Dillon on self-respect.

Possible Class Activities:

- Translate to Doctor-Patient Relationships.
- Compare to Advice Columns

What traditional texts might this text replace?

- 1) Strawson, P.F.: "Freedom and Resentment."
- 2) Benson, Paul: "Free Agency and Self-Worth."
- 3) Various Kant texts.