

Kant on Lying

Allen Wood

Kant's ethical theory has been commonly misunderstood in several ways, but perhaps the most spectacular and persistent of them has to do with his views on the right and the ethics of veracity. The focus has often been on a brief and very late essay in which Kant appears to be saying that if a would-be murderer asks us where our friend (his intended victim) is hiding, then we must tell him the truth, thereby making ourselves complicit in the murder. Kant's view, so understood, seems so shockingly wrong that it has often been thought to discredit his entire ethical theory. There are several different misunderstandings involved in this way of viewing Kant's position: About the structure of Kant's ethical theory, his conception of obligation, the distinction in Kant's moral theory between right and ethics, and the way judgments about the consequences of actions can figure in judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions. My talk today attempts to sort out and correct the common errors. Kant's position may not be entirely uncontroversial, and the issues themselves may be harder than is commonly appreciated. But I do not think Kant is guilty of the absurdities on the topic of lying and veracity with which he is commonly charged.