

# The Moral Law of Duty

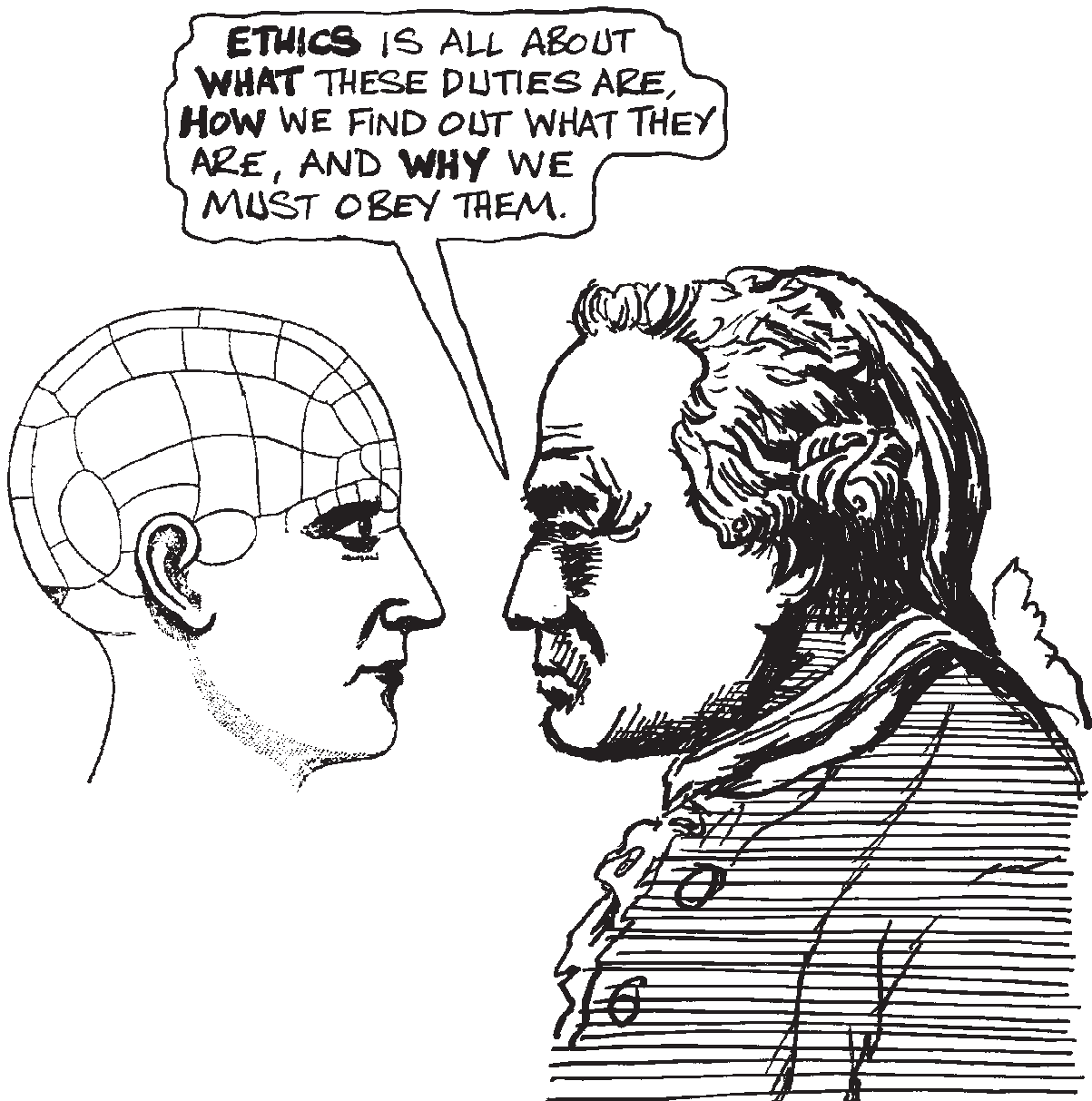
**Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) didn't agree with what he'd heard of Utilitarianism, and thought that morality rarely had anything to do with happiness. Kant was born, lived, worked and died in Königsberg, a professional academic paid to study and teach philosophy. He was so ridiculously regular in his habits that people would set their clocks by observing his daily walks through the town.



This he set out to do in **Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals**.

## Practical Reason

Kant started by asking what it is that distinguishes a moral action from a non-moral one. He concluded that a moral action is one which is done from a **sense of duty**, rather than following inclinations or doing what we want. This is why Kant is often known as a **Deontologist**, or believer in duties.



Kant begins with the assertion that humans are rational beings. People have "Theoretical Reason" to enable them to perform complex cerebral tasks like mathematics and logic. They also have "Practical Reason" to service their "good will". "Good will" is the motive that produces our determination to be good people, and our practical reason helps us get there.

## Duty versus Inclination

Doing our duty means always obeying certain compulsory moral laws or "imperatives", even if these laws may often seem tiresome or inconvenient to us personally. Being good is hard. It usually involves an internal mental struggle between what our duty is and what we would really like to do. This is where Kant radically differs from the Utilitarians. Deontologists like Kant often appear to be fairly miserable because they always deny themselves pleasures and grimly carry out their moral obligations.

IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO PERFORM ACTS THAT COMBINE INCLINATION AND DUTY... BY BEING A DUTIFUL AND LOVING PARENT, FOR EXAMPLE.



NEVERTHELESS, ACTS DONE FROM **DUTY** ARE ALWAYS SUPERIOR.

## The Parable of the Rich Young Man

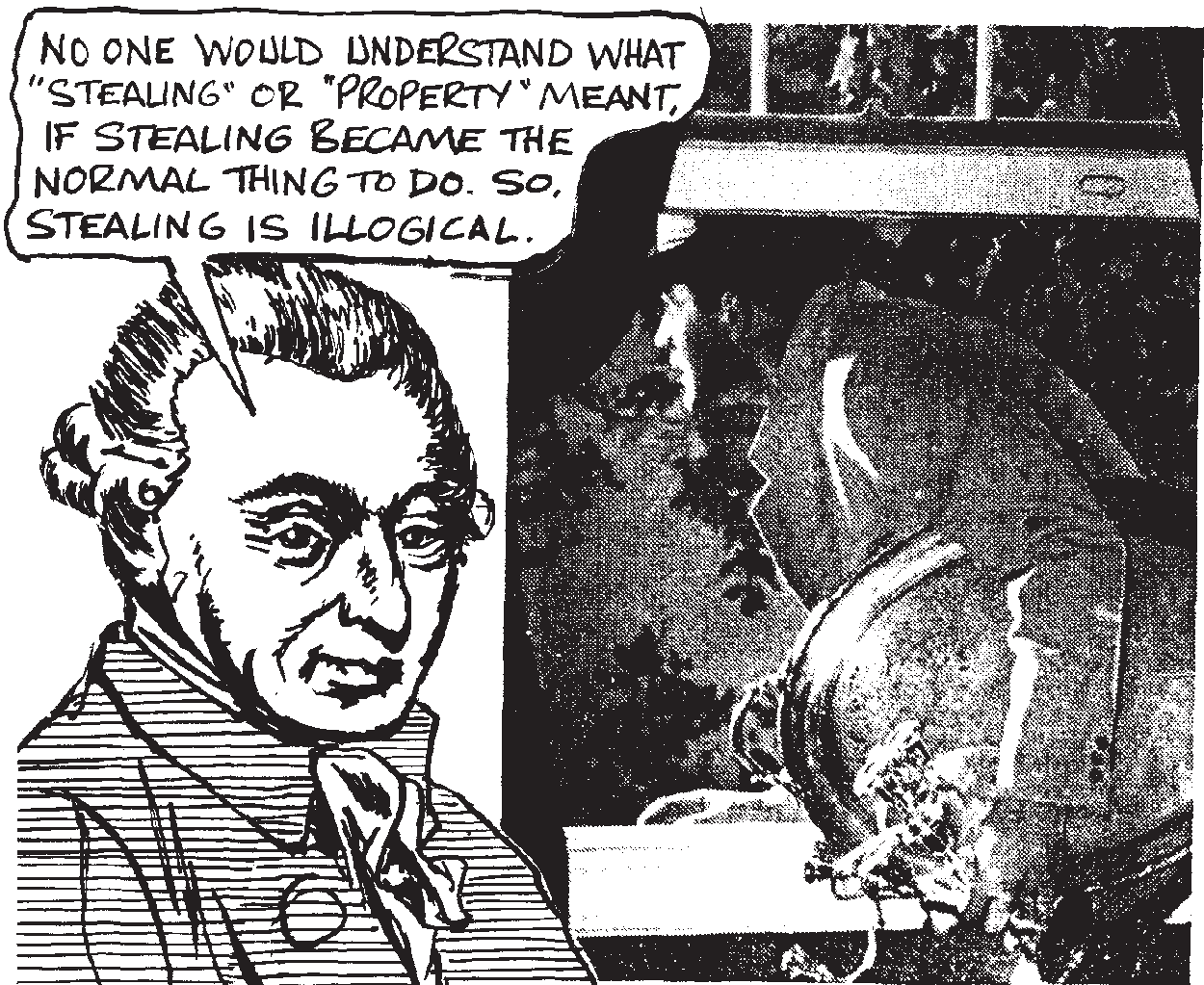
Kant implies that a naive, rich young man who spontaneously gives money to beggars isn't a moral person. Although the consequences of his instinctive generosity are obviously good for local beggars, he has no idea of what his moral duty is.



He is like a child who accidentally makes the right move in chess. He has no inner understanding of the game's rules or purpose. Morality for Kant is a serious business. It involves choosing **duties**, not wants; **motives** and not consequences are the central distinguishing feature of a moral action. Morality is not about **doing** what comes naturally, but **resisting** what comes naturally.

## The Universability Test

Kant explains how we can find out what the compulsory moral rules are. We work them out, not by asking ourselves what we would like to do, but by using our reason. He asks us to imagine what would happen if we "universalized" what we wanted to do, always making sure that we treated people as ends and never as means. Say we wanted to steal. If everyone stole from everybody else all the time then not only would society collapse rather rapidly but, more importantly for Kant, the concept of "stealing" would itself enter a kind of illogical "black hole".



By using our reason and the "Universability Test", we have indirectly discovered a compulsory rule or "**categorical imperative**": Don't steal! This test is like a "moral compass", always revealing the correct "moral north" to us. This test also works against lying. If everybody lied all the time, then truth and meaning would both disappear. So, lying is irrational and not allowed. This is how Kant tries to show us why moral rules are compulsory.

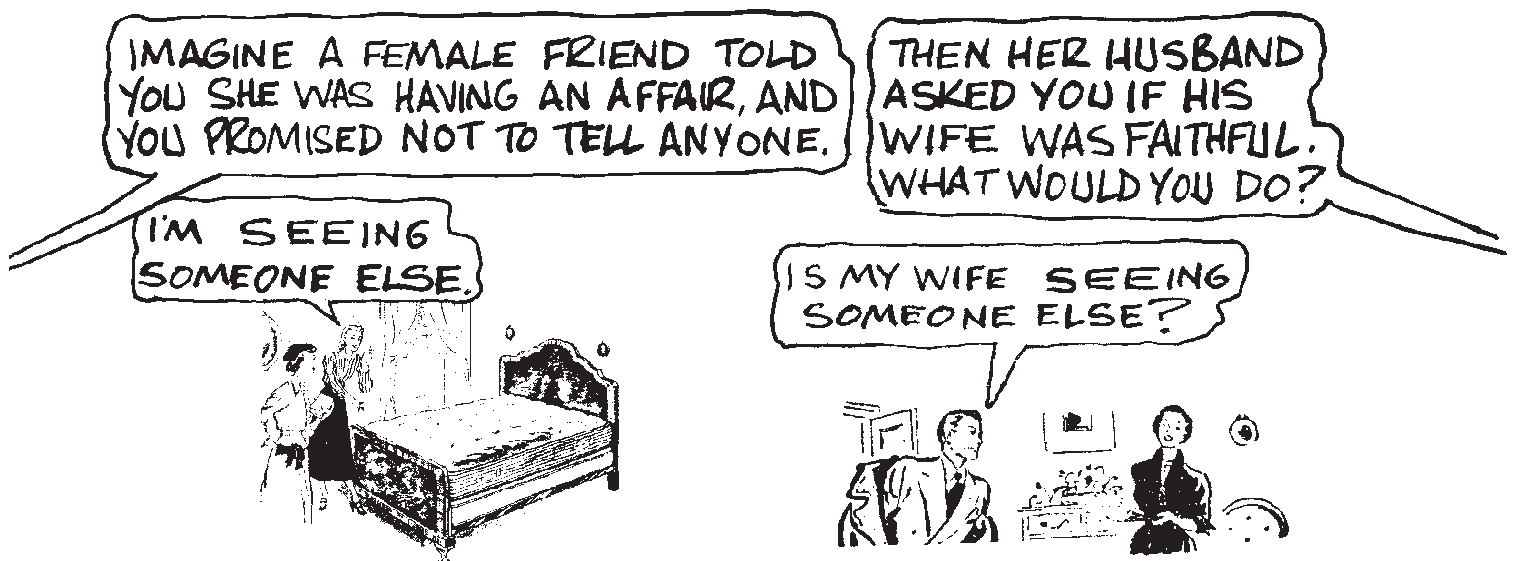
## Inflexible Rules

But can we really accept that it is never right to lie?

Kantian ethics sounds too perfect for most human beings. Moral rules are rather like useful generalizations: in general we think it is best not to lie, but there are occasionally circumstances where it is obviously morally correct to do so.



Kant's system of compulsory rules seems monolithic and incredible because it doesn't allow for exceptions. It also doesn't help us choose **between** moral rules. Sometimes it is just not possible to keep a promise and to tell the truth at the same time.



In this situation it's simply impossible to keep your promise and tell the truth, and Kant doesn't offer you a method for deciding which rule to obey.

## Moral Imagination

Kant seems to think that as rational beings we "must" be moral, just as we "must" recognize that  $2 + 2$  "must" be 4. The problem is that the logical necessity of maths is internal to maths itself, whereas ethical choices are not "necessary" like this. Lots of people can and do choose to be wicked and carry out their evil deeds in a rational manner. But Kant is probably right to stress the importance of motive in ethics, and to insist that universality is an essential part of it.



Kant also stresses the importance of **moral imagination**. To be moral, we have always to imagine ourselves as being on the receiving end of other people's decisions. People who are wicked, in other words, may just be unimaginative.