CHAPTER

14

KANT

KANT STANDS at one of the great dividing points in the history of ethics. For perhaps the majority of later philosophical writers, including many who are self-consciously anti-Kantian, ethics is defined as a subject in Kantian terms. For many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly what Kant said it was. Why this is so can only be suggested when what Kant said has been understood. But at the outset we have to note one very general point about Kant. He was in one sense both a typical and supreme representative of the Enlightenment; typical because of his belief in the power of courageous reasoning and in the effectiveness of the reform of institutions (when all states are republics there will be no more war); supreme because in what he thought he either solved the recurrent problems of the Enlightenment or reformulated them in a much more fruitful way. The greatest example of this is his synthesis of those two idols of the Enlightenment, Newton's physics and the empiricism of Helvétius and Hume, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The empiricists had argued that we have rational grounds for belief in nothing beyond what our senses have already encountered; Newton's physics offered us laws applicable to all events in space and time. How to reconcile them? We can, Kant argues, be assured a priori that all our experience will turn out to be law governed and to be law governed after the manner of Newtonian causality, not because of the character of the external world, but because of the character of the concepts through which we grasp that world. Experience is not a mere passive reception of impressions; it is the active grasping and comprehension of perceptions, and without the concepts and categories by means of which we

order and understand perceptions, it would be formless and meaningless. "Concepts without perceptions are empty; perceptions without concepts are blind."

Kant's theory of knowledge, even as so very briefly adumbrated, is important for his theory of morals in at least two ways. Because causal relations are discovered only when we apply the categories to experience, we have no way of inferring causal relationships beyond and outside experience; we cannot, therefore, validly infer from the causal order of nature to a God who is the author of nature. Nature is entirely impersonal and nonmoral; it may be viewed *as if* it were the product of a great and benevolent designer, but we cannot affirm that it *is* such. We have, therefore, to look for the realm of morals outside the realm of nature. Morals must be independent of how the world goes, for how the world goes is nonmoral. Moreover, Kant never proceeds, as Descartes and some of the empiricists did, by looking for a basis for knowledge, for some set of first principles or hard data, in order to vindicate our claims to knowledge against some hypothetical skeptic. Kant takes the existence of arithmetic and that of Newtonian mechanics for granted and inquires what must be the case with our concepts for these sciences to be possible. So also with morals. Kant takes the existence of an ordinary moral consciousness for granted; his own parents, whose sacrifices had made his education possible, and whose intellectual gifts were notably less than his own, seemed to him models of simple goodness. When Kant read Rousseau, Rousseau's remarks on the dignity of ordinary human nature struck home at once. It is the moral consciousness of this ordinary human nature which provides the philosopher with an object for analysis; as in the theory of knowledge, the philosopher's task is not to seek for a basis or a vindication, but to ask what character our moral concepts and precepts must have to make morality as it is possible.

Kant therefore is among those philosophers who see their task as one of *post eventum* analysis; science is what it is, morality is what it is, and there's an end on't. This essentially conservative view is all the more surprising when we recall that Kant's lifetime (1724–1804) was a period of rapid social change. Part of the explanation of Kant's attitudes is perhaps biographical; Königs-

berg, near Prussia's eastern limits, was no metropolis, and Kant led an isolated academic existence. But much more important is the fact that Kant conceived his task as the isolation of the a priori, and therefore unchanging, elements of morality. In different societies there might be different moral schemes; Kant insisted on his own students coming to terms with the empirical study of human nature. But what is it that makes these schemes *moral*? What form must a precept have if it is to be recognized as a *moral* precept?

Kant approaches this question from an initial assertion that nothing is unconditionally good—except a good will. Health, wealth, intellect, are good only insofar as they are used well. But the good will is good; it "shines forth like a precious jewel," even if "through the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature," the agent is insufficiently strong, rich, or clever to bring about desirable states of affairs. Attention is thus focused from the outset on the agent's will, on his motives and intentions, rather than upon what he actually does. What motives or intentions make the good will good?

The good will's only motive is to do its duty for the sake of doing its duty. Whatever it intends to do, it intends because it is its duty. A man may do what is, in fact, his duty from quite other motives. A shopkeeper giving the correct change may be honest not because it is his duty to be honest but because honesty pays off by bringing him custom and increasing his profits. But it is important to note here that a will can fail to be good not only because duty may be done from self-interested motives but also because duty may be done from altruistic motives which nonetheless spring from inclination. If I am a friendly, cheerful, kind person by nature, who enjoys helping others, my altruistic acts, which may be what duty in fact demands from me, may be done not because duty demands them but just because I have an inclination to behave in this way—I enjoy it. If so, my will fails to be decisively good, just as if I had acted from self-interest. Kant rarely mentions and never dwells upon the difference between inclinations to act in one way rather than another; the whole contrast is between duty upon the one hand and inclination of every kind upon the other. For inclination belongs to our deter-

mined physical and psychological nature; we cannot in Kant's view choose our inclinations. What we can do is to choose between our inclination and our duty. How, then, does duty present itself to me? It presents itself as obedience to a law that is universally binding on all rational beings. What is the content of this law? and how do I become aware of it?

I become aware of it as a set of precepts which in prescribing to myself I can consistently will should be obeyed by all rational beings. The test of a genuine moral imperative is that I can universalize it—that is, that I can will that it should be a universal law, or, as Kant puts it in another formulation, that I can will that it should be a law of nature. The point of this latter formulation is to stress that not only must I be able to will that the precept in question should be recognized as a law universally, but I must also be able to will that it should be acted on universally—in the appropriate circumstances. The sense of "be able to" and "can" in these formulations is equivalent to "can without inconsistency," the demand for consistency being part of the demand for rationality in a law that men prescribe to themselves as rational beings. Kant's most helpful example is that of promise keeping. Suppose that I am tempted to break a promise. The precept upon which I am considering acting may be formulated as: "I may always break a promise when it is in my interest to do so." Can I consistently will that this precept should be universally acknowledged and acted upon? If all men acted upon this precept, and broke their promises whenever it suited them, clearly the practices of making and of relying upon promises would break down, for nobody would be able to trust the promises of others, and consequently, utterances of the form "I promise to . . ." would cease to have point. Hence to will that this precept should be universalized is to will that promise keeping should no longer be possible. But to will that I should be able to act on this precept (which I must will as part of willing that the precept should be universalized) is to will that I should be able to make promises and break them, and this is to will that the practice of promise keeping should continue, so that I can take advantage of it. Hence to will that this precept should be universalized is to will both that promise keeping as a practice should continue

and also that it should not. So I cannot universalize this precept consistently, and thus it cannot be a true moral imperative, or as Kant calls it, a categorical imperative.

In calling moral imperatives categorical Kant contrasts them with hypothetical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative is of the form "You ought to do such and such if . . ." The *if* may introduce either of two types of condition. There are hypothetical imperatives of skill—"You ought to do such and such [or, Do such and such] if you wish to produce this sort of result" (*e.g.*, "Press the switch if you wish to ring the bell"); and hypothetical imperatives of prudence—"You ought to do such and such if you wish to be happy [or, for your advantage]." The categorical imperative is limited by no conditions. It is simply of the form "You ought to do such and such." A version of Kant's categorical imperative certainly appears in ordinary moral utterance in our society. "You ought to do it." "Why?" "There's no reason. You just ought." The force of "There's no reason" is to draw a contrast with the cases where you ought to do something because it will be to your pleasure or advantage or will bring about some result you want. Thus, the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives is at this level a familiar one. What is unfamiliar is the Kantian test of ability to universalize the precept consistently. For what is not present in our everyday moral discourse is the concept of a rational—and because rational, objective—criterion for deciding which are the authentic moral imperatives. The historical importance of Kant is partly that his criterion is designed to replace two alternative criteria.

According to Kant, the rational being utters the commands of morality to himself. He obeys no one but himself. Obedience is not automatic because we are not wholly rational beings but are compounded of reason and of what Kant calls sensibility, in which is included all our physiological and psychological make-up. Kant contrasts what he calls "pathological love," by which he means not morbid or unnatural love but natural affection, the love that springs up in us spontaneously, with "the love that can be commanded," which is obedience to the categorical imperative, and which he equates with the love for our neighbor that Jesus commanded. But Jesus cannot be for us a moral authority; or rather, he is only insofar as our rational nature recognizes him

as such and accords him authority; and if that is the authority which we accept, it is in fact our own reason, and not Jesus, which we are taking to be ultimately authoritative. We can put the same point in another way. Suppose that a divine being, real or alleged, commands me to do something. I only ought to do what he commands if what he commands is right. But if I am in a position to judge for myself whether what he commands is right or not, then I have no need of the divine being to instruct me in what I ought to do. Inescapably, each of us is his own moral authority. To recognize this, which Kant calls the autonomy of the moral agent, is to recognize also that external authority, even if divine, can provide no criterion for morality. To suppose that it could would be to be guilty of heteronomy, of the attempt to subject the agent to a law outside himself, alien to his nature as a rational being. But belief in a divine law as the source of morality is not the only kind of heteronomy. If we attempt to find a criterion for assessing moral precepts in the concept of happiness or of what would satisfy human wants and needs, we shall be equally wrongheaded. The realm of inclination is as alien to our rational natures as any divine commandments are. Hence Aristotle's εὐδαιμονία is as useless for morality as Christ's law.

It is useless, in any case, because it can provide no fixed guide. The notion of happiness is indefinitely variable, depending upon variations in psychological make-up. But the moral law must be entirely unvarying. When I have discerned a categorical imperative I have discerned a rule which has no exceptions. In a short essay called "On the Supposed Right of Telling a Lie from Benevolent Motives," Kant replied to Benjamin Constant, who had criticized him on this point. Suppose that a would-be murderer inquires from me the whereabouts of his intended victim. And suppose that I lie in order to save the victim. The murderer then proceeds to follow my directions, but, unknown to me, the victim has in fact removed himself to precisely the place to which I have directed the murderer. Consequently, the murder is effected as a consequence of my lie, and I am responsible precisely because I lied. But had I told the truth, I could not have been held responsible, no matter what happened. For it is my duty to obey the imperative and not to look to the consequences. The resemblance of Kant's view to that of Butler is striking; and it is no accident that

for Kant, as for Butler, the insistence upon the irrelevant consequences is balanced by an invocation of theology. Kant argues that my duty is my duty irrespective of the consequences, whether in this world or the next. He has none of the crudity and insensitivity of the theological utilitarians. But he still argues, or rather asserts, that it would be intolerable if in fact duty were not in the end crowned with happiness. The odd thing is that if happiness is as indeterminate a notion as he suggests elsewhere—and as he suggests rightly elsewhere, for the Kantian notion of happiness has been detached from any notion of socially established ends and the satisfaction to be gained from achieving them—he can scarcely be consistent here in introducing happiness as the reward of virtue which though unsought, being indeed the reward of virtue only if it is unsought, is that without which the whole enterprise of morality would scarcely make sense. What this amounts to is a tacit admission that without some such notion, not morality itself, but the Kantian interpretation of it scarcely makes sense.

Practical reason presupposes on Kant's view a belief in God, freedom, and immortality. God is required as a power capable of realizing the *summum bonum*, of crowning virtue with happiness; immortality is required because virtue and happiness manifestly do not coincide in this life; and freedom is the presupposition of the categorical imperative. For it is only in acts of obedience to the categorical imperative that we are delivered from the bondage of our own inclinations. The *ought* of the categorical imperative can only have application to an agent capable of obedience. In this sense *ought* implies *can*. And to be capable of obedience implies that one has evaded the determination of one's actions by one's inclinations, simply because the imperative which guides action determined by inclination is always a hypothetical one. This is the content of moral freedom.

The power of this Kantian picture is undeniable, and its power is increased rather than diminished when the doctrine of the categorical imperative is detached from the dubious support offered by the Kantian forms of belief in God and immortality. Whence does this power derive? In the course of the discussion of Hume I described the emergence of the moral *ought* in the modern sense. Although we can discuss the first signs of philosophical

recognition for this *ought* in a writer like Hume, his utilitarianism does not allow him to give it a central place. But with Kant this *ought* is not only central but all absorbing. The word *duty* is detached altogether from its root connection with the fulfillment of a particular role or the carrying out of the functions of a particular office. It becomes singular rather than plural, and it is defined in terms of obedience to categorical moral imperatives—that is, in terms of injunctions containing the new *ought*. The very detachment of the categorical imperative from contingent events and needs and from social circumstances makes it in at least two ways an acceptable form of moral precept for emerging liberal individualist society.

It makes the individual morally sovereign; it enables him to reject all external authorities. And it leaves the individual free to pursue whatever it is that he does, without suggesting that he ought to do something else. This latter point is perhaps less obvious than the first. The typical examples of alleged categorical imperatives given by Kant tell us what *not* to do; not to break promises, tell lies, commit suicide, and so on. But as to what activities we ought to engage in, what ends we should pursue, the categorical imperative seems to be silent. Morality sets limits to the ways in which and the means by which we conduct our lives; it does not give them direction. Thus morality apparently sanctions any way of life which is compatible with keeping our promises, telling the truth, and so on.

A closely related point moves nearer to matters of directly philosophical interest. The doctrine of the categorical imperative provides me with a test for rejecting proposed maxims; it does not tell me whence I am to derive the maxims which first provide the need for a test. Thus the Kantian doctrine is parasitic upon some already existing morality, within which it allows us to sift—or rather, within which it would allow us to sift if the test it provided were a reliable test. But in fact it is not, even on its own terms. For the Kantian test of a true moral precept is that it is one that I can consistently universalize. In fact, however, with sufficient ingenuity almost every precept can be consistently universalized. For all that I need to do is to characterize the proposed action in such a way that the maxim will permit me to do what I want while prohibiting others from doing what would nullify the

maxim if universalized. Kant asks if I can consistently universalize the maxim that I may break my promises whenever it suits me. Suppose, however, that he had inquired whether I can consistently universalize the maxim "I may break my promises only when. . . ." The gap is filled by a description devised so that it will apply to my present circumstances but to very few others, and to none such that if someone else obeyed the maxim, it would inconvenience me, let alone show the maxim incapable of consistent universality. It follows that in practice the test of the categorical imperative imposes restrictions only on those insufficiently equipped with ingenuity. And this surely is scarcely what Kant intended.

The logical emptiness of the test of the categorical imperative is itself of social importance. Because the Kantian notion of duty is so formal that it can be given almost any content, it becomes available to provide a sanction and a motive for the specific duties which any particular social and moral tradition may propose. Because it detaches the notion of duty from the notions of ends, purposes, wants, and needs it suggests that, given a proposed course of action, I may only ask whether, in doing it, I can consistently will that it shall be universally done, and not ask what ends or purposes it serves. Anyone educated into the Kantian notion of duty will, so far, have been educated into easy conformism with authority.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the intentions or from the spirit of Kant himself. His wish is to exhibit the moral individual as being a standpoint and a criterion superior to and outside any actual social order. He sympathizes with the French Revolution. He hated servility and valued independence of mind. Paternalism, so he held, was the grossest form of despotism.[52] But the consequences of his doctrines, in German history at least, suggest that the attempt to find a moral standpoint completely independent of the social order may be a quest for an illusion, a quest that renders one a mere conformist servant of the social order much more than does the morality of those who recognize the impossibility of a code which does not to some extent as least express the wants and needs of men in particular social circumstances.