CHAPTER 6

Kantian Ethics

Imagine a person who reasons as follows: I should keep my money rather than pay it out in taxes, because if I keep it, I'll be able to afford a wonderful vacation for myself and my family. And no one is actually going to suffer if I pocket the money, since it's only a few thousand dollars that we're talking about. There's no way that money could bring as much happiness in the government's hands as it could in mine.

Suppose he is right about that. He spends the money on his vacation. He and his family have a terrific time. He is never caught.

Still, he has done something wrong. So has the person who cheats on her exams and gets away with it. So has the person who gleefully speeds down the emergency lane and escapes the traffic jam that the rest of us are stuck in. So has the person whose campaign of dirty tricks has gotten him securely into office.

Despite any good results that may come from their actions, these people did wrong—or so we think. And the explanation of their immorality is simple. What they did was unfair. They took advantage of the system. They broke the rules that work to everyone's benefit. They violated the rights of others. No matter how much personal gain such actions bring, they are still wrong, because they are unfair and unjust.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) thought this way, and was very likely the most brilliant philosopher ever to have done so. He remains perhaps the most important voice of opposition to utilitarianism, and to its claim that the ultimate point of morality is to improve well-being rather than do justice.

A. CONSISTENCY AND FAIRNESS

There is a natural way to understand what is wrong with the actions in the examples just given. In each case, people are making exceptions of themselves. Their success depends on violating rules that most other people are following. This is a kind of inconsistency—of playing by one set of rules while insisting that others obey a different set.

People are inconsistent to the extent that they treat similar cases differently. Tax cheats or dirty politicians are in the same boat as the rest of us. There's nothing special about them, or their situation, that exempts them from the rules that everyone must follow. That you can get away with making an exception of yourself doesn't mean that it is right to do so.

Our deep opposition to unfairness, and the resulting importance we attach to consistency, are revealed in two very popular tests of morality. Each takes the form of a question:

1. What if everyone did that?
2. How would you like it if I did that to you?

When we ask such questions—in the face of a bully, a liar, or a double-crosser—we are trying to get the person to see that he is acting unfairly, making an exception of himself, living by a set of rules that work only because others are not doing what he is doing. These basic moral challenges are designed to point out the inconsistency, and so the immorality, of that person's behavior.

Consider the first question: what if everyone did that? This question is really shorthand for the following test: *if disastrous results would occur if everyone did X, then X is immoral.* If

everyone used the emergency lanes in traffic jams, then ambulances and fire trucks would often fail to provide needed help, leaving many to die. If everyone cheated on their taxes, society would crumble. If every candidate resorted to dirty tricks, then the entire political system would become corrupted. The test works easily and well for these cases.

But the test fails for other cases, and so it cannot serve as a reliable way to learn the morality of actions. Consider a common argument against homosexual sex: if everyone did that, disaster would soon follow, for the human race would quickly die out. Even if this were true, that wouldn't show that homosexual sex is immoral. Why not? Well, consider those who have decided to remain celibate—perhaps they are priests, or committed lifelong bachelors who believe that one shouldn't have sex without being married. What if everyone did *that*—in other words, refrained from having sex? The same results would follow. But that doesn't show that celibacy is immoral.

What about the other test, the one that asks: How would you like it if I did that to you? This is a direct application of the **Golden Rule**, which tells you to treat others as you would like to be treated. The Golden Rule is the classic test of morality. Clearly, it is meant to be a test of consistency. If you wouldn't want to be slandered or exploited, then don't do such things to others. If you do them anyway, you are acting inconsistently, hence unfairly, and therefore immorally.

The Golden Rule seems to work well for these cases and many others. Still, the Golden Rule cannot be correct. Kant himself identified the basic reason for this. The Golden Rule makes morality depend on a person's desires. Most of us don't like to be hit. And so the Golden Rule forbids us from hitting others. Good. But what about masochists who enjoy being hit? The Golden Rule allows them to go around hitting others. Bad. The morality of hitting people shouldn't depend on whether you like to take a beating every now and then.

Consider a related problem, that of the fanatic. Fanatics are principled people. It's just that their principles are ones that we find frightening and revolting. Some fanatics are so wedded to their cause, so strong-willed and self-disciplined, that they would accept the suffering that they want to impose on their victims, were the role of victim and persecutor reversed. True, few Nazis, for instance, would really accept a march to the gas chamber were they to discover their Jewish ancestry. Most Nazis, like most fanatics generally, are opportunists of bad faith, ones with very limited empathy and only a feeble ability to imagine themselves in someone else's place. If roles really were reversed, they'd much more likely beg for mercy and abandon their genocidal principles. But some would not. There are true believers out there who are willing to suffer any harm in the name of their chosen cause. The Golden Rule licenses their extremism because it makes the morality of an action depend entirely on what you want and what you are willing to put up with.

Because the Golden Rule sometimes gives the wrong answer to moral questions, it cannot be the ultimate test of morality. Something else must explain why it works, when it does. Kant thought he had the answer.

B. THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY

Kant, like most of us, felt the appeal of the two tests just discussed. He agreed that common sense is deeply committed to the importance of fairness and consistency, something that these two tests were trying, but not quite succeeding, in capturing. His aim was to identify the ultimate principle of morality, one that would explain the attraction of the two tests while correcting for their shortcomings.

He thought he had found it in the following standard, the **principle of universalizability**:

> An act is morally acceptable if, and only if, its maxim is universalizable.

To understand what this means, we need to understand two things: what a **maxim** is, and what it is for a maxim to be **universalizable**.

A maxim is simply the principle of action you give yourself when you are about to do something. For instance, if you send a regular check to Oxfam, your maxim might be: contribute $50 per month to Oxfam to help reduce hunger. A maxim has two parts. It states what you are about to do, and why you are about to do it. You dictate your own maxims. These are the rules you live by.

Kant thought that every action has a maxim. Of course we don't always formulate these maxims clearly to ourselves prior to acting, but at some level, whenever we act, we intend to do something, and we have a reason for doing it. A maxim is nothing but a record of that intention and its underlying reason. Maxims are what we cite when we try to explain to others why we act as we do.

If we lack a maxim, then we aren't really acting at all. We could be moving our bodies, as we do when we sneeze or roll across the bed in our sleep. But the absence of a maxim in these cases shows that these are mere bodily movements, rather than genuine actions.

Kant thought that an action's rightness depends on its maxim. And this leads directly to a very important point. For Kant, the morality of our actions has nothing to do with results. It has everything to do with our intentions and reasons for action, those that are contained in the principles we live by. This is a clear break with consequentialism.

Indeed, we can imagine two people doing the same thing, but for different reasons. That means that they will have different maxims. And even if their actions bring about identical results, one of the actions may be right and the other wrong, since only one of the maxims may be morally acceptable. This is something that act consequentialists cannot accept.

It might be, for instance, that I keep my promises to you because I think it's right to do so. But I might instead keep my promises because I want you to like me so much that you leave your fortune to me in your will. Assume that these different reasons don't change the results of keeping my promises. Then the utilitarian thinks that each case of promise keeping is equally good. But since my maxim is different in these cases, Kant thinks that the morality of these actions might be different. It all depends, as we'll shortly see, on whether their maxims are universalizable.

Many people agree with Kant's view that the morality of our actions depends not on their results, but on our maxims. This supports our thought that those who set out to do evil are acting immorally, even if, through sheer chance, they manage to do good. It also justifies the claim that people who live by noble principles are acting morally, even when some unforeseeable accident intervenes, and their action brings only bad results.

So the morality of actions depends on their maxims. But how, precisely? Not every maxim is going to be a good one. We need a way to sort out the good maxims from the bad. That's where universalizability comes in.

How can we tell whether a maxim is universalizable? Here is a three-part test:

1. Formulate your maxim clearly—state what you intend to do and why you intend to do it.
2. Imagine a world in which everyone supports and acts on your maxim.
3. Then ask: Can the goal of my action be achieved in such a world?

If the answer to this last question is *yes*, then the maxim is universalizable, and the action is morally acceptable. If the answer is *no*, then the maxim is not universalizable, and the action it calls for is immoral.

This should strike a familiar note. The test of a maxim's universalizability clearly echoes the rule consequentialist's test for optimific social rules (see Chapter 5.C) and the *what if everyone*

did that? test discussed earlier. Indeed, Kant has us ask a version of that question in the second step of this three-part test. But unlike these other tests, Kant doesn't ask about whether people would be much better off in the imagined world, or about whether disaster would strike there. Instead, he asks about whether we could achieve our goals in that world. But what is so important about that?

The importance, for Kant, is that this three-part test serves as the real way to determine whether we are being consistent and fair. If our maxim is universalizable, then we are pursuing actions for reasons that everyone could stand behind. We are not making exceptions of ourselves. Our goals are ones that everyone *could* support, even if, in the real world, some are dead set against them. We are asking whether our aims could be achieved if everyone shared them. If they can be, this shows that we are living by fair rules. Were we making an exception of ourselves, our maxims wouldn't be universalizable.

Consider the tax cheat again. The only reason he can get what he is aiming for (a lovely vacation) is because enough others are not adopting his maxim. The same goes for the careless driver who speeds down the emergency lane. The morality of these actions doesn't depend on their results, but on their maxims. And those maxims are not universalizable. So those actions are immoral, as Kant says, and as we believe.

C. HYPOTHETICAL AND CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

Kant claimed that when we act on a maxim that can't be universalized, we are contradicting ourselves. We are being inconsistent. We are assuming that it is acceptable to act in a certain way, even though our purposes could not be achieved if others acted in that very same way. When we make an exception of ourselves, we are acting as if we were more important than anyone else, and going on as if we were exempt from rules that others must obey. But we are not more important than others, and we are not exempt from these requirements.

It follows that when we behave immorally, we are reasoning badly. We are making mistaken assumptions—that we are more important than other people, that the rules applying to them do not apply to us. Those mistakes, and the inconsistent, contradictory reasoning behind them, show that *immoral conduct is irrational*.

To act irrationally is to act and to reason very badly. If Kant is right, then when we act immorally, we are reasoning poorly. But can this be right? Haven't we heard of lots of folks who act immorally while also being sharp, cunning, and strategic—in short, while being rational?

Well, in one sense, Kant allows that these wrongdoers are rational, because they are following what he called **hypothetical imperatives**. Specifically, these are imperatives—commands—of reason. They command us to do whatever is needed in order to get what we care about. Hypothetical imperatives tell us how to achieve our goals. They require us, on pain of irrationality, to do certain things, but only because such actions will get us what we want.

For instance, if my goal is to lose twenty pounds (as it often is), then reason requires me to forgo that pint of luscious coffee ice cream. If I want to get that Wall Street job, then reason requires that I line up a good summer internship. Reason demands that I look both ways at a busy intersection if I want to remain alive. These rational commands apply to me because of what I care about. I am irrational if I disregard them or act in a way that violates them.

But what if I don't care about acting morally? Then it seems that I can rationally ignore its requirements. But Kant would have none of that. He wanted to show that some rational requirements are, in his jargon, **categorical imperatives**. Like hypothetical imperatives, categorical imperatives are commands of reason. But unlike hypothetical imperatives, categorical imperatives are rational requirements that apply to a person regardless of what

he or she cares about. They are requirements of reason that apply to everyone who possesses reason—in other words, everyone able to reflect on the wisdom of her actions, and able to use such reflections to guide her actions. Categorical imperatives command us to do things whether we want to or not, with the result that if we ignore or disobey them, we are acting contrary to reason (i.e., irrationally).

Kant thought that *all moral duties are categorical imperatives*. They apply to us just because we are rational beings. We must obey them even if we don't want to, and even if moral obedience gets us nothing that we care about.

One lesson Kant took from his thoughts about the Golden Rule is that the basic rules of morality do not depend on our desires. If they did, then moral rules would fail to apply to everyone, since our desires can differ from person to person. This would make morality too variable, and make it possible for people to escape from their moral duty just by changing what they want. Kant thought that he was defending common sense when he claimed that morality is, in this sense, universal—that everyone who can reason must obey its commands.

If moral duties really are categorical imperatives, then we act rationally when we act morally, and we act irrationally when we act immorally. Is that sort of view defensible? Can we really justify the claim that it is rational for everyone to act morally—even if we know that, for some people, moral conduct will only undermine their goals?

Kant thought he could do this. This is his line of reasoning:

The Argument for the Irrationality of Immorality

1. If you are rational, then you are consistent.
2. If you are consistent, then you obey the principle of universalizability.
3. If you obey the principle of universalizability, then you act morally.
4. Therefore, if you are rational, then you act morally.
5. Therefore, if you act immorally, then you are irrational.

It does seem that rationality requires consistency, as the first premise asserts. And, as we have discussed, the principle of universalizability is a demand of consistency. So, while more could certainly be said about these first two premises, let us take them for granted here and focus on the third. This is the claim that obedience to the principle of universalizability guarantees that our conduct is moral. Is this Kantian claim correct?

D. ASSESSING THE PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY

Unfortunately, the principle of universalizability fails as a general test for the morality of our actions. Look at premise 3 of Kant's Argument for the Irrationality of Immorality. It says that a maxim's universalizability is a guarantee of an action's rightness. That is false. We can act on universalizable maxims and still do wrong.

The principle of universalizability seems to be a very attractive way of pointing out how unfairness and inconsistency lead to immorality. So, for instance, when a thief robs a bank in order to gain riches, Kant can show why the robbery is immoral. If everyone acted on the thief's maxim, there would be no money in the bank to steal, and the thief's goal could not be achieved. But what if the criminal had robbed the bank in order to damage it and put it out of business? If everyone acted that way, then the thief's goal *could* be achieved. So the principle of universalizability fails to condemn the robbery. And yet such an act is surely wrong.

Recall the case of the fanatic that came up when we were discussing the *what if everyone did that?* test. The goals of fanatics are ones that can often be met in a world in which everyone shares their aims. Fanatics need not make exceptions of themselves. The murderous aims of

any number of groups could easily be achieved in a world in which everyone supported them. Thus fanatics can be consistent in the relevant sense: their guiding principles could be fulfilled if everyone else were to adopt them.

I think this shows that the principle of universalizability fails to give us an adequate test of fairness, for we can follow its advice while still singling out individuals or groups for discriminatory treatment. There can be consistent Nazis, after all. It doesn't follow that their policies are fair or morally acceptable.

E. KANT ON ABSOLUTE MORAL DUTIES

Kant thought that certain sorts of actions are never permitted. Lying is one of them. In a much-discussed case, that of the inquiring murderer, Kant has us imagine a man bent on killing. This man knocks at your door and asks if you know the location of his intended victim. You do. Should you reveal it? If you do, your information is almost certainly going to lead to murder.

Kant thought you had two decent choices. Ideally, you'd just say nothing. That wouldn't help the murderer, and it wouldn't involve lying. But what if you have to say something? In that case, you have to tell the truth—because you must never lie, under any circumstances.

I think that this is the wrong answer, and the interesting thing is that Kant's own theory does not require him to give it. Kant was so convinced that lying was wrong that he misapplied his own theory.

Kant never provided an argument for the claim that the moral rules that prohibit such things as lying and killing are **absolute** (i.e., never permissibly broken). The closest he came to supplying such an argument was in his belief that moral considerations are more important than anything else. In any conflict between moral duty and other demands—say, those of the law, self-interest, or tradition—morality wins.

Still, it doesn't follow that moral duties are absolute, for even if they always outweigh other kinds of considerations, moral duties might conflict *with other moral duties*. And if they do, they can't all be absolute. Some of them must give way to others.

And can't moral duties conflict with one another? It seems, for instance, that there is a duty to avoid hurting people's feelings, a duty not to start a panic, and a duty to protect innocent people from dangerous attackers. It also seems that fulfilling each of these duties will sometimes require us to lie, and that there is a moral duty not to do so. Perhaps none of these is really a moral duty. Or perhaps, implausibly, we'd never need to lie in order to respect these duties. But it's much more likely that these are real duties, and that they really can conflict with one another. And if that is so, then these duties cannot all be absolute.

This does not spell disaster for Kant. He does not need to defend the existence of absolute moral duties. His philosophy can, for instance, justify lying to the inquiring murderer. Kant's hatred of lying made him overlook a crucial element of his own view—namely, that the morality of action depends on one's maxim. He just assumed that anyone who lied would be operating with a maxim like this: tell a lie so as to gain some benefit. That maxim is not universalizable. In a world in which everyone did this, no one could trust the words of others, and people would be unable to obtain any of the goals they were trying to achieve through lying.

But Kant's maxim is not the only one you could have in such a situation. A maxim is a principle that you give yourself. No one forces it on you. When confronted with a potential killer, I might adopt this maxim: *say whatever I need to say in order to prevent the murder of an innocent person*. That maxim is universalizable. The goal I am aiming for—to save an innocent person's life—could be achieved if everyone acted this way.

For Kant, we can't determine whether an act is right or wrong until we know its maxim. And for any given action, there are countless maxims that might support it. After all, we make up our own maxims, and mine may be very different from yours. It follows that there is only one way for Kant to absolutely ban a type of action. And that is to be sure in advance that, of all the hundreds or thousands of maxims that might support an action, *none* of them is universalizable. It is hard to see how we could ever know that.

As a result, it is much harder than Kant thought to defend the existence of absolute moral duties. And in this particular case, that is all to the good, since it opens up the possibility that it is sometimes acceptable to lie—for instance, to the inquiring murderer. Of course, if Kant is right, then we would have to have a universalizable maxim that permits this. But nothing Kant ever said should make us think that this is impossible. Contrary to Kant's personal view, we don't have to regard all (or perhaps any) moral duties as absolute.

F. THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMANITY

In the course of his work, Kant identified a number of different candidates for the role of ultimate moral principle. Although the principle of universalizability clearly emphasizes the moral importance of fairness, another of Kant's formulations directs our attention to the respect and dignity that serve as the basis of morality. This formulation is widely known as the **principle of humanity**:

> Always treat a human being (yourself included) as an end, and never as a mere means.

To understand this principle, we need to get clear about three things: humanity, ends, and means.

When Kant spoke of *humanity*, he wasn't thinking necessarily of *Homo sapiens*. Rather, he was referring to all rational and autonomous beings, no matter their species. Perhaps there are aliens, or some nonhuman animals, who are rational and autonomous. If so, then they count as human beings for purposes of Kant's principle.

Treating someone *as an end* is treating her with the respect she deserves. Treating someone *as a means* is dealing with her so that she helps you achieve one of your goals. This may be perfectly okay. I do this, for instance, when I hire a plumber to fix a broken water pipe in my kitchen. In an innocent sense, I am using him—he is needed to get me what I want (a functioning sink, in this case). Yet if I greet him at the door, give him any help he asks for, and then pay him as he leaves, I am also treating him with respect, and so, in Kantian terms, I am also treating him as an end.

But what if, while the plumber is checking the leak, I remove a wrench from his tool kit and whack him over the head with it? He's out cold—excellent. I then snugly fit his head into the space where the pipe has corroded, thus plugging the leak. While he's unconscious, I rush off to the hardware store and buy a cheap bit of PVC pipe. The plumber wakes up just as I am returning from the store. I scold him for falling asleep on the job and usher him out the door with a curt good riddance. Then I proceed to fix the leak myself, saving a hefty fee.

What has happened in this ridiculous scenario is that I've used the plumber literally as a thing, as a piece of pipe. He might as well have been an inanimate object. I failed to treat him in a way that recognized any of his distinctively human features. That's why I have treated him as a *mere means*.

Although it often happens that people do treat one another both as an end and as a means, one can't treat people both as an end and as a *mere* means. Treating someone as an end implies a degree of respect that is absent when treating someone as a mere means.

Most of us think that there is something about humanity that lends us dignity and makes us worthy of respect. Most of us also think that

human beings are worthy of greater respect than anything else in creation. Humans are more important than monkeys or sharks or daffodils or amoebas. Is this a defensible position, or is it just a self-interested prejudice?

Kant had an answer. He claimed that we are each rational and autonomous, and that these traits are what justify our special moral status. These two powers make us worthy of respect. Being rational involves using our reason to tell us how to achieve our goals and to determine whether we can pursue them in a morally acceptable way. It takes a lot of brainpower to be able to formulate your goals, to imagine a world where everyone pursues them as you do, and then to ask about the consistency of your actions. Humans are the only beings on earth who can engage in such complex reasoning.

Being autonomous literally means being a self-legislator. Autonomous people are those who decide for themselves which principles are going to govern their life. You are an autonomous person. You possess the ultimate responsibility for the choices you make, the goals you aim for, and the manner in which you pursue them. You are not a slave to your passions; you can resist temptation, check your animal urges, and decide for yourself whether to indulge them. You are not forced to act as you do, but are free to choose your own path.

Kant thought that our rationality and autonomy made each of us literally priceless. Despite the work of actuaries, and juries in wrongful death suits, you can't really put a dollar figure on a human life. The assumption that we are infinitely valuable explains the agony we feel at the death of a loved one. If we had to choose between the destruction of the most beautiful art object in the world and the killing of a human being, we should choose the former. No matter how valuable the object, the value of a human life exceeds it by an infinite amount.

Kant argues that rationality and autonomy support the dignity of each human being, and that everyone is owed a level of respect because of these traits. This makes excellent sense of a number of deeply held moral beliefs. Here are the most important of them.

1. It explains, in the first place, the immorality of a fanatic's actions. Such people don't regard human life as infinitely precious, but rather treat their despised opponents as mere obstacles to the achievement of their goals. The principle of humanity forbids such behavior, even when it is consistently undertaken, and thus allows us to address the most severe problem facing the principle of universalizability.

2. The importance of autonomy explains why slavery and rape are always immoral. Slavery treats the oppressed without regard for their own goals and hopes. Rape is treating another human being solely as a source of one's own gratification, as if the victim had no legitimate say in the matter. These are the most extreme examples of duress and coercion. They are immoral because of their complete denial of the victim's autonomy. As such, these crimes are perhaps the clearest cases of treating other people as mere means.

3. The principle of humanity easily explains our outrage at **paternalism.** To be paternalistic is to assume the rights and privileges of a parent—toward another adult. Paternalism has us limit the liberty of others, for their own good, against their will. It is treating autonomous individuals as children, as if we, and not they, were best suited to making the crucial decisions of their lives.

It is paternalistic, for instance, if a roommate sells your TV set because he is worried about your spending too much time watching *Archer* reruns and too little time on your homework. Or imagine a classmate who thinks that your boyfriend is bad for you, and so writes him a nasty note and forges your signature, hoping that he'll break off your relationship. Anyone who has experienced paternalistic treatment knows how infuriating it can be. And the reason is simple: we are autonomous and rational, and the ability to create our own life

plan entitles us to do so. We ought to be free to make a life for ourselves, even if we sometimes make a mess of things.

4. Our autonomy is what justifies the attitude of never abandoning hope in people. The chance that a very hard-hearted man will change his ways may be very small, but the probability never reduces to zero. No matter how badly he was raised, or how badly he has lived his life, he is still autonomous, and so can always choose to better himself. It is usually naïve to expect such a transformation. Changing your character and habits is hardly easy. But the possibility of redemption is always there, and that is only because we are free to set our own course in life.

5. Many people believe in universal human rights. These are moral rights that protect human beings from certain kinds of treatment and entitle each of us to a minimum of respect, just because we are human. Kant can explain why we have such rights. We have them because of our rationality and autonomy. These two traits are the basis for living a meaningful life. If you doubt this, just imagine a life without them. It is a life fit for an insect, or a plant. What endows our life with preciousness is our ability to reason and choose for ourselves how we are going to live it. Every person is rational and autonomous to some degree, and every person needs these powers protected in order to have the sorts of experiences, engage in the kinds of activities, and support the sorts of relationships that make life worth living. Human rights protect these powers at a very fundamental level.

6. Our autonomy is what explains our practices of holding one another accountable for our deeds and misdeeds. Because we are not robots, but rather free and rational human beings, we are morally responsible for our choices and actions. We are fit for praise and blame, and that is because our conduct is up to us. We don't blame sharks or falcons for killing their prey; neither do we condemn a wilted orchid or a nasty-smelling ginkgo tree. Plants and animals deserve neither moral credit nor blame, and this is because their lives are not autonomous ones.

Despite its many attractions, the principle of humanity, with its emphasis on rationality and autonomy, is not trouble-free. In particular, the notion of treating someone as an end is vague, and so the principle is difficult to apply. Unlike the three-step process used to apply the principle of universalizability, there is no straightforward test that tells us how to apply the principle of humanity. It tells us to treat humanity as an end—in other words, with the respect that people deserve. It's sometimes crystal clear whether the principle is being honored. No one doubts, for instance, that the principle is violated by treating a plumber as a piece of pipe or by enslaving someone. But the vagueness of the notion of treating someone as an end often makes it difficult to know whether our actions are morally acceptable. Do we respect celebrities by telling the truth about their private lives—even when this is damaging to their reputations? Is it disrespectful to enemy soldiers to set landmines at our borders? Are we failing to give due respect to famine victims if we spend money on a new computer rather than donating it to an aid agency?

We can't know the answer to these questions without a better understanding of what it is to treat someone as an end. Without a more precise test of when we are respecting others and treating them as they deserve (i.e., as their rationality and autonomy demand), the principle of humanity fails to give us the guidance that we expect from an ultimate moral principle.

G. CONCLUSION

Kant's ethical views are rich and suggestive. They are extremely important in their own right, but it can also be quite helpful to contrast them with the consequentialist outlook that is so popular in political and economic circles

these days. Whereas utilitarians think of benevolence as the central moral virtue, Kant thought that fairness occupied that role. Kant regarded many of the basic moral rules as absolute, and so insisted that it was never acceptable to break them—even if breaking them led to better results. He also rejected the exclusive emphasis on the future and an action's results in determining what is right and wrong, and instead asked us to focus on a person's maxim, since rational consistency, rather than the utilitarian's emphasis on maximizing happiness, is the test of morality.

Many of the shortcomings of consequentialism are nicely handled by the Kantian theory. But consequentialists are pleased to return the favor: the Kantian theory isn't without its own problems, and many of those are neatly addressed by consequentialism. Let's now have a look at another important contender, the social contract theory, whose defenders hope to secure many of the benefits of these two ethical outlooks, while escaping the problems that confront them.

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

Absolute: moral rules are absolute if and only if it is never permitted to break them.
Categorical imperative: a command of reason that requires us to act in a certain way regardless of whether doing so will get us anything we care about.
Golden Rule: the moral principle that requires you to treat others as you would like to be treated.
Hypothetical imperative: a command of reason that tells us to do whatever is needed in order to get what we care about.
Maxim: a principle of action you give yourself when you are about to do something.
Paternalism: the practice of assuming the rights and privileges of a parent toward another adult.
Principle of humanity: always treat a human being (yourself included) as an end, and never as a mere means.
Principle of universalizability: an act is morally acceptable if, and only if, its maxim is universalizable.
Universalizable: a maxim is universalizable if and only if the goal that it specifies can be achieved in a world in which everyone is acting on that maxim.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the Golden Rule and the *what if everyone did that?* test. What problems arise for each? Do you think that they can be remedied?
2. What is a maxim, and what does it mean for a maxim to be *universalizable*? Why does the principle of universalizability fail to be a good test of the morality of our actions?
3. According to Kant, it is always irrational to act immorally. What reasons does he give for thinking this? Do you agree with him?
4. What is the difference between hypothetical and categorical imperatives? Why did Kant think that morality consists of categorical imperatives?
5. Why does the existence of fanatics pose a challenge to Kant's moral theory? How do you think that the Kantian should respond to this challenge?
6. What is the relationship between Kant's principle of universalizability and the principle of humanity? Do the two ever give conflicting advice? If so, which do you think is a better guide to our moral obligations?
7. If rationality and autonomy explain why we are as important as we are, how (if at all) can we explain the moral importance of infants and nonhuman animals?