CHAPTER 11

The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice

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 securely into office. Despite any good results that may arise 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 its claim that the ultimate point of morality is to improve well-being rather than do justice.

Consistency and Fairness

There is a natural way to understand what is wrong about 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. There's nothing special about the tax cheat or the dirty politician that licenses their actions. They acted as if they had a unique privilege and were exempt from the rules that everyone must follow. But there has to be something unusual about a person, or her situation, in order to gain that sort of privilege. 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 corresponding importance we assign to consistency, is shown in some very familiar tests for immorality. The two most popular tests each take 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, 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 reveal 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—i.e., refrained from having sex? The same results would follow. But that doesn’t show that celibacy is immoral.

The real problem for this test, apart from the fact that it sometimes delivers mistaken verdicts, is that it makes the morality of an action depend on how it is described. Suppose the sexual relations of a gay couple were described as their having consensual, enjoyable sex. In that case, their actions would pass the test. But that undermines the test, because it shows that the test yields contradictory results. The very same action is said to be both morally wrong and morally acceptable, depending only on how it is described. Without any independent guidance on how to select one description over another, this test cannot do the job it was supposed to do—namely, identify which acts are 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.

Getting people to imagine what it would be like to switch places with their intended victims is often a very effective way to convey a moral message. That is why films and literature are often such powerful tools of moral education. But imaginatively filling someone else’s shoes, and asking yourself whether you’d accept being treated in a certain way, is actually an unreliable test of morality. 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. So far, so good. But what about masochists who enjoy being hit? The golden rule allows them to go around hitting others. That’s 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.

The golden rule also fails to give us guidance on self-regarding actions—i.e., those that concern only oneself. That’s not a problem for most people these days, since it’s now unusual to think that we owe moral duties to ourselves. But in Kant’s time, self-regarding duties were widely endorsed, and many people still think, for instance, that there is something immoral about suicide or about letting one’s talents go to waste, even if no one else is harmed in the process.

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.

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 fifty dollars per month to Oxfam to help alleviate 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 implication. 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 embedded within 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 promise to you because I think it’s right to do so. But I might also keep my promise to you because I want you to develop such a trust in me that you leave me your fortune in your will. Assume that the way I keep my promise in both cases is the same. And assume that the results are the same in both cases as well. Then the utilitarian thinks that the morality of my action cannot change between the two cases. But since my maxim is different in these cases, Kant might think that the morality of these two actions might be different. It all depends, as we’ll shortly see, on whether these 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. For 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.

Kant had a deep reason for making the morality of an action depend on its maxim, rather than its results. That reason (discussed in detail in the next chapter) is this: it is crucial that the morality of our actions depends entirely on what is within our control. We can control which maxims will govern our actions. We decide for ourselves what we intend to do. Even in cases where my options are severely limited, as when a thug has a gun at my head, it is up to me to decide which choice to make.

By contrast, the results of our actions are often out of our hands. We can’t always control them. And it is unfair to assign credit or blame for things we can’t control. That is why we have an insanity defense. That is why we don’t prosecute animals for the damage they sometimes cause. That is why we don’t condemn infants for any harm they do.

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 the previous chapter), and the What if everyone did that? test. 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 own 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.

Kant sought to make this point with an example of his own. (I am embellishing a bit, but the essence of the example is Kant's.) Suppose that I am a compulsive gambler who is constantly in debt. One night I go to the tables to recoup my losses, only to dig myself further in the hole. The casino boss is having his men drop by tonight to collect. I can either pay them or have my kneecaps broken. I know which one I'd prefer.

The problem is, I don't have the money, the bank won't lend me any more, and I don't have anyone to turn to but you. (No one else trusts me any longer to repay my debts). Since you are aware of my reputation, I know that the only way to get the money is by lying to you. So, I beg and plead and promise you, by all I hold dear, that I will repay you—all the while having no intention of doing so. I have just made what Kant calls a lying promise.

It seems clear that what I am about to do is immoral. And that is true even if, through a minor miracle, I then feel so much guilt that I repent of my ways, transform myself, and make the lie turn out for the best in the end. The morality of the action doesn't depend on its results, but on its maxim. And my maxim here is not universalizable. So my action is immoral, as Kant says, and as we believe.

Here's why. Suppose my maxim is: lie to a friend, in order to escape from being hurt. And suppose everyone acts on this maxim. They lie whenever they think that it is necessary to avoid some personal harm. In that situation, no one would trust the promises of others. And without that trust, people could not achieve the goals they are aiming for with their promises. In a world where no one believed the promises of others, I'd never be able to get money from you with my promise. And so the purpose of my promise would be defeated. And so my maxim is not universalizable. I am making an exception of myself, and am treating you unfairly. My action is therefore immoral.

Morality and Rationality
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.

That is a very striking claim, and one that most of us hope is true. We want to be able to convict rapists or terrorists of irrationality, of ignoring their strongest reasons. We want to be able to truthfully say that there were excellent reasons for them to do good and to avoid evil. Kant believed that we could do this.

But how could Kant be right? Consider the ruthless contract killer who knows precisely what he wants, knows exactly how to get it, and executes his plan without fail. Morality doesn't enter into his calculations. He knows that what he is doing is immoral, but that doesn't faze him. It seems that such a person is reasoning flawlessly. How could we convict him of irrationality?

Let's call this the Amoralist's Challenge. The amoralist is someone who believes in right and wrong but doesn't care about morality at all. The amoralist has the same attitude to moral rules as I do to the rules of professional cricket—yes, they really exist, but they have no bearing on my life at all. Obedience to these rules is completely optional. If I am interested in playing the game, then I'll follow the rules. If not, then there is no reason to do so.

The Amoralist's Challenge supports this view in the following way:

1. People have a reason to do something only if doing it will get them what they care about.
2. Doing their moral duty sometimes fails to get people what they care about.
3. Therefore, people sometimes lack any reason to do their moral duty.
CHAPTER 12

The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect

Is there anything wrong with slavery?

This probably sounds like an idiotic question. Of course slavery is wrong. So let me rephrase my question: Is there anything wrong, in and of itself, with enslaving other people? In practice, slavery has always created much more harm than good. But what if that were not the case? What if the members of a slave society—slaves as well as masters—were, on the whole, wealthier, better educated, healthier, and better satisfied with their lives than most members of a free society? And what if the abolition of slavery was sure to undercut these greater benefits? In those circumstances, would slavery still be wrong?

This thought experiment was put to readers by an important twentieth-century moral philosopher, Richard Hare. In his article “What Is Wrong with Slavery?” Hare defended the utilitarian view that denied that anything is intrinsically wrong with slavery. Everything depends on the actual results of a slave system; in the imagined example, Hare had to admit that the slave society, since it created greater overall benefits, was the morally superior option. This despite the fact that Hare was, for all practical purposes, once a slave himself. As a British soldier in World War II, he was captured by Japanese forces and interned in a camp that effectively enslaved its inmates.

Hare emphasized that his views did not license any slave system as actually practiced. He presented the story as a way to show that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with slavery. The utilitarian says that the morality of slavery, like that of any other practice, depends entirely on its results. In the picture Hare paints, slavery can be morally acceptable.

Many will recoil at this verdict. They will feel that slavery can never be morally right, because it grossly violates people's autonomy. Slavery allows people to be treated as mere things—objects without any rights, of no intrinsic importance.

This is precisely the Kantian objection to slavery. Morality requires us always to treat human beings with the dignity they deserve. Slavery is inherently disrespectful. No one deserves such treatment. That is what explains why slavery is wrong.

Intuitively, this makes good sense. But it requires a bit of work to unpack it. We need to better understand why treating people as they deserve is so important, and what it means, specifically, to say that we deserve dignity and respect.

The Principle of Humanity

In the course of his work, Kant identified a number of different candidates for the role of ultimate moral principle. He thought that they each ended up requiring and forbidding precisely the same things, though most philosophers see important differences in these principles, and think that they sometimes issue different recommendations. While 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 our moral treatment of others. 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 was not thinking of all members of the species Homo sapiens. Rather, he was (for reasons that will soon become clear) referring to all rational and autonomous beings. Perhaps there are aliens, or some other mammals, 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 assistance 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 toolkit and whack him over the head with it? He's out cold—an end. I then snugly fit his head into the space where the pipe has corroded, thus temporarily stopping 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 myself 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.

While 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, as we have seen, 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. Human beings are the only species on earth that 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 animalistic urges, and decide for yourself whether to indulge them. You are not absolutely 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 cannot really put a dollar figure on a human life. Unlike mere objects, human beings are not replaceable one for another. The assumption that we are infinitely valuable explains our feelings of agonized loss 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.

The Importance of Rationality and Autonomy

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 Seinfeld 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, as is sometimes the case, we make a mess of things.

4. Our autonomy is what justifies the attitude of never abandoning hope in people. The chances that a very hard-hearted man will change his outlook 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 determine the principles that will guide our lives.

5. Many people believe in universal human rights. These are moral rights that protect every human being 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 credit nor blame, and this is because their lives are not autonomous ones.

7. Relatedly, most people believe that punishment, rather than conditioning, is the appropriate response to serious wrongdoers. When dogs “misbehave,” we don’t try to reason with them. We try to condition them to change their behavior through a set of rewards and punishments. They don’t deserve to be punished when they break our rules, and that is because they lack the power to change their behavior by reasoning about it. By contrast, humans do sometimes deserve to be punished, precisely because they could have chosen to act well, but decided to act badly instead. People also deserve not to be manipulated into becoming obedient citizens. If we want criminals to behave differently, we must still respect their autonomy. The importance of autonomy explains why it is so objectionable to brainwash people, or to drug or torture them into doing what we want.

The Good Will and Moral Worth

Kant’s insistence on the importance of rationality and autonomy led him to a view of intrinsic value that is very different from that of consequentialists. The structure of consequentialist thought is simple. Identify what is worth pursuing for its own sake; your moral duty is to maximize this value. Kant rejected this picture in every way.

Kant rejected the idea that happiness (or well-being in any form) is the ultimate value. Happiness has no value, he said, if it is experienced as a result of wrongdoing. (The enjoyment that a sadistic killer brings to his task does not add value to his crime, but only makes it worse.) And the same goes for other possible values. Wealth can be misused; so can power, and health, and understanding, and bravery. None of these is unconditionally valuable—none is valuable in every context. There is only one thing that is valuable, no matter what—only one thing whose presence in any situation is bound to add value to it. That one thing is the good will.

The good will has two parts. It is the ability to reliably know what your duty is, and a steady commitment to doing your duty for its own sake. The good will works in a familiar way: we see what we are morally required to do, and we do it for that very reason. No calculations of costs and benefits, no worries about what impression we might be making, what enemies we might be gaining, what riches might be in store for us. Once we understand where our duty lies, we do it straightforwardly.

Kant had some very interesting ideas about how the good will worked. Two of these ideas are especially important. Kant thought, first, that acting from the good will is the only way that actions can be truly praiseworthy.
(Kant referred to such actions as those that possessed **moral worth**.) He also thought that acting from such a motive is entirely an exercise of reason.

Consider the first point. Kant has us imagine two shopkeepers, each of whom does his duty by giving his customers the correct change. But the first does this only because he fears that if he were to cheat them, word would get out and he would lose business in the long run. He does his duty, but there is nothing morally worthy about his behavior.

The second store owner does the very same thing, but for completely different reasons. He treats his customers fairly because he thinks that cheating people is wrong, and he is committed to living up to the highest moral standards. This motivation earns the second shopkeeper the greatest praise. According to Kant, his actions and character display a worth that (like the value of humanity) is literally priceless. He is not for sale; he cannot be bought.

Kant's second point, about the importance of reason in motivating worthy conduct, is fairly complex. He thought that reason, operating alone and in the absence of any desires or emotions, could do double duty. It could reveal your moral duty, and it could motivate you to obey it.

To have a good will is, first of all, to know where your duty lies. Reason alone can tell you this. We can know what is morally required of us without the help of our feelings and emotions. When we determine whether a maxim is universalizable or think about whether a proposed action will respect the humanity in others, we don't need to want or feel anything at all. We just need to carefully follow the three-step test for a maxim's universalizability, or to reflect on the importance of autonomy. We can reason our way to moral knowledge. Indeed, neither our wants nor our emotions play any essential role in moral discovery. For Kant, we must be able to determine what is right and wrong by rational thinking alone, without the aid of desires or feelings.

That's because Kant saw these as unreliable moral guides. Compassion can lead you to wrongly help an escaping criminal; the courage of a terrorist can make his actions worse; anger can cloud impartial judgment. Our emotions often lead us astray, says Kant. They need to be guided by sound principles before we can trust them. Without such guidance, we might end up doing our duty, but that would be just a matter of luck.²

Further, and importantly, Kant thought that moral wisdom should be available to everyone, regardless of his or her emotional makeup. All of us are rational. We each have the power to reason well, even if we often fail to use this power as we should. But our emotions are not always under our control, and they will differ from person to person. If a specific emotional makeup is needed to gain moral wisdom, then such wisdom might be out of reach for many of us. Kant thought that such a view is elitist and a denial of the fundamental equality of all human beings.

Knowing what you are required to do is one thing; actually doing it is another. Here Kant also downgraded desires and emotions in favor of reason. He denied the claim, made famous by Hume, that our motivations always depend on our desires. Hume thought that beliefs alone could never move us, and that we must want something before we will ever act. By contrast, Kant thought that we could do things even if we didn't want to do them, and even if we didn't think they'd get us anything we wanted. When acting from the good will, we are acting solely from an understanding of what is morally required of us, not from any desire or emotion. If our action is to have moral worth, then this understanding, all by itself, must be enough to motivate us.

Anticipating Freud by a hundred years, Kant argued that our motivations are hardly transparent. In fact, we can never be sure that we have ever acted from a good will. Still, even if we can't be sure that our actions have ever earned moral worth, we can know what standard we should aim for.

Kant went so far as to write that dutiful actions motivated by emotions or desires lack any moral worth. Those whose generous nature causes them to lend a helping hand are to receive no credit. Aid workers whose compassion or whose love of their work leads them to do what they do are not to be praised for their good deeds. But those who overcome a complete lack of interest and nonetheless offer help, not because they want to but just because it is their duty to do so, will receive full moral credit.

There are two ways to interpret Kant's message here. The first says that the presence of emotions is enough to rob an action of moral worth. The second is more charitable. It says that actions done solely from desire or emotion cannot possess moral worth, but that some cases of mixed motives—cases in which the good will moves us to act, though helped along by an emotional push—can yet have moral worth. Kant scholars are still conflicted as to which interpretation best captures his intentions.