

such a principle: noncontradiction. Rather than offering a concrete rule with some specific content, such as “help the poor” or “honor your parents,” Kant provided an abstract rule from which (he claimed) all other valid moral rules could be derived. He called it the categorical (or unconditional) imperative: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”²²

Bentham told us to use arithmetic to figure out the right course of action, but Kant told us to use logic. Both men accomplished miracles of systemization, boiling all of morality down to a single sentence, a single formula. Did Kant also have Asperger’s syndrome?

Like Bentham, Kant was a loner who never married and whose inner life seems cold. He was famous for his love of routine (he set out for his afternoon walk at precisely three-thirty every day, regardless of the weather), and some experts have speculated that he too had Asperger’s syndrome.²³ After reading accounts of Kant’s personal life, however, I think the case is not as clear as it is for Bentham. Kant was widely liked, and he did seem to enjoy company, although some of his socializing had a calculated feel to it (he valued laughter and companionship because they were good for his health).²⁴ The safest thing to do is to take advantage of Baron-Cohen’s two dimensions and say that Kant was one of the most extraordinary systemizers in human history while being rather low on empathizing, without joining Bentham at the bottom right corner of figure 6.1.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

I do not want to suggest that utilitarianism and Kantian deontology are incorrect as moral theories just because they were

founded by men who may have had Asperger’s syndrome. That would be an ad hominem argument, a logical error, and a mean thing to say. Besides, both utilitarianism and Kantian deontology have been enormously generative in philosophy and public policy.

But in psychology our goal is descriptive. We want to discover how the moral mind *actually* works, not how it *ought* to work, and that can’t be done by reasoning, math, or logic. It can be done only by observation, and observation is usually keener when informed by empathy.²⁵ However, philosophy began retreating from observation and empathy in the nineteenth century, placing ever more emphasis on reasoning and systematic thought. As Western societies became more educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, the minds of its intellectuals changed. They became more analytic and less holistic.²⁶ Utilitarianism and deontology became far more appealing to ethicists than Hume’s messy, pluralist, sentimentalist approach.

This trend explains why I found moral psychology so dull when I first studied it in graduate school. Kohlberg had embraced Kant’s rationalism. He created a theory in which moral development had one and only one end point: a full understanding of justice. This whole approach felt wrong to me. It was oversystemized and underempathized. It was The True Taste restaurant, serving up a one-receptor morality.²⁷

BROADENING THE PALATE

So what else is there beyond harm and fairness? Shweder’s three ethics offered a useful starting point, but like most cultural anthropologists Shweder was wary of evolutionary explanations of human behavior. The prevailing view among