Kant's Moral Philosophy has become popular in our times, mainly as a viable alternative to utilitarianism. Since utilitarian theory downplays the moral significance of such important elements as respect, human dignity, individual rights, and minority protection, an alternative moral theory might be needed. [Utilitarianism, and consequential theories in general, do not accord an intrinsic and incommensurable value to any element - in other words, nothing - not even human dignity or even human life - is to be valued as morally good or morally valuable in itself and isolated from comparison, or weighing, against other goods. In utilitarianism, in particular, the conversion of all things is to happiness or pleasure or utility or preferences; in this way, everything has a common denominator - and this makes it possible to have a ready-made formula for assessment of what one should do morally [act in such a way as to maximize the overall happiness or happiness of the greatest possible number]; the down-side is that nothing - not even life or rights or human dignity - is to be kept out of the utilitarian calculus. Although utilitarianism is handy when it comes to tough cases and moral dilemmas - it has ample scope and range of cases it can handle in its own way - it is rather counter-intuitive in its insistence that even what we generally hold as the most morally valuable things are just numbers in a calculus. Also, since the greatest number prevails, this theory is not sensitive to the needs of 'permanent' minorities.

Kant's theory is on the other extreme of consequentialist theories. Kant's moral theory does not look at all into consequences. [There is considerable confusion about this, but clarity requires us to pay attention to this aspect of the theory: the theory does NOT take consequences to be morally significant.] Then, what does this theory take as morally significant? The answer is this: Kant's theory is 

**deontological** - it looks only into what SHOULD be done regardless of the consequences. Do the right thing even if this causes unhappiness - even if the heavens fall, to paraphrase a classical saying. This might not strike you as sensible: Why should we not care if our actions, to be morally appropriate, should have the right kinds of effects on other people? Consider this example: If someone tries to do something nice for you but messes up and causes trouble, you cannot, in good faith, blame him. Assuming that he meant well, his good intention must surely count, morally speaking. If the outcome could not have been predicted, for instance, then, the fact that the outcome was not to your benefit should not affect your judgment of his action: He did mean well, after all. Isn't a good intention all that counts when it comes to praising and blaming moral agents?

Another way of putting the above point is this: Kant asks a basic moral-philosophical question: Shouldn't ethics be dealing with what is morally good? Of course, it should. Now, what is morally good in the universe? Can you name something that is morally good in the whole universe, no matter where you find it? If we find this morally good thing, then, for starters, we know that a morally good action must have something to do with this morally good thing. But, there is a catch: The morally good thing should be morally good and nothing but - it should be morally good without qualifications. What does this mean? Here is what it means: There are many things that COULD be morally good if used right: for instance, your health and vigor might let you devote your life to energetically helping disadvantaged people. But you HAVE to put your energy to such morally good causes - so, there is a qualification; the health or vitality is not in itself morally good. The same is true with wealth, of course: you could be using your wealth to help the poor or you could be squandering it on morally reprehensible or just dubious pursuits.
So, what is morally good without qualification? The answer is: a good will - the will or intention to do the right thing only for the sake of doing the right thing. Psychologically, this might be impossible - you might always have ulterior or hidden or subconscious motives that also propel to want to do the right thing. Kant does not promise you that his theory is easily actualizable - after all, a theory can just be a regulative ideal, it can guide you as an ideal that you can only try to approximate and never quite reach or attain. The philosophical point that is important is that the only morally good thing, without qualification, in the whole universe is a good will: a rationally guided intention that checks itself very strictly asking the question: are you sure you want to do this just for the sake of doing what is right, and not for any other reason - not for profit, and not to benefit anyone, and not even for that goosebumpy feeling that follows from being nice? Do the right thing ONLY for the sake of doing the right thing. But you can see that the theory has marvelous elegance and beauty: it is very consistent: it is a theory that assesses the morality of good actions by looking only into the intention of the moral agent; and the intention of the moral agent can be good - good, period, without ifs and buts attached - if it is just the intention to do the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing and for no other reason!

Here is another way of presenting Kant's main thought: Suppose we are looking for a truly scientific theory of ethics. Suppose that we are looking for the moral-philosophical equivalent of Newtonian physics. Now, when, in Newtonian physics, you are studying the law of gravity and its applications in concrete exercises, you take it for granted - and for good reason - that this law of gravity applies universally - everywhere the same, regardless of place, time, or any other consideration. In other words, the law of gravity is a universal law without exceptions. If this is what you are looking for in ethics, then, this is what you should do to figure out your duty. Assume that you are asking yourself the question: Should I lie or should I not lie? Whatever the answer is, you know that you are looking for a universal law. In other words, your answer - your maxim, or the moral principle you are trying to give to yourself - should be universalizable - it should be able to withstand universalization without absurdity or contradiction. Here is, more specifically, how this applies to lying: Does lying withstand universalization - would lying make sense as something you will as a universal law? Think about it: Could you possibly will that lying became a universal law of conduct? This is impossible: if everyone lied, then, your own lies would be useless anyway; it is logically impossible that you would will to lie for the sake of making your lying ineffective - and it would become ineffective if it were a universal law, but you know that you are looking for a universal law of conduct. Notice that, even though it looks that Kant does care about consequences after all, this is not the case: You are checking the consequences [of lying in this instance] not to see if those consequences are morally valuable but only in order to check the logic of your test: Would this law - for instance, lying as a moral law - survive logically if it were a universal law? When the answer is no, then you know that you are in error - because you know that you are looking for a universal law. Therefore, your reason tells your will that lying cannot possibly be the moral law you are looking for. Hence, the moral principle must be: Do NOT lie.

Kant's ethics is absolute. It is better than utilitarianism when it comes to precision - utilitarianism can keep counting consequences for ever and ever - but, on the other hand, Kantianism has less scope - don't lie means don't lie, period, no matter what other contextual circumstances are present; and, obviously, this theory is absolute: do not lie means do not lie, period, no matter what. This is a strict theory. The moral law - do not lie - has no exceptions, for Kant. It is a
CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE - a command - an imperative - that is without exceptions - categorical.

Everyone of us is a moral agent. When we act morally we give the moral law - do not lie, do not cheat, do not take your life even if suffering, etc. - to ourselves. This means that we make sure, in this way, that only reason guides our will - that it is a good will without qualifications that is propelling our actions. We should not allow for anything but the reason's guidance - and the test for reason is: do the right thing only for the sake of doing the right thing - because, otherwise, our will would not be good without qualification. For instance, if the reason we did not lie was that we were afraid that we would be caught or to gain a benefit, then our will was not simply morally good - we acted this way because of an exterior motive [fear or the expectation of benefit.] Here is another example: If you don't cheat customers because you want them to continue to patronize your business, then, your motives are commercial and prudential, not moral. For your action to be morally praiseworthy, you should be refraining from cheating only because this is the right thing to do. [We determine that it is the right thing by applying a logical test like we did above with lying.]

We give the moral law to ourselves, by thinking if we are doing the right thing only for the sake of doing the right thing. Giving the law to ourselves makes us autonomous moral agents. This is the greatest morally relevant fact in the universe for Kant. The greatest value anywhere in the universe, for Kant, is the presence of a rational being that is able to ask questions about right and wrong and can decide on what the moral law is by applying the logical test we used above with lying. Granted that all of us are rational agents in a basic sense, how do we know that we are able to do this? For Kant, we can think of human being in two ways - both ways are plausible and defensible even though they are at cross purposes and go against each other: We can think of a human being as being in nature - determined by biology and environment; in that case, a human being is not free and, therefore, a human being is NOT a moral agent [ethics presupposes free will.] Or, we can think of a human being as rational - one that freely chooses to do the right thing when it also knows that it could choose to do something that is morally wrong. Only when we thing of a human being as rational-free are we able to do ethics. Therefore, we should be using logic - as we did above with the test about lying - to determine what our duties are. Check your readings for specific examples: Should we cheat? Tell lies? Take our own life when we are miserable and hopeless? Break promises? The answer to all these questions is NO - because if we logically blew them up to make them unto universal laws we would see that, logically, contradictions would follow. Try these tests by yourself.

Morally valuable things - rational human beings - are entitled to respect and to be treated with dignity. You see, again, how this goes against utilitarianism. Something that has dignity is an absolute - no price or quantity can be assigned to it, and it cannot be allowed to be pitted against the pains and pleasures or anyone. From this thought we can derive the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative - which many find easier to understand and more practicable in ethical applications: Never treat a human being in such a way that you fail to respect the intrinsic human dignity of this human being/ Can we be more precise - how do we avoid disrespecting the human dignity which all rational agents - human beings - have? Here is how: Never treat anyone as a mere means to an end - this would mean disrespecting them; never treat anyone as a mere tool to bring about goals or objectives she or he has not and could not
possible accept or consent to; always treat a human being as an end-in-him/herself - treat a rational human being as if he or she were able to form his/her own projects and plans and goals in life. Do you see how this goes together with the duties we determined above? For instance, when you lie to someone you are treating him as an instrument - a means; you must be lying to them against their consent - it is impossible to first ask someone if you could lie to himm or her; so you are treating the person against his or her dignity - you are treating the person as a means to advance external-to-the-person goals.

Kant's theory runs into problems because of its absoluteness - no exceptions for white lies or for lies that one undertakes for some really good moral purpose - like lying to a terminally ill person or to hide a would-be victim for a pursuing criminal. Also, leaving out consequences altogether does not sound morally appropriate. Furthermore, Kant's theory does not handle moral dilemmas - instances in which you have TWO or more duties to perform and you can only fulfil one of them. Finally, retarded human beings and animals are excluded from the moral kingdom of ends since they are not rational - hence, incapable of rationally guided moral autonomy.