When someone merely likes something, he does not really need to produce a reason for justifying what he likes. But, when one has to act, he needs to produce a reason for acting in the way he does, a reason that needs to rest upon some principle. For example, if John says that he likes to drink orange juice, he does not need to explain why he likes it. Even if someone insists on asking John why he likes drinking orange juice, John can only reply that he does not really understand the question since he just likes it and there is no way of explaining why he does. And that’s the end of the matter. Consider though someone else, George, for example, who says: “I ought to give Adam 100 euros”. In this case, it makes sense to ask why, and George needs to produce a reason explaining why he should give Adam 100 euros; he might argue, for example, that he promised Adam to give him 100 euros. Still, one could further ask George why, merely because he has promised to give Adam 100 euros, he should actually give that sum to Adam. “Certainly”, George could reply, “since we should all keep our promises”. And, at this point, discussion comes to an end. Of course, someone else in John’s position, like Jim, for example, could have promised to give Adam 100 euros, but despite the promise made, he might finally decide not to give Adam the sum promised. In this case, the only way for Jim to justify his decision not to give Adam 100 euros, would be to adopt the principle that “nobody should keep his promises”. Anything, that is, that one might think that he should or should not do is dictated by some moral principle. Ethics—which, as Socrates has pointed out, deals with the question of “how should one live” and “why”– is a matter of principles.

Which principles though? Is one justified to evoke any principle he wants or thinks to be good or convenient to him? Is one entitled, like Jim, to make promises without keeping them or, to put it more generally, is one allowed to lie when disclaiming the principle according to which one should always tell the truth? According to some philosophers, like Immanuel Kant, this cannot be the case.

According to Kant, the principle ‘we should all tell the truth’ cannot be doubted by any reasonable being. This principle cannot be doubted, because, if it were to be rejected, then human communication would become impossible, a consequence that could eventually lead to the collapse of our community as we know it. This is a possibility that no reasonable person would desire. Imagine, for example, what would happen if all the air traffic controllers did not give accurate information to the pilots. It would not be possible for planes to fly. Similarly, one could suppose that the implications to every aspect of everyday life would be very distressing if the principle that people should always tell the truth was not implemented.

Of course, one could point out that our persistence in the principle that we should always tell the truth is likely in some cases to put us into serious dilemmas. Let’s suppose, for the sake of the argument, that someone in order to escape his pursuer who is after his life, takes refuge into my house. The pursuer, looking out for his aspiring victim, calls at my house and asks me whether the man he is seeking is hiding there. Being aware of the fact that the persecuted person is at my house, I find myself in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, if I follow the general principle according to which we should always tell the truth, it is my duty to reveal to the pursuer that the man he is seeking is hiding in my house and, as a result, the pursuer will find and kill the man. On the other hand, if I violate the general principle according to which we should always tell the truth, then I am in a position not to let the pursuer know that his intended victim entered my house and, thus, I am able to save the victim’s life. In other words, in this case I am in a position either to save a person’s life by violating the principle that dictates that we should always tell the truth or to connive at the murder of a fellow being by abiding to the principle that dictates that we should always tell the truth. Which should I choose? According to Kant, I should remain faithful to the principle that we should always tell the truth by revealing to the pursuer that the man he is after has taken refuge at my house, since the moral worth of an action cannot be appreciated from its consequences. In the above example, if, by following the principle that we should always tell the truth, I were to tell the truth to the pursuer that his aspiring victim is inside my house, it is possible that the pursuer might discover where the man is hiding but might not, nevertheless, manage to capture him. Maybe, a neighbour noticed the pursuer and by crying out loud or by some other kind of intervention he managed to prevent his death. Or, maybe, in the meanwhile, the victim had already escaped through the back door. In any case, if −as the principle that we should always tell the truth− I were to tell the truth to the pursuer, then I would direct him inside my house to look for the hiding man in vain. While, if −by violating the principle that we should always tell the truth− I were to lie to the pursuer about the whereabouts of his intended victim who has escaped via the back-door, I might lead the pursuer to his victim sooner than anticipated. Thus, according to Kant, in any case, the principle that we should always tell the truth cannot be judged according to its consequences, since one could never be certain in advance about what the future will hold. It is because of this that, according to Kant, one ought to apply the moral principles in all cases and independently of their consequences, without having to calculate their consequences.

However, several objections can be made against Kant’s view. It is, of course, true that nobody can be certain about future events and, therefore, as Kant has pointed out, it is not
possible to know in advance the consequences of following or not following a moral principle so as to be in a position to decide in advance what course of action to take. This does not mean though that we should, as Kant claimed, to completely ignore the events that are about to happen in the future. Merely, there are events that it is reasonable to be expected to happen in the future and events that it is not reasonable to be expected to happen. According to Hume, between two or more events, there is a logical possibility that the most likely to happen is the one that there is more indication for it to happen. So, when it’s cloudy, it is reasonable to assume that it is going to rain and not that God is going to send manna, since there are more indications in favour of raining than sending the manna. In a similar way, in the previous example of the pursuer and the victim who has taken refuge at my house, if the odds are that the person pursued is still in my house and that his pursuer will most likely kill him if he finds him, then I can think that it is reasonable for me to decide that I should lie to the pursuer in order to save a human life. In this case, I would have violated the general principle according to which I should always tell the truth on the basis of the positive consequences overall that the non-implementation of the truth might cause.

Although Kant proclaims the absolute character of moral principles by arguing that we all have a moral duty to do what each moral principle dictates independently of the consequences of our actions, it is possible, nevertheless, to argue that Kant does indeed, at the end of the day, think that we should appreciate the value of a moral principle judging by its consequences.

In some cases, Kant urges us to decide on which maxim we should act upon every time we are to do something. If, for example, at a given moment I am obliged to make a decision, I am at liberty to choose between the maxim that dictates I should always tell the truth and the maxim that dictates that I am allowed to lie. In this case though, the question is: which maxim? According to Kant, one ought to follow that maxim which could be rendered a universal law, a principle that should apply to all people: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Groundwork, 421, 52). So, between two maxims—telling the truth and telling lies—it is only that according to which one ought to tell the truth that can be rendered into a universal law. This is the case because, in the alternative scenario, if everybody told lies, our society—which to a great extend is based on the assumption that people are generally honest—would eventually collapse, as in the example I mentioned above. And, at the end of the day, there is no reasonable person that would like to see something like this happen. Therefore, when one has to decide on something, he ought to tell the truth because the rule according to which one should always tell the truth has been rendered into a universal law: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (Groundwork, 421, 52). In other words, every time that one is about to act, he or she should ask the question: What would happen if everybody did the same?

Kant himself calls us to consider the imaginary case of a person who has been driven into despair by various unfortunate events in his life:

A man feels sick of life as the result of a series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair, but he is still so far in possession of his reason as to ask himself whether taking his own life may not be contrary to his duty to himself. He now applies the test ‘Can the maxim of my action really become a universal law of nature?’ His maxim is ‘From self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure’. The only further question to ask is whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. It is seen at once that a system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function (Bestimmung) is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself and consequently could not subsist as a system of nature. Hence this maxim cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is therefore entirely opposed to the supreme principle of all duty.

In any case, the moral principles, by which we decide on how to act, are not absolute. If moral principles are not absolute, this implies that moral principles cannot remain unaffected by the particular conditions and desires of each society. Moral principles can, that is, transform in the sense of, either evolving or becoming more complex, or of declining and even degenerating, as we could, for example, argue that has already happened in the case of the sacred symbolism of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where the remains of an unidentified soldier who was killed in action are placed—or at least, it is supposed that this is what happens—universally symbolises the service to one’s country and to the ideal of freedom with selfless devotion. Nevertheless, it is not quite clear that nowadays, after recent development in biological research, this could still be the case. The demystification of the abovementioned symbolism started some years ago when in the US and more specifically in Washington D.C. where, at the end of each American war, the remains of an unknown soldier killed in action used to be placed. Thus, after the end of the Vietnam War, the remains of an unidentified American soldier who was killed in action were placed in the Washington Memorial Tomb. An American family, though, that suspected that these remains belonged to one of its members who had fought and died in Vietnam, after a long judicial fight and many DNA tests, succeeded in claiming them back. From this individual case we could generalise in saying that, in theory at least, it is possible, due to the advancement of biology, to discover the identity of all remains that have ever been buried worldwide in all the Unknown Soldier Tombs. If this was possible, the Unknown Soldier Tombs would stop being memorials that contain unidentified soldiers’ remains. It does not mean that the idea—the selfless and ingenious act of sacrifice for one’s country—that the Unknown Soldier Tombs express should be abandoned. It is just that, under the light of new scientific
discoveries, this idea should find a different way of expressing itself.

In the same way, if moral principles alter depending on new developments, we are, then, in a position to assume that, as time goes by, morality also renews itself, so as its principles can adapt to the novel circumstances of society. The concept of renewal though presupposes something constant and unchangeable. Otherwise, we would not be talking about a renewal, but about a completely new creation. For example, imagine Peter saying to somebody he had not seen for a long time, ‘Gosh, you have rejuvenated!’ Peter’s remark would be completely pointless if the person that he said that had rejuvenated was not Paul whom he had not seen for some time. Under different circumstances, if Peter told Paul ‘Gosh, you have rejuvenated’ and the person that he thought was Paul replied that he is not the Paul he thinks, obviously Peter’s judgement that Paul had rejuvenated would be arbitrary. In the same way, for ethics to be able to renew itself, morality should from a certain point of view remain constant and unchangeable. The question is from which point of view?

In anticipation, one could argue that what remains invariant and absolute in ethics is how one should act so as his actions would be morally praiseworthy. It is possible that what one should do might change since, as was mentioned above, the principles that determine moral duty might possible vary depending on the particular pertaining circumstances of society; nevertheless, the way that one should act, in order to be morally praiseworthy, remains unchangeable. The question that follows in this case is how, on the one hand, one should act in order to be morally praiseworthy and, on the other hand, where does the universal and absolute feature of morally praiseworthy human action depend on. I’ll try to give an answer to the second question before trying to answer the first.

What determines that a person is a reasonable being (a person that makes intelligible thoughts) is the principle of non-contradiction, i.e. the ability to be consistent with what one claims. It is inconceivable that A can hold both p and non–p at the same time, for example to say that a white flower is at the same time white and not white or to speak of a triangle that has only two angles while a triangle has by definition three angles etc. Human beings could never accept contradiction. Since moral thinking has always being an important human activity, the timeless activity of being consistent with one’s word, has also defined moral agency. When one acts morally, he does not cease to be a reasonable being that is characterised by the principle of consistency. In particularly, as I have mentioned above, anything one does that can be morally evaluated is determined by some moral principle. If John decided to go Adam the sum of 100 euros that he had promised to him, he did so because, consciously or unconsciously, he embraced the moral principle according to which we should always keep our promises. In the opposite case, if, John did not give Adam the 100 euros that he promised, although he initially adopted the principle that we should always keep our promises, then he would be morally accountable since his action contradicts the principle he himself has adopted. If John did not want to give Adam the sum promised without being morally blameworthy, he should have adopted the principle according to which we should not keep our promises. It does not matter so much which principle one adopts, as how consistent one remains towards it. The moral agent, before adopting the principle on which he will act upon, should acknowledge that both he and anyone else will be obliged under similar circumstances to act on the principle he has adopted. Thus, according to Kant, the rule of moral behaviour is: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”.

Kant’s formulation of this principle of ethics, or ‘moral law’, as himself calls it, or ‘categorical imperative’, as it’s widely referred to, entails a danger that not even Kant himself managed to escape. It is possible, that is, to mistakenly assume that the universality of the categorical imperative is a generality. The universality is a matter of consistency, while generality is a matter of degree or breadth. For example, the proposition ‘all metals expand when heated’ is more general than the proposition ‘all bronze objects expand when heated’, since, in contrast to the proposition ‘all bronze objects expand when heated’ which refers to only one category of metal objects, the proposition ‘all metals expand when heated’ is a much more general one as it refers to all categories of metals. Since science rests upon general laws, between the two above propositions, the one that holds that ‘all metals expand when heated’ is a law. On the contrary, the proposition that ‘all people should tell the truth provided they do not harm other people’ might not be as general as the proposition that ‘all people should tell the truth’ but it is, nevertheless, universal. Both propositions refer universally to other people. Simply, the first proposition, that ‘all people should tell the truth’, refers to all people generally, while the second, that ‘all people should tell the truth provided they do not harm others’, refers specifically to all people who ought to tell the truth under the condition that they will not harm other people by telling the truth.

Unfortunately, Kant did not identify the distinction between the generality and the universality of a law. As I mentioned above, in the rephrase of the categorical imperative Kant characteristically says that one should act as if the maxim of his/her action were to become through his/her will a universal law of nature; for example, the principle that all people should tell the truth would refer generally to all people. Thus, due to the equivocation of universality and generality, Kant argued that the principles of moral behaviour should be absolute.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative has indeed marked a starting point in moral philosophy. According to Kant’s theory, the question that one should ask should not be what one ought to do, but how one should act so that his behaviour would be morally praiseworthy. In particular, what we should do every
time we have to decide to do something is to think that what we will eventually end up doing would be expected to be followed not only by us but also by everybody else on every other similar situation. In other words, an action is morally permissible if and only if it would be possible for everybody to act in the same way. In this way, the continuity of a person’s moral story is made possible in a world where moral principles can constantly renew themselves.

REFERENCES
2. Ibid.