

# Kantian ethics

## Introduction

The seventeenth century was a period of intense warfare throughout Europe. The religious divide between Catholic and Protestant states made conflict inevitable. As a result of this conflict, certain ideas began to develop which were to free ethics from the domination of religion. These ideas include the importance of:

- human reason in determining moral truths
- individual freedom and autonomy
- a sense of duty or obligation to act morally.

These three ideas come to the fore in the writings of Immanuel Kant.

Kant is generally regarded as the outstanding philosopher of the eighteenth century. Kant developed a philosophical theory known as **transcendental idealism**. A fundamental aspect of transcendental idealism is the view that concepts or ideals, such as beauty and justice, do exist and that they have a universal meaning. Transcendental idealism is therefore opposed to **relativism**, where the meaning of concepts depends on the attitudes of a particular culture, society or individual.

## Key point

Kant's morality is based on a firm belief that morality exists universally; it is independent of human experience.

Kant was not a relativist. He argued that it is incoherent to believe that justice can mean one thing in a specific country or time period and something different in another society or era. Kant believed the meaning of such concepts is **a priori**, independent of and prior to human knowledge, and that they transcend human experience. These concepts and the laws that govern them are not discovered by observation of nature or by an understanding of human psychology. It is human reason alone that gives

## Key terms

**transcendental idealism** – Kant's theory that humans construct knowledge by imposing universal concepts onto sensory experiences.

**relativism** – the theory that there are no universal truths; truth is relative to the subject and can vary from person to person and society to society.

**a priori** – can be known without human experience.

## Key terms

**empiricism –**

the idea that knowledge can only be gained by analysing sensory experiences of the material world.

**moral law –** in Kantian ethics a rule for how you should act, based on a maxim.

**autonomous individual –** a person who is free to choose.



Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was the eighteenth century's greatest philosopher.

humanity knowledge of moral truth. Therefore Kant rejected **empiricism**, the idea that morality can be discovered through the observation of human nature or through the way the natural order works.

Kant rejected the idea of happiness or contentment as the basis of morality. He believed that human beings cannot fulfil their lives by concentrating on happiness; morality is more important than the selfish desire for personal happiness. For Kant, such desires are morally dangerous and lead the human race down a false path. Kant regarded those philosophers that try to turn happiness into a higher value as no better than those who view morality as 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die'. The problem with happiness as the basis for morality is that it is based on feelings and desires and that it is subjective; what makes one person happy might make another person unhappy. Kant was determined to discover the essence of moral truth, which he believed was objective in nature and based on reason, not feelings.

Moral knowledge comes through the power of human reason and rational debate. All human beings have the ability to argue rationally; some use this ability and others do not. Kant believed that human beings are not by nature moral creatures. They have the capacity to be moral and they discover this through reason. Kant believed that he had discovered the method by which rational human beings could discover the **moral laws**. His system creates a method. Once learnt and implemented, Kant believed, these rules would set humanity free to be **autonomous individuals**.

## Key point

Whether you are a king or a commoner you are under the same moral law. All human beings are morally equal and each person must determine rationally his or her moral framework.

## Extension note

### Kant, walks and Königsberg (Kaliningrad)

Kant was born near Königsberg (now renamed Kaliningrad) in East Prussia. He spent most of his life living in the city and its suburbs. He is buried in its cathedral. Kant loved the city and seldom left it. Each day, in the suburbs to its south, he went for a very long walk. Year after year, day after day, he walked the same route. He met the same people en route but he never spoke to anyone. He covered his mouth with a scarf that protected him from what he believed were the germs of those he passed. Kant's walks kept him fit and he lived to the advanced age of 80.

Kant's walks symbolize the rigour and exact nature of his philosophy. He hated lack of precision. Everything had to be logically structured and coherent. His walks followed a similar plan. They were well organized, starting and ending at the same time each afternoon, summer and winter. His intellectual rigour was replicated in the discipline of his exercise.

Kant saw himself as the Socrates of the modern age. Like Plato's Socrates he believed that truth was revealed only by the careful dissection of arguments. Rational argument alone would reveal error. Kant created a system of thought that he believed, if used, would cut through subjective uncritical judgements and the errors of empiricism and romanticism. He viewed British Utilitarianism with derision and romanticism with contempt. The dryness and strict logic of his method was, like his walks, untarnished by contact with human beings. Subjective feelings have no rational moral basis; when love enters the room, morality exits.

### From maxims to moral laws

Kant believed that there are universal moral laws, which are created by God. Yet Kant rejected the Divine Command theory as a basis for knowing these laws. God's

## Key terms

**maxim** – a moral principle, subjective in origin, which demands practical application.

universal moral laws, he asserted, cannot be known through direct revelation. Instead, Kant believed that human reason has the ability to uncover them.

This discovery starts with a series of **maxims**. These are subjective moral principles that, Kant believed, can be deduced by all rational human beings. Sit down, look at the moral life and imagine the sort of ethical principles that society needs. One of these might be the principle that lying is wrong. Kant then goes on to argue that through trust, which is the idea of good will towards others, these basic principles can be developed into moral laws to govern society. For example, laws such as libel or slander are developed from the maxim that lying is wrong. In order to develop these laws, there must be **good will** between human beings. Each rational human being must, in a moral society, live his or her life with a sense of trust and good will to others. Trust and good will are central to Kant's belief that human beings have the ability to turn subjectively-based ethical maxims into moral laws.

## Extension note

### Trust, the will and good will

Kant believed that human beings approach moral issues in two separate ways. They have natural instincts, which lead them into selfish acts. They also have rational minds, which make them realize that there are moral principles (maxims) that ought to control human behaviour. This division within human beings creates a problem. It leads to the struggling will, in which the human being is uncertain of what moral decision to make. Trust is crucial in resolving this ethical dilemma.

Trust is an important element in the applicability of the universal principle. The rational human being must trust his or her ethical decision-making. The individual must not allow his or her thoughts to be clouded by emotional impulses, even when these seem to be morally good. Therefore Kant rejects concepts such as sympathy or love as bases for ethical decision-making. The moral agent must rise above such emotions, however good they may appear.

What is it that drives human beings forward? Earlier writers, such as Dante, spoke of the human soul's journey towards God. Kant, though, is concerned with the human will. The precise meaning of the will in Kant is hard to define. This is because he tries to fuse the objective, rational nature of logical thought with the subjective qualities of a human being's drives. It is the human will that makes choices in life and drives humans forward, using practical reason.

This forward movement (teleology) relies on trust. Trust as defined by Kant is essentially the idea of good will. Kant's good will is independent of the object of the moral action. It makes decisions based on reason and logic. It does not need detailed knowledge since ignorance of the object of the moral decision brings with it clear thoughts rather than the emotional nature of sympathy, which can cloud judgement.

### The Categorical Imperative

How are God's moral laws to be known? How can we know if a maxim, which is subjective in origin, is morally right? Kant's solution lies in the use of the **Categorical Imperative**.

The Categorical Imperative has three tests that show whether a moral maxim is to be accepted as a universal law. These tests are:

- the universal law principle
- the principle of humanity as an end not a means
- the principle of the universal kingdom of ends.

### Key point

The Categorical Imperative lays down the moral maxims that should be followed in life.

### The universal law principle

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant gives the formulae that control morality. The first is:

*Act only on that maxim whereby which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. (Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Broadview Press Ltd, 2005)*

The basis of this idea is that when making moral decisions no one should do anything that he or she would not accept as a universal law for everyone in every situation. Maxims can

### Key term

#### Categorical Imperative

– something human beings are duty-bound to do, whatever the circumstances.

be tested by seeing if they can be applied regardless of the circumstances and individuals involved. Kant gave examples from life of maxims that should be seen as moral laws. The first of these is the issue of **suicide**. Kant argued that there is a universal law that suicide is always wrong. He argued this on the basis that if you, in a state of suffering and despair, were to sit down and think about the moral principles involved in taking your own life, you would decide that it was contrary to the universal principle. Why? You would have to reflect on whether, in all situations, you would wish people to take their own lives. For example, would it be a good idea for healthy people or individuals bullied into a state of despair to commit suicide? The answer would surely be no.

**Telling lies** is another example of Kant's universal principle in action. He argued that it is never morally acceptable to lie. However, you might decide that it is morally right to lie in a particular situation. Let's illustrate this. Imagine that you are walking down a street. A man passes you and turns left at the junction ahead. A minute later another man brandishing a gun also passes you. He stops and asks which way the first man went. What do you do? Do you lie, either by saying he turned right when the man actually turned left or by saying 'I don't know' when clearly you do? Kant said never lie. You must tell the truth. His argument is that if lying were turned into a universal law it would mean that it would be morally right to lie in any situation. Since human relationships are grounded in trust, it would be impossible for any trust between people to exist.

A further example Kant gave is the issue of **borrowing money**. Here again Kant concludes with the universal principle that all debts must be paid, however difficult that might be. Indeed, if you borrow money and then get into dire straits, you must still pay back what is owed. This is true even if such payment brings harm to your family. This is because if debts were not paid, normal business transactions would not be possible. The credit crunch that began in 2007 illustrates the problems that can occur when people cannot repay their debts. In some respects the element of trust is to be found in the lending of money, as with the telling of lies.

### Key point

The universal law principle states: '*Act only on that maxim whereby which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*' (Immanuel Kant)

### The principle of humanity as an end not a means

Kant, in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, defines the next formula as:

*So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only. (Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals)*

This Kantian principle argues that you must not use others in pursuit of an ethical end. As an example, imagine you propose a hydroelectric power scheme on the Turkish banks of the Tigris River. Lower down the river Turkish and Iraqi communities would suffer as a consequence of the reduction in the water supply. The benefits of the dam for some areas would be great, but by harming some people in order to achieve the general good you would be treating those people as a means not an end. Therefore such a dam would be morally wrong.

Kant noted the illogical nature of projects that use people in pursuit of the general good. It is self-contradictory for you to act in a way that devalues the worth of the human being, whilst seeking to do something for the good of humankind.

Kant's principle of humanity as an end has a further meaning. It refers not only to other people but also to the moral agent. Kant regarded self-worth as important; you cannot undervalue yourself when seeking a moral end. Thus it would be wrong for  $x$  to starve in order to give to  $y$ , since  $x$  is of equal value to  $y$ . It may be admirable to help others but not at the expense of self-destruction or self-harm. Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* illustrates this. Timon's generosity to others in good times leads to him becoming destitute himself. His kindness results in his own destruction.

### Key point

The principle of humanity as an end not a means states: '*So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only.*' (Immanuel Kant)

### The principle of the universal kingdom of ends

The last of the three formulae that form the basis for the Categorical Imperative is the notion of the kingdom of ends. Kant wrote:

*Act according to the maxims of a member of a merely possible kingdom of ends legislating in it universally. (Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals)*

The **kingdom of ends** appears under various guises in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant is describing a state of affairs in which all members of a society desire the same good; a society that the moral laws are designed to achieve. These goods are the common ends of humanity. Kant wants to achieve a state of affairs where conflict is removed and all human beings realize their common aims.

How is this achieved? Consider the following scenario. You meet a group of people from your area because things are chaotic in your town or village. You need to sit

## Key term

**Hypothetical Imperative** – something human beings ought to do, to achieve a certain end.

down with them and draw up moral principles (maxims) that will establish a good, moral society. When you discuss your ideas with the other people in the room, you suddenly realize that they share your ideas. You meet them and, slowly but surely, you draw up laws for your society.

Kant believed that most human beings are rational people. They prefer the moral life to the immoral. Kant knew that it is not possible to realize this in life; but the process must be attempted. The universal kingdom of ends must be pursued.

### Key point

The principle of the universal kingdom of ends states: '*Act according to the maxims of a member of a merely possible kingdom of ends legislating in it universally.*' (Immanuel Kant)

### To think about

Can you put the universal law principle, the principle of humanity as an end not a means and the principle of the universal kingdom of ends in your own words, presenting them as three bullet points?

### The Hypothetical Imperative

Kant asserted that not all moral issues are determined by the Categorical Imperative. Those that do not fall within the ethical tests of the Categorical Imperative are determined by the **Hypothetical Imperative**. The Categorical Imperative is a command that must be obeyed. The Hypothetical Imperative refers to commands that ought to be obeyed to achieve a certain aim.

The Hypothetical Imperative is concerned with moral ends. The moral agent examines how a moral end is to be achieved. Simply put: if I want *x*, then I ought to do *y*.

The Hypothetical Imperative is conditional on the practicality of the aim. If the agent does not want that aim, then it lapses. It may be that the moral agent decides that the moral aim is not feasible. In this case the moral action may not be implemented. If, though, the rational person concludes that it is possible then he or she ought to act.

For example, the moral aim might be the elimination of poverty in Africa. This might be achieved, or certainly helped, by cancelling the huge debts that some African countries owe. This action is not determined by the Categorical Imperative. If we were to apply the universal law principle we would see that abolishing debt is not universally moral. It would not be right to cancel all debts, in every situation. This action is covered by the Hypothetical Imperative. *If* we want to eliminate poverty *then* we ought to drop the debt owed by poor African countries.

### To think about

Which kinds of action are bound by the Categorical Imperative and which by the Hypothetical Imperative?

### Duty



### Key term

**deontology** – a moral system based on duty. What is moral is what you have a duty to do.

A soldier who risks their life for their country does so because it is their duty.

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that human beings give the most praise to those who perform an action simply because they are required to. They act from duty alone. For example, the carer who dedicates ten years of their life to care for a sick and paralysed parent or the soldier who risks their life for their country. Both act from a sense of duty. Kant argued that this sense of moral duty can be converted into a series of universal moral laws that all human beings ought to follow.

### Key point

For Kant morality is based on duty, not on emotions or ties of love.

Kant's ethical position is duty based, deontological. This is not an ordinary sense of duty but something more extreme. It is, as Kant puts it, like the duty to preserve your life:

*... a wretched man ... longs for death and still preserves his life without loving it – not from inclination or fear but from duty. (Immanuel Kant, The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Taylor & Francis, 2005)*

This is **extreme duty**. It is done at a cost to self. It rejects happiness as a basis for moral decision-making.

The strengths of Kant's deontological morality are that it takes account of the responsibility that we have to others and it recognizes the universality of morality. However, duties sometimes conflict.

Imagine you are a young man or woman with a partner and a young baby. One day you are walking along the street and you see someone being attacked. You recognize the attacker as a criminal who the police have warned the general public not to approach. What do you do? Do you confront the violent attacker? Or, do you stand aside and watch the attack whilst phoning for police assistance? It is praiseworthy to act. You have a duty to act, but you also have a duty to your family. You tackle the assailant but you are killed in the encounter. You have done your duty and the media praise you, but you have left behind a partner and baby.

Kant did not recognize this problem with the deontological approach. He argued that a conflict of duties is 'inconceivable', as duties are universal and do not discriminate. Imagine that you are in the midst of a bush fire. Forest areas are ablaze around you and you can see a row of houses in flames. From the attic of the nearest house you hear a person calling for help. You are duty-bound to respond but you know your mother is stuck in a burning house at the other end of the street. What do you do? Kant is firm. You must try to save the person in the nearest house. Your mother will have to wait. Why? Kant argued that the duty to save life is universal and therefore should not discriminate in favour of a loved one.

## To think about

Can you see a conflict of duties in the above scenario? Should you have a greater sense of duty to your family than to your neighbour?

### Taxonomy of duties

Kant had a low regard for the value of human nature. He viewed our natural inclinations as being contrary to reason. This low estimation of human nature means that the concept of duty is raised to a new height. Duty saves human beings from self-delusion. It is as if human beings perform duties despite themselves *not* because of themselves.

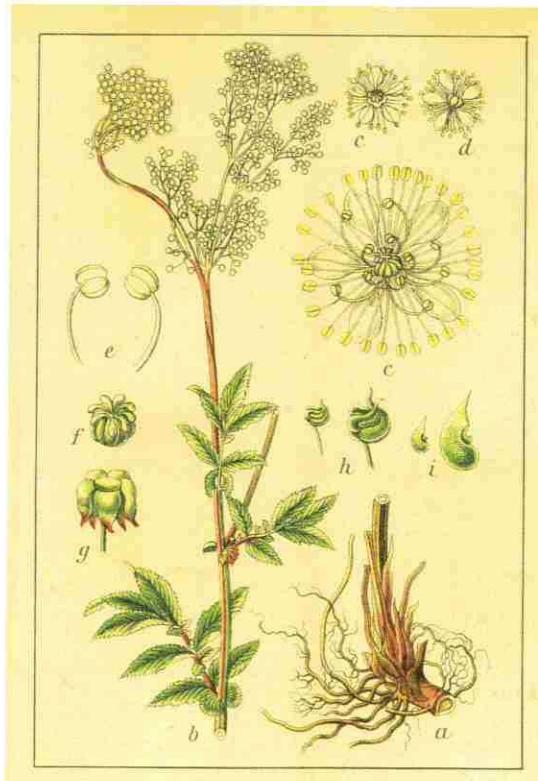
Kant regards duty as always being towards an object, whether this is another person or oneself. In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* he lays down:

1. the link between these duties and virtue
2. the nature of these duties.

Allen W. Wood, in *Kant's Ethical Thought* divides these duties into two categories: duties to oneself and duties to others.

He lists the duties to oneself of rational people as:

- as an animal being
  - against suicide
  - against lust
  - against drunkenness
  - against gluttony (greed)
- as a moral being
  - against avarice (greed for wealth)
  - against lying
  - against servility (acting in a manner that undervalues yourself). (Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1999)



*Taxonomy is the science of classification; it is usually used to classify plants and animals. Kant used this principle to draw up a list of duties that human beings have to perform in order to be moral agents.*

According to Wood, the duties to others of rational people are:

- *to love by beneficence* (generosity/charity), *gratitude and sympathy*
- *to respect as individuals and equals.* (*Allen W. Wood, Kant's Ethical Thought*)

### Extension note

#### Taxonomy

The Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778) published his work *The System of Nature* while Kant was at university. Kant read the work and drew on its ideas.

Linnaeus was the first scientist to draw up a taxonomy of plants, a system of classification into which everything fits. Taxonomy is the law or structure of classification; it is key to Darwin's theory of evolution.

Kant uses the principle of classification to draw up two taxonomies. The first can be seen above. It is a list of duties that human beings have to perform in order to be moral agents. This taxonomy of duties points human beings towards achieving the highest good. It is sometimes known as a transcendental taxonomy, as these duties transcend everything else. The second taxonomy is Kant's taxonomy of passions, a list that points in the opposite direction, towards insanity.

Patrick Frierson points out that there are empirical aspects in Kant's thought, one of which is his interest in psychology. Kant sees a stark distinction between the psychology of the moral agent who is dedicated to reason and achieving the highest good, and that of the irrational, whose morals are products of their passions. Human beings have a choice; they can live by their passions or they can live by reason.

In 1791 a rich Austrian woman wrote to Kant, stating that life was not worth living. She had kept a secret from her lover and on disclosing it had lost his affections. Maria von Herbert was a fervent follower of Kant and wrote to the great philosopher for advice. Kant replied that she should not brood over her loss: 'the value of life, insofar as it consists of the enjoyment we can get out of people, is generally overestimated, whereas life, insofar as it is cherished for the good that we can do, deserves the highest respect' (Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Kant: Correspondence*, Cambridge University Press, 1999). Two years later she wrote again. Her relationship troubles are resolved, but she can't shake off a feeling of intolerable emptiness. Her only desire is to 'shorten this so useless life of mine' (Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*) Kant never wrote to her again. He bundled up her letters and sent them on to the daughter of a friend as a warning, as he saw it, against letting your fantasies run away with you. Maria von Herbert committed suicide in 1803.

### To think about

Is it easier to let your passions rule you than to be led by reason alone? Why is this a problem for Kant's ethical theory?

### The *summum bonum* in the moral community

Kant's moral system is designed to create a moral community in which all moral ends are reconciled. This will be a slow, perhaps ineffectual, process. It has a **teleological** and religious basis. Kant is clear that the implementation of the ethical principles in his moral system will lead to a unity of ends and the purposeful transformation of human society.

Conflicts are resolved as this unity is achieved. The analogy of a game of chess illustrates this. The world at present is like a game of chess being played between two grandmasters. Both have different goals and the game is about conflict. But suppose a time comes when these grandmasters look at a chess problem and join together to solve it. Conflict would be resolved and the kingdom of ends would be created. Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, called this state of affairs 'the highest good' or, in Latin, the **summum bonum**.

Kant believed that this *summum bonum* consists of the resolution of two different ends. He described these two ends as **good** and **well-being**. By the former Kant meant **moral goodness** or **righteousness**. The latter is meant to convey the idea of **contentment**. The individual is truly moral when he/she is both good and happy with that state of affairs. Kant does not mean that happiness is a basis for moral well-being. He means by this that human beings must do good and be happy that they live a life which is praiseworthy. A moral society is one in which rational beings are ethically upright and are content with this moral position. Since most human beings are incapable of resolving these ends in this life, Kant argued that *summum bonum* is not reached until after death. The nature of this afterlife, as with the nature of God, is not examined. It is impossible for any human being to define that which, until after death, cannot be known or understood. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant adds the idea of the **consummation of moral good** to his idea of the *summum bonum*. This new phrase suggests that happiness and moral goodness will work in heaven in tandem, like parallel rails on a railway track.

### Key terms

**teleology** – designed for or directed towards a final end.

**summum bonum** – the highest good, which is only achievable in the moral community.

**Key term**

**autonomous individual** – a person who is free to choose.

**universalizability**  
– the principle that moral values are universal and therefore universally applicable.

**Teleology in Kantian ethics**

Kant believed that the consequences of an action should not be the basis of a moral action. Yet, at the same time, Kant was clear that there is an inbuilt goal to which nature and history aspire – that is the kingdom of ends. Kant imagined that all rational creatures have within them a germ that predisposes them towards a moral end. This **predisposition to moral reasoning** is, as Kant put it, the ‘ground for the determinate development’ of humanity. Humankind progresses towards perfection and the kingdom of ends.

**Kantian ethics: strengths and weaknesses**

Kantian ethics has many strong points. They are:

1. Unlike other ethical theories it does not view all human action as being morally based. **Most actions do not require a moral litmus test.** This frees up the moral decision-making process to concentrate on what is important. It recognizes that many actions, however moral, should not be performed because they are not based on a universal moral law.
2. It emphasizes the worth of each human being as an **autonomous individual**, with the freedom to act morally.
3. Human equality and harmony are central features of Kantian ethics.
4. It puts **pressure on the individual** to act in a moral and logically coherent manner.
5. It emphasizes the **dignity and worth of all human life**. As a result activities such as pornography and slavery are seen as immoral in themselves.
6. The emphasis on **duty** appears to fit in with human experience.
7. Equal treatment of individuals **eradicates bias** towards family, friends or nation that sometimes influences decision-making.
8. The principle of **universalizability** emphasizes that moral actions cannot be just in one society and unjust in another.

**Extension note****The problem of duty**

The Nuremberg trials are renowned throughout the world. Less well-known are the war crimes trials that took place in Vienna, Austria, at the end of World War II.

The details of one trial held there reveals one problem with a moral system based on duty.

At the end of the war an atrocity occurred in a village high up in the Tyrolean Alps. The war was ending. To conceal the existence of Nazi death camps, soldiers were ordered to march those left alive inside the camps around the countryside. The soldiers were, by this stage of the war, old men and teenagers. The prisoners were ordered out of the camps and marched each day so that, through exhaustion and starvation, one by one they died. To the Allied troops they would look like refugees that didn't survive. The Nazi soldiers reached a village high up above the valley of the river Inn. The soldiers were fed up. They were far from home and they too had no food. They went to the mayor of the village and sought the advice of the town council. The solution was an atrocity. The prisoners were rounded up and put into a hay cart; the cart was then pushed over the side of the mountain down into the valley below. All those on board perished. The soldiers had done their duty. The mayor and the town council had likewise done their duty to the Nazi soldiers. Yet the plea of doing one's duty was not an excuse either in Vienna or Nuremberg.

Kant's deontological ethics is based on duty but it contains other elements that, in the example above, conflict with the plea of 'I was just doing my duty'. Kant's **taxonomy of duties** means that duty is not to be followed blindly, but there is a list of precise duties which are vital. As a result, an appeal to duty for duty's sake is invalid. The individual must act to respect others and to value their autonomy. Clearly, on the Austrian mountain slopes, they did not.

Modern criticisms of Kant include:

- 1.** Does the teleological nature of Kantian thought undermine the whole basis of its ethical theory? This is the **problem of compatibilism**, which appears to be a contradiction in Kant's thought. Compatibilism is the idea that human beings are both free and at the same time bound by moral and physical laws. On the one hand Kant is in favour of human freedom and autonomy but, on the other hand, he implies that the moral agent must obey the principles given in the Categorical Imperative.
- 2.** There is **no place for love and personal relationships**; it is too cold and logical.
- 3.** **Consequences are ignored** but they matter in deciding the best (most moral) way to proceed.
- 4.** **Do a priori moral laws actually exist?**

5. **Are moral laws essentially products of environment and culture?** Kant does not take into account, nor could he develop, modern ideas in sociology and psychology.
6. The issue of **moral luck**. Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams (1929–2003) argue that Kant's moral philosophy is not fatally flawed because it does not take into account the consequences of a moral decision. Rather it is damaged because it ignores the circumstances of a moral action. This is known as moral luck. An individual may think that they are doing good by doing  $x$  but the circumstances of their actions may result in harm being done. Another person may do exactly the same action but the result is a moral good and not harm.
7. The **law of double effect** may not be so morally certain. For example, should a terminally ill patient be given painkilling drugs to ease their suffering if the administration of these drugs will cause them to die sooner? Or, should the harm in shortening life be the crucial factor and the patient allowed to continue to suffer in pain? Philippa Foot, among others, has made this criticism.

### Practice exam questions

#### (a) Explain Kant's theory of duty.

Kant's ethical system is deontological, that is based on duty. Mention could be made of Kant's view that there are certain universal and absolute moral principles. These are grounded in the Categorical Imperative and human beings are obliged to conform to these moral principles. This leads on to Kant's view that (as a result of using the Categorical Imperative) there are certain basic duties that human beings have in life. You could examine Kant's understanding of duties to self and duties to others. You could also discuss the idea of extreme duty.

#### (b) 'Kant's ethical theory has no serious weaknesses.' Discuss.

You could start by considering criticisms of Kant's ethical theory. For example, Kant rejected happiness as a basis for ethical decision-making and argued that you should not favour loved ones in doing your duty. This leads to the criticism that his ethical theory is cold and impersonal. Kant's theory is non-consequentialist and does not take into account the results of an action. You could also mention the problem of compatibilism and the question of whether a priori moral laws actually exist. In a good answer you might discuss whether you consider any of the criticisms to be a serious weakness to the ethical theory. For example, a counter argument to the criticism that the theory is non-consequentialist could be that consequences are not predictable anyway. Therefore you might not consider this a serious weakness.



## Develop your knowledge

There are a number of excellent books and relevant sections on Kant's moral philosophy. These include:

*A Companion to Kant* by Graham Bird (ed.) (Blackwell, 2006)

*A Companion to Ethics* by Peter Singer (ed.) (Blackwell, 1993)

*The Puzzle of Ethics* by Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch (Fount, 1999)

*Kant's Ethical Thought* by Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1999)