

Kant's Ethical Theory

Strengths	Weaknesses
Not consequentialist – Kant easily shows the fatal flaw of Utilitarianism – a bad act can have good consequences. Kant's theory doesn't make this mistake.	Consequences – There are some occasions when consequences are so severe that many think it is better to break a rule than allow awful things to happen.
Universal – Kant's theory provides moral laws that hold universally, regardless of culture or individual situations.	Inflexible – You should be able to break an unhelpful rule if the individual circumstances warrant it.
Clear – Kant's theory gives us a system that a child could understand. "Would you like it if someone did that to you? No? Then don't do it to someone else."	Lack of motivation – Realising that something is irrational (like illegally downloading music, for example) doesn't give any motivation to do the right thing.
Autonomy – Kant has the greatest respect for human dignity and autonomy.	Conflicting duty – Sartre described a pupil torn between looking after his mother in France or going to England to fight with the Free French Forces. "I find myself drawn into a vicious circle." Which of the duties do I follow?
Rational – Kant is not swayed by emotion. His theory does not allow us to show favouritism for friends. It is a purely rational theory.	Absolute duty – Ross thinks we have an absolute duty when all things have been considered, but individual duties cannot be absolute – sometimes we have a duty to break a promise
Human Rights – Kant's theory provides a basis for Human Rights. In 1948, the UN Declaration of Human Rights was agreed by 48 countries & is the world's most translated document, protecting humans around the globe.	Moral Law – Some philosophers question the existence of the moral law. Why should we believe that there is objective morality?
Equality and Justice – Kant's theory provides the foundation for modern conceptions of equality and justice.	Anthropocentric – According to Kant, non-human animals (and certainly any non-rational creatures) have no intrinsic value. Many environmentalists see this as dangerous and wrong.
International Law – Kant's ethical theory underpins most UK and many international laws. When Jack Kevorkian tried to defend his killing of Thomas Youk, the judge limited the evidence he could introduce, saying it didn't matter if he intended to help Mr Youk, or if Mr Youk wanted to die. What was important was the act itself.	Too vague – It is not clear how broad our application of the CI should be. For example, my council wants to collect rubbish every 2 weeks. I think this is contrary to the will, as no rational person would want to have smelly rubbish sitting around for so long. Is this really morally wrong?
Objective – Kant's theory gives objective standards, independent of our own interests, cultural bias etc.	Difficulty forming maxims – SS ask if you have Jews hiding in your attack. Which maxim are you universalising? "Do not tell lies" or "Do not expose others to violence"?
Duty – At first, it may seem better to act out of compassion. However, it is possible to make bad choices out of love. Acting out of duty is always right.	A priori – Some have criticised the claim that we work out our duty a priori . Surely we need to refer to experience to work out what is right, particularly in modern medical ethics.
Reliable – A system of rules works, and everyone knows what their obligations are. If you allowed people to break rules because of consequences, or out of love, the legal system would be a mess, and no-one would know what they ought to do.	Unrealistic – Kant asks us to follow maxims as if they were universal rules, but just because we act this way, it doesn't mean others will. For example, pacifism makes sense as a law of nature, but if we chose to be pacifist, we would be a sitting duck for any non-Kantians.
Authority – It doesn't make sense to say we ought to break promises – if that was so, promises would mean nothing. This makes Kant's rules logical and reasonable, giving them a real authority.	Unforgiving – Kant believed in retributive justice, 'an eye for an eye'. It doesn't allow for mercy. Bentham believed punishment should be rehabilitative – that it should make things better rather than just get revenge.
Ends in themselves – Kant's respect for human life is being challenged by changes in medical ethics, but many hold this as the most important aspect of his theory.	Every situation is unique – Universal rules aren't helpful in the real world where every situation is different. If no two situations are the same, morality should be relativist not absolutist.