Kant model answer and guidance

**Model answer (1) :** *Explain Kant's Categorical Imperative*

This part a. of an OCR question at AS scored 17/25 (B grade).  Be aware that AS part a. questions are often more challenging than this. For example "*How might Kantian* [*ethics*](javascript:void(0)) *approach issues surrounding the right to a child*", this brings together theory and application.

Emmanuel Kant lays down his theory of the ‘Categorical Imperative' in his book Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. The book deals with his theory that [morality](javascript:void(0)) is a priori synthetic and that morals decisions should be taken with a universal view to ones duty to mankind as a whole. The Categorical Imperative is split into three principles, each building on the last to explain how Kant believed a human should make moral decisions through reason rather than emotion.

The first of these three principles: "Act Only According to that [maxim](javascript:void(0))...which should be a universal law". Kant argues that for the imperative to be categorical and deontological it must consist of principles that can be applied in any situation. Taking lying as an example, Kant posits the theory that one should never lie; if you lie, he states, you break the first principle. Clearly, if lying was universalised everyone would be able to lie, Kant argues that a lie always hurts someone even if it gets the liar out of trouble. If lying is universalised this harm caused by the lie would ‘erode' society and would eventually make society intolerable.

Following on from universalisation Kant's second principle in the Categorical Imperative is the idea of treating everyone as a means to an end. Kant argues that all humans are searching for the summam bonum (a state in which human [virtue](javascript:void(0)) and happiness are united). Kant believes that, as it is clearly impossible to achieve this state in one human lifetime we must have immortal souls to be able to succeed. Because of these immortal souls Kant argues that humans deserve special treatment. Because of Kant's strong belief in duty, he argues that to develop our own perfection, moral, intellectual and physical selves (and reach summam bonnum) we should seek that happiness (the ‘end') of others as long as seeking this happiness does not infringe on other humans ability to seek happiness. Therefore every human is an end in and of themselves and not a means for our own personal gain. This belief also supports his reasons for the principle of universality.

 Closely linked to his second principle, the third and final principle of the categorical imperative states: "Act as if you were , through your maxim, a law making member in a kingdom of ends. " Kant says that if one is obeying the first and second principles - making moral decisions that can be universalised, and treating people as ends in themselves - the decisions you make should be centred around the idea that these decisions are law which can be applied to every other end: people. In essence this puts the first two principles into action. For example if you are trying to decide if it would be justified to kill someone who was threatening your family - using Kantian principles - you should not kill them . Acting according to the third principle (and taking the first and second into account) murder can obviously not be universalised or humanity would be wiped out, and killing the man threatening your family is treating him as a means (to saving your family) rather than an end: a human seeking summum bonum.

Overall the Catagorical Impertive seeks to allow humans to make moral decisions which do not infringe the happiness of others but also allow us to progress to perfection.

**Points arising from assessment essay (KANT) "Explain Kant's categorical imperative".**

1. Cover the key technical vocabulary: a priori, synthetic, categorical, hypothetical, universalisability etc. A priori reason is a key idea when deriving Kant's idea of goodness.

2. Don't just drop terms in: explain them and relate them to the argument. (See first paragraph where a *priori synthetic* is dropped in, but not explained).  
Eg Not - "Kant believed in the importance of the a priori", but "a priori reason is important because through abstract reason we can establish duties which apply everywhere for all time - not based on desires and feelings (which change), but on the logic of abstract practical reason".

3. Spell out the applications of a principle to the real world. For example, Kant is arguing that a failure to universalise is a failure of consistency or rational logic. To explain this you need to explain a contradiction in nature and a contradiction in will (key word here is contradiction). The first, a contradiction in nature is something like breaking a promise - if everyone breaks promises the idea of a promise ( a binding commitment) ceases to exist, so it cannot be willed as a universal. Ground these in practical examples (film, experience, novels etc).  The above essay could do with some more examples to ground the points, and the second formulation is not correctly explained at the outset (a common mistake).

4. Use quotes. Not just quotes from Kant himself which would be a good idea), but from authors like Korsgaard or Rachels (see workbook). Short quotes are fine. Quotes should be integrated into the argument and not just pasted in (as it were!). There are no quotes at all in the above answer.

5. Historical context is important and could be mentioned. But instead of saying "Kant was a leading philosopher of the [Enlightenment](javascript:void(0))", write this, "Kant adopted the Enlightenment motto "dare to think", which illustrates his belief in the primacy of reason.

6. You must explain clearly the formulations of the Categorical Imperative (preferably all three) - don't just state them, explain what they imply for ethics.  
Formulation 1: universalisability - implies consistency. To be immoral is to be inconsistent and so irrational. See point about contradiction in nature or will above.  
Formulation 2: ends - suprising how often this is misstated, it should read "treat people not merely as a means to an end, but as an end in themselves". Don't garble this up and write what one of my students wrote in last year's exam "don't treat people as an end to a [mean](javascript:void(0))" (not even "means"). This is clearly nonsense! This formulation implies dignity, respect and equal [rights](javascript:void(0)).  
Formulation 3: autonomy or the kingdom of ends - implies a sense of society with mutual obligations and duties, coming from the autonomous reason we all share.

7. Don't repeat yourself - it wastes time. If asked to explain, do not evaluate by going on about strengths and weaknesses - irrelevant!  The above essay is a good attempt partly because it sticks rigidly to the question.