“shortening one’s own life” (das Leben abzukürzen) (both G, 4:422 [1785]/CEPP:73–4), “disposing freely of my life” (die freie Disposition über mein Leben nehm en), “ending life at will” (as in sein Leben willkürlich endigen) (both CPrR, 5:44 [1788]/CEPP:175). The term most frequently translated directly as “suicide” (e.g., at G, 4:429/CEPP:80) is the German Selbstmord (literally “self-murder”), though Kant also uses Entleibung (e.g., at MM, 6:421 [1797]/CEPP:546).

Kant most famously discusses suicide in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where it serves as one of four examples intended to show that he has correctly formulated his categorical imperative. Suicide (along with lying promises, a blanket refusal to aid others, and overall neglect of one’s own talents) is barred when two central formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative are applied. May I “make it my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness” (G, 4:422/CEPP:74)? The “universal imperative of duty,” that is, “act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature,” says no (G, 4:421/CEPP:73, Kant’s emphases). Can suicide “be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself” (G, 4:429/CEPP:80, Kant’s emphasis)? No: it “makes use of a person merely as a means” (G, 4:429/CEPP:80, Kant’s emphasis). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant again cites its handling of suicide as proof positive that his moral imperative is well formulated and that applications will give the right results. Here, it is “obvious” that suicide is ruled out by the categorical imperative’s demand to act only on universalizable maxims (CPrR, 5:44/CEPP:175). Suicide also receives extensive discussion in Collins’s and Vigilantius’s lecture notes on ethics, is discussed in the *Metaphysics of Morals* as part of the ethical duty to self-preserve, and is mentioned in the *Anthropology*.

Kant wrote at a time when European attitudes to suicide were shifting from moralizing condemnation and legal sanction toward compassion and sympathy, both for suicides and their survivors (see Hume, Beccaria, Goethe, Voltaire). Readers today may be even more likely to take issue with Kant’s claims, and few are persuaded by Kant’s arguments that suicide is “obviously” immoral. Indeed, many argue that at least some suicide is morally permissible, even indicated, by Kant’s own lights.

It is a mistake, however, to read Kant’s opposition to suicide merely as a poorly thought through nod to an older moral universe. Suicide from despair (the paradigmatic suicide for Kant, and by far the most prevalent type, then and now) constitutes a kind of giving up on oneself that Kant could not countenance. The Stoic who is done with life, finding it a smoky room from which it feels only natural to depart, is urged by Kant to stick it out. Martyrdom and other politically motivated suicides constitute using oneself as a tool or instrument in a way Kant would refuse. Recall the weight Kant attaches to there being an “end in itself” which cannot be traded off against other goods. It is thus most productive to read Kant less as repulsively wagging a finger toward those in the throes of suicidal despair and more as seeking a moral diagnosis of the ills of suicide, which surely, at least in its paradigmatic case, is among the most lamentable things people do.

**Related terms:** Categorical imperative, Duties to self, Humanity, Life, Respect

**Jennifer K. Uleman**

**Superstition (Aberglaube)** The earliest appearance of the term “superstition” (Aberglaube) in Kant’s published work is in the pre-Critical work *Observations on the Feeling of the*
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Beautiful and Sublime (OFBS, 2:250–1 [1764]/CEAHE:57–8). In the later Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Kant interestingly mentions superstition as having a sociopolitical function, namely, in terms of “the auguries and haruspices contrived by the Romans for politically shrewd purposes,” “sanctified by the state in order to guide the people in dangerous times” (A, 7:194 [1798]/CEAHE:301–2). In the same work, Kant also associates superstition with dementia (Wahnsinn), whereas fanaticism (Schwärmerei) is more comparable to insanity (A, 7:203/CEAHE:310). In the Physical Geography, superstition is associated, more standardly, with the customs and beliefs of supposedly inferior races and cultures (PG, 9:316, 386 [1802]/CENS:576, 631), and in particular with fetishism, originating in West Africa (PG, 9:415/CENS:661).

However, in The Conflict of the Faculties, superstition is defined in its true critical technical meaning as “the tendency to put greater trust in what is supposed to be non-natural than in what can be explained by laws of nature, whether in physical or in moral matters” (CF, 7:65 [1798]/CERRT:285). This does not imply a simple naturalism for which only facts exist, because in “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” it is stated that the “complete subjection of reason to facts (Facts)” is equally tantamount to superstition (OOT, 8:145 [1786]/CERRT:17). Rather, reason is “subject to the rules of nature on which the understanding grounds it by means of its own essential law,” the denial of which is “superstition” (CPJ, 5:294 [1790]/CECPJ:174, emphasis added). Further, superstition is the eminent prejudice, “since the blindness to which superstition leads, which indeed it even demands as an obligation, is what makes most evident the need to be led by others, hence the condition of a passive reason” (CPJ, 5:294–5/CECPJ:175). Passive reason is precisely the opposite of the principle of enlightenment, the principle namely “to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another” (WIE, 8:35 [1784]/CEPP:17). i.e., to actively “think for oneself” (CPJ, 5:294/CECPJ:174). Therefore, enlightenment is the “[liberation from superstition” (CPJ, 5:294/CECPJ:174).

In Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, “religious superstition” is defined, more particularly, as the “delusion that through religious acts of cult we can achieve anything in the way of justification before God” (Rel, 6:174 [1793]/CERRT:193).

It is superstitious delusion to want to become well-pleasing to God through actions that any human being can do without even needing to be a good human being (e.g., by the profession of statutory articles of faith, the observance of ecclesiastical practice and discipline, etc.). And it is called superstitious because it is a choosing of merely natural (not moral) means which on their own can have absolutely no effect on something which is not nature (i.e., the ethical good). (Rel, 6:174/CERRT:194)

Similarly, in Conflict, Kant states that “if a church commands us to believe . . . a [biblical] dogma, as necessary for salvation, and we obey out of fear, our belief is superstition,” for “it is superstition to hold that historical belief is a duty and essential to salvation” (CF, 7:65/CERRT:285).

Related terms: Belief, Dogmatism, Enlightenment, Enthusiasm, Fanaticism, Reason

Dennis Schulting

Sympathy (Sympathie, Mitgefühl, Mitleid, Mitfreude, Theilnehmung) Kant defines sympathy in his 1797 Metaphysics of Morals as follows: “Sympathetic joy [Mitfreude] and sympathetic