

(كانط) والانتحار: استجابة نقدية لـ(توماس د. هارتر)

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الملخص

يبحث هذا البحث في إمكانية تسويق الانتحار أخلاقياً ضمن إطار نظرية (إيمانويل كانط) الأخلاقية؛ حيث غالباً ما يُفهم أن (كانط) يدين جميع أشكال الانتحار إدانة قاطعة، استناداً إلى صيغ الأمر القطعي. ومع ذلك، فإن هذا التفسير يتغافل عن بعض الغموض المفاهيمي والنصي في أعماله، فيتناول البحث نقدياً محاولة (توماس د. هارتر) للدفاع عن قراءة أكثر تساهلاً من خلال التمييز بين نوعين من قتل الذات: الانتحار بدافع حب الذات، الذي يُعدّ غير أخلاقي، وقتل النفس بدافع الواجب، الذي قد يكون ممدوحاً أخلاقياً. وعلى الرغم من أن مقارنة (هارتر) ذات قيمة فلسفية، إلا أنها غير كافية لأسباب عدّة، أولاً: أنها لا تأخذ في الاعتبار كفاية بنية نظام الواجبات عند (كانط)، والعلاقات بين الواجبات القطعية وغير القطعية، ثانياً: أنها تُخاطر بخلط الأخلاق الكانطية مع النفعيّة أو العاطفيّة الهيووميّة من خلال التركيز على النتائج مثل الإحسان أو الدوافع العاطفيّة، فبدلاً من التمييز بين أنواع الانتحار، يحتاج هذا البحث بأن التقييم (الكانطي) الصحيح للانتحار يجب أن يستند إلى المبادئ القصدية للفعل، والنية، والعلاقة بالقانون الأخلاقي، كما توضح أن الانتحار قد يكون مسوّغاً في الحالات التي يؤدّي فيها الاستمرار في الحياة إلى تقويض قدرة الفرد على تمثيل الإنسانية أخلاقياً، ويجري هذا من خلال الاستناد إلى بعض نصوص (كانط) الأساسية، وتستنتج الورقة أن الانتحار قد يكون مسوّغاً عندما لا يعود بإمكان الفرد أن يعيش بكرامة أو بعقلانية، وبالتالي فإن أخلاق (كانط) تسمح بفهم أكثر مرونة وسياقية للانتحار مما يُفترض عادةً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخلاق الكانطية، الانتحار، الواجبات الأخلاقية، الأمر القطعي.

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الاستلام: 2025/7/16، التعديل النهائي: 2025/9/7، إجازة النشر: 2025/9/10

Kant on Suicide: A Critical Response to Thomas D. Harter

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether suicide can be morally justified within the framework of Immanuel Kant's ethical theory. Kant is often interpreted as categorically condemning all forms of suicide, based on his formulations of the Categorical Imperative. However, this interpretation overlooks important textual and conceptual ambiguities. The research critically engages with Thomas D. Harter's attempt to defend a more permissive reading by distinguishing between two types of self-killing: suicide motivated by self-love, which is morally impermissible, and self-killing from duty, which may be morally praiseworthy. While Harter's approach is philosophically valuable, it remains insufficient for several reasons. First, it fails to properly account for the structure of Kant's system of duties and the relations among perfect and imperfect duties. Second, it risks confusing Kantian deontology with utilitarianism or Humean sentimentalism by appealing to outcomes such as beneficence or emotional motives. Instead of distinguishing types of suicide, this paper argues that a proper Kantian evaluation of suicide must be based on the agent's maxims, intentions, and relation to the moral law. It further shows that suicide could be morally permissible in cases where continuing to live would undermine one's ability to act as a representative of humanity. Drawing on some of Kant's primary works, the paper concludes that suicide may be justified when the agent can no longer live worthily or rationally. Thus, Kant's ethics allows for a more flexible and context-sensitive account of suicide than often assumed.

Keywords: Kantian Ethics, suicide, moral duties, categorical imperative.

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Submitted: 16/7/2025, **Revised:** 7/9/2025, **Accepted:** 10/9/2025.

To cite: p.239

Introduction

Immanuel Kant's ethical judgments are grounded in his three formulations of the Categorical Imperative, which evaluate actions in themselves, independent of external consequences or contingent factors. Consequently, many scholars criticize Kantian ethics as overly rigid and inflexible. However, Kant does not always state explicitly what the moral verdict is in relation to certain actions—particularly suicide—because his primary concern is to establish a systematic method that can be universally applied, regardless of outcomes. As a result, many commentators argue that Kant unequivocally condemns all forms of suicide. For example, Michael J. Cholbi contends in *Kant and the Irrationality of Suicide* that “no one may ever will his own death, nor let it occur” (Cholbi160).⁽¹⁾

Conversely, Thomas D. Harter argues in *Reconsidering Kant on Suicide* that Kant does not categorically reject all forms of suicide and that a plausible interpretation of Kantian ethics could allow for its permissibility. This paper criticizes Harter's argument by demonstrating that it is neither necessary to distinguish two types of suicide nor to posit a conflict between Kant's conceptions of duty in order to conclude that suicide may be morally permissible. It is important to emphasize that this critique of Harter is not intended as a critique of Kant himself, nor does it aim at portraying Kantian ethics as rigid or deficient. Rather, the objective of this paper is to explore whether suicide can, under certain conditions, be morally justified within the Kantian ethical framework.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, it examines Kant's examples of suicide to assess whether his texts support a morally consistent position on the issue. Second, it engages with Harter's interpretation in detail, highlighting key conceptual moves that are critically assessed in the subsequent section. Third, the study offers a critique of Harter's proposed distinction between two types of suicide. Finally, it considers the structure of Kant's conceptions of duty, exploring their interrelations to clarify whether suicide can be morally permissible according to Kantian ethics.

1.0 Kant's Examples of Suicide

Kant discusses several examples of suicide throughout his writings, and these have become central to debates regarding whether suicide can be morally permissible within his ethical framework. This section examines these examples to illustrate the interpretive tensions and the possibility of conflicting readings of Kant's position on suicide.

One of the most frequently cited cases is that of Cato. Many commentators interpret this example as evidence that Kantian ethics allows for morally justified suicide. This view is often supported by Kant's remark in *Lectures on Ethics*, where he states that Cato's act is “the only example which has given the world the opportunity of defending suicide” (*Lectures on Ethics* 149).⁽²⁾ However, this interpretation is not

uncontested. Latham (2007), among others, highlights Kant's conclusion in the same lecture to argue against using Cato's case as support for permissibility.⁽³⁾ Indeed, Kant ultimately asserts:

[M]an may not use his freedom against himself to his own destruction ... No chance or misfortune ought to make us afraid to live ... Had Cato faced any torments which Caesar may have inflicted upon him with a resolute mind and remained steadfast, it would have been noble of him; to violate himself was not so. Those who advocate suicide and teach that there is authority for it necessarily do much harm in a republic of free men. (Lectures on Ethics 153).

Thus, scholars remain divided over how to interpret Cato's suicide. Some take it as evidence that suicide can, under certain conditions, be compatible with the Categorical Imperative, while others perceive it as ultimately condemned by Kant's reasoning.

Another illustrative case appears in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, presented as one of Kant's "casuistical questions." In this example, a man bitten by a rabid dog begins to feel the onset of hydrophobia and chooses to end his life to prevent harming others:

A man who had been bitten by a mad dog already felt hydrophobia coming on. He explained, in a letter he left, that, since as far as he knew the disease was incurable, he was taking his life lest he harm others as well in his madness (the onset of which he already felt). Did he do wrong? (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 220).

Similarly, another "casuistical question" concerns Frederick the Great of Prussia. This example, used by Cholbi to suggest that Kantian ethics may permit suicide, involves the hypothetical moral status of carrying poison into battle:⁽⁴⁾

Can a great king who died recently be charged with a criminal intention for carrying a fast-acting poison with him, presumably so that if he were captured when he led his troops into battle he could not be forced to agree to conditions of ransom harmful to his state?... for one can ascribe this purpose to him without having to presume that mere pride lay behind it. (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 220).

In posing these casuistical questions, Kant offers no definitive verdict regarding whether the suicides in question are morally permissible, thereby, leaving the matter unresolved and open to interpretation.

In addition to these cases, Kant introduces two other compelling examples—those of Lucretia and Christ. In *Lectures on Ethics and Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant contrasts Lucretia, who takes her life after being dishonored, with Christ, who permits himself to be executed.⁽⁵⁾ These examples illustrate Kant's distinction between actively seeking death and passively allowing death when it is imposed by others.

Given the complexity and ambiguity of these cases, it is crucial to examine them

carefully before engaging with broader theoretical claims. For ease of reference, the following abbreviations will be used throughout the remainder of this paper: the case of Cato (CA), the man bitten by the rabid dog (M), Frederick the Great (F), Lucretia (L), and Christ (CH).

2.0 Thomas D. Harter's Argument

In *Reconsidering Kant on Suicide*, Thomas D. Harter argues that “some self-killing, such as Cato's, appears virtuous and possibly defensible without committing a contradiction or tautology” (Harter 168). Harter's approach is grounded in a distinction between two types of self-killing. The first, which he identifies simply as “suicide,” is neither moral nor morally praiseworthy. The second, which he labels “self-killing from duty,” is presented as morally praiseworthy and potentially defensible within Kantian ethics (Harter 168, 181).

Harter's argument develops in several stages. First, he revisits Kant's two central arguments against suicide, both articulated in the *Groundwork* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*. To clarify these, Harter turns to Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, particularly the example of Cato, which he treats as a key illustration. Second, he argues that Kant himself implicitly distinguishes between two types of suicide by referring to two different moral contexts: the abstract casuistical questions posed in the *Groundwork* and *Metaphysics*, and the historical example of Cato in the *Lectures on Ethics*. Finally, Harter raises a concern about whether Kant's ethics adequately addresses situations in which agents foresee the permanent loss of their rational capacities—such as in the rabid dog case (M) (Harter 168).

Harter begins by reiterating the familiar Kantian objections to suicide. The first is that suicide violates the Formula of Universal Law (the “law of nature” formulation) (Harter 168). The second is that it violates the Formula of Humanity, by treating oneself as a mere means rather than as an end in oneself (Harter 170). This paper does not focus on explaining how suicide violates these formulas, it aims at arguing that there may be alternative grounds within Kant's ethics for considering some forms of suicide morally permissible. Consequently, Harter's argument is critiqued as neither sufficient nor complete.

In the second stage of his analysis, Harter discusses Kant's three objections to suicide in the *Lectures on Ethics* (Harter 172).⁽⁶⁾ First, Kant claims that suicide violates the Categorical Imperative, which he considers the supreme principle of morality. Second, suicide is said to involve a misuse of one's freedom as a rational being (Harter 173). Harter concludes from this that “the only way for us to achieve the ends of mankind—of which man, as a rational being, is also an end—is by the reasonable use of our freedom” (Harter 173). However, he does not adequately define what

constitutes the “reasonable” use of rationality, which risks conflating Kantian ethics with consequentialist or Aristotelian moral theories. The third reason Kant provides is that suicide rests on a maxim that rational agents cannot will as universal law (Harter 174).

Up to this point, Harter offers no clear justification for how suicide could be morally permissible according to Kant’s ethics. To move forward, he draws on Allen Wood’s example that distinguishes between “falsification” and “lying,” using it as an analogy to justify his own distinction between two types of self-killing (Harter 176).⁽⁷⁾

The most substantial portion of Harter’s argument is developed through a reconsideration of the purpose of Kant’s “casuistical questions.” He claims these examples are designed to illustrate actions that may be compatible with morality even if not motivated by duty. Often, such actions are driven by self-love rather than pure moral intention. Nevertheless, Harter argues that some instances of self-killing—such as Cato’s—may be motivated by duty and thus be virtuous (Harter 178). To support this view, Harter explores three possibilities.

First, he considers whether Cato’s act (CA) could be virtuous because it is motivated by reason, aligning with ancient Greek ethical ideals. This is ultimately dismissed, since Kant views it as irrational to commit suicide based on reason alone. Second, Harter entertains the idea that preserving one’s own life is not an absolute duty, but he rejects this view as inconsistent with Kant’s ethics (Harter 180). Third, he suggests that Cato’s act may be virtuous because it is motivated by beneficence toward the Roman people.⁽⁸⁾ While Kant condemns suicides driven by self-interest, Harter maintains that Cato’s action was not motivated by self-interest but rather by concern for public welfare (Harter 180).

Despite distinguishing two types of self-killing, Harter ultimately concludes that even if an act like Cato’s may appear virtuous, it remains morally blameworthy within Kant’s framework. To illustrate this, he turns to the example of Lucretia (L). While her suicide may seem virtuous, Kant criticizes her for failing to uphold her moral duty to defend her honor. Harter takes this as evidence that even morally motivated suicides are not free of blame (Harter 182).

To explain this apparent contradiction—that suicide can be both praiseworthy and blameworthy—Harter offers two responses. First, he points to Kant’s distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Second, he asserts that Kant’s ethical system does not allow for conflicts between such duties. However, Harter’s claim that Cato acted out of beneficence remains problematic. According to Kant, beneficence is an imperfect duty and cannot override the perfect duty of self-preservation.

Harter asserts that rational individuals must determine the best course of action among three virtuous duties: the duty to preserve one’s own life, the duty of beneficence, and the duty to pursue moral perfection (Harter 183). These belong to two

distinct categories—perfect and imperfect duties—which leads Harter to conclude that Cato's suicide was simultaneously virtuous and blameworthy. The duty to preserve life is perfect and therefore renders self-killing blameworthy, while the act of beneficence is an imperfect duty that, in this case, justifies the same act.

Harter concludes with a discussion of the rabid dog case (M), which raises a question he believes Kant does not resolve: "What if losing one's rationality is foreseeable?" (Harter 184). He suggests that this presents a paradox: committing suicide would violate the Formula of Humanity, yet refraining might result in a loss of rationality and, with it, the capacity to act morally. However, Harter does not explain how (M) violates the Formula of Humanity. According to his own interpretation, suicide is immoral when one uses oneself merely as a means to destroy humanity or fails to treat oneself as an end in oneself (Harter 171).

In sum, Harter's argument rests on differentiating two types of self-killing and on positing a conflict between perfect and imperfect duties. One way to criticize his position is to show that he either misunderstands Kant's distinction between types of duties or fails to provide a coherent account of their interaction. It is important to note that this paper does not reject Harter's conclusion outright. Rather, it challenges the internal logic and sufficiency of his argument to develop a more robust Kantian defense of the permissibility of suicide—one that does not rely on bifurcating types of suicide or assuming a conflict between duties. The next section turns to this critique in detail.

3.0 The Problem of Distinguishing between Two Types of Self-Killing

Harter's argument remains insufficient and incomplete because he fails to recognize Kant's methodological approach, which consists of both analysis and synthesis. Kant begins the *Groundwork* by analyzing the common understanding of morality to differentiate various motivational forces—such as feeling, desire, inclination, and duty—and then synthesizes these distinct elements to establish a framework for a life worth living. Consequently, before determining whether suicide can be considered morally virtuous in accordance with Kantian ethics, it is necessary to analyze the nature of the question itself. This entails asking whether it is adequate to investigate an action in isolation or whether it is imperative to consider other internal elements, especially motives.

To answer this, Kant draws a crucial distinction between acting from duty and acting merely in accordance with duty. For example, consider the shopkeeper who treats his customers honestly, not out of a sense of moral obligation, but because such behavior enhances trust and boosts his profits. In this instance, the shopkeeper acts from self-love rather than from duty. Consequently, he uses others as a means to his own end—profit—which violates the second formula of the categorical imperative. In

contrast, when the shopkeeper acts honestly from duty, his action acquires genuine moral worth.

It is not sufficient to assess the action alone; it is also necessary to examine other elements such as motives, intentions, purposes, and maxims. Kant affirms this need: “The correct determination of this principle in comparison with maxims based on need and inclination, so that it may escape from its predicament about claims from both sides and not run the risk of being deprived of all genuine moral principles through the ambiguity into which it easily falls” (Groundwork 4:405).⁽⁹⁾ Harter acknowledges this essential feature of Kantian ethics—namely, that investigating the action in isolation is inadequate; the motive must also be considered. He recognizes the importance of maxims when addressing why suicide violates both the first and second formulas (Harter 168–170). However, Harter overlooks the necessity of considering other elements—such as intentions, purposes, and maxims—in an interconnected manner. Isolating these components from one another undermines the analysis.

This approach may raise a challenge: one might argue that such a method shifts the focus away from the action itself and toward extraneous factors. However, this objection fails, for the elements in question—intentions, purposes, and maxims—are intrinsic to the action itself. An action does not exist in a moral vacuum; it is constituted by these internal features. Moreover, if we were to regard these components as extrinsic, the agent could no longer be held morally responsible for their actions, which would instead appear to be the result of heteronomous or external causes. Kant rejects such heteronomy. He also dismisses the scientific model of explanation that attempts to understand a phenomenon by seeking external causes. Kant critiques this model because it relies on appearances rather than on the underlying reality. Consequently, conflicts inevitably arise when phenomena are analyzed solely in terms of appearances. Kant’s criticism of this method is evident in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, where he rejects empirical approaches to morality.

Harter’s treatment of the example of Cato (CA) reflects these shortcomings. He argues that Cato’s suicide is morally justified because it is driven by benevolence rather than by self-interest. Harter juxtaposes two possible causes for Cato’s action—namely, personal desire and concern for the overall well-being of the Roman people—without analyzing their underlying moral structures (Harter 180). This juxtaposition suggests that both causes belong to the same category or arise from the same type of motive. Harter’s method—isolating a singular explanatory cause—neglects the full array of moral prerequisites for an action. He detaches the action from other vital moral considerations. In this respect, Harter’s methodology mirrors the scientific approach that Kant criticizes in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. A useful analogy here is the shift initiated by the Copernican Revolution: prior to it, scientists interpreted appearances as reality and concluded that the sun revolved around the earth. Only when they examined

a broader set of causal factors did they arrive at a more accurate understanding. Likewise, in ethics, deeper insight requires more than reliance on appearances.

Another critique of Harter's analysis arises from the possibility that Cato's motivation—his desire or maxim—may be rooted in emotional beneficence rather than in moral duty. For instance, it is plausible that (CA) suicide stems from a feeling of compassion rather than from a sense of obligation. To improve his argument, Harter would need to explore the moral prerequisites of action and demonstrate that Cato's action arises from duty and not merely from emotion or desire.

Moreover, Kant does not condemn suicide because it is an inherently immoral action; rather, he condemns it based on the maxims and internal features associated with it. Harter compares two causes of Cato's suicide—self-interest and concern for the Roman people—to argue that both fall under the category of maxims. To determine whether suicide is morally impermissible according to Kant's framework, two steps must be taken: first, explain why suicide from self-love is condemned; and second, demonstrate why a maxim based on concern for others' well-being does not justify suicide.

Kant unequivocally rejects self-love as a valid maxim, as it cannot be universalized into a natural law. To elaborate, he introduces the notion of the "law of nature" within the universal formula. Kant analyzes suicide in light of natural inclinations to illustrate that morality and nature can align rather than conflict. He presents the example of an individual overwhelmed by unbearable suffering who contemplates suicide out of self-love. Kant poses the question of whether such a maxim could be willed as a universal law. He responds:

"The only further question is whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. It is then seen at once that a nature whose law is would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feelings whose destination is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contradict itself and would therefore not subsist as nature; thus that maxim could not possibly be a law of nature and, accordingly, altogether opposes the supreme principle of duty" (Groundwork 4:422).

Suicide, for Kant, undermines nature itself because it uses the very instincts meant to preserve life to destroy it. Moreover, if self-love were universalized as a reason for suicide, humanity would ultimately cease to exist. Suicide based on self-love therefore violates the formula of the law of nature and the duty of self-preservation.

Furthermore, such an act breaches the Formula of Humanity by treating the self merely as a means—to escape suffering—and not as an end in itself. To understand why Kant might consider Cato's suicide morally justified, one must examine whether beneficence toward the Roman people can qualify as a moral maxim. At first glance, acting from beneficence appears commendable. However, this is misleading unless

such beneficence is undertaken as a duty. Actions rooted in emotion or sentiment—unless guided by reason—are unreliable and contingent. Therefore, it is not enough to act out of beneficence; such action must be performed as a duty within the broader system of duties.

The maxim of beneficence must be evaluated through all three formulas: the law of nature, the formula of humanity, and the formula of the kingdom of ends. According to the formula of the law of nature: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (Groundwork 4:412).⁽¹⁰⁾ This requires asking whether everyone could will a maxim of self-sacrifice to benefit others to the extent that it entails suicide. In such a world, people would regularly destroy themselves to fulfill others’ desires. Though superficially noble, this would ultimately lead to self-erasure and the collapse of humanity. Clearly, this cannot serve as a sustainable moral law.

Such a scenario would also give rise to a problem of self-effacement: when individuals help others without limit, they risk eroding their own self-worth and moral agency. Moreover, actions driven solely by the external goals of others can lead one to commit immoral acts in the name of service. A paradox emerges: while suicide might help fulfill another’s needs, it also precludes the agent from fulfilling duties to others. If everyone acted in this way, it would become impossible to help anyone, as all potential helpers would cease to exist. In this sense, self-preservation is a necessary condition for beneficence. The perfect duty to preserve one’s life must precede the imperfect duty to aid others.

Additionally, a maxim of beneficence must be applied universally—serving the entirety of humanity, not a select group. Suicide is motivated by beneficence toward a limited population, such as the Roman people, fails to meet this condition and thus violates the first formula.

Such an action also contravenes the Formula of Humanity: “Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Groundwork 4:429).⁽¹¹⁾ If an individual commits suicide for others’ benefit, they use themselves merely as a means, thereby violating moral equality. One might object that denying differences between self and others also violates the second formula. Yet this is a misunderstanding. Recognizing that all individuals are ends in themselves does not entail a hierarchy or preference; it means that all ends must be equally respected as expressions of shared humanity.

Another criticism of Harter’s argument is his failure to consider the interrelations between duties when treating (CA) as a morally praiseworthy action rooted in beneficence. Such a suicide also violates the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends: “Act in accordance with maxims of a universally legislative member for a merely possible realm of ends” (Groundwork 4:439).⁽¹²⁾ In this ideal moral community, members must act in ways that sustain its continued existence. A person who commits suicide for

the sake of others removes themselves from this moral community. If such acts were universalized, the community would collapse.

In sum, it is impossible to justify suicide out of beneficence without examining its relation to the full system of duties, as such an act violates all three formulations of the categorical imperative. Harter's attempt to distinguish between two types of self-killing is thus fundamentally flawed. Moreover, this distinction introduces confusion by aligning Kant's ethics with utilitarianism. Harter's emphasis on the "overall" well-being of the Roman people implies that Cato's suicide is justified by its utility—i.e., achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number. According to this reasoning, there are two types of self-killing—A and B—and suicide is morally praiseworthy when it prioritizes others' desires over one's own. This rationale belongs more to the principle of utility than to Kantian moral reasoning.

There are multiple grounds for rejecting this utilitarian importation. Kant's universal formula invokes the "universal I," which undermines the utilitarian division between the non-universal "I" and "others." To understand the "universal I," one must grasp the concept of the transcendental "I." While differences between self and others exist at the level of appearance, they do not exist at the level of moral law. The moral law applies universally, linking the agent to all rational beings within the noumenal realm. Kant's second formula reinforces this by insisting that all persons be treated as ends, not as means. Utilitarianism, by contrast, allows preferences for the greatest number's desires over the individual's, thereby dividing humanity into two unequal groups: "I" and "others."

In conclusion, Kantian ethics reject basing action on others' desires or projects. Nevertheless, it remains important to explore potential tensions among Kant's various duties. This task will be undertaken in the next section, which critically addresses Harter's justification of (CA) as a morally praiseworthy suicide.

4.0 The Conflict of Duties

Harter addresses three different duties relevant to the case of Cato (CA): the duty of self-preservation, the duty of beneficence, and the duty to increase one's moral perfection (Harter 183). However, he does not sufficiently explain the basis for this distinction or the relationships among these duties. One reason for Harter's misunderstanding of Kant's notion of duty lies in his failure to consider perfect duties more broadly. Kant discusses not only the duty of self-preservation but also other perfect duties, such as the duty not to lie or make false promises. Therefore, it is crucial to account for how all duties—perfect and imperfect—are interrelated within a unified moral system, rather than isolating them.

Although Harter asserts that perfect and imperfect duties cannot conflict,

his representation of duties suffers from several conceptual flaws. First, he fails to distinguish between the positive and negative formulations of duties. Second, he characterizes all three aforementioned duties as wide duties, implying that individuals have broad discretion in how to fulfill them. Consequently, he misrepresents the perfect duty of self-preservation by expressing it in a positive form—namely; that individuals are free to choose whatever best preserves their lives. However, representing perfect duties positively allows for problematic interpretations: it might imply that suicide could be virtuous if it seems to be the best option for preserving one's moral agency.

In contrast, presenting perfect duties in their negative form emphasizes the prohibition of specific actions, regardless of circumstances. Under this view, suicide is prohibited as a specific act, whether it is carried out with a gun or by jumping from a building. Thus, the circumstances do not affect the moral evaluation of the act itself. By expressing the perfect duty of self-preservation in a positive form, Harter risks introducing utilitarian reasoning into Kantian ethics. Individuals might then determine what is “best” based on personal or societal utility—preserving themselves or others through maximization of happiness or well-being. This undermines Kant's categorical imperative by introducing subjective criteria for moral evaluation.

Furthermore, failing to consider the relationship between perfect and imperfect duties confuses Kantian ethics with both utilitarianism and Hume's sentimentalism. If the duty of beneficence is derived solely from feelings, as in Humean ethics, then it loses its status as a duty grounded in reason. While Kant does not deny the role of natural feelings in moral motivation, he insists that such feelings must be subordinated to reason. Feelings alone, especially those of beneficence, may lead to immoral actions if not properly regulated by moral law. Therefore, it is insufficient to argue that perfect and imperfect duties never conflict; what matters is understanding their interrelationship.

To clarify these relationships, we may adopt a classification of duties based on two dimensions: their perfectness and their object (self or others). This yields four distinct duties, summarized in the following table:

The Object / The Perfectness	Perfect Duty	Imperfect Duty
I (self)	No suicide	Self-development
Others	No false promise	Helping others in need

In this table, imperfect duties are expressed positively—they require the performance of certain actions. For example, one may choose how to develop oneself or how best to help others. Perfect duties, by contrast, are expressed negatively—they prohibit certain actions. For instance, one must not lie or commit suicide. While it might appear that perfect duties are more important than imperfect ones, the more accurate interpretation is that perfect duties are necessary conditions for the fulfillment

of imperfect duties. Without preserving oneself, for example, one cannot fulfill the duty of helping others.

One might argue that the duty of self-development entails acting from self-love, which Kant explicitly rejects as a moral maxim. This would imply that the duty of self-development should override the duty to help others. However, distinguishing duties based on their object does not imply they are unrelated or that one should override another. Rather, Kant's notion of the universal "I" helps illustrate the moral symmetry between self and others. The duty of self-development and the duty of beneficence are interdependent: moral development equips the agent with the capacities necessary to help others, and the awareness of the need to help others motivates further self-development.⁽¹³⁾

Accordingly, all four duties are mutually dependent, making the question of suicide more complex within Kant's ethical system. To further understand when suicide may be morally justified, we must ask: Why is life important? Why should we live? Kant addresses this in his *Lectures on Ethics*, stating: "Life is not to be highly regarded for its own sake. I should endeavor to preserve my own life only so far as I am worthy to live" (*Lectures on Ethics*, 150).⁽¹⁴⁾ Therefore, one must live worthily, and the purpose of living—not life itself—holds moral significance.

This purpose is clarified through the second formula of the Categorical Imperative, which requires us to act as representatives of humanity. Living should be aimed at humanity, not personal gratification. If an agent can no longer fulfill this moral function—if he can no longer represent humanity—suicide may be justified. Kant writes: "To live is not a necessity; but to live life honorably while life lasts is a necessity" (*Lectures on Ethics*, 152). Thus, if something happens that permanently prevents the agent from living honorably or representing humanity—such as a terminal illness or loss of rationality—then suicide may be morally appropriate.

This reasoning helps resolve Harter's so-called "paradox" concerning the case of the man (M) bitten by a rabid dog. Harter considers this a paradox because suicide in this case violates the second formula, even though the man will soon lose the capacity for moral agency. However, if the agent's intention, maxim, and understanding of rationality are considered, the paradox dissolves. Suicide violates Kant's ethics only if it is motivated by self-love or a desire to avoid suffering. But if it is performed for the sake of humanity, it may be justified. In this case, the man commits suicide to avoid becoming inhuman—irrational, driven by instinct, no longer capable of moral action. His suicide is thus a way of preserving his dignity as a moral agent.

Similarly, Cato's case (CA) can be analyzed in light of this reasoning. While we do not know his exact maxim or intention, several possibilities help illustrate why Kant might regard his act as morally permissible—or not. In the first scenario, Cato kills

himself out of self-love to escape torture. This is morally impermissible, as it violates the first and second formulas. In the second scenario—Harter's own account—Cato acts out of beneficence toward the Roman people. While this seems praiseworthy, it is problematic if Cato had alternative ways of fulfilling this duty. If he could have continued representing humanity by enduring torture and inspiring resistance, then suicide was not morally justified.

A third scenario offers a more defensible reading: Cato commits suicide because he judges that humiliation by the enemy would render him unworthy of life, and incapable of fulfilling his moral duties. In this case, his suicide is not an act of escape, but a final effort to preserve moral dignity. Thus, while Kant might say that it is "better to be tortured than to commit suicide," he may also allow that, under specific conditions, suicide can be morally acceptable—if it arises from duty and not from emotion or inclination.

Conclusion

Harter's argument for distinguishing between two types of self-killing—suicide from self-love and self-killing from duty—ultimately proves inadequate. While his attempt to reconcile Kantian ethics with the moral permissibility of suicide is commendable, his approach misconstrues the structure and interrelation of Kantian duties. His reliance on beneficence as a moral justification for suicide neglects the systematic coherence required in Kant's ethics, where no duty—particularly an imperfect one—can override a perfect duty without careful contextual analysis.

This paper has argued that it is unnecessary to distinguish between two types of suicide to assess its moral permissibility. Rather, we must consider the full set of internal requirements of moral action—intentions, maxims, and purposes—and examine them in relation to Kant's three formulas of the Categorical Imperative. Suicide may be morally justified in Kantian terms if and only if it arises from the recognition that one can no longer represent humanity or live in a morally worthy manner. Such justification is possible in cases like (M), where rational agency is permanently lost, but not in cases like (CA), where alternative honorable courses of action remain open.

Therefore, Kant's ethics does not condemn all suicide. It allows for the moral permissibility of suicide under narrow conditions namely, when continuing to live would preclude fulfilling one's fundamental moral duty to humanity. This interpretation preserves the rigor of Kantian moral theory while offering a more nuanced understanding of moral agency in extreme circumstances.⁽¹⁵⁾

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Endnotes

- (1) See also Vong, G., "In Defense of Kant's Moral Prohibition on Suicide to Avoid Suffering." and Latham, Stephen R., "Kant Condemned All Suicide."
- (2) For instance, see Cooley (38).

- (3) For more information on how the example of Cato violates the Categorical Imperative, see Latham, *Kant Condemned All Suicide*. For an argument that the example of Cato does not violate the Categorical Imperative, see Cooley, *A Kantian Moral Duty for the Soon-to-be Demented to Commit Suicide*.
- (4) For more information, see Cooley (37).
- (5) For more information, see Unna (459–60).
- (6) Harter uses another reference for *Lectures on Ethics*, which is Cambridge edition.
- (7) Wood does not argue whether suicide could be morally permitted, but he emphasizes the importance of considering Kant's examples of suicide as evidence of flexibility. See Wood (240–44; 172–73).
- (8) The third possibility is also explored by Hardwig. See Hardwig (283–90).
- (9) Gregor edition.
- (10) Gregor edition.
- (11) Yale edition.
- (12) Yale edition.
- (13) Another example that illustrates the conflict between duties—and how such a conflict might be approached—is provided by the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre in his article *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Sartre describes a situation in which no moral guidelines are available, which he refers to as “forlornness.”
- (14) Hackett edition.
- (15) Although this paper concentrates on the critique of Thomas D. Harter's reading of Kant, it is important to acknowledge that a comprehensive account of Kant's position on suicide would require tracing its development across his major ethical works (*Groundwork*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, and *Metaphysics of Morals*), as well as his anthropological reflections in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Such a broader study, which would also situate the ethical treatment of suicide within Kant's anthropological discussions of the love of life and fear of death, lies beyond the scope of this paper but represents a promising direction for future research.

To cite this article: Sharaf, Ali. "Kant on Suicide: A Critical Response to Thomas D. Harter." *Arab Journal for the Humanities*, 44, 174, 2026, 223–239.
<https://doi.org/10.34120/ajh.v44i174.3635>

الإشارة المرجعية للبحث:

شرف، علي: "كانط) والانتحار: استجابة نقدية لـ(توماس د. هارتر)"، *المجلة العربية للعلوم الإنسانية*، جامعة الكويت: المجلد 44، العدد 174، 2026، 223–239.

<https://doi.org/10.34120/ajh.v44i174.3635>

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P-ISSN: 1029 - 6069

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