



# Love's Imperative: A Study on Kant and Kolbe

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## **Abstract**

From where does Kant's categorical imperative come? Can Kant's moral vision lead to the virtue of love? To help answer these questions, this paper will set Kant's philosophy against the life of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe. Fr. Kolbe, the martyr of Auschwitz, led a life of love for God and his fellow man so whole in its calling, one is at times unsurprised by this final and most famous act of sacrifice. In allowing his life to be exchanged for that of a prisoner designated to die from isolation at the baleful camp, the Pole bore testament to his faith's highest ideals. What prompted his final, fateful choice and how close does his faith's own imperative approach love? Fr. Kolbe will be compared to Kant in that the former, through his faith, presented an adherence to something beyond human imperatives. Ultimately, this essay will seek to answer whether the differences between imperatives and attainments truly separate Kant from Kolbe.

*Let us follow for a moment the clue of the martyr and the suicide; and take the case of courage...He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.*

G. K. Chesterton

When commenting on the residual, though potent, effects Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* has had on the Western mind since its inception, former Franciscan University Professor Benjamin Wiker struck a lamentable note. Wiker (2008) cited the coupling of humanity's most sundry, or sordid, desires legitimized as "rights," and the construction of governments to, in effect, guarantee such liberties. This, the author saw as becoming more and more commonplace as modern society struggled to discover, or perhaps rediscover a non-transcendent morality. The rationality of Hobbes's own ensuing Age of Enlightenment seemingly held little sway in the public ethos, as Wiker correctly pointed to the Englishman's paradigm being a product of willful declaration, rather than reasoned argument.

When faced with this accordingly short, nasty, and brutish perspective on human nature, today's students normally pursue one of two alternatives. First, there is the begrudging, yet inevitable embrace of dismal turgidity; a rationalization, at some points born of reflex, at others of premature cynicism. Second, there appears a partial acceptance of the premise, but a rejection of the declaration-spawned conclusion.

In the latter avenue pursued, non-transcendent sourcing of morality is maintained. However, instead of resignedly coping with central planning generated virtues, a reborn, humanly-derived system of ethics is offered. Integral to this however is the establishment of reason as the chief agency through which one acts on ethical impulses. Unlike ancient

pagan philosophy, the realm of the eide is ventured upon, this time without Socratic daimons as travel guides. There are few thinkers who so closely approach these hinterlands as Immanuel Kant. Kant's *categorical imperative* is possibly the most refined of the non-transcendent ethical systems, though the contemporary secular culture at times seems blithely unaware of its tenure.

This being said, there are two points of intrigue with regard to the German's thought. From what, exactly, does the imperative come? Since Kant is dealing with a purely human source of his moral philosophy, this would of necessity emanate from nowhere else.

Next, what are the extents of its commands? Or, put in another way, can Kant's moral vision lead to theistic philosophy's cardinal virtue, love? The categorical imperative may possibly arrive at human goods, even those shared by a majority of persons. However, can these goods equate with the call to community and sanctity found in Christian thought?

For the purpose of providing a paradigm for these latter queries, this paper will set Kant's philosophy against the life of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe. Fr. Kolbe, the martyr of Auschwitz, led a life of love for God and his fellow man so whole in its calling, one at times is unsurprised by his final and most famous act of sacrifice. In allowing his life to be exchanged for that of a prisoner designated to die from isolation at the baleful camp, the Pole bore testament to his faith's highest ideals. What prompted his final, fateful choice, and how close does his faith's own imperative approach love? The priest will be compared to Kant in that the former, through his faith, presented an adherence to something beyond human imperatives. Ultimately, this essay will seek to answer

whether the differences between imperatives and attainments truly separate Kant from Kolbe.

In Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the German arrived at the conclusion that nature intended what was best for the human will. Nature, a seemingly benevolent, albeit intentionally deliberate entity in itself, granted reason as the means through which a good will was achieved. Contrasted to the siren song of the inclinations, reason sought "the establishment of a good will as its highest practical destination." Kant claimed this end of the good will to be likewise determined by reason, the faculty hastening the will's arrival to said destination. This arrival effectively served as reason's only source of satisfaction.

Building from this spare infrastructure, the philosopher next intended to elaborate on the concept of a likewise minimalist will which was "highly esteemed for itself, and is good without a view to anything further." The concept of duty was therefore necessary in this task though it hinted at various non-objective limitations. Leaving aside actions undertaken with duty in mind, since these may be duly affected by inclinations, Kant stressed the importance of acting "from duty."

Here, several beneficial avenues to action are opened. It was duty, for example, to maintain a person's life. Kant emphasized, however, that this call to action ought not be done "as duty requires" because there are human inclinations which direct this course. Rather, the preservation of life should be performed without regard to self-love or trepidation. Hence, the only remaining command would stem *from* duty, which gave the act "moral worth."

Kant added the capacity to be “beneficent when we can” to the possibilities of acting from duty. For this, he hypothesized the sorrowful philanthropist, an individual so immersed in his own misgivings that he did and could not feel the plights of those who potentially may benefit from his generosity. This melancholy effectively divorced the philanthropist from his fellow man, thus severing any inclination to do good for the purposes of bettering his community. In this case, should the donor somehow manage to wrest himself away from his troubles to act benevolently toward his objects, simply moving from the direct commands of duty, he may possess “genuine moral worth.”

Apart from these two avenues of acting from duty, Kant reinforced fundamental principles of the singular linearity of such actions. The objects of benefit from dutiful acts are not to be the main focus, since “an action done from duty derives . . . *not from the purpose* which is to be attained, but from the maxim by which it is determined . . . .” Hence, what is of import is strictly the will, or “*principle of volition*,” bolstering said acts. A performs B, not in order that C may be achieved, but sparingly because A so desires, or is compelled to.

Lastly, Kant elevated acting from duty as akin to following legal statutes. Here, “*Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law. . . .*” Proceeding from a mere inclination for a preferred effect on the object of an action is insufficient for Kant, because he “cannot have *respect* for it just for this reason that it is an effect and not an energy of the will.” Inclinations are to be overcome, not by simply neglecting them, but rather by allowing them to be overwhelmed by something more objectively powerful. The victor in this sense is a will-spawned law. It is not difficult to see a Mosaic Golden Calf caveat with this final fundamental of duty. Following acting from duty, and

stressing the will and not the object of benefit, what seems to command Kant is a humanly-derived metaphysical abstract: obeying a law because the will has stripped away all tangential inclination, revealing at last an imperative which the subject wishes to be there.

Returning home to nature's initial effort to employ reason to bring about a good will, Kant queried, "what sort of law that can be the conception of which must determine the will, even without paying any regard to the effect expected from it, in order that this will may be called good absolutely and without qualification?" Kant offered what would come to be the calling card for moral thought, the categorical imperative. The law an individual establishes as worthy of respect, owing to its being a product of duty as previously discussed, that wherein "I am never to act otherwise than so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (Kant 1949, 14–19).

It is worthwhile noting some peculiar instances that occur within Kant's chain leading to the categorical imperative. Somehow, nature endows rationality within human beings, enabling them to reach good wills, as charted by reason. The command to act in accordance with such a will manifests itself in the form of duty, perhaps to emphasize the distance of acts born from inclination. These acts from duty are to be conceived in the most spare linearity, their worth being assessed via the will choosing them. Such a choosing will ought adhere to a law it itself establishes, again to thwart any pull from desired inclined effects. Up to here, the linearity mentioned, which almost makes it seem as if Kant's agent is acting in a vacuum, is an abundantly solitary endeavor. Individuals are to act with little regard for anything other than themselves. Suddenly, however, when the objective, culminating law that finally adjudges a good will is formed, it is broadcast

to humanity writ large, perhaps paralleling the theoretical expansion *ex nihilo* of the universe. *We know what is best for each other by coming up with moral goods while completely being divorced from each other.*

Similar observations have been found throughout historical analysis of Kantian ethics. The Oxford Jesuit Fr. Frederick Copleston, when commenting on the German as part of his *A History of Philosophy*, pointed out the set of acts done “in accordance with duty is much wider than the class of actions performed for the sake of duty.” Copleston stated that the larger set of actions done in accordance with duty, which may possess variable shades of inclination, may not necessarily be “morally wrong.” However, according to Kant, these acts lack moral worth since they are not performed from duty. In this case the Jesuit posited the contrasting cases of a person who saved his own life because he had an inclination to do so, and a suicide. In the former example, this may not be a moral act. However, it is not “an immoral action in the sense in which suicide is immoral.”

In addition, Copleston wrote of the odd proportionality represented by acting for duty’s sake. Since Kant implies greater moral value to rise in ratio to the disinclination of performing such acts, then, as Copleston puts it, “the more we have to overcome ourselves to do our duty, the more moral we are.” Thus, provided an individual overcomes his tendencies, “it seems to follow that the baser a man’s inclinations are, the higher is his moral value. . . .” To this, the Jesuit struck at the implicit Manichean, or Heraclitean, paradigm of warring inclinations and duties. This view would be contrary to the “integrated personality, in whom the inclination and duty coincide.” Likewise, Copleston realized the potential, if not deliberate, challenge this Kantian line of reasoning



would present to natural law. This is most odd in a sense, considering the German endeavored to author, with reason as ghostwriter, a transcendent-free version of this logos (Copleston 1994, 316–317).

Joining the Jesuit in this examination of Kant’s ethical thought many years later was the contemporary British philosopher Roger Scruton. In his *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, Scruton focused on the categorical imperative’s vaunted objectivity. The categorical imperative’s commands, written in terms of ought and should, may or may not reach validity, but as Scruton stated, “they certainly claim it.” Though the imperative may have been argued by Kant to possess a priori validity, this command presupposed a postulated ideal world. In this realm, “the agent sees himself as one among many, of equal importance with them, deserving and giving respect on the basis of reason alone, and not on the basis of those empirical conditions which create distinctions between people.” The agent, solely bound by his nature as a rational being, follows a moral law not merely universal, but necessary as well.

Scruton asked if the original Kantian claim to objectivity could be maintained. Noting the difficulties that begin arising from this point, particularly the adjudging of a priori validity of the categorical imperative, Scruton wrote that Kant “recognizes that it is no more sufficient in the case of practical reasoning that it is in the case of scientific understanding to make such a claim.” Ultimately, Kant “left the gap between his metaphysics and his morals unclosed” (Scruton 2002, 154–156).

Notwithstanding these critiques on the possible limitations of Kantian ethical thought, it now follows to see whether these arguments help or hinder this most developed of non-transcendent moral systems in arriving at actions and states typically

the province of theistic truths. In order to advance in this direction, an examination of the life and death of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe is required.

As a young man in his twenties, Maximilian Kolbe once asked his mother Maria, “Pray that I will love without limits” (Treece 1982, viii). The entreaty was most appropriate for the man later considered the martyr of Auschwitz. Before examining the act for which he is most famous for, his decision to volunteer to suffer another man’s death sentence, it would be worthwhile to delve into accounts of Fr. Kolbe’s earlier life and career. From these, it is possible to construct a model offering unique perspectives regarding the ethical framework constructed by Kant.

In the spring of 1930, the Franciscan and four accompanying Brothers traveled via mail steamer to the Orient. Their destination was Japan, where in the city of Nagasaki Fr. Kolbe taught philosophy at the local seminary and published a Japanese language religious magazine. The latter involved learning the language as quickly as possible, and living in the most trying of conditions. The priest would often find himself sick from eating cuisine he was not accustomed to, coupled with his already complicating tuberculosis. As one of the Brothers put it, however, “We’re sleeping on straw . . . we eat from benches and sit on the ground. The poverty is extreme but we are very happy. . . .”

Despite the well-suffered hardships, Fr. Kolbe had to return at intervals to Poland to give an account of his efforts to his superiors during Provincial Chapter meetings. Successfully convincing his audiences to allow him to found a friary and train Japanese who wished to join, Kolbe noted, “a good religious is good not because he does much, but because he obeys” (Treece 1982, 46–48).

Poverty alone could not drain the Franciscan whose mission entailed “. . . to be one in will with Mary of the great fiat . . . to be perfectly united to the will of God.” Through this unity of faith and will, Fr. Kolbe stressed to his flock to allow God to “. . . transform you into a knight of love, who with others, will conquer the whole world, not in the sense of capturing it, but of freeing it” (Treece 1982, 73).

When war finally came to Poland, Fr. Kolbe, along with members from his friary were initially held at the internment camp of Amtitz. There the priest, facing starvation, caused his fellow inmates bewilderment by distributing his meager day’s rations to the most needy of prisoners. Soon, rumors began spreading of the prisoners’ release. Younger Brothers implored Fr. Kolbe to hide himself at local convents for fear of what the Germans might do to him on the way home. As Plato once responded to Crito’s plea, the priest refused the call and remained. God, he said, “wanted otherwise.” His steadfastness was later attributed by a fellow Franciscan to Fr. Kolbe’s “supernatural obedience” (Treece 1982, 85).

A few points are most clear and distinct in these accounts illuminating the priest’s character. Unlike Kant’s good will, Fr. Kolbe’s own volition does not itself spawn a course of duty it must follow. The trait of obedience appeared many more times in the various reminiscences on the latter’s life. For those who knew him, this quality was perhaps only matched by Fr. Kolbe’s piety. The priest’s will was good because he surrendered it to an ultimately better one. This divine will assigned duties that when followed led not only to a hypothesized ideal world, but the real world emancipation of all. It may be argued as to whether the presence or absence of any Kantian inclinations affected Fr. Kolbe’s decisions and actions. However, since the priest humbly surrendered

his will instead of allowing it the godlike abilities to author one's own duties, it is likewise feasible to point out that Fr. Kolbe's is the one more lacking in inclination. Kant divorces desired effects from his good will through duty. Ultimately, the adherence to self-duty is a desired effect. On the other hand, Fr. Kolbe allows another will, regarded as infinitely more benevolent than his own, to work through him.

At last, this will which works through Fr. Kolbe can be best seen in the priest's actions during the summer of 1941 at the dreaded Block 14 at Auschwitz. In response to a fellow prisoner's attempt to escape, Fr. Kolbe and 599 others were assembled and meticulously lined up according to height by their German captors. The commanding officer at the time informed the prisoners that though the lone escapee had been caught, ten of those assembled were condemned to die from starvation. Remarkably, Fr. Kolbe himself was passed over in the selection. Yet, when the condemned were being made ready for their dark fate, a forty-year-old Polish sergeant, Francis Gajowniczek, implored, "My wife and my children" (Treece 1982, 170).

Almost immediately, there appeared someone who assertively, though peaceably, made his way through the ranks of those spared. It was Fr. Kolbe. In polite, flawless German, the priest announced, "I wish to make a request please . . . I want to die in place of this prisoner." The guards were dumbfounded, and Fr. Kolbe persisted, "I have no wife or children. Besides, I'm old and not good for anything. He's in better condition." When demanded by the commandant to say who he was, he retorted, "A Catholic priest" (Treece 1982, 170–171).

Even in the cramped, filthy, penal block chosen for the captives' slow execution from starvation, Fr. Kolbe led others in prayer and heard as many confessions as he

could. So placid was the priest's suffering, a fate he bore for another, that the SS guards on call remarked, "So einen wie diesen Pfarrer haben wir hier noch nicht gehabt. Das muss ein ganz aussergewöhnlicher Mensch sein." *We've never had a priest here like this one. He must be a wholly exceptional man.* Finally, after two weeks, Fr. Kolbe was one of four surviving prisoners who would be given fatal injections of carbolic acid. Upon his death, an eyewitness account stated, "Father Kolbe was sitting upright . . . His body was not dirty like the others, but clean and bright . . . His eyes were open. Serene and pure, his face was radiant" (Treece 1982, 175–176).

Fr. Maximilian Kolbe's faithful obedience has been earlier noted. Yet aside from this separation from Kant's own humanly-derived imperative, there are more telling points of divergence made clearer by the priest's final act.

Previously, Kant's ethical framework was shown to be meticulously able to ascertain what was right for fellow human beings from the very distant and peculiar perch of being in conceptual isolation from them. This was not the case with Kolbe. Since the priest did not, through reason, manufacture routes to the good will via self-generated legal ordinances, he would seem to have been in constant contact with the transcendent source of his imperatives. It is this constant companionship with God, reminding the priest of his relationship to his fellow human beings, that solidifies Kolbe's final resolve. Love is more manifestly clear and possible when viewing one's self as part of a community of distinct fellows, a perspective that Kant for all his elegance in construction does not maintain.

Next, the issues raised by Fr. Copleston deserve revisiting. The Jesuit argued that Kant favored actions born out of the rifts carved between inclinations and duties. As

discussed, the more one has to overcome one's baser inclinations, the greater the moral value of the dutiful act. However, it is very possible in Maximilian Kolbe's example that he represented Copleston's integrated personality, one whose duties and inclinations in fact coincided. Simply from the historical accounts, Fr. Kolbe's actions in 1941 and before did not speak of the suppression of the priest's undisclosed desires, in order to provide for his flock. Rather, Fr. Kolbe almost joyously took to his assigned fate, alleviating the suffering of all, save himself, every step of the way. It begs to question whether Kant would have considered these examples of lesser moral worth by dint of Fr. Kolbe being inclined to perform them.

Lastly, there is a fundamental difference in the way both Immanuel Kant and Fr. Maximilian Kolbe chose to deal with human inclinations. It is up to this point obvious that both men valued selflessness as central to their moral worldviews. That Kant was even able to arrive at this juncture sans a transcendent source for his categorical imperative was and is most noteworthy. A survey of the older and more modern secular moralities shows many who fall far short of the German's skill and adherence to reason. In fact, so telling is his work that modern secular ethicists' shortcomings in this field reflexively imbue in Kant a touch of near-transcendence. However, to construct a moral duty and view it as a law is not to, as Kant said, overwhelm the inclinations, it is to choose not to deal with them.

Fr. Kolbe, like the savior he followed, wished and loved selflessly for the better of all, even his enemies. Though he may, as mentioned, have possessed inclinations that coincided with his duties, the priest knew all too well the limits of his mortal shell. To suffer the most dire torture, isolation, and death would have required Fr. Kolbe truly and

fully surrendering his will to God's. Once done, he would have been able to not merely ignore the inclinations for survival, or of despair, but to actually confront these and reject them.

Whether or not Kant's categorical imperative would encompass the actions of Fr. Kolbe is subject to further debate. It remains to be seen if the potential universal command to alleviate human suffering would clash against a similar one that called for preserving one's own life in light of injustice. What is not as arguable is the fundamental distinction between the natures of humanly and divinely-derived ethical commands; the uniqueness, beyond human reason, of love's imperative.

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