

# Describe Kant's Argument on the Right to Rebel and Why is IT Wrong

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## Introduction

Immanuel Kant's rejection of a legal right to rebellion is one of the most controversial parts of his political philosophy. Kant defended republican government, public reason, civil freedom, and gradual constitutional reform, yet he denied that subjects possess a juridical right to overthrow an existing sovereign. This position can appear inconsistent because he expressed admiration for the moral enthusiasm generated by the French Revolution, even while condemning revolutionary action as unlawful. The original discussion correctly identifies this tension but mistakenly refers to a revolution in 1968; the relevant event is the French Revolution of 1789. Kant's argument is best understood as an attempt to preserve a public legal order. Its weakness is that it can require obedience even when the state destroys the rights and legal conditions that supposedly justify political authority (Kant, "Perpetual Peace"; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Williams, 1983).

## Kant's Concept of Right

Kant defines right as the set of conditions under which the freedom of each person can coexist with the freedom of everyone else according to a universal law. Political authority is necessary because individuals living outside a civil condition cannot secure rights through private judgment alone. Even well-intentioned people may disagree about property, punishment, contract, or self-defense, and without a common authority each person becomes judge in his or her own case. Entering a civil condition is therefore not merely convenient; it is a duty of justice. The state provides public laws, courts, and coercive institutions that make reciprocal freedom determinate. Kant's opposition to rebellion follows from this framework. If every citizen retains a unilateral right to decide when government has lost legitimacy, the public legal order appears to collapse into competing private claims (Kant, "On the Common Saying"; Ripstein, 2009).

## Why Kant Calls a Right to Rebel Contradictory

Kant argues that a legal right to rebellion would be self-contradictory because the sovereign is the highest public lawgiving authority. A legal right must be authoritatively recognized and enforceable, but no superior civil authority exists above the sovereign within the state. If the constitution explicitly permitted subjects to overthrow the government whenever they judged it unjust, the sovereign would no longer possess final authority. Conversely, if rebels claim a right that the legal order does not

recognize, their claim is revolutionary rather than juridical. Kant therefore distinguishes moral dissatisfaction from enforceable public right. Citizens may believe that legislation is unjust, but they cannot transform that private judgment into a lawful authorization to depose the ruler. For Kant, the concept of a legally guaranteed revolution undermines the unity required for any system of public law.

## The Original Contract as an Idea of Reason

Kant does not treat the social contract as a historical event in which people literally transferred power to a ruler. It is an idea of reason used to test whether laws could have arisen from the united will of a free people. A law is legitimate when it can be conceived as one to which all citizens might consent under conditions of equality. However, this test guides lawmakers and public criticism; it does not authorize individuals to dissolve the state whenever actual laws fail the ideal. Kant fears that permitting rebellion in the name of the original contract would allow every faction to declare itself the authentic people. The contract therefore limits the moral authority of legislation without creating a judicial procedure for revolution. This separation between normative legitimacy and enforceable authority is central to his position and to its practical difficulty.

## Public Reason and Lawful Reform

Although Kant denies rebellion, he does not demand intellectual silence. In “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” he distinguishes the public use of reason from obedience within an official role. Scholars and citizens should be free to publish criticism, expose injustice, and argue for reform, even while officials perform lawful duties attached to their positions. Kant expects rulers to learn from public debate and gradually improve institutions. He also favors representative government and rejects paternalistic rule that treats adults as incapable of directing their own lives. Political progress should therefore occur through publicity, legislation, and constitutional reform rather than insurrection. This model assumes, however, that the state permits meaningful speech and contains some path by which criticism can influence law. Under systematic censorship or terror, public reason may have no practical effect (Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”).

## Resistance, Disobedience, and Revolution

Kant’s terminology must be handled carefully. He condemns active resistance aimed at overthrowing the sovereign, but his political writings leave difficult questions about passive noncompliance, refusal to participate in wrongdoing, and the duties of officials under unjust orders. His moral philosophy insists that individuals remain responsible for their actions and may not excuse wrongdoing merely by citing authority. This creates tension when legal obedience requires direct participation in injustice. A person cannot coherently claim both an unconditional duty to obey the state and an unconditional

duty never to violate moral law unless the two are guaranteed never to conflict. Later theories of civil disobedience attempt to occupy this space by allowing public, principled, and nonviolent lawbreaking without seeking to destroy the legal order. Kant did not develop a complete account of that possibility.

## Kant's Response to the French Revolution

Kant did not endorse the violent overthrow of the French monarchy as a lawful act. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he condemns rebellion and even regicide because subjects cannot punish the sovereign from whom public authority is legally derived. Yet in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he describes spectators' enthusiasm for the French Revolution as a sign of humanity's moral disposition toward freedom and republican government. The apparent contradiction becomes clearer when action and judgment are separated. Kant denies that revolutionaries possess a right to rebel, but he believes that observers' sympathy for constitutional freedom reveals moral progress. Once a revolution has succeeded and established a new legal order, he also insists that citizens owe obedience to the new government rather than attempting counterrevolution. Success does not make the original revolt lawful, but it creates a new civil condition (Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties"; Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals").

## The Problem of Tyranny

The strongest objection to Kant arises when a government is not merely imperfect but tyrannical. A state may abolish courts, imprison critics, persecute minorities, wage aggressive war, or use law as an instrument of terror. Kant's theory still appears to deny subjects a right to overthrow it because allowing private judgment to authorize revolution threatens public order. Yet this reasoning can become circular. The state is owed obedience because it represents public right, but it may continue to receive obedience even after destroying the institutions through which public right is realized. The theory therefore risks protecting the existence of authority more strongly than the freedom authority is supposed to secure. Critics argue that when law becomes organized domination, rebellion may defend rather than negate the conditions of rightful political life.

## The Risk of Civil War and Revolutionary Violence

Kant's caution should not be dismissed. Revolutions can produce civil war, revenge, economic collapse, foreign intervention, and new forms of dictatorship. Once political disputes are settled by force, groups may repeatedly attempt to seize power rather than accept constitutional procedures. The French Revolution itself passed through terror and war, demonstrating that opposition to tyranny does not guarantee a just outcome. Kant's rejection of rebellion reflects a serious concern that law cannot survive when each faction claims the authority to punish rulers. Modern history provides many

examples in which revolutionary movements replaced one oppressive regime with another. The moral case for resistance must therefore consider probability of success, civilian harm, the availability of reform, and the institutional order likely to follow. Kant's argument is strongest as a warning against romanticizing political violence.

## Why the Absolute Prohibition Is Unconvincing

Even if rebellion is dangerous, an absolute prohibition is difficult to defend. Moral and political judgment cannot be reduced to a choice between perfect obedience and unlimited private violence. Governments vary in legitimacy, and resistance includes strikes, refusal, sanctuary, noncooperation, civil disobedience, armed defense, and revolution. A regime committing genocide cannot plausibly demand obedience merely because it controls legal institutions. Nor can victims be required to wait for reform that the regime deliberately makes impossible. Kant's framework needs an emergency principle explaining when authority has so radically abandoned public right that subjects are no longer confronting a defective civil order but organized coercion without legitimate law. Without such a principle, his theory can make justice dependent on the cooperation of unjust rulers.

## Constitutional Remedies and Institutional Lessons

The best practical lesson from Kant is the importance of institutions that reduce the need for rebellion. Written constitutions, independent courts, representative legislatures, free elections, lawful impeachment, protected speech, and professional civil services provide mechanisms through which citizens can challenge authority without destroying the state. A political order is more legitimate when it allows criticism and peaceful transfer of power. Kant's fear of rebellion therefore supports constitutional design, even though his own theory inadequately addresses regimes that lack such safeguards. Modern democracies can interpret his position as a demand to institutionalize resistance within law: citizens need enforceable rights, opposition parties, judicial review, and procedures for removing leaders. Where these channels exist, revolution is harder to justify; where they are systematically eliminated, Kant's absolute conclusion becomes less persuasive.

## A Qualified Assessment

Kant is correct that a right to rebel cannot function like an ordinary legal entitlement within the authority it seeks to overthrow. He is also correct that revolutionary actors may misjudge circumstances, represent only a faction, or produce greater injustice. However, these points do not prove that rebellion is always morally wrong. The absence of a domestic legal procedure does not eliminate moral evaluation, especially when the state violates basic rights or closes every peaceful avenue of reform. A distinction is therefore needed between a juridical right enforceable under an existing constitution and a moral justification for resistance under extreme conditions. Kant explains

why revolution cannot be normalized as routine constitutional politics, but he does not show that people must submit indefinitely to a government that has abandoned reciprocal freedom.

## Conclusion

Kant rejects a right to rebellion because public rights require a final legal authority, and a constitution that authorizes its own overthrow would contradict that authority. He prefers public criticism, gradual reform, and republican institutions to violent revolution. His admiration for the French Revolution concerned the spectators' commitment to freedom, not a legal endorsement of revolutionary action. The theory offers a valuable warning about civil war, factional claims, and the unpredictable results of political violence. Nevertheless, its absolute form is wrong because it can require obedience to regimes that destroy courts, suppress public reason, and systematically violate human freedom. A more defensible position preserves Kant's commitment to lawful reform while recognizing that extreme tyranny may create a moral justification for collective resistance when no effective legal remedy remains.

## References

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