

Kant's Views On Human Rights

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Immanuel Kant is one of the most influential philosophers in modern moral and political thought. His ideas continue to shape discussions of human dignity, autonomy, rights, duty, and the limits of state power, even though contemporary human-rights documents do not simply reproduce his philosophy. The original essay contrasts Kantian ethics with utilitarianism and argues that Kant provides a stronger basis for protecting human beings because he refuses to treat individuals merely as instruments for producing a desirable social outcome. That central claim should be preserved. Kant's moral theory asks people to examine the maxim, or guiding principle, of an action and determine whether it could be willed as a universal law. It also requires humanity, whether in oneself or another person, to be treated always as an end and never merely as a means.

This framework is relevant to human rights because it locates moral worth in rational agency rather than wealth, citizenship, social usefulness, or majority approval. A person possesses dignity and therefore cannot be assigned a price in the same way as a commodity. Governments and institutions may pursue security, prosperity, or public welfare, but they must respect the status of persons who will be affected. Kantian ethics does not provide a complete contemporary list of rights, and some aspects of Kant's own political writings remain controversial. Nevertheless, the concepts of autonomy, universal law, equal moral standing, and respect for persons offer an important philosophical foundation for rights-based reasoning.

Kant's Moral Philosophy and the Good Will

Kant begins the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* by claiming that a good will is the only thing good without qualification. Intelligence, courage, wealth, and even happiness can be used badly when the will directing them is corrupt. A good will acts from respect for moral law rather than only from inclination, fear, or expected reward. This does not mean that emotions or consequences are worthless. It means that the moral worth of an action cannot depend solely on whether it happens to produce a pleasant result (Kant, 1996; Kant, 1998).

The original essay finds this aspect of Kant's theory attractive because a well-intentioned person may produce an unintended negative outcome that could not reasonably have been predicted. Kant would not say that consequences are irrelevant to every judgment. Rational agents must understand circumstances and choose means capable of achieving their duties. However, moral worth belongs principally to the maxim from which the person acts. A lucky outcome does not transform a selfish maxim into a moral one, and an unforeseen failure does not necessarily destroy the moral worth of an honest attempt.

The First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

The categorical imperative is a command of reason that applies regardless of a person's particular desires. Its first major formulation requires one to act only according to a maxim that could at the same time be willed as a universal law. The test asks whether the principle underlying an action could operate consistently if everyone in comparable circumstances followed it. A person considering a false promise to obtain money must ask whether a general practice of false promising could exist. If everyone used promises deceptively whenever convenient, trust in promises would collapse and the act would undermine the institution it depends upon.

Universalization is not a simple question of whether one would personally like everyone to behave in a certain way. It examines the rational consistency of the maxim and whether the agent can will the resulting world. This provides an impartial perspective. A person cannot create one moral exception for personal benefit while expecting everyone else to respect the rule. Human rights similarly require standards that do not change merely because the person affected belongs to an unpopular group.

The Humanity Formulation

The second formulation emphasized in the original essay states that humanity must be treated always as an end and never merely as a means. People inevitably use one another's services in ordinary life. A customer relies on a worker, and a patient relies on a clinician. The violation occurs when another person's rational agency is bypassed through deception, coercion, exploitation, or disregard. Treating someone as an end requires recognizing that person's capacity to form purposes and make decisions.

This principle gives Kantian ethics its direct connection with dignity. Torture, slavery, trafficking, discriminatory exclusion, and nonconsensual experimentation reduce persons to instruments of another goal. Even when a policy is said to benefit society, it cannot simply sacrifice individuals without considering their status as ends. Modern rights such as informed consent, equality before law, and protection from degrading treatment resonate strongly with this idea.

Autonomy and Human Dignity

Kant's notion of autonomy does not mean doing whatever one desires. An autonomous person gives moral law to oneself through reason and acts according to principles that could apply to all rational beings. Freedom is therefore connected with self-government rather than impulse. A person ruled entirely by appetite, fear, or manipulation is not fully exercising practical freedom (O'Neill, 1989).

Dignity follows because rational beings can understand and bind themselves through moral law. Things with market value may be replaced by equivalents, while persons have a worth that cannot be

exchanged. Contemporary human-rights language often uses dignity more broadly than Kant, extending protection clearly to children, people with significant cognitive disabilities, and others whose rational agency may be developing or impaired. A modern account should therefore avoid making rights depend on an individual's demonstrated intellectual capacity. Kant's framework is most useful when rational nature is understood as the basis of a moral community whose institutions protect every person.

Kant and Utilitarianism

The original essay contrasts Kant with Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. Utilitarian theories evaluate actions or rules according to their effects on overall welfare, happiness, or preference satisfaction. Their strength is attention to consequences. Public policy cannot responsibly ignore whether an action prevents suffering, saves lives, or distributes resources effectively. Kantian ethics, by comparison, warns that maximizing aggregate welfare can permit severe harm to a minority when their loss creates a larger numerical benefit.

The contrast should not be exaggerated. Sophisticated utilitarians develop rules and protections because insecurity, coercion, and rights violations generally reduce welfare. Kantian decision-makers also need empirical knowledge of consequences to understand what they are doing. The deepest difference concerns moral structure. For utilitarianism, individual interests enter a larger calculation. For Kant, some treatment is wrong because it violates the status of a person, even when the calculation appears favorable. Human-rights systems often combine both perspectives: they protect basic rights while allowing proportionate policy choices within those boundaries.

The Problem of Sacrificing the Few

The original essay argues that utilitarianism may sacrifice members of society for the greater good. Familiar thought experiments illustrate this concern. If punishing an innocent person would stop a riot and save several lives, a crude act-utilitarian calculation might appear to support punishment. Kantian ethics rejects it because deception and punishment without guilt treat the innocent person as an instrument. The state's duty to justice is not cancelled by expected public benefit.

Real cases are more complex. Governments routinely allocate limited medical resources, set safety regulations, and make decisions that distribute risks. A Kantian approach does not eliminate trade-offs. It requires institutions to justify them through universal principles, equal respect, transparency, and procedures that do not designate some people as disposable. Rights act as constraints on the ways collective goals may be pursued.

Intentions, Foreseeability, and Responsibility

The original essay gives the example of a person who intends to help but produces a negative result. Kant's emphasis on intention explains why moral judgment should distinguish deliberate harm from an unforeseen accident. Yet good intentions alone cannot excuse negligence. A person has a duty to use available reason, knowledge, and care. If harmful consequences were foreseeable and ignored, the maxim may reveal indifference rather than good will.

This distinction is important for professional ethics. A doctor, engineer, or public official cannot defend a harmful decision only by claiming benevolent motivation. Professional duties include competence, evidence, and attention to risk. Kantian ethics protects the moral importance of intention while still demanding that rational agents take responsibility for the means they choose.

Kant's Doctrine of Right

Kant distinguishes ethics, which concerns internal maxims and duties, from right, which concerns external freedom and the lawful coexistence of persons. The universal principle of right permits an action when its maxim can coexist with everyone's freedom under a universal law. Political institutions are needed because individual claims to freedom can conflict. A rightful civil condition establishes public laws, courts, and coercive authority that protect equal external freedom.

This makes Kant a significant liberal thinker. Rights are not merely favors granted by a ruler. They are conditions under which free persons can coexist. Property, contract, and public authority receive detailed treatment in his legal philosophy, though modern readers may reject some of his specific conclusions. The broader contribution is the idea that legitimate law must be capable of justification to persons as free and equal members of a public order.

Human Rights and International Order

Kant's essay "Toward Perpetual Peace" proposes republican government, a federation of free states, and a limited cosmopolitan right of hospitality. He did not design the United Nations or draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but his emphasis on universal moral law and international legal order influenced later traditions of cosmopolitan thought. Human rights claim that certain protections belong to people regardless of nationality. This universal scope is compatible with Kant's rejection of moral standards based solely on local advantage (Kant, 2006; United Nations, 1948).

Kant's cosmopolitanism also has limits. His right of hospitality is narrower than contemporary refugee and migration rights, and his writings include racial and gender hierarchies that conflict with equal dignity. A responsible analysis should not portray him as the complete originator of modern rights. Human-rights thought also arose from religious traditions, natural-law theories, antislavery struggles,

labor movements, feminist activism, anticolonial movements, and responses to atrocity.

Part B: How Kant Changes My View of Right and Wrong

Kant's theory changes my perspective by directing attention away from convenience and toward the principle I am willing to authorize through action. Before making a choice, I can ask what maxim I am following and whether I could accept everyone acting on it. This question exposes self-serving exceptions. If I justify lying because truth is inconvenient, I must consider a world in which people use the same principle against me. If the practice would destroy trust, my exception is not morally coherent.

The humanity formulation provides a second test. I must ask whether my action respects the other person's capacity to choose. This is especially important in relationships, employment, education, and digital communication. Manipulation may achieve an immediate goal while denying the other person information needed for an independent decision. Kant's approach therefore gives practical meaning to respect. Respect is not only politeness; it includes honesty, consent, fairness, and refusal to exploit vulnerability.

Rights and Duties

The original essay recognizes that Kant connects rights with duties. If one person possesses a right, others and institutions have corresponding obligations. The right not to be deceived implies a duty of honesty. The right to equal legal protection implies duties for courts and public officials. This relationship prevents rights language from becoming a list of personal demands without social responsibility.

Kant also distinguishes perfect duties, which prohibit acts such as lying, from imperfect duties, which require adopting ends such as helping others but leave discretion about how and when. Beneficence is not optional, yet no individual can assist everyone at every moment. This framework balances moral obligation with practical agency.

Criticisms of Kantian Ethics

Kant is often criticized for rigidity. His strong prohibition on lying appears difficult in cases where deception might protect an innocent person from violence. Critics argue that moral judgment must consider context and competing duties. Kant's defenders respond that exceptions based on predicted outcomes threaten the universality of moral law and that people remain responsible for their own actions rather than controlling every consequence. The debate shows that applying principles

requires careful formulation of the maxim and attention to institutional context.

Another criticism concerns emotion and relationships. Love, empathy, and care appear secondary when duty is described in highly rational terms. Care ethics argues that moral life includes dependence, particular relationships, and responsiveness to need. Kant need not be discarded, but dignity and universal respect can be combined with attention to care and social vulnerability.

Applying Kant to Contemporary Human Rights

Kantian ideas can illuminate privacy, artificial intelligence, medical consent, employment, and criminal justice. Collecting personal data without meaningful consent may treat users as sources of value rather than autonomous persons. An algorithm that excludes applicants through opaque criteria can undermine equal respect. Medical treatment without informed consent violates bodily agency. Punishment that humiliates rather than respects lawful personhood risks turning the offender into an object of public anger.

In each case, the Kantian question concerns the principle embedded in the system. Could the practice be justified publicly and universally? Does it allow affected persons to understand, contest, and participate? Does it recognize them as ends? These questions do not solve every technical issue, but they expose ethical dimensions that efficiency alone may ignore.

Conclusion

Kant's philosophy contributes to human-rights thought through its defense of rational agency, autonomy, dignity, universal law, and equal respect. The categorical imperative asks agents to act on principles they could will universally and to treat humanity always as an end. These ideas challenge policies that use individuals merely as instruments for collective benefit. They also explain why rights protect minorities even when majorities prefer another outcome.

The original comparison with Bentham correctly identifies a major tension between duty and aggregate consequences. A complete ethical approach should understand both. Consequences matter because actions affect real lives, but human beings should not be reduced to entries in a calculation. Kant's theory has limitations and cannot by itself explain the full historical development of human rights. Nevertheless, it provides a rigorous test for personal and institutional conduct: whether the maxim is universalizable and whether every affected person is respected as a bearer of dignity (Wood, 1999).

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