

# Kant's Categorical Imperative and Modern Human Rights Discourse

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**Abstract-** This article explores the foundational role of Immanuel Kant's *Categorical Imperative* in shaping modern human rights discourse. Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy, universality, and human dignity offers a robust philosophical framework that underpins contemporary human rights principles. By analyzing Kant's formulations and comparing them with other human rights theories, this study elucidates the enduring relevance of Kantian ethics in addressing current human rights challenges and informing policy development.

**Keywords:** Kant, Categorical Imperative, Human Rights, Moral Philosophy, Universality, Autonomy, Dignity, Ethical Theories

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of human rights has been significantly influenced by philosophical thought, particularly during the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, centered on the *Categorical Imperative*, provides a critical foundation for understanding and justifying human rights. Kant posits that moral actions are those performed out of duty, guided by principles that can be universally applied, and that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means (Kant 36). This deontological approach emphasizes the intrinsic worth of individuals, laying the groundwork for the concept of inalienable human rights.

## 2. KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant's *Categorical Imperative* is articulated through several formulations, two of which are particularly pertinent to human rights:

### A. The Formula of Universal Law

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, particularly his *Formula of Universal Law*, offers a rigorous and systematic procedure to test whether an action is morally permissible. The central principle "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" serves as the foundation of Kant's deontological ethics (Kant 31). Kant's test for morality unfolds through four distinct but interrelated steps: formulating the maxim, universalizing it, checking for contradictions, and rendering moral judgment.

The first step in the Kantian moral test is to formulate the maxim, which is essentially the guiding principle behind one's intended action. A maxim includes the action itself, the circumstances under which it is performed, and the purpose or motive for the action. For instance, if a person considers making a false promise to secure a loan they cannot repay, the maxim might be: "Whenever I am in need of money and believe I cannot repay it, I will make a false promise to obtain a loan." This subjective principle is what the agent intends to act upon (Kant 32).

The second step is that once the maxim is formulated, the next step is to universalize it, that is, imagine a world in which everyone acts on the same principle in similar circumstances. This act of moral imagination evaluates whether the maxim could logically function as a universal law of nature. Continuing the previous example, one must envision a world where everyone makes false promises whenever they need money. In such a world, the practice of promising would lose its meaning entirely, as no one would believe or rely on promises. Therefore, the action undermines the very institution it relies upon.

The third step is to check for contradictions that may arise upon universalizing the maxim. Kant identifies two types of contradictions: contradiction in conception and contradiction in will. A contradiction

in conception occurs when the universalization of a maxim would render the very practice it depends on incoherent or self-defeating. In the case of the false promise, the institution of promising collapses if everyone makes promises they do not intend to keep, this is a clear contradiction in conception. On the other hand, a contradiction in will arises when a rational agent cannot will the maxim to be a universal law because it would conflict with other necessary ends of rational beings (Kant 33; Korsgaard 78). For example, refusing to help others in distress might not create a conceptual contradiction, but it would result in a contradiction in will, as one could not rationally will a world where no one helps others, especially since one might someday need help itself.

Finally, based on whether a contradiction arises, one arrives at a moral judgment. If a contradiction in conception or will is present, the action is deemed morally impermissible. Conversely, if no contradiction arises upon universalization, the action is considered morally permissible. Therefore, in the example of making a false promise, the action fails the Kantian test because its universalization destroys the coherence of the institution of promising, leading to a contradiction in conception. The moral conclusion is that making a false promise is immoral, regardless of its consequences. This structured test emphasizes Kant's belief in the universality and rationality of moral law, showing that morality is not contingent on outcomes but rooted in consistency and respect for rational agents. It also aligns closely with human rights discourse, as both frameworks demand that actions respect the dignity and autonomy of all individuals by subjecting personal principles to universal moral scrutiny.

Immanuel Kant's *Formula of Universal Law* "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" can be directly and meaningfully applied to the concept and practice of human rights, offering a rational and systematic foundation for their universal validity. Human rights, as moral entitlements possessed by all individuals by virtue of being human, rest on principles of universality, rationality, and moral equality, all of which resonate deeply with Kant's deontological ethics.

To begin with, the first step in Kant's moral test, the formulation of a maxim, can be applied to human rights violations. For example, consider the action:

*"When it serves the interests of the state, it is permissible to silence or imprison individuals for expressing dissenting opinions."* This maxim reflects authoritarian practices that infringe upon the human right to freedom of speech. According to Kant, this guiding principle must now be tested by imagining what would happen if everyone acted in the same way under similar circumstances (Kant 34; Hill 22). In the second step, when we universalize this maxim, we envision a world where every state suppresses dissent whenever it sees fit. In such a world, public discourse, free thought, and political participation would be impossible. There would be no meaningful exercise of autonomy, rational dialogue, or critique, foundational components not only of democracy but of Kantian personhood. The very notion of a public sphere based on reason would collapse, as individuals would no longer be able to trust that they could speak or act freely without repression. This leads to the third step, which checks for contradictions. Here, a contradiction in conception clearly arises. The act of suppressing free expression undermines the rational communicative conditions required for governance, law making, and even moral deliberation itself. It contradicts the purpose of a political society grounded in public reason. Moreover, there is a contradiction in will: no rational agent could will a world in which they are permanently denied the ability to express themselves, especially knowing that they might one day need to criticize injustice. This internal contradiction indicates that such a policy is morally impermissible under Kant's ethical system. The final step, then, is the moral judgment: since the universalized maxim leads to both a contradiction in conception and a contradiction in will, the suppression of dissent is not just politically unjust, it is morally impermissible. This conclusion supports the human right to freedom of expression, showing it to be not merely a contingent political convenience but a rational and necessary condition of moral agency.

Kant's framework can similarly be applied to other human rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and bodily integrity. For instance, a maxim like *"It is acceptable to torture prisoners for information if it benefits national security"* fails the universalization test, as a world where everyone acts on such a maxim would dissolve the moral and legal protections of all persons, rendering everyone vulnerable to inhumane

treatment. This again produces both contradictions in conception and in will.

In conclusion, Kant's Formula of Universal Law reinforces the moral foundations of human rights by insisting that actions must be justifiable as universal laws applicable to all rational beings. Any principle that leads to inequality, repression, or instrumentalization of persons cannot be willed universally without contradiction. This test reveals that human rights are not optional privileges granted by states, but rational imperatives rooted in the universal dignity and autonomy of persons. In this way, Kant's moral philosophy provides not just a critique of unethical practices but a reasoned moral basis for the defence and global recognition of human rights.

#### *B. The Formula of Humanity*

*"Act in such a way that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of another always at the same time as an end never merely as a means"*

This quote is one of the key formulations of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, specifically his second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, found in his work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant is emphasizing the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being. To act in such a way that you treat humanity always as an end and never merely as a means is to respect the rational and autonomous nature of human beings. People must not be used solely as tools for achieving one's own goals, but should be acknowledged as autonomous individuals with their own purposes and rights. To treat someone as an end means to respect their humanity to recognize that they have their own desires, goals, and inherent worth. For example, if you are running a business and you hire employees, treating them as ends would mean providing fair wages, safe working conditions, and respecting their need for time off, rather than exploiting them purely for profit. You recognize that they are not just labouring bodies to maximize your income but human beings with lives of their own.

Conversely, to treat someone merely as a means is to use them for your benefit without regard to their own goals or dignity. For instance, if someone pretends to be in love just to gain access to their partner's wealth or social status, they are using that person as a means to an end. They are manipulating the other person's emotions and autonomy to achieve a selfish goal,

which Kant considers morally wrong. Kant is not saying that we can never use people as means after all, in everyday life we rely on others for various purposes, such as paying a taxi driver to take us somewhere or asking a friend for help. What matters is whether we are also respecting the other person's autonomy in the process. If the taxi driver agrees to the transaction freely and is treated fairly, then using their services is not morally wrong because they are not being treated merely as a means. In essence, Kant's principle calls for moral actions that uphold the dignity and rationality of all human beings. We must consider how our actions affect others not just instrumentally but in terms of their own values, rights, and autonomy. It is a moral standard that encourages respect, fairness, and mutual recognition in all human interactions.

When applied to human rights, Kant's principle *"Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means"* (Kant, *Groundwork* 429) becomes a powerful moral foundation for their universal recognition and protection. Human rights are rooted in the idea that every person possesses inherent dignity and worth, simply by virtue of being human. Kant's view insists that this dignity must be respected in all actions, laws, and social institutions and not be compromised for convenience, efficiency, or political gain.

For instance, consider the issue of forced labour or human trafficking. In these cases, individuals are clearly treated merely as means, as instruments for profit or exploitation, rather than as human beings with rights, aspirations and the capacity for autonomous moral judgment. Such practices violate Kant's moral imperative because they disregard the victim's personhood and use them solely to serve someone else's interests. According to Kantian ethics, this is not just illegal it is profoundly immoral, because it denies the humanity of the exploited. In the context of civil liberties, such as the right to free speech or the right to a fair trial, Kant's principle implies that denying these rights is a way of treating people as mere tools of the state or society, rather than as moral agents capable of reason and independent thought (Kant, *Groundwork* 428–29). A government that censors its citizens, imprisons them without due process, or discriminates against certain groups is failing to treat them as ends in themselves. It reduces them to instruments for

achieving power, control, or ideological conformity, which contradicts the very basis of human rights. Moreover, in international relations, Kant's principle encourages nations to treat each other and their citizens with mutual respect, rather than as pawns in a geopolitical game. For example, using vulnerable populations for economic or strategic gain such as exploiting poor countries for cheap labour while ignoring the violation of their basic rights would be morally unacceptable in Kantian terms. Humanitarian aid, refugee protection, and the global advocacy for human rights are ways of affirming each person's value as an end. Ultimately, applying Kant's moral philosophy to human rights leads to the conclusion that every individual must be respected and protected regardless of race, gender, nationality, economic status, or ability. Rights cannot be granted conditionally or selectively; they must be universal, because every person is an autonomous being worthy of moral consideration (Hill 38–40). This idea underpins many modern human rights charters, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which similarly affirms the “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”

### C. Kant's “Kingdom of Ends”

Immanuel Kant's concept of the *Kingdom of Ends* offers a compelling moral framework for understanding and justifying human rights. Introduced in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the Kingdom of Ends envisions a moral community composed of autonomous rational agents who legislate and abide by universal moral laws. Each individual, in this ideal kingdom, is treated not merely as a means to an end but as an end in themselves. As Kant articulates, one must “act according to maxims of a universally legislating member of a merely possible kingdom of ends,” (Kant, *Groundwork* 439) emphasizing both the universality and reciprocity of moral obligation. This idea closely aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of human rights, particularly in its insistence on the inherent dignity and equal moral worth of every individual.

When the ‘Kingdom of Ends’ is applied to human rights, it demands that all individuals be regarded as autonomous moral agents capable of self-legislation. This moral status prohibits the instrumentalization of persons for political, economic, or utilitarian purposes.

Practices such as slavery, torture, discrimination, and human trafficking become morally indefensible within this framework because they violate the imperative to treat every person as an end in themselves. Conversely, respecting and institutionalizing human rights such as the right to life, liberty, freedom of expression, and equal treatment under the law are expressions of the moral law that recognizes and upholds each person's capacity for rational agency (O'Neill 128–30). Importantly, the Kingdom of Ends is not merely a speculative ideal but a regulative principle by which laws and institutions can be evaluated and reformed. A just society, according to Kantian ethics, is one in which public institutions are structured to reflect the moral principle of respect for persons. Human rights, in this context, are not contingent social constructs but necessary moral imperatives grounded in the universal capacities of reason and autonomy. For example, the right to education affirms the developmental needs of rational beings, while the right to a fair trial respects their capacity for moral accountability and public reason. In this sense, the realization of human rights is essential to the construction of a political order that approximates the Kingdom of Ends.

The international human rights framework resonates deeply with this Kantian ideal. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) begins by affirming the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, echoing the Kantian belief that dignity arises from moral autonomy. By grounding human rights in moral reason and universalizable principles, Kant provides a philosophical justification for their application across all cultural, political, and historical contexts. In conclusion, Kant's Kingdom of Ends offers a powerful moral vision for understanding human rights as universal and necessary. It calls for a world where all individuals are treated with equal moral concern, not because of social convention or political expediency, but because they are autonomous beings capable of rational moral legislation (Wood 197–99). As such, Kantian ethics not only critiques injustices that treat persons as mere means but also affirms the global human rights project as a moral endeavor aimed at the establishment of a truly just and dignified human community.

### 3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS THEORIES

Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics stands as a powerful philosophical foundation for human rights, yet it gains depth and clarity when compared with other prominent theories in the field. One such theory is Natural Rights Theory, which traces its lineage to thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Aquinas. This theory posits that human rights are inherent, inalienable, and derived from natural law, a moral order grounded in human nature itself. It emphasizes the universality and inborn quality of rights that exist independently of legal or institutional recognition. While Kantian ethics aligns with the idea of universality, it diverges by locating the source of rights not in nature but in rationality. For Kant, it is the capacity for autonomous reason and moral deliberation that renders human beings ends in themselves and deserving of rights, not their biological or natural essence. Thus, whereas natural rights stem from human nature, Kantian rights are justified through the exercise of rational moral agency (Locke 57; Aquinas 94; Kant, *Groundwork* 429).

In contrast, Utilitarianism, as advanced by philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, takes a consequentialist stance. It argues that moral actions and policies are those that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. From a human rights perspective, this theory raises concerns because it allows the rights of the few to be sacrificed for the happiness of the majority if such an outcome increases overall utility. Kantian ethics rejects this approach, asserting that morality must not depend on consequences. Instead, it insists that every individual has intrinsic worth and must never be treated merely as a means to an end. In this way, Kant's philosophy provides a robust safeguard against the potential injustices permitted by utilitarian calculations, especially in matters concerning individual rights and freedoms (Bentham 15–16; Mill 121; Kant, *Groundwork* 430).

Alan Gewirth's Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) presents a compelling synthesis that builds upon Kantian foundations. Gewirth contends that because all agents value their freedom and well-being as necessary conditions for action, they are logically bound to acknowledge these rights not only for themselves but also for others. His argument is rooted

in the very logic of agency: if one claims rights for oneself, one must grant similar rights to others to avoid inconsistency. Like Kant, Gewirth emphasizes rational consistency and universality. However, his contribution lies in framing rights as a necessary entailment of purposive agency, thus bridging Kantian formalism with a more explicit commitment to socio-political rights such as liberty and material well-being (Gewirth 16–17).

John Rawls' Theory of Justice introduces another influential perspective, one deeply influenced by Kantian ethics yet distinct in its focus. Rawls proposes the "original position" and "veil of ignorance" as a method for determining fair principles of justice. Under this hypothetical scenario, individuals choose principles of justice without knowledge of their own social status, ensuring impartiality. This results in a conception of justice that prioritizes fairness, particularly in the distribution of basic goods and opportunities. While Kant emphasizes duties and respect for persons as moral law, Rawls adapts these ideas into a framework for distributive justice, concerned with the structural design of society and the fair allocation of resources. Thus, whereas Kant provides a moral groundwork, Rawls extends it into the political and institutional domains (Rawls 136–38; Kant, *Groundwork* 439).

Kant's moral philosophy provides a compelling framework for human rights by emphasizing the intrinsic worth of individuals and the necessity of universal moral laws. His deontological approach offers a counterbalance to consequentialist theories, ensuring that rights are upheld regardless of outcomes. This ethical model preserves the dignity of each person by affirming that human beings are not tools to be used but moral agents deserving of respect. However, critics argue that Kant's formulations, though morally rigorous, are often abstract and difficult to apply in nuanced real-world situations. The categorical imperative does not always provide clear guidance when rights conflict or when moral duties are complex and competing. Nonetheless, the foundational insight—that every person possesses an inviolable moral status—continues to influence contemporary human rights debates and legal doctrines (Wood 62; Hill 122).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In sum, Kant's moral philosophy offers a deeply principled and rational foundation for the discourse on human rights. By asserting that every individual must be treated as an end in themselves and not merely as a means to an end, Kant provides an enduring moral anchor that transcends cultural, political, and utilitarian calculations. While other theories, such as natural rights, utilitarianism, and social contract models, each bring valuable insights, they often rely on contingent factors like human nature, social utility, or hypothetical consensus. Kantian ethics, grounded in universal reason and moral autonomy, demands unwavering respect for the dignity of all persons. Despite the challenges of applying its abstract principles to real-world complexities, its unwavering commitment to human dignity continues to serve as a cornerstone in both philosophical and legal conceptions of universal human rights. As such, it remains not only relevant but essential in guiding ethical thought and policy in an increasingly globalized and morally pluralistic world.

#### 5. OUTCOME

The integration of Kant's *Categorical Imperative* into human rights discourse reinforces the importance of moral principles grounded in reason and respect for autonomy. This philosophical foundation supports the development of rights that are universal, inalienable and centered on human dignity. By aligning moral obligations with rationality, Kantian ethics provides a robust justification for the protection and promotion of human rights.

#### 6. RELEVANCE FOR POLICY

Incorporating Kantian principles into policy-making can enhance the ethical grounding of laws and regulations. Policies informed by the *Categorical Imperative* would prioritize the inherent dignity of individuals, ensure that actions are universally justifiable and prevent the instrumentalization of persons. Such an approach is particularly relevant in areas like human rights legislation, bioethics, and international relations, where ethical considerations are paramount.

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