

Kant's Conception of Human Dignity: Unravelling the Moral Fabric of Humanity

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the significance of the Kantian prescriptive on humanity in understanding the essence of human dignity for the larger good of humanity. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to specify the importance of the three formulations of the Categorical Imperative in promoting human dignity. Here, I want to portray how Kant's moral system gives us a way to foster human dignity. This paper responds to the following questions: Is there any gap between the Kantian conception of human dignity and how humans perceive human dignity? How Kantian morality is crucial in preserving human dignity in today's world? This paper also seeks to define what humans must do to promote and sustain human dignity under the Kantian moral framework.

Keywords: *Humanity, End-in-itself, Duty, Morality, Respect, Free Rational Will.*

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, we are in a century where human civilization is progressing fast, but it is apparent that humans lack humanity in many respects. However, why this happens is the most crucial question in our modern era. To know the answer to the above question we first need to know what human dignity is. The etymological root of the term "dignity" is "*dignitas*" (this is a Latin word, which is translated in English as "worth"¹). Generally, dignity refers to something which must be respected or valued. However, the question is: On what basis a human should be respected? In response to the question, I have found that the word 'dignity' can be used in two senses². Every sense conveys a unique viewpoint on which basis human beings are valued. The first sense is the restricted sense of dignity, which originated in Ancient Roman civilization. Those in prominent positions within the institutions were respected or recognized as dignified members of society at that time. In this scenario, a person's social standing determines their

¹ Schachter, O. (1983). "Human Dignity as a Normative Concept." *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 77 (4), p. 849.

² Toscano, M. (2011). "Human Dignity as High Moral Status." *Les ateliers de l'éthique*, vol. 6 (2), pp. 5-6.

dignity. It is also stated that a person is obliged to do their duty according to their rank³. This group is called the “traditional paradigm of dignity” by Oliver Sensen⁴, who believes that dignity is a relational value property since it depends on certain human capacities⁵. Sensen also emphasizes that people in higher societal positions are elevated above others because they possess certain capacities such as reason and freedom⁶. The second sense of dignity (also known as the Universal Sense of dignity) states that every individual, regardless of social rank, is equally worthy simply by virtue of being human. Dignity is regarded as a non-relational value property because humans by their nature (being human) inherently carry dignity. This approach is also referred to as the “contemporary paradigm of dignity.”

However, when we try to define the concept of ‘dignity,’ we become puzzled as it is a very complex concept to understand. We face difficulty explaining this concept as it has various uses in different domains. It is also certain that this concept is mainly considered political and ethical, although it has also been used in the areas of sport, architecture, war, sexuality, etc. In modern human rights discourses, dignity plays a central role. The term ‘dignity’ is mentioned in two fundamental documents of the United Nations, which are: ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (1948) and ‘The Grundgesetz (Basic Law) of the Federal Republic of Germany’ (1949). Article 1 of ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”⁷ Article 1 of ‘The Grundgesetz’ states: “Human dignity is inviolable. To respect it and protect it is the duty of all state power. The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.”⁸ The concept

³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵ Sensen, O. (2009). “Kant’s Conception of Human Dignity.” *Kant-Studien*, vol. 100 (3), p. 313.

⁶ Toscano, M. (2011). “Human Dignity as High Moral Status.” *Les ateliers de l’éthique*, vol. 6 (2), p. 12.

⁷ Schachter, O. (1983). “Human Dignity as a Normative Concept.” *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 77 (4), p. 848.

⁸ Rosen, M. (2012). *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 2.

of ‘dignity’ has also been placed on many significant human rights associations, like, ‘International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights’ (Article 10), ‘International Covenant on Economic’, ‘Social and Cultural Rights’ (Article 13), ‘American Convention of Human Rights’ (Article 5), etc. So here, the question is: Why has human dignity become an inalienable part of human rights associations? In this context, an analysis of human rights discourses reveal that humans have inherently carried dignity, and this virtue must be protected, so, it becomes an inalienable part of human rights associations.

In the book *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*⁹, Michael Rosen states that dignity is the characteristic “that all human beings have simply in virtue of being human, [which] is something more modest and restricted: an aesthetic quality that manifests itself in human behaviour or a virtue.”¹⁰ After analyzing this, if we try to discover the defining property or central characteristics of dignity, then we find that dignity is an inalienable virtue of humans that has inherent value. When we look at the traditional paradigm, this group argued that dignity is dictated by social rank. Still, this viewpoint does not imply that exterior positions determine dignity, rather, it refers to human capacity, i.e., reason, because people with good reasoning abilities tend to hold high social ranks or positions. On the other hand, the contemporary view holds that humans inherently possess dignity by virtue of being human which also implicitly indicates human capacity, i.e. reason. Here, it can be said that both the traditional and the contemporary view bring attention to the reasoning capacity of humans to excavate the essence of the conception of human dignity. Therefore, it is possible to argue that humans should be treated with dignity only because they are rational beings.

Now we can have some idea about what human dignity is. At this juncture it is pertinent to discuss the question, which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, i.e., why the dignity of humans is continuously degrading in the present-day world? Or, we can frame this question differently like, why are human beings struggling to preserve their dignity? In response to this question, I have sufficient reason to believe that humans struggle to maintain their dignity because they

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

conceive themselves worthy not because of their reasoning ability but because of their exterior values like social status, educational status, financial status, and so on. In this context, I can say that to preserve and maintain human dignity every human must conceive themselves worthy by having their reasoning capacity. Another query can come up at this point: How does society embrace this view of human dignity? In this respect, it can be said that when we examine German Philosopher Immanuel Kant's moral principle of the Categorical Imperative (also termed by Kant as the supreme principle of morality), we discover that it explains how we should conduct ourselves and other humans to preserve human dignity. So, in the next section, I would like to unravel the Kantian moral approach to human dignity.

2. Dignity in Kantian Moral System

If we thoroughly analyze Kant's moral philosophy, then we find that he highlights moral capacity as the ground of dignity. Kant's moral philosophy assigns absolute worth to a person's moral capacity. Humans have the rational ability to cultivate their moral nature and freely impose objectively legitimate laws on themselves. That is why Kant suggests that humans deserve dignity since they are rational moral beings. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a being who does not follow moral laws does not mean they are not dignified beings. Because Kant intends to show us that just because humans are inherently rational beings, they deserve dignity whether they follow moral laws or not. That means humanity itself has dignity due to its rational nature. Despite that, it does not mean we can skip our moral duties because we are rational and dignified beings. Because to enhance and preserve our sense of dignity it is very important to follow the path of morality. So, to preserve the dignity of humans one should follow or establish morality by employing the Kantian perspective. For Kant, to establish morality one must act in accordance with Categorical Imperative. However, the query is: What Kant intends to mean by the Categorical Imperative in the case of morality? In this context, it can be said that Kant tries to establish a pure moral philosophy that must be necessary and universal to all rational agents, which means it has an *a priori* form that does not contain any empirical concepts within it. To form this moral philosophy Kant says a moral action must be motivated by good will and also must

be done in reverence for duty. In doing one's duty a moral agent must not be attached to any kind of inclination to do it but rather do it for the sake of duty. While following duty an agent must adopt some rules (maxim) to accomplish it. As an agent adopts some subjective maxim it does not mean it has only subjective validity rather it must have objective and unconditional validity and must be derived from practical reason. This moral principle also acts as a command. Even though it is not a command of external authority but rather a self-imposed command that a free rational agent only imposes upon himself. This command or imperative of practical reason must be followed by an agent in an unconditional way. This command or imperative is nothing but the Categorical Imperative or supreme principle of morality. Humans as rational agents are obliged to follow their moral law or Categorical Imperative. Every rational agent comes under the realm of the moral law only through free rational will. In this context, I have found that humans have dignity or deserve dignity due to their ability to give moral laws to themselves. So, to illustrate the conception of human dignity it is necessary to discuss Kant's supreme principle of morality or Categorical Imperative, which consists of three formulations, i.e., the "Formula of Universal Law", the "Formula of Humanity", and the "Formula of Autonomy". In this context, I would like to explain how these three formulations are interlinked and inevitable to preserve human dignity, although the concept of dignity is embedded in the formulation of humanity and autonomy. Hence, the following sub-sections are intended to illustrate Kant's three formulations of the supreme principle of morality to dig out his conception of human dignity.

2. a. Formula of Universal Law

Kant in his first formulation of the Categorical Imperative stated: "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."¹¹ This formulation means that a maxim may only be regarded as moral if it can be converted into a universal law, which means it must be equally valid to all rational agents. For example, the maxim, 'Do not steal,' is deemed a moral maxim when it becomes a universal maxim, which means it must

¹¹ Kant, I. (1997). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (Trans.), United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, p. 31.

apply equally to all human beings. Here, a person may ask themselves, “How do we know if a maxim is universally valid?” A maxim is referred to as universal if it contains no contradictions and can be adopted by anyone.

Let us now investigate how this formulation made some contribution in the case of preserving human dignity. Suppose, in my case, when I apply a maxim to myself, I must consider other fellow human beings, before adopting that maxim. Before implementing my maxim, I must consider my fellow humans to see whether it (my maxim) applies to everyone or can be accepted by all as their own. In this situation, I believe this formulation upholds human dignity because when I adopt a certain maxim for my personal well-being, considering that this maxim will also be adopted by every rational fellow being, and also never causes harm to anyone, then this rational moral decision indicates nothing but the respect or dignity that I show to myself and other fellow beings. When we say that ‘every rational agent must act so that their maxim must be universally valid,’ we mean that every rational agent has the potential to impose an objectively valid maxim on himself. As a result, it indicates that every rational agent has dignity because he or she can formulate a universal maxim that has impersonal validity, which indicates respect and dignity for all human beings.

2. b. Formula of Humanity

Kantian morality tells us how a rational agent ought to act and, in this respect, Kantian “Formula of Humanity” has a significant role in guiding us on how people should treat themselves and others. Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative gives supreme importance to human dignity as an end-in-itself. This formulation is also known as the “Formula of Humanity” and the formula is: “All rational beings stand under the law that each of them is to treat himself and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as an end in themselves.”¹² According to this formulation, everyone has to regard others, even themselves as an end-in-itself. Here, it is necessary to find out what Kant means when he uses the terms ‘end-in-itself’ and ‘means’ in the context of humanity and how this formulation goes a long way in upholding human dignity.

¹² Ibid., p. 41.

The term ‘end-in-itself’ refers to objective and unconditional goodness. This means it must be self-sufficient. When the term ‘end-in-itself’ is associated with an idea or concept, it cannot be employed as a medium or means. Kant suggests humans should treat themselves and others as an end-in-itself. Humans as an end-in-itself have incomparable worth within themselves as they have objective or unconditional goodness. Dignity can be served when humans treat themselves and others as end-in-themselves. This brings up the question: How can dignity be served if we consider humans as the end-in-themselves? It will be feasible to think of each being as an end-in-itself—that is, as something that is objectively, unconditionally good, or worthy—when each is valued exclusively as a rational being, regardless of their attributes like intelligence, skill, calm deliberation, etc. In this way, agents conceive humanity as having absolute worth and also sustain dignity. Dignity cannot be earned or destroyed. Simply by being human, they deserved dignity. Kant assigns value or respect to each human being based on their ability to determine their moral law through reason. Human dignity can also be upheld when everyone is treated equally because of their rational faculty and respected for their natural worth. The entire mankind will then be able to maintain and preserve their dignity.

Now, the term “means” refers to an arbitrary end that is not employed as an end-in-itself but as a channel for receiving any other end. Consider a piece of furniture, such as a chair or table, that is designed with usefulness in mind. Since a chair is primarily manufactured for its efficacy, it is used as a means. Kant asserts that when we treat an individual as a means, we treat them as a thing, not a person. Even, when we frequently respect an individual’s distinctive features, those qualities are interchangeable. It’s also possible for someone else to possess more attributes than the initial person. The person who is viewed as a means in this sense is valued according to some external value rather than in itself. Consequently, the person was merely considered an object or thing. Things or objects have price value. Things with a price value can be substituted with something of equal value. Humanity has intrinsic or irreplaceable value. According to Kant, humans must be valued for their inner value, which is above all price. Humans must be respected for being able to set an objectively valid end. Thus, it is possible to argue that people

have intrinsic worth because they are capable of creating moral laws for themselves, by applying their reasoning power. By upholding morality, people can preserve and foster dignity as in following morality they can realize the intrinsic value or priceless worth in themselves and others.

However, there may occur a situation: where a murderer kills an innocent person (which is an immoral act) then does that murderer bear dignity or not? That means does an immoral person deserve dignity? In this context, it can be said that every individual has equal worth, even the worst human being has the same dignity¹³. Kant asserts we cannot withdraw respect from a vicious person even though his deeds prove himself unworthy of it¹⁴. But such assertion of Kant does not mean that one is free to do wrong deeds, rather he says wrong-doers deserve punishment¹⁵. Instead by saying that all humans have equal dignity, he refers to all human's same capacity to set their end rationally. Humans should not compare their worth with each other. He also suggests that humans by virtue of their inherent dignity deserve some degree of respect¹⁶. Kant says comparing oneself with others negatively affects one's character; it leads to self-deception, envy, and malice¹⁷. Moreover, by doing wrong deeds one makes themselves unworthy. Indeed, others should not declare the wrongdoer as unworthy relating to their wrongful deeds. All humans can make themselves worthy by respecting moral laws. Kant also claims humans are obliged to respect others' moral law. This can only be possible in so far as they can give respect to themselves or their rationale. To give others respect one first respect themselves as an end-in-itself. At the same time, in this context, it is noteworthy that humans do not always act on their rational moral laws, due to the influence of their emotional incentives. In this respect, Kant speaks about a natural human tendency to strive for self-perfection. He also asserts humans should cultivate their capacity to act upon their free rational will. To do this Kant directs to cultivate the virtue of 'autocracy' (self-mastery) by which one can develop the

¹³ Wood, A. (1999). *Kant's Ethical Thought*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, p.132.

¹⁴ Timmons, M. (2021). *Kant's Doctrine of Virtue*. United States: Oxford University Press, p. 242.

¹⁵ Wood, A. (1999). *Kant's Ethical Thought*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, p. 134.

¹⁶ Timmons, M. (2021). *Kant's Doctrine of Virtue*. United States: Oxford University Press, p. 242.

¹⁷ Wood, A. (1999). *Kant's Ethical Thought*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, p. 136.

ability to overcome any incentives that conflict with duty¹⁸. Hence, according to the context of the “Formula of Humanity”, it can be said that just because humans are capable of following their rational instincts, as well as their self-imposed moral laws, which makes them the end-in-themselves, they deserve dignity.

2. c. Formula of Autonomy

Kant in his moral philosophy claims that autonomy is the ground of dignity¹⁹. Kant places so much importance upon free rational will or autonomous will in his third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which is also known as the “Formula of Autonomy”. The autonomy principle is stated thus: “so that the will could regard itself as at the same time giving universal law through its maxim.”²⁰ This maxim may lead someone to believe that they are free to do anything they wish. Although an individual is free to follow their moral principles, Kant also asserts that the maxim must possess universal law at the same time. Therefore, it can be said that the “Formula of Autonomy” cannot be formed in the absence of universal legislation. The “Formula of Universal Law,” the “Formula of Humanity,” and the “Formula of Autonomy,” all are interconnected. The “Formula of Universal Law” cannot be established without this principle. When an agent adopts a universally valid maxim, it can only become a moral maxim if the agent applies the maxim to himself or herself through autonomous will. Even humans are considered as the end-in-themselves also because of their rational autonomous will or free will. In this sense, all these formulations are interlinked, as I stated before.

Now the question is: How does this formulation help humans to preserve and maintain their dignity? In this formulation, it is evident that individuals must make their laws freely and exercise self-legislation. It means that when an agent adopts a maxim, he or she is not bound by any external obligation to do so. At the same time, the agent should avoid attempting to force their moral maxims on others. In light of this, I must state that people are entitled to dignity as they can autonomously give themselves moral laws. Moreover, because of some natural

¹⁸ Timmons, M. (2021). *Kant's Doctrine of Virtue*. United States: Oxford University Press, p. 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁰ Kant, I. (1997). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (Trans.), United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, p. 42.

inclinations, people could struggle to recognize their autonomous and self-legislative nature. Despite this, Kantian morality stresses that people are inherently driven to achieve perfection despite their imperfections. Hence, everyone deserves dignity because due to their free rational will they can transcend imperfection, cultivate their rational faculties, and adhere to unconditional objective imperatives that they can only impose upon themselves. When everyone can follow these moral principles, they will be able to create a community in which their actions harmonize with one another. In this way, every human being can contribute to a more harmonious society in which we all care about our own and other's well-being.

3. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be said that humans have inherent dignity since they have rational faculties. In present times, if we look around our society, we can find that we tend to forget that we are dignified beings and we must give respect or dignity to our fellow beings because we all share a common intrinsic value, i.e., our rational nature. The present-day status of our society reveals that we are very much socially conditioned and try to define our worthiness in terms of external factors, such as social status, wealth, education, and so forth. That is why, we are struggling to maintain dignity. This struggle arises because we try to define and maintain an intrinsic value with external characteristics. This is why at the current time it is imperative to look back into Kant's moral philosophy, which is definitely a good guide to understanding how we should treat ourselves and others to sustain human dignity. This paper is a moral call to our society to recognize and embrace Kantian morality in our day-to-day lives to become more conscious of our inner dignity, so that, we can create a good society for ourselves and our future generations.

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