

Human Dignity and Rights: Echoes From Kant's Categorical Imperative

PaulinusChikwadoEjeh, PhD

*Philosophy Unit, General Studies Division,
Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria*
paulinus.ejeh@esut.edu.ng

and

Rev. Fr. Dr. Patrick NdumUjah

patiujah@gmail.com

Abstract

The constant abuse and violation of the fundamental human rights of individuals and groups in various societies as well as baseless undermining of human dignity necessitate the need for this paper. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, the dignity of man has been thrown to the dogs such that even man's life longer has value. Terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery etc are predominant in most African countries especially in Nigeria which clearly undermine the dignity of man and violate fundamental human rights of the victims. The question which this paper seeks to provide answer to is: how can we restore the dignity of man and protect his fundamental human rights? To answer the question, the paper takes a cue from Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher and one of the greatest moral philosophers of our time, who seems to have shone lights on the idea of human dignity and human rights. His ethical writings, no doubt, appear to contain and at the same time offer our contemporary society the principles or ethical guidelines with which we could tackle the numerous social and moral evils prevalent in our society today, as well as appreciate and respect the rights and dignity, both of ourselves and those of our fellow human beings. This paper is therefore, a study of the place of human rights and human dignity in Kant's ethics. It aims to show the importance of human rights and human dignity as stressed and portrayed in Kant's categorical imperative. The paper then, recommends the principles of Kant's categorical imperative as the practical means of preserving and protecting human rights and dignity. The paper adopts the expository and analytic methods in espousing our subject matter. The

expository method was used in exposing the nature of human dignity and rights as well as the concepts of human dignity and rights in Kant's Categorical Imperative, while the analytic method was used in analyzing and explicating the logic behind human dignity and rights in Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Keywords: Dignity, Rights, Categorical imperative, ethics, Principles

Introduction

Human dignity is simply the recognition that human beings possess a special worth and value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings. It is the dignity of human life that led to the formation or declaration of the Universal Human Rights. In other words, human dignity is the basis of the fundamental human rights. Human dignity has become an important principle in the constitutional and human rights discourse during the last few decades. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognition of the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.¹ Since its incorporation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a central constitutive value, it formed the basis of fundamental rights in the national constitutions of every country with an increasing frequency. Unfortunately, our human predicament is such that we usually forget our own dignity and rights, as well as the dignity and rights of our fellow humans. Rather than recognize and appreciate our dignity and rights, we instead substitute them with pride, which is the vain attempt to imagine or think that we are better than others. Pride comes into our lives as a result of a partly forgotten dignity that has been turned upside-down. Besides, in our contemporary society, human dignity and human rights have been

¹. "United Nations," *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

continuously undermined and violated. Consequently, the dignity of the individual human being is no longer respected. In fact, even the fundamental human rights that every individual is entitled to have been from time to time, denied some individuals. This lack of respect for human dignity as well as the violation of the fundamental human rights of individuals has led to series of problems that have threatened peaceful co-existence in our contemporary society. Thus, the recognition of human dignity and human rights is the key step towards an authentic living and co-existence with one another in the pride-prone and conflict infested contemporary society.

Recognizing his own dignity and rights and those of his fellow humans, Immanuel Kant, in his moral philosophy, reminds and re-awakens our slumbering spirit to the reality and importance of human rights and dignity, when he enjoins us to: “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 and never simply as a means”.² This is Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative – the moral principle to which, according to Kant, we must adhere to if our actions are to be adjudged or considered morally good. This second formulation of the categorical imperative is the summary of our relationship with ourselves and others. It is also, the basis for our recognition of our dignity and rights, as well and those of other human beings. It is believed that when we recognize our dignity and rights, we would equally recognize and respect the dignity and rights of our fellow human beings. Kant's categorical imperative provides us with the yardstick with which we could always measure our actions towards others in order to always recognize and respect their dignity and rights.

² Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 148.

In this paper therefore, our aim is to show how human dignity, which is the basis of the fundamental human rights echo throughout Kant's ethical theory, as a reminder to us that the recognition of and respect for human rights, are the key steps towards overcoming human pride and living peacefully with other human beings in our conflict-prone contemporary society. Hence the paper seeks to use the principle of the categorical imperative as a yardstick for measuring our attitudes towards one another in order to respect the dignity of man as well as respect and preserve the fundamental rights of every human being.

The nature and Basis of Human Dignity

The concept of human rights raises the fundamental question, what is man? To disagree or deny the idea of human rights, is obviously to deny the nature and dignity of a person. The question to be asked is “Is man merely a social being? Is he merely an animal? Or is he merely an economic being floating in the economic space without worth?

It has been established that human beings are qualitatively and intrinsically different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of thinking, knowing and choosing. The concept of human dignity was not only based on Natural Law, but also on the fact that man is a thinking being. According to the famous Western Philosopher – Immanuel Kant, humans have intrinsic dignity which requires no effort on the part of the dignity bearer. Kant argued that dignity is inviolable and cannot be denied even a vicious man. In other words, intrinsic dignity cannot be lost because we are all born with dignity and we all die with dignity. Hence nobody can take it away from us. It is therefore, this sense of dignity which is regarded generally as the foundation stone or basis of human rights.³

³. Kant, *Immanuel, Ground Work*, 152.

Meanwhile, the concept of human dignity is the belief that all human beings(or all persons) without exception hold a special value that is tied solely to their humanity or human person. This dignity that each human possesses has nothing to do with their class, race, gender, religion, abilities, or any other factor other than the fact that they are simply human beings.

The original meaning of the word “dignity” designates that someone deserved respect because of his status. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that concept was categorically situated as its Article 1 reads: “ All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”⁴ From this, we see that dignity wasn't something that people earned because of their class, race, or another advantage. It is rather something all humans without exception, are born with. Therefore, by being human, all persons deserve respect. It is therefore, right to say that Human rights naturally spring from human dignity, because by redefining dignity as something inherent to everyone, it also establishes universal rights.

The word "dignity" comes from the Latin word *dignitas*, which means prestige, honor and respect. In ancient Rome people who held high social and political status could possess dignity.⁵ Conversely in the same ancient Rome, only men could have dignity not women.⁶ For this reason, a person's dignity in the ancient Rome was associated with function of social status. By implication, anyone including women, who do not occupy any social or political status does not have dignity. Contrary to the popular belief in the ancient Rome, Cicero believed that all human beings have dignity because of their inherent capacity to reason.⁷ Since

⁴. “United Nations,” *Universal Declaration*.

⁵. Henry, L. Meltzer. “The jurisprudence of dignity”. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, (2011): 169-233.

⁶. Henry, “The Jurisprudence,” 190.

⁷. Henry, “The Jurisprudence,” 190.

all human beings have the capacity to reason, then this very universal attribute bestows all human beings equal respect.

Cicero is not alone in this rationality aspect of man, as Immanuel Kant also based the core of his moral philosophy or ethics on the foundation of rationality. Kant wrote "humanity so far as it is capable of morality, is the only thing which has dignity."⁸ Kant believes that this moral dimension makes people ends in themselves but not means and requires a dignified treatment. Kantian notion of dignity calls for respect of the individual choices of persons as well as not to treat them as objects that disregard their free will. For Kant, inherent dignity connotes individuality, rationality and autonomy, and this does not judge the merits of individual choices or reasoning.⁹

Kant's idea of self-worth and self-dignity is important for understanding the modern concept of dignity because from it flows the recognition that people should pursue life projects while respecting the dignity of other members of the community. Hence, Kant's theory recognizes the fact that, one's dignity is closely connected to the recognition of others' dignity. In truth, all human beings have real dignity simply because they are persons—entities with natural capacities for thought and free choice. All human beings have this capacity, so all human beings are persons. Each human being therefore deserves to be treated by all other human beings with respect and consideration. We argue therefore, that all human beings, regardless of age, size, stage of development, or immediately exercisable capacities, have equal fundamental dignity.

⁸. Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 176.

⁹. Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work*, 149.

The Idea of Human Rights

The origin of the concept of human rights can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome, where it was closely tied to the doctrines of the Stoics, who believed and taught that human conduct should be judged according to, and brought into harmony with, the law of nature. Humanrights has become one of the most important concepts in our modern discourses. Governments, corporations and even activists use it to draw attention to a collective understanding that all people without exceptions deserve certain rights and freedoms. The United Nations (UN) defines human rights as those rights that are inherent in our state of nature and the absence or deprivation of which human beings will live as sub-humans.¹⁰ Human rights therefore, are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. They are rights to which every person is entitled by reason of being a member of the human family. And they apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe or how you choose to live your life. These basic rights are based on shared values like **dignity, fairness, equality, respect and independence**. Thus, no matter who a person is, where they're from, what they believe, or how they live, everyone has rights that cannot be taken away.

Human rights do not depend on the specific of the individual or the relationship between the right holder and the right-guarantor.¹¹ For Raphael humanrights are the rights of humans generally as well as the rights which everyone has by virtue of being a human being.¹² Simply put, human rights are the minimum standard and basis for human dignity, survival, existence, development, civilization and well-being. They are

^{10.} United Nations," *Universal Declaration*.

^{11.} Mishra, P. *Human Rights Global Issues* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2000).

^{12.} Raphael, J.V. *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), 12-14.

rights which every human being must assert, exercise, enjoy and obtain remedy for their violation through appropriate legal mechanism. Under international law, several rights such as right to life; dignity of human person; personal liberty and freedom from slavery, torture, inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment, fair hearing and a fair trial; family and private life; thought, conscience and religion; association and assembly; freedom of speech and the press; freedom of movement, freedom from discrimination, right to equal treatment before the law etc, have been recognized. These rights are equally recognized and protected under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The importance of these rights to the realization of the dignity and worth of human person cannot be over-emphasized especially in this critical times in our nation.

In Nigeria today, insecurity has risen to the level where citizens have lost their dignity and rights. Generally, there is an urgent call and rise in the demand for respect for and protection of the right to human dignity in Nigeria and all over the world. This is because the idea of human rights revolves around the notion that humans, as distinct from other species of animals, are endowed with certain set of rights that are fundamentally inalienable, simply by virtue of their being members of the human species. These rights are universal in nature and apply to all members of the human species irrespective of race, colour, gender, class, nationality, religion, age, employment status, political orientation, sexual orientation, disability status and so forth.

Human Dignity and Rights in Kant's Categorical Imperative

In general, Kantian ethics is basically designed to provide a yardstick for determining how humans should or should not act. Hence, all talks about human dignity and rights should arise from our perception of the value of human life, since morality, generally is all about the recognition and

respect for the rights and dignity of human beings.

Kant's concept of dignity for sure, recognizes an inner and absolute value to the human being because of his humanity. This recognition implies a duty of respect to be followed by the individuals in their relationships with themselves and with others without discrimination. The categorical imperative for Kant, is an unconditional imperative which immediately commands a certain conduct without having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by it.¹³ Hence, the categorical imperative commands actions as good in themselves and not as a means to other ends. As H.J. Paton rightly noted, the categorical imperative equally commands conformity to law in general – which is that, the maxims which serve as the principles of our volition should conform to universal law.¹⁴

Kant gave three different formulation of the categorical imperative but for the purpose of this paper, we are concerned with the second formulation which is: 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 and never simply as a means.¹⁵ This principle implies that rational human beings are “ends in themselves” because they have practical reason, autonomy and intrinsic value. By saying that we should treat people as ends and never as a means, Kant admonishes us against using other people as a means to our own ends. Hence, a rational being is constrained by reason not to use his fellow human beings merely as a means to achieve his own purposes, not to enslave them, abuse or exploit

^{13.} Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Paul Carus, (ed.). (London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1949).

^{14.} Paton, H.J. *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*(London: Hutchinson Co. Ltd, 1947).

^{15.} Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work*, 176.

them, but always to recognize that they contain within themselves the justification of their own existence, and a right to their autonomy. Kant thought that morality entailed the recognition of the dignity of each person as a person and as such, that all human beings should be treated as free and equal members of a shared moral community. Kant introduced the idea of respect for persons and gives humans value. By this second formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant urges that each individual is to be valued, not on what he can do, but on the fact that he is a person. Therefore, treating them as an end does not give them the individual freedom they deserve; but treating a person as an end itself looks at what would be best for that person. However, this does not mean that we do not at all use people as a means. For instance, if I go to a taxi driver and ask him to take me to the airport; in this case, I use the taxi driver as a means for the end which I seek or desire; or if I go to an artisan (a plumber) and ask him to fix my leaking tap; in this case too, I use the plumber as a means for the end which I seek. Therefore, as rational beings we all use people as means to our own ends, and this is alright. The only time problems arise from using people as means to our own ends is when we constantly use them merely as ends without giving a thought to the fact that they have a right to their autonomy. And this is exactly what the second formulation of the categorical imperative forbids.

Thus, Kant warned that even if we use people as means at times, we should not use them merely as means without realizing that they themselves are ends in themselves and that they have rights like ourselves. Hence, Kant advises that we should always treat other people as valuable individuals instead of reducing them to the roles of objects. The second formulation therefore, supports universally accepted laws and so forbids such things as murder, theft, dishonesty, rape and fraud, colonialism, slavery, etc. From the above, the second formulation of the

categorical imperative makes clear three important points namely: (1) that suicide is a case of treating oneself as a means instead of as an end, (2) that breaking of promises constitutes treating another person as a means instead of as an end, and (3) that the neglect to develop one's talents is failure to treat oneself as an end. Hence, a universal duty to respect the rights and interests of others is imposed on us by this second formulation.¹⁶

From the above, it is clear that Kant's ethics recognizes human dignity and rights, hence it forbids such things as rape, extra-judicial killings, ethnic cleansing, suicide, abortion, slavery, colonialism, dishonesty, fraud (yahoo, yahoo, yahoo Plus etc). In fact, the second formulation of the categorical imperative forbids all forms of evil. All evil committed against humanity are the consequent of the breach of the categorical imperative as well as the suppression and lack of respect for human dignity and rights. Apart from forbidding the aforementioned evils, the second formulation of the categorical imperative leads us to the discovery of our duties to ourselves and to other human beings. Such duties include the duty to preserve life, the duty to help others, the duty to refrain from suicide, and the duty to refrain from making false promises.¹⁷ These duties arise from the recognition of human dignity and rights, hence we are enjoined to recognize, appreciate and uphold the dignity and rights of all humankind. Unfortunately, man's inhumanity to man that abounds in our society today is a stark reality of lack of respect for human dignity and rights. People now value things more than their lives and that of others. Some value animals more than human life. It has not ceased to amaze me when, for instance, the developed countries like

^{16.} Ejeh, P.C. "The Universal law of Action: A Critique of Kant's Categorical Imperative" *Journal of Law and Allied Disciplines*, vol. 2, Issue 2, (June 2015): 47-61.

^{17.} Ejeh, P.C. "The Universal law of Action, 50.

America and others enact laws to protect animals and are ready to go at any length to protect animal rights, yet, thousands of lives are daily wasted in Africa by terrorists and they pretend not to be aware of it or feel it doesn't concern them. Yes, one may argue that what happens in Africa is not the responsibility of America and other developed countries as such. But then, is human dignity and human rights not the responsibilities of all human beings? Metaphysically, what happens to one human being affects the rest of humanity in one way or the other. This is the reason Kant speaks of the duty to ourselves and duty to others (to help others). For Kant, duty is that which is in man, inside of him and which acts as a tap from which all actions if they are to have moral worth must flow from. It is therefore, our duty to recognize, appreciate and protect the dignity and rights of all human beings. Kant tells us that all human beings are naturally equal and free, and that nobody can give away this natural freedom and equality; nobody can enter into a contract that makes them cease to be their own master.¹⁸ Taking a cue from Kant, Singer writes:

Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favouring the interests of their own sex.¹⁹

From Singer's perspectives, both racists and sexists are guilty of undermining human dignity and violating the fundamental human rights by the very nature of their actions. In other words, racism can be seen as a condition in which does not recognize the inherent dignity and rights of others who are not of the same race. Sexism on the other hand, equally plays down on the dignity and rights of those who do not belong to their

^{18.} Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work*, 176.

^{19.} Singer, P. *Animal Liberation* (2 ed.). (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990).

own sex. It is against this type of condition that Kant talks about duty – duty to ourselves and duty to others which acts as a tap or a source from which all moral actions most flow from. Therefore, the second principle of Kant's categorical imperative as we have seen is the foundation upon which human dignity and human rights are built and sustained. It is for this reason that we examined Kant's categorical imperative so as to conscientize the contemporary society of the need to always apply the principle of the categorical imperative in whatever we do especially in relating or dealing with our fellow human beings – always to treat them as ends in themselves and never as means.

Conclusion

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. Human rights are universal because all human beings are holders of human rights – always, everywhere and without exception. Hence, from the Kantian perspectives, Human rights are basic rights that belong to all of us simply because we are human. They embody key values in our society such as fairness, dignity, equality and respect. Most importantly, these rights give us power and enable us to speak up and to challenge poor treatment from a public authority. Human beings have intrinsic dignity. This intrinsic dignity does not depend on any circumstance, stage of development, or potential, and no human community can grant or rescind it. Thus, human beings must always be treated as an end and never used solely as a means.

We call upon the international community and indeed the Federal Republic of Nigeria to recognize that all human beings have intrinsic dignity, which is the foundation of human rights, prior to law and government, and is the only authentic source for the development of legal instruments. This recognition and respect for intrinsic human dignity

would help in putting a stop to loss of lives and properties going on in Nigeria presently. Therefore, in order to promote the common good, all law must be at the service of the human person, and taking Kant's principles seriously, recognize all persons as ends in themselves.

Bibliography

- Ejeh, Paulinus C. "The Universal Laws of Action: A Critique of Kant's Categorical imperative". *Journal of Law and Allied Disciplines* vol 2, Issue 2, (June 2015): 47-61.
- Henry, L. Meltzer. "The jurisprudence of dignity". *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, [S.l.], v. 160, (2011): 169-233.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Ground Work for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- Mishra, P. *Human Rights Global Issues*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2000.
- Paton, H.J. *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*. London: Hutchinson Co. Ltd, 1947.
- Singer, P. *Animal Liberation* (2 ed.). London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.
- Sullivan, Dennis M. "The Conception View of Personhood". *Ethics and Medicine*, Vol.19, Issue1, (2002): 11-33.
- Raphael, J.V. *Human Rights and International Relations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
- "United Nations," *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- Walsh, Martin J. *A History of Philosophy*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985.