

Kant on the Universality of Moral Principles: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the foundation of moral principles in Kant's philosophy. It argues that within Kant's ethical framework, moral principles are not derived from empirical observation or contingent circumstances but from the a priori universality and necessity of reason. Central to this system is the categorical imperative – Kant's supreme principle of morality – which requires that moral actions must be willed as if they could become universal law. Accordingly, I argued that in Kant's moral philosophy, true freedom constitutes not merely the absence of external constraints but the positive capacity to act according to reason. This conception of rational autonomy underpins Kant's principle of equality. As every individual possessing this same capacity is inherently equal in moral worth. Similarly, respect for persons fundamentally entails respect for the moral law itself since recognising human dignity involves acknowledging each individual's capacity for rational self-legislation. The exploration of the universality of moral principles in Kant's moral philosophy, on the one hand, provides a robust and enduring framework for understanding freedom, equality and justice as interdependent elements of a rational moral system; on the other hand, it demonstrates how this universality remains critically relevant for addressing contemporary moral dilemmas.

INTRODUCTION

Kant is considered the greatest enlightenment philosopher in the history of philosophy. He has transformed philosophical thinking through his unique and systematic work in epistemology and ethics. His distinctive contribution lay in grounding philosophy in necessity and universality. Like true science (*Wissenschaft*), he sought to establish a foundation for philosophy that would be universally valid. To achieve this, he was determined to formulate certain fundamental universal principles that would be uncontroversial and universally acceptable—principles that would be equally applicable to all and similarly imposed on all. Kant begins this project through his epistemological framework. According to Kant, the hallmarks of true knowledge are necessity and universality. In Kant's epistemological scheme, there are two sources of knowledge: *Sensibility* and *Understanding*. Sensibility supplies the materials of knowledge, while understanding provides the *a priori* forms that organise and process the materials of knowledge. But what is the source of these *a priori* forms of our experience? For Kant, the source of this *a priori* form of knowledge is the intuition of the rational human being. He posited that all rational individuals share the same categories of understanding and argued that their proper application leads objectively to universal knowledge.

Kant's moral philosophy is also grounded in necessity and universality. The primary aim of his moral philosophy is to formulate universal principles for human behaviour—principles free from the ambiguities of speculative metaphysics—that would serve as an irrefutable foundation for action. In other words, Kant seeks to establish how we *ought* to act. As he argues, morality consists not in acting from personal desire or inclination but from duty. For Kant, an action is moral only if it is performed *solely* out of duty. He further contends that moral principles originate in pure reason. Individuals, therefore, ought to be guided by moral laws derived from pure reason, independent of external influences. Thus, universality is undeniably central to Kant's moral philosophy. This paper examines how Kant establishes the universality of moral principles, particularly those of freedom, equality, and justice. It concludes by noting that while Kant's ethical framework offers a rigorous basis for understanding morality, contemporary ethical theories—with their greater flexibility—challenge his insistence on universality. Further exploration of Kantian ethics, however, may shed light on unresolved moral dilemmas.

The basis of Kant's moral philosophy is also necessity and universality. The fundamental purpose of Kant's moral philosophy is to formulate certain basic universal principles for human behaviour that will be free from the ambiguity of speculative metaphysics and inevitably set the foundation of our actions as an irrefragable principle—that is, to provide the basis of how we should act. As Kant argues, morality consists of acting from duty rather than from personal inclinations or desires. For him, an action is considered moral or ethical only if it is done solely for the sake of duty. He further states that the source of moral principles is pure reason. A person should be guided by

moral laws that arise from pure reason, without being influenced externally. So, it seems clear that in Kant's philosophy, universality is foundational. This paper aims to show how Kant established this universality of moral principles, particularly of freedom, equality and justice. This paper concludes with remarks that although Kant's ethical philosophy provides a rigorous framework for understanding moral principles. The flexibility of contemporary ethical theories challenges Kant's philosophy of universality. Therefore, further exploration of Kantian ethics can illuminate existing moral dilemmas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is regarded as the seminal text of his moral theory because, in this short work, he clearly expresses his unique views on the fundamental principles of morality. Widely read in the 2nd half of the 20th century, Kant's *Groundwork* is regarded as an inspiration for the creative work of contemporary moral philosophers. There are compelling reasons for this consideration. Firstly, because it provides the most basic principles of morality; secondly, it gives concrete moral paradigms of human behaviour and the application of basic principles of morality; and thirdly, from the notion of human freedom and autonomy, it provides a stirring picture of morality rules governing human behaviour that have no religious basis. Thus, Kant's *Groundwork* can be regarded as the paradigmatic expression of ideals in European Enlightenment philosophy that have been irrevocably devaluated. However, the primary purpose of Kant's *Groundwork* was to formulate a universally acceptable principle of morality that is inherently valid, i.e., *a priori*. The main argument of Kant's *Groundwork* can be introduced as follows: The practical claims of reason can be expressed through a universal moral principle that imposes necessary and sufficient conditions on subjective principles (*maxims*). The principle is that 'I can only act on that principle which I can also accept as a universal principle.'

Kant's reasoning for founding philosophy on universal principles is tangible. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant realises the necessity for the universal principle of morality on the ground that actions motivated solely by inclinations cannot be morally justified, no matter how fruitful they are. He argues that acting according to maxims grounded in universal principles constitutes the sole alternative to actions motivated by inclination. Merely inclination-based actions, Kant maintains, can yield nothing but hypothetical imperatives. Kant also argues that moral principles should always be necessary and universal because, without universality, the ground of any conception of good can be motivated by self-inclination and, therefore, empirical; and for being empirical, it cannot be universal and necessary but contingent and whimsical. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant also aims to legitimise practical laws as regulators of human actions. According to Kant, practical laws are valid in the will of every rational being. If our pure reason can regulate the will and achieve practicality, practical laws must exist. In this context, his main point is that the desire for any particular

object can never establish universality in practical laws because it cannot be equally valid for all rational beings. Since Kant excludes all forms of personal desire from the basis of moral principles, it cannot be anything other than universal legislation. Furthermore, he contends that a rational being must recognise the subjective principles of its motivation as necessarily universal practical laws. Kant explains the human desire for universal moral principles with the *incentive theory* of pure practical reason. According to Kant, moral law is the only thing that can really motivate a rational being to act. In other words, the only reason we should do the right thing should be our rational will, not any reward or external reason. Moreover, he argued that the moral law must never be merely an external rule to follow; rather, it should intrinsically guide our actions. If we obey the moral law only externally without internalising it as motivation, then we cannot truly be considered to be acting morally (Guyer, 2000, p. 136).

Kant presents two arguments concerning the inherent incentive for moral duty. First, he contends that there is nothing praiseworthy in ordinary human actions, even if they are outwardly consistent with moral principles; only actions internally motivated by moral law can be considered morally praiseworthy. In this view, an action can only be morally valid if it is directly motivated by the moral law. When moral laws follow from personal inclination or self-interest rather than from respect for the moral law itself, the action may be legally valid, but it lacks moral worth (Guyer, 2000, p. 137). Second, affirming humanity's capacity to be motivated by moral principles, Kant argues that such principles can serve as intrinsically sufficient grounds for duty – provided we consistently act in accordance with them. Universal moral principles do not reflect subjective desire. Actions stemming from particular inclinations inevitably conflict with moral requirements. Thus, genuine moral action necessitates motivation by moral principles alone.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we employ a philosophical and conceptual analysis method to examine the foundations of ethical principles in Kant's moral philosophy. This study is primarily theoretical and interpretive in nature. To explore the universality of moral principles, we have analysed Kant's primary works, including the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Metaphysics of Morals*, along with relevant secondary literature on Kantian ethics.

RESEARCH RESULT

This article explores the universality of moral principles in Kant's ethical philosophy. According to Kant's deontological ethics, ethical principles are a priori and universal. His categorical imperative asserts that moral laws should be founded on rational maxims that can be universally applied. It suggests that, in Kant's ethics, moral duties are intrinsic and independent of consequences or outcomes. Based on this Kantian ethical framework, we have explored the universality of moral concepts like

freedom, equality, and justice. We have shown that in Kant's ethics, true freedom is not simply the absence of external constraints but the positive capacity to act according to reason. This notion of rational autonomy underpins Kant's concept of equality, as every individual possessing this same capacity is inherently equal in moral worth. In the same way, respect for persons, in Kant's view, is ultimately respect for the moral law itself, as recognising an individual's inherent dignity involves acknowledging their capacity for rational self-legislation. Justice, within this framework, is understood through the lens of duty. These duties represent the highest principles of moral action, derived from individual practical reason. This paper also shows how modern ethical theories diverge from the Kantian ethical framework. In the Kantian framework, universality is the foundation of moral principles. Kant emphasised universality, duty, and rational autonomy as the basis of his moral principles. On the other hand, although greatly influenced by Kant, modern ethical theories often emphasise consequences, context, emotions and relations in ethical principles.

DISCUSSION

Freedom: the moral autonomy

In Kant's moral philosophy, freedom is intrinsically and unconditionally valuable. His view on the value of freedom can be traced back to the publication of his famous book *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Regarding the value of freedom, Kant states that freedom is intrinsically valuable and the source of all other moral values and obligations. More specifically, the values of other ideals are determined by the value of freedom. In Kant's view, freedom is the fundamental aspect of human existence. It represents the highest intrinsic value in the world and is the ultimate virtue that forms the basis for all other perfections. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant wrote: Freedom is the faculty that enables all other faculties to reach their highest efficacy. As the foundation of all perfections and their necessary condition, it represents the highest form of existence. While other beings may act according to their will, their will is not truly free, as it remains subject to external influences; consequently, their actions are governed by necessity. If every being's will were constrained in this manner, the world would lack genuine value. The highest good, or *summum bonum*, resides in freedom—particularly in a will unimposed by external forces. In this way, freedom constitutes the intrinsic worth of the world (Guyer, 2000, p. 129).

According to Kant, it is freedom that makes humans ends in themselves. Just before publishing his *Groundwork*, Kant first introduced the concept of the 'end in itself' in his *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lectures on natural law (*Ius naturae*). During his lecture, he told his students that, in the system of ends, just as in the chain of causes, there must be something that exists as an end in itself—not merely as a means—just as there must necessarily be an uncaused cause (Guyer, 2016, p. 10). In this connection, Kant proclaimed humanity as an *end in itself*—a being whose very existence demands absolute respect. To reduce man to a mere instrument, he argued, is to violate his

fundamental nature. He argued that it is not rationality alone that elevates humanity above utility, but freedom: the sovereign power that makes man a self-legislative being, worthy of dignity, never subjugation. Kant saw reason as just a tool – useful, but not what defines our ultimate worth. True dignity derives from freedom alone. It enables us to exist as ends in ourselves rather than merely as instruments for others. Through freedom, we transcend mere impulse-following; we become self-governing beings capable of choices and autonomous actions (Guyer, 2016, p. 10). Hence, the idea of freedom in Kant's thought is not just a way to get rid of any desire, indeed, it is the only thing that is 'intrinsically valuable,' and the purpose of reason is to guide us to realise freedom as the capacity of our will. He further contends that the moral laws we can formulate through reason are only possible because of our freedom. It is that capacity for which we can choose the most appropriate principle and conduct among the many alternatives.

For Kant, true freedom isn't about doing whatever we want. For him, it is intrinsically valuable and governed by moral laws, which simultaneously encompasses the idea of value and duty. He argues that this freedom is a condition that must be attained and maintained by voluntary obedience to moral laws. Kant believed that freedom only becomes truly valuable when we willingly follow moral laws that come from our reason, not externally. These self-imposed rules aren't restrictions; they are what make freedom meaningful. Without them, freedom would only be chaos. But when we govern ourselves rationally, we don't just obey – we become the authors of our own dignity (Guyer, 2000, p. 2). Kant argues that the *Categorical Imperatives* are not the principles that compel us to submit to any fundamental moral values; these are the principles of *ought* or propriety – we should follow them for the complete expression of our freedom. For him, no end can be good that is not governed by unconditional moral principles. Only the moral rules governed by unconditional constraints can preserve and develop the concept of freedom to the full extent. Universal moral principles don't only limit our pursuit of contingent ends, they express our necessary end.

Kant's argument for considering universal moral principles as the basis of our freedom is to secure our existence and identity as potential rational beings. For him, if we want to live as rational beings, we should determine or regulate freedom in adherence to moral laws. Furthermore, our true identity as rational beings is completely revealed only if we free ourselves from any personal instincts and determine our actions according to the universal laws derived from our reason. For Kant, our status as an end in ourselves is the source of universal law. He argues that as rational beings, we should never be used by mere means; therefore, the only way to protect our freedom is to respect the freedom of all. According to Kant, humans cannot merely be a means because we are inherently valuable. This creates a fascinating tension: while natural forces don't constrain my free will, it needs to harmonise with everyone else's freedom. Freedom is about acting in ways that could work for everyone. Nature doesn't limit us, but other people's equal right to self-determination does. That is the social contract of human dignity (Guyer, 2000,

p. 157). If someone violates the freedom of others, they ultimately undermine their own freedom. Therefore, society must create a system where each person's freedom is balanced with the potential freedom of everyone else, ensuring that no one loses their own freedom. Freedom, in this sense, is grounded in a universal principle. The value of freedom doesn't come from legal restrictions but from being a necessary condition for the true realisation of everyone's freedom.

Equality: the equal rational capacity

One of the hallmarks of Kant's political philosophy is the concept of human equality. The commitment to the equal value of human beings permeates his ethical thought. According to Kant, all human beings are morally equal beings. All are entitled to equal dignity and respect because of their rationality, irrespective of any differences such as intellectual superiority or race. In his thought, all humans are ends in themselves, and none can be subject to any means. In his conception of equality, Kant was mostly influenced by Rousseau. He acknowledged the influence of Rousseau in shaping his thought. Initially, Kant regarded knowledge as the highest principle of respecting humanity. The wisest man was the most respected person to him, and he despised the ignorant. Later, inspired by Rousseau, he learned the principle of respecting and treating all humans as equals. As Kant put it, Rousseau opened my eyes and freed me from this deeply ingrained bias (Wood, 1999, p. 5). For him, it is the human tendency to judge oneself on various grounds like birth, wealth, power, etc. and to present oneself as superior to others and argue that whatever the basis of such judgments is nothing but self-conceited illusion and false thinking. He then states that if I didn't believe that my thoughts were not establishing human rights by valuing equal respect for all men, then I should consider myself useless than a worker. He believed that the mere belief in inequality creates real divisions among people. Only Rousseau's teaching could lead even the most knowledgeable philosophers to see themselves as no better than ordinary individuals, standing with integrity and without relying on religion to affirm their worth (Wood, 1999, p. 6).

Kant's idea of human dignity, respect, and ultimately equality is based on a universal foundation. There are two interpretations of Kant about the underlying universal principle of equality, which are found respectively in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of the Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. In *Groundwork*, he famously argues that moral duty should be followed purely for its own sake. According to him, an action holds moral value only when it is performed out of duty. Its worth does not lie in the outcome it seeks to achieve but in the principle that guides the decision to act (Kant, 1996, p. 55). When we act merely for the sake of duty, the will to the duty is objectively determined by the moral law itself, and subjectively, the will is determined by the pure respect to the practical law. Kant means that our duty to respect all requires a specific principle that will treat everyone as an end in themselves regardless of their merit, and as a result, each will treat others as equal

persons. Hence, Kant states that ‘respect for a person’ is nothing but respect for the law. Kant explains it as follows: Respecting a person ultimately means respecting the moral law they embody. When we see someone with great talents, we recognise developing our own abilities as a duty and view them as an example of this principle in action. Our admiration for them stems not from their personal qualities alone but from the moral law they represent. In essence, all moral motivation is rooted in reverence for this law (Kant, 1996, p. 56).

Kant means that when we show our respect for a person’s good—which may be his good deeds that are valuable—we see that person as an example of law. We think that the person’s actions reflect moral norms, that is to say, reflect what is required for a universal moral law or how we want to see universal moral law ought to be. Consequently, we understand that the law should be according to his deeds. Orienting ourselves towards that person, we make respect for the law or *maxim* and thus begin to feel practical respect for the law. Kant refers to it as a feeling, but it is not a sensible feeling; it is a condition of feeling of respect, and its determining cause lies in the pure practical reason. Kant put it as follows: While our emotions and inclinations provide the basis for what we experience as respect, the true source of this feeling lies in pure practical reason. Because of this, respect is not driven by mere emotional impulses but is shaped by rational principles and moral understanding (Kant, 2015, 63, 5:76).

Kant sees the capacity to act morally as the foundation of human dignity. He begins this analysis by contrasting between relative worth and absolute worth. For him, something that consists of *relative worth* is determined by its price, and something that has *absolute worth* ‘is raised above all price’ and exists as an end in itself. While discussing dignity, he emphasises that qualities like keeping promises faithfully and showing kindness based on principles rather than mere instinct possess true inner value (Kant, 1996, p. 84). What, then, is the foundation of human dignity? Kant himself raises this question, asking what gives good disposition or moral virtue the right to such a high status (Kant, 1996, p. 85). He answers that dignity comes from our ability, as rational beings, to participate in the creation of universal moral laws—an ability that makes us worthy members of a possible community governed by ethical principles (Kant, 1996, p. 84). So, what gives humans that sacred status—that we must be treated as ends in ourselves? Kant’s answer cuts deep: it is our moral compass. Not our skills, not our usefulness, but that raw capacity to know right from wrong and choose it—even when it is hard. That’s the seed of human dignity. He would put it like this: True worth isn’t about what you do, rather that you answer to something higher—that you are part of a shared moral universe where your choices matter. Without that? We are just clever animals. With it? We are sovereign (Kant, 1996, p. 79). What does Kant say about humanity or morality as an end in itself? Kant says that humans are not a means. You can’t just use someone as a means to your own ends—not yourself, not others. Every person, just by virtue of being a thinking, moral creature, has inherent worth.

That's why we call them 'persons' in the first place. It is not about what they can do for you or how useful they are (Kant, 1996, p. 79). Therefore, it becomes clear that every rational human being has dignity for their *moral capacity* by which they are entitled to claim equal respect irrespective of any merit.

Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPR) also explains the moral law as the determining ground of the will to respect and dignity. In CPR, Kant doesn't say that we behave morally because we feel respect for the law; rather, he makes the much deeper point that this feeling of respect is morality itself, experienced from our subjective perspective as motivation (Kant, 2015, p. 63). According to Kant, arising entirely from pure reason, this feeling neither evaluates any action nor establishes any ground objective principle of morality. Its main purpose is to ground moral law as an incentive to the supreme principle. For Kant, respect is always person-centred, not things. Things can only awaken in us the inclination, or love, if they are animals, or fear, if they are seas or volcanoes, but they cannot awaken respect. He also says that a man can be the object of our love or fear; his sense of humour, rank, power, etc., can arouse this feeling in us, but cannot arouse inner respect. In this context, Kant reflects on Fontenelle's quip, "*I bow before an eminent man, but my spirit does not,*" and encounters it by saying that when I meet an ordinary person of exceptional moral character—someone more principled than me—my mind automatically bows in respect, whether I like it or not. Even if I try to maintain his social superiority by keeping his head high, I can't help but feel humbled internally. Why? Because that person's integrity acts like a moral mirror—their very existence proves that living virtuously is possible, and this undeniable example shatters any illusions I might have about my moral superiority (Kant, 2015, p. 64).

Kant states that this respect is imperishable. If, later on, I am aware of the equal uprightness of the person in me, my respect for the person will remain the same. I cannot disregard the law shown and established by example. Being unknown to me, the standard adorned by Him appeared to me as pure light. As Kant says, respect isn't something we can choose to give—it forces itself on us when we recognise true worth in someone (Kant, 2015, p. 64). We might pretend not to admire them, we might even act dismissive, but that inner acknowledgment? That's automatic. Like, when we meet someone whose character or talent is so undeniable, your gut response bypasses all your pretenses. You can fake indifference, but you can't stop feeling that pull of genuine respect. In other words, we cannot deny paying respect to merit because it determines the value of respect. Moreover, since this example presents a principle that challenges my self-conceit, it cultivates respect for a form of moral law. Kant consequently argues that when we respect someone, we are not, in fact, respecting the person as such, but rather the moral principle manifested through their actions (Kant, 2015, p. 65).

Justice: the universality of fair laws and the duty of virtue

Kant's conception of justice, primarily outlined in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, differs from the contemporary egalitarian conception of justice, which mainly focuses on distributive justice. Rather than centering on the fair distribution of resources, Kant sees justice as rooted in our moral obligations. For him, justice arises from our duty – specifically, the *duty of virtue*, the *duty of love*, and the *duty of mutual respect*. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explicitly states that helping the poor is a moral obligation. He asserts that we should help those in need and should do so selflessly, without expecting anything in return (Kant, 1996, p. 568). According to Kant, being beneficent – assisting others within our capacity to improve their well-being – is a fundamental moral responsibility. While speaking of the law of duty or the source of reciprocity, Kant states that the foundation of duty and reciprocity lies in the moral world we live in, where rational beings are drawn together by both attraction and repulsion. He emphasises that the principle of mutual love serves as a constant reminder for individuals to foster closer connections with one another (Kant, 1996, p. 572).

Kant does not confine love and respect for others to situations of distress; rather, he advocates for adopting love and respect as fundamental ends of humanity. For him, the demonstration of love and respect as duty is not a pathological love; that is, it is neither a matter of feeling nor is it a feeling of satisfaction seeing the happiness of others; indeed, these are respectively the “maxim of benevolence” – “the practical love” and “maxim of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person” (Kant, 1996, p. 569). Kant argues that we must awaken our sympathetic natural feelings and participate in the fate of others, i.e., to coexist among the poor. By sympathetic feeling, Kant doesn't refer to external this or that feeling; the feelings he talks about are the means of fulfilling duties. That is to say that, for Kant, the duty of love to others is neither the internal act of the human mind nor merely a wish or desire for the happiness of others. It consists of a practical aspect. It is a maxim – the highest *subjective principle* of action – that originates from individual practical reason. In this sense, the duty of love to others is a *principle of benevolence*, which results in the *beneficence* of others (Kant, 1996, p. 569). It consists of an idea of active benevolence and constitutes our external duty – the duty that compels us to act for the welfare of others (Kant, 1996, p. 569). As Kant argues, benevolence constitutes the feeling of satisfaction derived from others' happiness, whereas beneficence represents a more advanced commitment – the active promotion of others' well-being. The duty of beneficence originates in reason, which obligates us to uphold this principle as a universal moral law (Kant, 1996, p. 571).

Along with the '*duty of beneficence*,' Kant also envisioned two other forms of duty – the '*duty of gratitude*' and the '*duty of sympathy*.' According to Kant, these are more encompassed with love for others (Kant, 1996, p. 571). According to Kant, *gratitude* is another duty that conforms to moral law. For Kant, I show respect to a person because that person puts me under the obligation of gratitude to him by benefiting me. This expression of gratitude is

not merely an expression of active emotion; we may consider it a relationship of love or even a duty of virtue—a *sacred* duty. Kant argues that failing to fulfil this duty can set a harmful example, undermining the very moral foundation of beneficence (Kant, 1996, p. 573). He further states that, unlike other duties, this one is unique because it cannot simply be repaid or cancelled. No matter how much kindness is returned, the original act of generosity remains morally significant, as the benefactor will always hold the distinction of being the first to act with goodwill (Kant, 1996, p. 574). Kant refers to this as a form of appreciativeness.

According to Kant, sympathetic joy and pain (*sympathia moralis*) describe the feeling of understanding the others' emotional state, which can be called a shared feeling. This shared or sympathetic feeling is innate, a natural human capacity, i.e., human beings are born with the ability to feel and understand such emotions. Kant called this *duty of sympathy* the *duty of humanity* (Kant, 1996, p. 575). He connects the duty of sympathy to the duty of humanity because humans are not solely rational beings but also embodied with reason, which obligates us to empathise and care for others. For Kant, this humanity manifests in two ways. Firstly, as the *capacity* and *will* to share another's feelings (what we might call practical humanity). It is free because it involves a conscious choice to participate in the emotional lives of others and, therefore, truly sympathetic, which is grounded in practical reason; and secondly, as the receptivity to shared feelings. It is a natural ability of shared feeling, endowed by nature (what we might call *aesthetic* humanity). It is not a matter of choice but an involuntary response, akin to catching an illness; therefore, an unfree compassion, a communicable feeling we are naturally inclined to experience. In other words, while we are morally obligated to cultivate the first type of humanity (active, sympathetic sharing), the second (passive, receptive compassion) is simply part of our human nature. In this context, Kant draws on the Stoic ideal of a wise man who seeks friendship not for personal gain in times of hardship but for the opportunity to support and uplift others (Kant, 1996, p. 575). This suggests that even when we cannot directly alleviate someone's suffering, we can still connect with their experience by imagining ourselves in their place, allowing us to share in their emotions through empathy.

In this context, Kant argues that we cannot have the duty to increase evil, nor should we perform good merely out of compassion. He considers such actions, driven solely by feeling, to be a form of '*humiliating sympathy*,' lacking moral worth, and therefore, has no place in human relationships. Kant further states that while we cannot actively force ourselves to feel the sufferings of others, we can compassionately choose to engage ourselves with their fate; that is, we can be responsibly concerned about their fate. This constitutes an implicit duty, one that should naturally cultivate through practical reason. We can think of it this way: Consider our natural feelings of compassion as tools. We are obligated not simply to *feel* but to act by utilising these feelings (tools), guided by moral principles. Thus, the feeling itself is not

the duty; rather, duty lies in employing our feelings as a catalyst for compassionate and ethical behaviour.

However, Kant's conception of the *duty of beneficence* has two foundations, found in both *Groundwork* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant's first premise states that the principle of acting solely out of self-interest cannot be universally applied without leading to contradiction (Loriaux, 2020, p. 5). It implies that, according to Kant, a universal principle of pure self-interest is inherently contradictory. For him, every individual desires the help and affection of others. In other words, each person wants to set himself as an end to others. However, a maxim cannot be regarded as an obligation unless it becomes a universal principle. Hence, the well-being of others must be a shared end, i.e., every human being must demonstrate their practical love for others; otherwise, it would not be possible to form any universal maxim. As a result, the maxim of common interest becomes a universal duty. In contrast, the maxim of self-interest is antithetical to duty because its universalisation would logically preclude receiving help from others, thus undermining the maxim itself upon which it is based. This inherent contradiction renders pure self-interest incompatible with moral obligation (Loriaux, 2020, p. 6).

The second basis for the duty of beneficence is rooted in the idea that humanity, as an end in itself, should be treated with harmony and respect for its inherent value (Loriaux, 2020, p. 8). In this context, we should remember that the term 'humanity' doesn't refer to the human race or any characteristics of humans as a biological species. Rather, it denotes rationality – the capacity to act and conceive oneself as an end according to his reason. Kant posits this rational capacity as an absolute and unconditional value. Humanity, in this sense, possesses inherent and absolute worth that limits the freedom of human action. Kant emphasises that every human being, and every rational being in general, has intrinsic worth and should be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as a tool for someone else's purpose (Loriaux, 2020, p. 8). Building on Christine Korsgaard's interpretation, we can understand humanity – or rational nature – as the source of value. The goals we pursue through our actions hold significance only because we assign value to them. However, we can only justify valuing these goals if we also, at least implicitly, recognise and value our own rational nature as the foundation that grants them worth. (Loriaux, 2020, p. 8). This constitutes the rational process of valuation. As this evaluative capacity is fundamental to human existence, it represents a subjective principle of action common to all rational beings. Kant consequently characterises love for others – and their well-being – as simultaneously a duty, an end, and thus a virtue-based obligation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article discusses the depth of Kant's transcendental philosophy, arguing that it provides a robust foundation for understanding the universal concepts of freedom, equality and justice. Kant's assertion of the universality of moral principles offers a distinct framework for understanding freedom, equality, and justice – concepts that fundamentally shape modern conceptions

of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Kant establishes an enduring moral framework grounded in the apriori structure of reason rather than experience. By grounding morality in the universal and necessary structure of reason, Kant offers a framework that transcends the limitations of space and time. Kantian ethics views freedom as the ability to act following the moral law derived from pure reason rather than external forces. From this perspective, according to Kant, freedom signifies acting in accordance with universally valid moral principles. Since moral principles are derived from the pure reason of rational beings, individuals are bound by a sense of duty. Another characteristic of Kant's ethics is that it views rational beings as an end in itself, rather than means, which provides a unique interpretation of human equality. In contemporary ethics, the equal moral dignity of all sensible beings, regardless of social status, intelligence, or wealth, reflects Kant's interpretation of equality. Justice, in the Kantian framework, is creating a legal and moral system that respects the dignity of individuals. Therefore, according to Kant, justice is the equal application of universal principles, which profoundly influence the modern framework of human rights.

Ultimately, Kant's ethical philosophy provides a rigorous and rational framework for moral principles, offering a clear and systematic formulation of ethical precepts. However, contemporary ethics, with its emphasis on emotions, relationships, and contextual factors, challenges Kantian moral philosophy and questions its claims to universality. Nevertheless, further exploration of Kantian ethics can contribute to contemporary moral debates by clarifying the practical applications of its principles.

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