



In Defence of Kantian Human Dignity in the 21st Century: An Ethical Consideration

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Abstract

This article entitled “In Defence of Kantian Human Dignity in the 21st Century: An Ethical Consideration” is based on the idea that the 21st century, an era of scientific and technological advancements, brings many benefits with various detrimental effects. The most crucial problem that we are facing is the constant deterioration of human value and dignity. This era introduces the idea of posthumanism or transhumanism, whose agenda is to go beyond the humanistic approaches and find themselves as more than humans. In the present venture, I shall highlight the fact that due to technological advancements, these post-humanistic or trans-humanistic approaches are somehow responsible for the deterioration of human dignity. Here, I also shed light on the adverse effects of wars, which are also responsible for the loss of human dignity in the present times. However, the primary intention of this paper is to give a solution in defence of human dignity by revisiting Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, especially his idea of humanity and human autonomy.

Keywords: Human dignity, Value, Reason, Morality, Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Technological advancements, War.

1. Prelude

It is a well-known fact that human beings are valuable by nature. However, the moot question is: Why do humans have special significance over other living creatures? In this regard, various philosophers acknowledge the fact that due to the reasoning capacity possessed by humans, they are intrinsically valuable, and this inner significance secures their status as special, higher beings over other living animals in this mundane world. Humans are the sole creatures in this world with a higher degree of reasoning capacity that separates them from other animals. However, before delving into the discussion of the conception of human dignity, first, we

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should know what we mean by human value, which is the determining factor of human dignity. The English term “value” is the translated form of the Latin word “valēre”, which means “be worth.” According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, value means “worth, desirability, or utility of” a subject or object. So, in the present venture, since I am dealing with the idea of human value, I can define human values as the worth of human beings. We can categorize human values into two kinds, viz., relative or subjective and absolute or objective¹. Values that vary from individual to individual are called relative or subjective values. That means values that apply to human beings from external forces come under this category, like different cultural, social, or religious values. On the other hand, a value that is the same for all rational human beings is the absolute or objective value. That means the intrinsically generated value of human beings falls under this category. Through the parameter of human value, we can determine how human beings are related to society, culture, and the external world around them, and this is also the answer to the question of why humans deserve dignity.

Since ancient times, human dignity has been the most debatable issue in philosophy, especially in ethics. If we analyze the history of philosophy, it is apparent that different philosophers were immensely concerned about the status of human dignity, which compelled them to figure out the determining factor that justifies human dignity. Philosophers acknowledge that human dignity can be ordained by means of human values, which can be intrinsic or extrinsic. However, as we know, we live in the 21st century, an era of technological and scientific advancements. This century brings lots of advantages and various challenges for human beings. Different scientific and technological advancements come with various new ideas, whose developments lead us to the transhuman age, where the dignity of natural or biological human beings is being questioned. Humans are compelled to think: Can these transhuman developments lead to the degradation of human dignity? What will the status of human dignity be if such artificial inventions overpower them? If such artificial inventions dominate biological beings, what should be done to protect human dignity? All these questions demand answers, and the primary intention of this paper is to find out the response to such questions, which will intend to defend the status and dignity of natural human beings. To fulfil the purpose of this paper, first, I intend to highlight the problems that are responsible for the deterioration of human dignity. To excavate this fact, the second section illustrates the moral permissibility of transhuman developments and different issues of the 21st century responsible for the degradation of human dignity. Then, the third section examines why humans deserve dignity by following the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, whose notion of humanity bears far-reaching implications, even today. Lastly, the concluding section offers possible suggestions on how to defend and

enhance human dignity from the challenges of the 21st century. Hence, at first, it is necessary to shed light on the primary concern of this paper, i.e., is there any danger in preserving or defending human dignity in this posthuman and transhuman era? The response to this question can be excavated through the debate between transhumanists and bioconservatives, which I shall discuss in the next section.

2. The Status of Human Dignity in the Transhuman Era

The scientific and technological advancements gained momentum between the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Undoubtedly, due to these advancements, humans can ease their day-to-day living. These scientific and technological advancements have led to some new theories, and the transhumanist approach is one of them. The term “transhumanism” was first coined in 1957 by the English biologist and philosopher Julian Huxley(1887-1975). He uses this term to describe human evolution in the post-modern world. So, before delving into the status of human dignity (one of the main concerns of humanism), in the 21st century, it is crucial to know: What is the concept of transhumanism, and how does it differ from humanism? To respond to this question, we should look back at the history of philosophy. It is evident that at the initial stage of philosophical thinking, different philosophers were immensely concerned about the truth of reality, i.e., the true nature of this mundane world. However, the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras’ famous contention, “Man is the measure of all things,” shifts philosophical thinking from nature-centric to anthropocentric. From that time, different philosophers showed interest in excavating the true nature of human beings and their relation with the external world around them. This human-centric approach to philosophy gave birth to humanism, which came into force mainly in the Enlightenment period. Humanism is the philosophical approach that protects human rights and their relation to each other by emphasizing their rational, autonomous, and conscious nature. This approach also emphasizes the fact that the inner significance of human beings enables them to become responsible agents, and due to this, they can control all external affairs of the natural world. That means, in simple words, we can say that humanism is the philosophical stance that promotes the natural power of humankind. However, in the late 20th century, a new philosophical movement emerged to challenge and criticize humanism, viz., posthumanism. This posthuman movement mainly criticizes the human-centric approach, human agency, and human power to control everything. This posthuman movement also introduces another approach called transhumanism. These two movements of posthumanism and transhumanism intend to reconsider or redefine the meaning of human beings with the help of a new theoretical framework. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two

movements, i.e., posthumanism intends to criticize the biological, moral, and ontological positions of humanism. In contrast, transhumanism tries to strengthen the humanistic approach as an extension by changing or improving it, with the help of science and technology.ⁱⁱ However, in the present venture, I shall only deal with transhumanism to discover the status of human dignity in contemporary times.

To illustrate the status of human dignity in this transhuman era, we should discuss the activity or scope of transhumanism. If we look into the characteristics of human beings, then the first thing that comes to our mind is that humans are rational beings with limitations. Here, we define humans as limited beings because they possess some limited capacity. Among the different limitations of humans, the most crucial limitations are their epistemological and ontological limitations. That means if we thoroughly analyze the nature of human beings, we find that humans possess limited cognitive ability, which does not allow them to go beyond their epistemological limitations. Likewise, humans are short-lived creatures, and this short lifespan indicates their ontological limitations. All these limitations are inherent to human beings, i.e., they are natural or biological. However, as I have mentioned earlier, transhumanism is the movement that mainly tries to blur the line between humans and their limitations by changing or improving human conditions. Transhumanism holds that it is possible to modify human nature and transcend their epistemological or ontological limitations, using various technological methods and applied science.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the question is: What kind of modification of human nature are they talking about? In this context, they hold that though humans are biologically limited beings, it is possible to improve their biological nature by increasing their physical and intellectual capacities, health span, or even their life span, with the help of technology. Transhumanists promote the view that, due to “morphological freedom”^{iv} and “reproductive freedom,”^v humans are free to choose different “human enhancement technologies.”^{vi} By adopting “human enhancement technologies,” humans can become transhumans with greater capacities than any usual human beings. This transhumanist wave is constantly working on various biotechnological advancements, e.g., artificial wombs, anti-ageing therapy, artificial intelligence, brain microchips, gene editing therapy, robotic arms, cyborgs, etc. All these biotechnological tools are used to enhance human capacity.

Now, a question may intrigue one’s mind: If such human enhancement technologies are made for the well-being of humans, then what is the problem with these technological advancements? In response to this question, it can be said that all these technological advancements may increase the physical and intellectual capacities of humans. Still, all these methods are, by nature, dehumanising.” In the present time, due to these technological advancements, humans are facing

some potential losses like human dignity, autonomy, and also their privacy. In this context, it is vital to highlight the view of bioconservatives, who oppose the transhumanist agenda. Bioconservatives are immensely concerned about human dignity and human values. They hold that all these human enhancement technologies that make humans “more than human” might undermine human dignity or something valuable about being human. These creations of transhumans will be a threat to ordinary natural human beings.^{vii} With the help of an instance, it can be illustrated why it threatens ordinary human beings. Suppose a transhuman using a brain microchip can enhance the brain’s functioning capacity. Due to this implantation, the transhuman can be more intellectual than an ordinary human. Even by implanting various internal robotic limbs, transhumans can be more powerful than ordinary humans. These types of implantations might be a serious threat to ordinary human beings, which can make them slaves of transhumans. Because all these human enhancement technologies are so expensive, not everyone can afford them. This inaccessibility to technology promotes a boundary between the poor and rich, where transhumans can access superior existence, which is the direct path to discrimination and inequality. Due to this boundary, it might be possible that in the future transhumans can overpower ordinary humans because it is an apparent fact that the strong always want to oppress the weak. The agenda of transhumanism is dehumanising because its biotechnological advancements harm the status of human values and dignity by changing their true biological nature. Hence, these biotechnological transformations of humans are potentially dangerous for mankind.

Moreover, besides these transhumanistic challenges, there is another issue that causes the deterioration of human value and dignity, i.e., war. In the era of scientific and technological advancements, different countries use various technologies to make themselves powerful. They prepare themselves for the war by making powerful nuclear bombs, bioweapons, artificial intelligence, information technology, etc. To my mind, a war is never a good thing for the well-being of mankind. Maintaining peace is a crucial duty for human beings. Though a war is held between two countries due to political interest, it causes immense loss of human lives, dignity, and value. Because of the commencement of war between the political leaders, the lives of innocent people are always at stake, which is never acceptable. Every human being has the right to live their life peacefully. However, various political leaders, due to some political interests, decide to wage war without even thinking about the innocent citizens of the countries. They use their innocent citizens by sending them to war or taking the lives of citizens of the opponent country. This war is nothing but the use of humans as a means to achieve an end, which is highly unacceptable for the sake of human dignity. Hence, this analysis leads us towards the question: Is

there any possibility of preserving or defending human dignity in the era of technological advancements? For the response to this question, in the next section, I shall propose a ground in defence of human dignity by following Kant's moral philosophy, which not only suggests the reason for considering humans as dignified beings but also teaches the defence mechanism to preserve human dignity.

3. Human Dignity in the Light of Kant's Moral Philosophy

By considering the absolute value theory, it can be said that human beings possess an intrinsic rational capacity that makes them worthy of themselves, and due to this absolute value, they demand or deserve dignity. If we thoroughly analyze Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) philosophy, it is apparent that he established the foundation of his entire critical philosophy based on the notion of human reason. He considers the notion of human reason as the central theme of his transcendental critical philosophy. In his monumental work *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), Kant intends to show us that human reason has two sides, i.e., one is theoretical and the other is practical. Through the theoretical reasoning capacity, humans can comprehend the cognition of the empirical world. To put it differently, it is the practical reason that determines the interest of humans regarding the sense of morality, and freedom of their will, and also satisfies their practical needs for some supernatural transcendent things, which do not have objective reality but haunt them in their thinking, like God, the afterlife, etc. So, the practical interest of human reason is the source of the sense of morality in human beings. That means the practical function of humans' faculty of reason commands them what they ought to do, how to behave, etc., and we can determine the absolute human value responsible for their dignity by examining their rational moral nature. Hence, for the proper illustration of the Kantian perspective on human dignity, it is essential to highlight Kant's idea of morality, because it is evident that Kantian ethics is the basis for his conception of humanity, which helps us to excavate the fact of why humans deserve dignity over other living creatures.

Kant illustrated his moral stance in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*^{viii} (1785) and *The Critique of Practical Reason*^{ix} (1788). All this literature indicates that he was immensely concerned about the definition of moral action. However, to fulfil the purpose of this paper, it is necessary to focus on the definition of moral actions because this definition will help us to determine human value and dignity. In this context, Kant defines moral action as one that is not driven by any form of inclinations, compassion, or consequences. He considers that a moral action ought to be performed with a sense of duty. Kant emphasizes the motive behind any action to recognize moral action. For ease of understanding, I can give an instance. Suppose I have

donated some food to the children of an NGO and shared some pictures of that event on social media, thinking that it is praiseworthy in front of both the virtual and non-virtual society. In this case, this action cannot be considered moral because I did that action not with a sense of duty but to fulfil some personal gain. So, for Kant, a moral action can be determined only by the motives behind those actions. This motive must be based on the sense of duty. As we know, humans can control the intentions behind their actions, but the consequences of those actions are not in their hands. That is why Kant emphasizes the motives behind the actions rather than the consequences, in the case of determining an action as moral.

Now, one can raise the following question: What is the thing that instigates the sense of duty in humans? In this regard, Kant intends to show us that only *good will* can generate a sense of duty for moral actions. Kant holds that *good will* is good without any qualification because other goods (like courage, intelligence, prudence, etc.) also can be used to fulfil evil intentions. For instance, people can use their courage to kill someone. This example indicates that courage is good, but cannot be considered good when used to fulfil an evil intention. But *good will* is good in itself and can never be used for malicious purposes. This *good will* helps humans to choose moral duty freely. So, the *good will* and the sense of duty are both purely motivated by the command of practical reason.^x In the case of moral actions, there is no room for emotions because Kant established his entire notion of morality based on the human capacity for reason. If we focus on the nature of reason and emotion, we find that both are incompatible. That is why the sense of duty always contrasts with the sense of inclinations or feelings.

In this context, Kant sheds light on his conception of the categorical imperative. Kant believes that rational human beings perform various actions either from a sense of inclination or from a sense of duty. A sense of duty comes from our respect for moral laws.^{xi} Action performed with a sense of duty is naturally categorical. These duties are *categorical* in the sense that they are unconditional. For instance, always respect elders; this maxim comes under the categorical imperative. That means in the case of moral actions, there is no scope for “if-then” maxims (Kant calls such “if-then” maxims hypothetical imperatives), which are driven by our inclinations. So, Kant suggests that for moral actions, rational human beings only pursue those maxims that are categorical or unconditional by nature.

In his work, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*,^{xii} Kant mentions three formulations or expressions of the *categorical imperative*, or as Kant called the “supreme principle of morality.”^{xiii} Our practical reasoning capacity guides this principle. Among these three expressions, the first one is the “Formula of Universal Law,” which indicates that humans

should act by employing those maxims that can apply to all rational human beings. That means the maxims chosen by different rational beings are subjective. However, humans should wish for the universal or objective validity of those maxims for moral recognition of their actions. The second expression is the “Formula of Humanity,” which implies that for the recognition of moral action, humans should never use other fellow beings as the means to fulfil their desired end. After this, the last expression of the categorical imperative is called the “Formula of Autonomy.” This formulation suggests that humans possess free will to choose different maxims, and that is why they should not fall under the influence of other forces like emotions, passions, or other fellow beings, for their moral actions. These three expressions of the supreme principle of morality help humans to find their maxims perfect for moral duties. However, to fulfil the purpose of this paper, i.e., to excavate Kant’s perspective on human dignity, we should focus on the second and third expressions of the *categorical imperative*, i.e., “Formula of Humanity” and “Formula of Autonomy.”

Kant illustrates his “Formula of Humanity” in the following way:

“Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”^{xiv}

This expression of the “supreme principle of morality” is a manifesto of humanity and the answer to the question: why should humans deserve dignity? By introducing this formulation, Kant intends to convey that every rational human being should be respected and deserves dignity because of their common intrinsic value (i.e., their rational nature or the power of the faculty of reason), which they share with their fellow beings. This inner significance makes them worthy of themselves. Each human being is, by nature, an end in themselves. Because the faculty of reason not only prescribes laws to humans for their everyday conduct but also prescribes laws to itself so that it can validate and examine itself for the betterment of its functions. Humans can decide what to do in various challenging situations, using their faculty of reason. This means that, in changing conditions, they can change their decisions with new considerations. So, humans, due to their reasoning capacity, are intrinsically valuable. This rational capacity helps them to constitute and find the true nature, which is the essence of humanity. Due to this intrinsic worth of human beings, they always deserve respect and dignity. That is why they should never use themselves or other fellow beings as a means to achieve a specific end. All human beings should respect each other because they share an absolute common value that makes them special among

other living beings. Moreover, Kant's "Formula of Autonomy" also plays a crucial role in determining and preserving human dignity. The "Formula of Autonomy" states that:

"So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim."^{xv}

This formulation indicates human autonomy or freedom to choose the laws of morality. Humans are the only creatures of this universe bound to moral laws prescribed by their practical reasoning capacity. Rational beings act according to moral laws, where they can will freely, and due to this free will, they can wish for any moral law to be universal. That means the human faculty of practical reason commands different moral laws to navigate the external affairs around them. However, due to their freedom of will, they can freely choose these laws by applying their rational power. There is no obligation to obey such laws; instead, due to the sense of reverence, they act, judge, and behave in accordance with reason. This autonomy or freedom of the will of human beings provides supreme value to them, which is why they deserve dignity. Due to these qualities, such as humanity and autonomy, we can determine the absolute value of humans, which ensures human dignity. So, up to this, it is palpably clear why we consider humans as dignified beings; or, why humans should deserve dignity. Hence, it can be said that by keeping the Kantian idea of human dignity, or the method of respecting humanity in mind, humans can preserve or protect their humanity in the 21st century.

4. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be said that in the 21st century, there are lots of problems that cause the deterioration of human dignity. Among these problems, I have mentioned the two most crucial issues: transhuman developments and war. As a supporter of humanism, Immanuel Kant beautifully showed us that humans are dignified beings due to our intrinsic rational and moral nature. Our qualities of humanity and autonomy always deserve value and dignity. We consider humans to be rational moral beings, and this status is given to us naturally or biologically. However, in this present era, due to technological advancements, we find a difference between humans and transhumans that undermines the Kantian model of human dignity. There is no doubt that transhumanistic developments are made for the well-being of humans, but we have to ponder the usage of these technological means for the sake of human dignity. To my mind, not all technological advancements are dehumanizing. If human beings, with the help of technology, want to eradicate some physical disability and implant a limb (like a leg, hand, etc.) in their bodies, then there is nothing wrong with it. We cannot say these are

dehumanizing. However, it will be dehumanizing only when we use these technologies in order to change or improve some intrinsic nature of human beings. That means if we want to increase our intellectual capacity, or the power of brain functions by using brain chips, or if we want to be immortal by implanting new genes in our bodies, then I think it will be dehumanizing. Hence, we have to be cautious about the use of technology.

Moreover, we have to stop wars for the sake of humanity. We must not forget that war is not the solution to any political or geographical problem. Here, a question may intrigue us: What is the practical basis of this thinking, where the present scenario is different? In this context, it can be said that it is high time to revisit Kant's notion of the rational moral being. As I have mentioned earlier, humans are rational beings, and their rational nature makes them responsible for their actions. So, as conscious rational beings, we should generate our goodwill to develop our moral nature to avoid war-like situations. This will be possible only when we act by following our reasoning capacity. If we act under the guidance of reason, then it will help us to decide about the moral permissibility of our actions. By being an actual moral agent, it will be easy for us to understand where we should and should not use technology for the well-being of mankind. This means that in a war-like situation, we have to think about its consequences, which implies nothing but the loss of humanity and human dignity. When we consider such an issue, keeping the idea of humanity and human dignity in mind, we can avoid such war-like situations. Here, we can consider Kant's idea of humanity and human dignity not as a solution to these problems but as a moral appeal to mankind. Hence, it can be said that in the present time, where constant deterioration of human value and dignity is apparent, we should develop our rational moral nature to defend mankind and human dignity.

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ⁱ Here, the term “objective” has been used in the sense that it can be the same and applicable to all human beings.

ⁱⁱMerzlyakov, S.S. (2022). “Posthumanism vs. Transhumanism: From the “End of Exceptionalism” to “Technological Humanism”.” *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 92 (Suppl. 6), Obshchestvennye Nauki i Sovremennost Publication, pp. S475–S482, <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622120073>.

ⁱⁱⁱBostrom, N. (2005). “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity.” *Bioethics*. Vol. 19 (Number 3), Blackwell Publishing Ltd., p. 202.

^{iv}“Morphological freedom” is a human right that allows humans to modify their bodily shortcomings, i.e., humans can do whatever they want to do with their bodies.

^v“Reproductive freedom” is mainly concerned with women’s rights, where they can control their reproductive system as they can freely choose whether they are ready to reproduce or family planning and contraception or not.

^{vi}Bostrom, N. (2005). “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity.” *Bioethics*. Vol. 19 (Number 3), Blackwell Publishing Ltd., p. 203.

^{vii}Ibid., p. 203.

^{viii}Kant, I. (2011). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (Trans.), New York: Cambridge University Press.

^{ix}Kant, I. (2015). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Mary Gregor (Trans.), United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

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^{xi}Warburton, N. (2001). *Philosophy: The Classics*. London and New York: Routledge Publications, p. 141.

^{xii}Kant, I. (1964). *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. H. J. Paton (Trans.), New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers.

^{xiii}Gregor, M. J. (1996). *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, p. xxiii.

^{xiv}Kant, I. (1964). *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. H. J. Paton (Trans.), New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, pp. 32-33.

^{xv}Ibid., p. 34.