



Moral Autonomy and Human Dignity: A Comparative Ethical Study of Immanuel Kant and Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comparative ethical analysis of Immanuel Kant's concept of moral autonomy and Rabindranath Tagore's vision of human dignity, bringing into dialogue two distinct yet complementary approaches to moral freedom and human worth. Kant's moral philosophy grounds autonomy in the rational capacity of the human will to legislate universal moral laws for itself, thereby establishing human dignity as intrinsic, unconditional, and independent of empirical circumstances. In contrast, Tagore articulates an ethical humanism rooted in spiritual freedom, creative self-realization, and relational harmony. The paper argues that Kantian autonomy implicitly relies on dimensions of moral life—such as ethical responsiveness and motivational force—that it cannot adequately explain within its own conceptual framework. By placing these perspectives in critical dialogue, the study identifies both significant convergences and crucial divergences concerning the nature of autonomy, moral law, ethical motivation, and affectivity, yielding a richer and more inclusive account of moral autonomy and human dignity for contemporary global and intercultural ethics.



1. Introduction

Moral autonomy and human dignity occupy a foundational place in modern ethical theory. They function not only as normative concepts regulating moral responsibility and respect for persons, but also as anchors for broader discussions concerning freedom, rights, and moral motivation. Among the most influential accounts of these notions is that of Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy grounds autonomy in the rational capacity of the will to legislate universal moral law for itself. On Kant's view, human dignity arises from this capacity for rational self-governance and imposes unconditional obligations on moral agents to treat humanity, in oneself and in others, always as an end in itself.

Despite the enduring influence of Kant's moral framework, a persistent difficulty continues to accompany Kantian accounts of autonomy: the problem of moral motivation. Although Kant insists that moral action must be guided by respect for the moral law rather than by inclination or affect, critics have long questioned whether purely rational self-legislation can adequately explain the lived force of moral obligation as it is experienced by moral agents. Bernard Williams, for example, argues that Kantian ethics abstracts moral deliberation from character, emotion, and social identity, thereby failing to account for the internal sources through which moral norms become practically motivating rather than merely intelligible. From a feminist and relational perspective, Carol Gilligan and subsequent theorists of relational autonomy similarly contend that Kant's model presupposes an overly individualistic and disembodied moral subject, insufficiently attentive to the affective and interpersonal contexts within which moral responsibility is formed and sustained. Comparative philosophers have extended this critique across cultural traditions: drawing on Indian ethical thought, Arindam Chakrabarti observes that Kantian morality systematically brackets emotional cultivation and moral habituation—central dimensions of ethical life in both Indian philosophy and virtue ethics—thus leaving unexplained how duty comes to be experienced as binding rather than merely rationally recognizable. Taken together, these critiques suggest that while Kantian autonomy remains normatively powerful, its account of moral motivation risks rendering moral obligation excessively formal and insufficiently grounded in the affective, relational, and experiential conditions through which ethical agency is actually realized.

This paper argues that Rabindranath Tagore's ethical humanism exposes a structural limitation within Kant's conception of moral autonomy. Although Tagore does not articulate a systematic moral theory in the Kantian sense, his writings advance a philosophically substantive account of moral freedom grounded in inner liberation, creative self-realization, and relational responsiveness. Tagore's conception of autonomy challenges the Kantian assumption that moral self-governance can be fully accounted for



through rational self-legislation alone. Instead, it suggests that moral autonomy is not merely a formal capacity, but a lived process sustained by affectivity, creativity, and ethical relation.

The central claim of this paper is that Kantian autonomy implicitly relies on dimensions of moral life—such as ethical responsiveness and motivational force—that it cannot adequately explain within its own conceptual framework. By bringing Tagore’s account of moral freedom into critical dialogue with Kant, this paper does not aim to offer a synthetic or harmonizing comparison. Rather, it contends that Tagore provides a philosophical resource for diagnosing the limits of Kantian rationalism with respect to moral motivation and the realization of dignity in lived ethical experience.

The argument proceeds as follows. First, we reconstruct Kant’s account of moral autonomy and dignity with particular attention to the role of rational self-legislation and duty. Second, we examine the problem of moral motivation within Kantian ethics, focusing on tensions between formal obligation and lived moral agency. Third, we analyze Tagore’s conception of moral freedom as articulated through his writings on creativity, love, and relational life. We then argue that Tagore’s ethical humanism illuminates dimensions of moral autonomy that Kant’s framework presupposes but cannot fully theorize. Finally, we consider the broader significance of this comparative diagnosis for contemporary value theory.

2. Conceptual Framework: Moral Autonomy and Human Dignity

Moral autonomy may be defined as the capacity of individuals to govern themselves according to moral principles that they recognize as binding through reason or conscience, rather than acting under external coercion, authority, or mere inclination. It entails self-legislation, moral responsibility, and independence from heteronomous control. As such, moral autonomy affirms individuals as agents capable of reflective moral judgment and accountable ethical action.

Closely connected to this notion is the concept of human dignity, which denotes the intrinsic and unconditional worth of the human person. Human dignity does not depend on social status, utility, achievement, or contingent attributes, but rests on the very fact of being human. In ethical philosophy, moral autonomy and human dignity are commonly understood as interdependent concepts: autonomy emphasizes moral agency and self-governance, while dignity safeguards the inherent worth of persons against instrumentalization, exploitation, or moral neglect.



A systematic philosophical articulation of this relationship is found in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who grounds human dignity in rational autonomy. For Kant, the capacity of the rational will to legislate universal moral laws for itself confers an absolute value upon human beings, requiring that humanity—both in oneself and in others—be treated always as an end in itself and never merely as a means. Moral autonomy, in this framework, is inseparable from obligation, duty, and respect for universal moral law.

By contrast, Rabindranath Tagore, while not formulating a formal or systematic ethical theory, develops a humanistic and spiritually grounded conception of moral autonomy and dignity. In Tagore's thought, human dignity emerges through freedom, creativity, love, and relational harmony, rather than through abstract rational self-legislation alone. Moral autonomy is expressed through lived ethical experience, creative self-realization, and participation in a shared human and cosmic order. Dignity, accordingly, is realized not only through moral agency but also through ethical relationships and aesthetic sensitivity.

A meaningful comparative analysis of these perspectives requires situating them within their respective philosophical and historical contexts. Kant's ethical theory arises from the Enlightenment project of rational self-determination, universality, and moral law grounded in reason. Tagore's ethical vision, by contrast, is shaped by Indian philosophical and religious traditions—particularly the Bhakti movement—as well as by his engagement with modernity, colonial experience, and global humanism. Attending to these contexts enables a more nuanced understanding of how moral autonomy and human dignity are conceptualized, justified, and ethically enacted within each framework.

3. Rabindranath Tagore on Moral Freedom and Autonomy

The writings of Rabindranath Tagore articulate a rich and multifaceted moral philosophy that foregrounds freedom, creativity, and human fulfilment, diverging in both method and emphasis from systematic ethical theories such as that of Immanuel Kant. Rather than grounding moral autonomy in formal rational self-legislation, Tagore conceives it as a dynamic and experiential process rooted in inner freedom (*mukti*), self-realization, and harmonious relation with others and with nature.

For Tagore, moral autonomy involves the holistic development of the human personality. True moral freedom is achieved when individuals are able to authentically express their inner truth through creative, meaningful, and ethically responsive forms of life. Autonomy, in this sense, is not reducible to obedience



to abstract moral law, but unfolds through the cultivation of sensibility, imagination, and ethical awareness. Moral freedom thus becomes inseparable from creative self-expression and the realization of one's humanity in relation to the world.

Crucially, Tagore rejects any conception of freedom as isolated, egoistic, or purely individualistic. Moral autonomy, in his view, is inherently relational and socially embedded. It is realized through communion with others and sustained by a sense of responsibility toward the broader human and natural order. This relational orientation underpins his sustained critique of mechanical education, rigid nationalism, and oppressive social structures, which he sees as stifling the autonomy of the human spirit. Tagore argues that education should nurture freedom of thought, imagination, empathy, and moral sensitivity, rather than enforce conformity, discipline, and unquestioning obedience.

In contrast to Kant's grounding of morality in universal rational law and duty, Tagore emphasizes love, compassion, creativity, and aesthetic experience as central sources of moral motivation. Moral conduct, for Tagore, emerges from an inner harmony between the self and the world, rather than from adherence to externally formalized principles alone. Autonomy is therefore understood as lived, experiential, and relational, shaped by ethical responsiveness and creative engagement, rather than as a purely formal or rule-based capacity.

4. Kant and Tagore on Moral Autonomy and Human Dignity

A comparative reading of Immanuel Kant and Rabindranath Tagore reveals both profound convergences and significant divergences in their respective conceptions of moral autonomy and human dignity. While emerging from distinct cultural, historical, and philosophical traditions, both thinkers share a fundamental commitment to the intrinsic worth of the human person and to the idea that moral freedom constitutes a defining feature of human existence.

At the level of convergence, Kant and Tagore agree that human dignity is not contingent upon social status, utility, or empirical achievement, but is grounded in a deeper moral reality that transcends instrumental valuation. Both reject any ethical framework that reduces human beings to mere means or objects of manipulation. Moreover, each affirms moral autonomy as essential to ethical life, understanding it as the condition under which human beings assume responsibility for their actions and participate meaningfully in the moral world.



The primary divergence between their frameworks concerns the foundation and expression of moral autonomy. Kant locates autonomy in the rational capacity of the will to legislate universal moral law for itself. Moral freedom, in this view, consists in obedience to self-imposed rational law, and dignity arises from the capacity to act according to universally valid principles. Ethical obligation is therefore formal, universal, and binding irrespective of affective inclination or contextual variability.

Tagore, by contrast, conceives moral autonomy as an experiential and relational process rather than a formal act of rational self-legislation. For him, moral freedom is realized through inner liberation (*mukti*), creative self-expression, and harmonious relation with others and with the natural world. Dignity, accordingly, is not merely a static attribute grounded in rational capacity, but an emergent quality of ethical life as lived in love, creativity, and social responsibility. Whereas Kant emphasizes duty and universality, Tagore foregrounds affectivity, aesthetic experience, and ethical responsiveness.

These differences also shape their respective views on moral motivation. Kant's ethics prioritizes respect for moral law as the primary motive of moral action, deliberately distancing morality from emotion in order to preserve its universality and objectivity. Tagore, however, regards love, compassion, and creative engagement as indispensable sources of moral motivation, without which ethical life becomes rigid, alienating, or dehumanizing. In this sense, Tagore's approach complements Kant's by reintegrating dimensions of moral life that Kant's rationalism deliberately brackets.

Despite these contrasts, the two frameworks are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they may be understood as offering complementary insights into the structure and meaning of moral autonomy. Kant provides a robust normative foundation for universal dignity and moral obligation, safeguarding ethical life against relativism and instrumentalization. Tagore, in turn, enriches this foundation by emphasizing the lived, relational, and affective dimensions through which moral autonomy is actually realized in human experience.

5. Tagore's Idea of Human Dignity

In the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, human dignity is intrinsically linked to the sacredness and uniqueness of each individual. Tagore conceives every person as a manifestation of the infinite, endowed with inherent worth and creative potential. Human dignity, therefore, does not arise from a single cognitive capacity or functional criterion, but from the irreducible value of human existence understood as spiritually, creatively, and relationally grounded.



Unlike ethical perspectives that locate dignity primarily in rational autonomy, Tagore emphasizes love, imagination, and spiritual development as essential dimensions of human worth. For him, dignity is realized through the unfolding of the human personality in freedom, creativity, and meaningful relation with others. Any social or political structure that suppresses these capacities constitutes a violation of human dignity. Accordingly, Tagore offers a sustained critique of colonial domination, rigid social hierarchies, and unreflective nationalism, all of which he regards as systems that dehumanize individuals by restricting freedom, creativity, and ethical responsiveness.

The recognition of human dignity, in Tagore's view, requires not only moral acknowledgment but also the creation of social and cultural conditions that enable human flourishing. Education, artistic expression, and intercultural openness play a central role in cultivating dignity, as they allow individuals to develop their creative and moral capacities in ways that are responsive to their historical and cultural circumstances. In this respect, Tagore advances a pluralistic conception of dignity: while human dignity is universal in scope, its realization is always mediated by cultural, historical, and personal contexts.

Furthermore, Tagore's ethical humanism establishes a deep connection between human dignity and respect for the natural world. He advocates a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, rejecting attitudes of domination, exploitation, and instrumentalization. This ecological sensitivity adds an additional ethical dimension to his conception of dignity, extending moral concern beyond human relations to encompass the broader web of life.

6. Convergences: Shared Commitments and Their Philosophical Significance

Despite their sharply different philosophical idioms and historical contexts, Immanuel Kant and Rabindranath Tagore converge on a set of fundamental ethical commitments that establish a shared normative terrain. Most centrally, both reject any moral framework that permits the instrumentalization of persons. Kant's formulation of humanity as an end in itself articulates this rejection through the structure of rational moral law, while Tagore affirms it through an insistence on the inviolability of inner freedom, creative expression, and moral uniqueness. Although these commitments are justified differently, they function similarly in delimiting the ethical space within which moral agency is possible.

Freedom likewise occupies a foundational role in both accounts, though it is differently articulated. For Kant, freedom is the condition of moral responsibility insofar as it enables rational agents to bind themselves to universally valid principles. Tagore also treats freedom as indispensable to moral life, but



conceives it as the condition for human fulfillment, ethical growth, and creative self-realization. Importantly, neither thinker equates freedom with the mere absence of constraint. Instead, both understand it as inseparable from discipline, responsibility, and respect for others, thereby rejecting libertarian or purely negative conceptions of freedom.

These shared commitments extend to a critical stance toward heteronomous moral authority. Kant explicitly denies that genuine moral obligation can arise from external coercion, reward, or tradition, insisting instead on the primacy of autonomous rational agency. Tagore similarly condemns social, political, and cultural structures—such as colonial domination and unreflective nationalism—that suppress ethical freedom and creativity. In different registers, both philosophers resist moral orders that subordinate human dignity to power, conformity, or instrumental ends.

These convergences are philosophically significant not because they suggest theoretical harmony, but because they impose a shared constraint: any adequate account of moral autonomy must explain how freedom can ground unconditional human worth while resisting instrumentalization and external domination. It is precisely at this point—where Kant and Tagore agree on what morality must accomplish—that their deeper divergence over how autonomy is constituted becomes philosophically consequential.

7. Divergences: Autonomy, Moral Motivation, and the Limits of Formalism

The most consequential divergence between Kant and Tagore concerns the structure and realization of moral autonomy itself. Kant conceives autonomy as a formal, rational capacity grounded in the self-legislation of universal moral law. Moral agency, on this account, is defined by the capacity to act from duty in accordance with principles that hold independently of empirical conditions, affective states, or social relations. The strength of this view lies in its normative universality and its resistance to relativism.

Tagore's conception of moral autonomy departs decisively from this formalism. Autonomy, for him, is not primarily a matter of rational self-legislation, but a lived and relational process that unfolds through inner freedom, creative expression, and ethical responsiveness to others and to the world. Whereas Kant deliberately brackets emotion and particularity in order to preserve moral universality, Tagore places love, empathy, aesthetic sensibility, and relational engagement at the center of ethical life. Moral autonomy, in this view, cannot be realized through abstraction from experience; it must be enacted within it.



A similar contrast emerges in their conceptions of human dignity. Kant grounds dignity primarily in rational capacity and moral autonomy, thereby restricting its foundation to rational agency as such. Tagore advances a more expansive conception in which dignity is inseparable from relational life, cultural embeddedness, creative potential, and humanity's relationship to the natural world. Human worth, in this framework, is not exhausted by rational self-governance alone but is realized through ethical participation in social and ecological contexts.

These divergences are not merely reflections of differing cultural traditions; they expose a substantive philosophical tension between formal and lived accounts of moral autonomy. While Kant provides a powerful account of the normative conditions of moral obligation, Tagore illuminates the experiential and motivational conditions under which autonomy is actually sustained. It is this asymmetry—rather than any simple opposition or complementarity—that motivates the central claim of this paper: that Kantian autonomy relies on dimensions of moral life that it does not itself fully explain, and that Tagore's ethical humanism offers critical resources for addressing this limitation.

8. Contemporary Relevance

The ethical perspectives of Immanuel Kant and Rabindranath Tagore retain strong relevance for addressing contemporary challenges such as human rights, education, globalization, environmental crises, and cultural conflict. Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy and human dignity continues to inform modern discussions of rights, justice, and moral equality, particularly in legal and political frameworks that seek to ground universal human rights in the intrinsic worth of the individual.

Tagore's ethical humanism, by contrast, provides a critical counterpoint to the limitations of excessive individualism, technological rationalization, and social fragmentation characteristic of many contemporary contexts. His relational and creative conception of moral life foregrounds empathy, imagination, and ethical sensitivity as indispensable dimensions of human flourishing.

In an increasingly globalized world marked by cultural diversity, structural inequality, and ethical pluralism, sustained dialogue between Kantian and Tagorean perspectives becomes especially valuable. Kant's moral philosophy supports the articulation of universal ethical claims by affirming that all human beings possess inherent dignity and corresponding rights grounded in their humanity. Tagore's vision, meanwhile, enriches this universalism by emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity, contextual understanding, and relational responsibility in ethical life.



9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that while Immanuel Kant's account of moral autonomy provides a powerful and normatively rigorous foundation for human dignity, it leaves insufficiently theorized the conditions under which moral obligation acquires motivational force within lived moral experience. Kant's conception of autonomy, grounded in rational self-legislation and universality, secures the unconditional worth of persons and resists instrumentalization. Yet precisely in bracketing affective, relational, and experiential dimensions of moral life, it risks rendering moral agency formally intelligible but phenomenologically thin.

Rabindranath Tagore's ethical humanism brings this limitation into sharper relief. By conceiving moral autonomy as a lived and relational process—sustained by inner freedom, creative self-expression, and ethical responsiveness—Tagore exposes dimensions of moral life that Kantian rationalism must implicitly rely upon but cannot fully accommodate within its own conceptual framework. Tagore does not merely supplement Kant with cultural or aesthetic insight; rather, his account challenges the assumption that rational self-legislation alone can explain how autonomy is realized, sustained, and experienced by moral agents.

The comparative claim advanced here is therefore not a synthetic reconciliation of two ethical systems, but a critical diagnosis: Kantian autonomy presupposes motivational and relational structures that it does not itself explain, while Tagore offers a philosophically substantive account of those very structures without abandoning the idea that moral freedom grounds human dignity. This asymmetry suggests that any adequate theory of moral autonomy must account not only for the formal conditions of moral obligation, but also for the lived conditions under which agents recognize, inhabit, and respond to moral demands.

The significance of this conclusion extends beyond the Kant–Tagore comparison. It raises a broader philosophical question concerning the limits of purely formal accounts of normativity and the role of affective, relational, and experiential dimensions in ethical theory. If moral autonomy is to serve as a robust foundation for human dignity, it must be intelligible not only as a rational principle but also as a lived mode of ethical agency. The dialogue between Kant and Tagore thus invites further philosophical inquiry into how autonomy can be both normatively universal and experientially grounded—a problem that remains central to contemporary moral philosophy.



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