IMMANUEL KANT’S ACCOUNT OF COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In this essay Gregory Bynum seeks to show that Immanuel Kant’s thought, which was conceived in an eighteenth-century context of new, and newly widespread, pressures for nationally institutionalized human rights–based regimes (the American and French revolutions being the most prominent examples), can help us think in new and appreciative ways about how to approach human rights education more effectively in our own time. Kant’s discussion of moral experience features prominently in Bynum’s analysis, which emphasizes the following: Kant’s conception of a Categorical Imperative to treat humanity as an end in itself; his conscious avoidance of, and his discussion of the necessity of avoiding, the limitations of empiricist and rationalist extremes of thought; and his discussion of moral experience in interrelated individual, community, and global aspects. Bynum demonstrates the usefulness of Kant’s approach by using it as a lens through which to appreciatively examine a Japanese-born university professor’s account of her ultimately successful effort to teach American students about U.S.-instigated human rights violations abroad.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I employ Immanuel Kant’s critical and humanist philosophy as a lens for examining, describing, and appreciating successful human rights education. My analysis emphasizes the following interrelated aspects of Kant’s philosophy: (1) its imperative to treat humanity as an end in itself, and never as a means only; (2) its avoidance of extremes of thought that overemphasize either the importance of concepts or the importance of empirical aspects of experience; and (3) its interrelation of individual, community, and global levels of ethical concern. In order to illustrate the usefulness for human rights education of Kant’s enactment and envisioning of critical humanism, I first discuss Kant’s philosophy and then employ his ideas in order to appreciatively describe and evaluate an account of successful human rights education that, I maintain, exemplifies Kantian critical and humanist engagement. This example is Japanese-born professor Michiko Hase’s effort to educate U.S. university students about contemporary human rights violations in an international context. Hase’s endeavor, I argue, is best understood and valued as an ultimately successful struggle to examine human rights violations responsibly, without being drawn into the biases Kant cautioned against — biases that are narrowly or exclusively ideologically driven, empiricist, or focused too specifically on individual, community, or global concerns.

Before entering into the heart of my discussion, however, I will address a question that may initially occur to readers — the question of why I would choose Kant’s eighteenth-century philosophy for reflecting upon human rights education in the twenty-first century.
Why Kant?

My project here begs the questions: Why Kant? Wouldn’t it be more useful to focus on contemporary thinkers about human rights and human rights education? I will address these questions in this section.

An advantage of reading Kant in relation to human rights is that he was a philosopher sympathetic to rights revolutions in an era of rights revolutions. He rigorously conceptualized interrelated human moral, intellectual, and epistemological experience during a time when assertions of human rights were newly and freshly important in a way that can be difficult to recapture today, centuries after the paradigm-changing eighteenth-century rights revolutions in France and the United States. By virtue of its combination of (1) rigor as an examination of human experience, and (2) responsiveness to the formative moment in human rights history in which it emerged, Kant’s philosophy can help us to think afresh about human rights and about experiences of powerful human rights education.

His philosophy responds in particularly provocative and fresh ways to the question of how to move away from authoritarian regimes of governance and thought (such as the political and religious authoritarian regimes of Kant’s time) to a moral and political base emphasizing the value, and the right to be valued, of each human being. Emerging as it did from a morally sensitive and socially attuned philosopher in a climate of newly and stridently emerging humanist imperative, Kant’s philosophy is especially useful for provoking us to think afresh about situations where great stress and challenge are entailed in teaching and learning about human rights, such as situations where cross-cultural challenges arise — challenges that may require difficult self-criticism, criticism of one’s own society, and efforts to step outside of one’s own cultural perspective. In such situations people are particularly susceptible to feeling that they have little in common with others, prompting them to ask “What possible commonality could I have with these people, who appear different from myself in such an alienating way?” For bringing us back to ourselves, and into sound moral relations with other people, in such crisis situations, Kant’s philosophy — conceived in and for a time of moral crisis — has useful resources.

In my interpretation of Kant’s philosophy in this essay, I hope to communicate some of the excitement of what it is to think anew and with a sense of lively challenge and edginess about human rights generally, and more specifically about the fresh communication and learning about human rights that constitutes human rights education. To this end, in the discussion of human rights education that follows my analysis of Kant, I have chosen to focus on an account of a particularly challenge-ridden and befuddling educational setting — a setting in which a Japanese-born professor in an American university struggles to communicate with her American-born students about the importance for them, and for their...
understanding of themselves as human beings, as U.S. citizens, and as world citizens, of coming to terms with human rights violations occurring in other nations — violations that, while far away from their immediate experience, also are nonetheless tied to the United States, its international influence, and the meaning of U.S. citizenship.

The next two sections of this essay address the question of how Kant viewed “humanity.” In the first of these, I discuss Kant’s views on what he called “humanity in itself”: human cognition and cognitive experience; human moral experience and potential for moral insight; and human interest, potential understanding, and morality as they relate to possible progress toward peace and the promotion of human flourishing in individual, community, and global spheres of moral and political concern. From that discussion, I move to a discussion of pedagogy, demonstrating how concepts and values from Kant’s moral thought may be employed as a lens for identifying and appreciating what works in human rights education, and specifically in the human rights education efforts of Michiko Hase, as she struggles — ultimately successfully — to communicate with her American students about human rights violations in an international context.

**Epistemology, Moral Thought, and Political Thought**

For Kant, the question “what does it mean to be human?” is inextricably linked with the question “what are the limits, and the potential powers, of human thought?” Related to this epistemological emphasis in Kant’s philosophy, Karl Ameriks has characterized Kant’s thought as follows:

Kant’s philosophy is unique in focusing on a level “in between” the domains of ordinary empirical judgment and theoretical science. While it accepts both domains as legitimate, it takes neither as absolute by itself but rather aims to articulate the philosophical principles they need to share in order to be jointly understandable and acceptable.

In this section, I defend the view that an indispensable value of Kant’s critical philosophy for human rights thought and education may be found by exploring the implications of the aspect of Kant that Ameriks describes in this passage — Kant’s distinctive project of critiquing human cognition in a manner that remains committed to the constantly difficult work of mindfully responding to both the importance and the humbling limitations of two, often differing aspects of human cognitive experience: (1) conceptualizations, made and used in our minds, and (2) sensible intuitions arising in the body in response to real-world stimuli. In his sustained philosophical examination of human experience, thought, and morality, Kant was deeply concerned with avoiding easy and common errors, such as taking either concepts or sensible intuitions to be superior to the other, or confounding the two together inappropriately. Kant’s criticism preserves the perplexing disparities between concepts and sensible intuitions while striving toward an understanding

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2. Contrary to the common perception of Kant as conceiving the mental as superior to, and as the enemy of, the physical, Kant actually, by his uncompromising criticism of unjustified concept-making, earned
of the “intellectual” in which they are harmonized — an understanding that he consistently defined as being both undeniably of the highest importance for full human flourishing, and ultimately impossible for human beings to achieve in a sustained way. In the words of Allen Wood, Kant denied that there is any solution to the mind-body problem.... We can never know whether the empirical self is a material or an immaterial thing, and any noumenal self wholly transcends our powers of empirical cognition. No causal connections between the corporeal and the mental can even be made intelligible to us, much less empirically investigated.³

Within the context of this almost unmanageably rigorous conception of critique, Kant sought to delimit the sphere of appropriate and morally legitimate thought and action [or, to use Kant’s term, the practical sphere] by excluding both extravagant speculative uses of the concept-making faculty, and the blindness that comes from succumbing to the influence of sense intuitions unmoderated by the defining operation of appropriate rational conceptualizations.

For Kant, a resolution of this tough epistemological challenge to human mental endeavor lies not in a rejection of any possibility of coherence in human experience but rather (and perhaps surprisingly, in our “postmodern” age) in a ringing humanist affirmation of the great value of humanity and of humanity’s moral centrality and indispensability. He held that the content of the sphere of practical morality, delimited by rigorous philosophical critique of the kind that has been described [critique that, in order for the right definition of practical morality to be sustained, must constantly remain present, active, and influential], is best indicated, or gestured toward, by the “Categorical Imperative” — an imperative that Kant represented in three alternative articulations. For my present discussion, the essential articulation is the second: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”⁴ My view is that the essential significance of the second articulation of the Categorical Imperative in its broader context of Kant’s thought is that rightly valuing and respecting humanity necessarily, and most significantly, means valuing and respecting humanity as experiencing the troublingly diverse phenomena of cognition (sense intuitions and concepts) in the fully receptive and vitally critical manner that has been described. It is this manner of responding to human experience that makes Kant’s writings an important model for humanely progressive human rights thought and education. Far from being an unrealistic, overly optimistic idealist — as he is sometimes depicted — Kant, in the most enduringly valuable aspect of his criticism, had his eyes wide open and showed a responsibly inconclusive and righteously honorific attitude toward the dignity of a vulnerably divisible humanity. His attitude can be taken as exemplary for responsibly reflective human rights thought and education.

The remainder of this section will be divided into three parts. In the first part I present a brief sketch of Kant’s interrelated epistemological and moral thought — a sketch that will later be drawn on as a resource for human rights thought.

In the second part I present a critical application of the aspect of Kant’s critique of cognition that often receives less attention: his vigorous, antirationalist refutation of misguided thinkers’ efforts to make reason overreach its rightful boundaries — intellectual efforts in which ideas are made fetishes or superstitiously tabooed, their importance being grotesquely exaggerated or extravagantly minimized to a point where they lose all intellectual and practical meaning and all connection with their sources in human experience. That this critical attitude lies at the core of Kant’s philosophy has been compellingly argued by Susan Neiman in her close reading of Kant’s writings on reason. Neiman shows that, for Kant, the function of reason is not knowledge (for example, not the presentations of falsely claimed “known facts” about metaphysical realities that Kant invalidated), but rather guidance.

In the third part of this section I turn to Kant’s discussion of the way in which a cosmopolitan-minded citizen must sustain attention to human interests at three levels simultaneously: the individual level (the level of one’s attitudes, feelings, and thoughts), the community level (the level of benefits and obligations that come with membership in and relation to various social groups such as family, profession, faith community, and nation), and the global level (the level of the interests of the universal community of humanity).

KANT’S PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDE

Kant’s philosophical project can be read as an effort to invalidate a conflict between extreme elements in two competing schools of thought that were influential in his time: the rationalist school and the empiricist school. Rationalist thought grew from Judeo-Christian moral and legal traditions emphasizing the absolute truth and authority of ideas and laws that come from an abstract, otherworldly source. A hardcore rationalist teacher might give students advice such as, “No matter what, stick with the conceptions of the world that you have learned from authorities and established in your head. Don’t allow your thinking to be influenced by things that happen in everyday reality, no matter how much that reality appears to contradict your established ideas.” Empiricist thought, on the other hand, was closer to the newly developing experimental science of Kant’s time, which emphasized the world of empirical reality — the evidence of the senses, scientifically observed — over the realm of abstract ideas. An empiricist teacher might tell students, “Never trouble yourself with big ideas like ‘God,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘morality.’ They won’t give you useful insight. Instead, only pay attention to what’s right in front of you — the evidence of your senses — and work with that. That’s what is real, and that’s all that is real.”

Kant responded to this disagreement by saying that we cannot be sure of finding perfect and complete truth either in concepts exclusively or in sense
intuitions exclusively. Our ideas and our sensory experience are both important, he argued, but neither has the final authority:

> It comes along with our nature that intuition can never be other than sensible, i.e., that it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects. The faculty for thinking of objects of sensible intuition, on the contrary, is the understanding. Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind’s concepts sensible [i.e., to add an object to them in intuition] as it is to make its intuitions understandable [i.e., to bring them under concepts].

This passage reflects Kant’s belief that, rather than going to the philosophical extremes of hardcore empiricism and hardcore rationalism, we should strive for truth by examining circumspectly the way our concept-making faculty works (and does not work, as with failed hardcore rationalism) in relation to our “sensible intuitions” or sense experience. By doing this, we make the humbling and morally important discovery that we have a lot of limitations. Our mental powers are ambiguous and uncertain in areas where long-established cultural and psychological habits guide us to expect definiteness and certainty. Our essential moral natures are inscrutable. The only way we can encounter our minds and our moral natures is practically, through action and lived experience; we can never see or conceptualize our minds and our moral natures as they are in themselves. Further, our feelings, sense experience, concepts, and ideals appear to us simultaneously as mutually distinct and, yet, as inextricable from each other.

Fortunately, although seekers of truth and knowledge may not achieve the insights they had expected, some patterns and truths do emerge from disciplined philosophical introspection, communication, and education. In the realm of information we get from the senses, we find that we must necessarily conceive our world as existing in space and time. In the realm of abstract thought, we find reliable truths of mathematics and geometry ($7 + 5 = 12$; the sum of the angles of a flat triangle is 180 degrees). And in the realm of morality, Kant asserted, we find that although we cannot directly intuit and understand our essential (“noumenal”) natures, we human beings are so constituted that we have no choice but to see the absolute validity of the following practical imperative (whether or not we actually end up complying with it): “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”

Neiman has shown how this imperative and the rational activity with which it is associated are not classed as “knowledge” for Kant; rather, the function of reason and the Categorical Imperative is merely guidance. We can never know exactly what is the right or wrong thing to do in a given situation, even while we are


7. Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994]. This work will be cited in the text as UR for all subsequent references.
doing it or after we have done it. We can only work on remaining practically and morally concerned with making our actions conform as closely as possible with our guiding imperative to respect humanity. Further, we are compelled to affirm the Categorical Imperative’s validity not because we have been persuaded by refined or authoritative metaphysical argument and symbolism — the essential truth of human beings’ moral natures lies irrevocably beyond the reach of such argument and symbolism — but rather, on a practical level, and spontaneously. The Categorical Imperative reminds us that whether or not we follow it, we all have a conscience that simply and directly affirms for us, in the course of everyday experience and without the assistance of philosophy, our own inherent value and the value of other human beings as deserving respect.

Accordingly, in this essay, the aspect of Kant’s philosophy just described is employed not as the source of authoritative and universally applicable knowledge of humanity and (by extension) human rights, but rather, as a model of even-minded, compassionate appreciation and moral responsibility that can guide human rights thought, legislation, advocacy, and education. I will be concerned in part to show how Kantian reason can guide people toward practical humaneness and away from the dangerous (and often nearly unavoidable) extremes of ideologically rigid, empty-concept rationalism, on the one hand, and anti-intellectual, blind-sense-intuition empiricism, on the other hand.

**Minding Reason’s Limits and Its Role of Providing Guidance Rather Than Knowledge**

In this section I elaborate further Kant’s critique of reason, and specifically his understanding of (1) the limitations of human concept-making powers, and (2) the limitation of human reason (in most cases) to a function of guiding human thought and action, rather than a function of providing specific knowledge of the truth. My exposition of Kant’s writing draws upon Susan Neiman’s appreciative and critical reading of Kant’s conception of reason in her 1994 book, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*.

According to Neiman, in order to understand Kant’s conception of reason, it is important to note that “the idea of human nature, as defined by its [potential] freedom, is the point on which Kant’s philosophy rests” (*UR*, 108). This potential freedom is not easy to approach, and movement toward it necessitates engaging mindfully with a difficulty inherent in human life that Neiman calls a “perpetual struggle or balance between two realms” (*UR*, 108) — a struggle that is reflected (among other places) in the rationalism vs. versus empiricism polemics that Kant sought to transcend. These realms are (1) that of the “actual,” or the way the world appears to be in its concrete aspect — a realm that tends to be associated with sensation and empirical aspects of human experience and thought, and (2) the realm of the “possible,” or the way the world ought to be, which tends to be associated with the new-concept-making and ideal-envisioning aspects of human experience and thought. Neiman writes that “those realms are not helpfully viewed as ontological ones, containing two [separately existing] sorts of selves”
Rather, being a human self means being involved in both realms, and sometimes being involved in a struggle between knowledge of the world’s empirical appearance and imaginings of the way the world could be, or ought to be [in Neiman’s words, “between the actual and the possible” [UR, 108]].

Neiman sees clearly how essential this struggle, and the enlightened understanding and engagement of it, are to Kant’s enterprise, in a way that has important implications for radical criticism of inhumane, established political practices that fail to engage the human struggle mindfully or responsibly:

Kant’s moral philosophy — and indeed, his philosophy as a whole — may be viewed as an attempt to legitimize this struggle [between the actual and the possible]. By ridiculing the very notion of a possible world that is not derived from the actual one, the empiricist would undercut this struggle from the start…. Kant shows [this] to be foul play; the appeal to experience is often an appeal to conditions caused precisely in order to make particular political institutions appear necessary. In no case may the validity of moral ideas be judged by the very experience they call into question. [UR, 108]

In support of this view of morality, it may be observed that, in various present and historical social situations, prevailing sociopolitical understandings of experience deem, and have deemed, the following inhumane practices to be “necessary”: men beating their wives as a sign that order is being maintained satisfactorily in the home; the exclusion of women from public political and intellectual life; the degradation and denial of women’s mental agency in all spheres of life; the forced subjugation of nonwhite people by white people; the extermination of nonheterosexuals; and the personality-deforming, radical curtailment of men’s emotional lives and range of intelligently experienced sensation in preparation, or as if in preparation, for military lives in which physically maiming, being physically maimed, killing, and being killed are considered normal. As illuminated by Neiman, a Kantian response to these practices [and the kind of response I favor] would be that, regardless of the experiences of pragmatic expediency, social-order-maintaining efficaciousness, convention-supported righteousness, and invigorating empowerment and fun that may become associated with these human-personality-deforming and humanity-destroying practices, such experiences cannot justify the practices. This is because no experience can surpass morally the significance of the imperative that human life should be conducted in a way that enables and healthily challenges all people to live fully human lives (or, in Kant’s terms, that humanity in oneself and others should be treated as an end in itself, and never as a means only). Though we may sometimes feel compelled to acknowledge in ourselves a present powerlessness to change certain inhumane practices, our times of felt powerlessness cannot justify such practices nor can they delegitimize human rights advocacy that criticizes them.

At this point, a critic might object that, if nothing in the wide range of experiences already described and rejected [that is, experiences of happiness arising from

8. This implies that it is misguided ideologically to dig oneself into either a “rationalist” or an “empiricist” position.
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satisfyingly expedient efficaciousness, from gratifyingly stabilizing social-order-upholding, or from the simple pleasure of immediately felt powerfulness] can provide moral justification, then nothing can. The Kant-derived moral philosophy being presented here [runs the criticism] — a philosophy based on an abstract and ideal “categorical” moral imperative that, by Kant’s own admission, never can be known with certainty to be evidenced, or to have been evidenced — cannot be actualized compellingly in the real lives of real people, and therefore is no good to anyone.

My response to this criticism draws from an idea that is central in Kant’s account of reason’s moral function — his conception of the experience of acting from duty. Though distinct from the other motivating experiences that I have mentioned, duty operates regularly in people’s lives as a powerful motivator to action. And unlike those other experiences, duty, in Kant’s philosophy, carries a connotation of moral worth. Kant wrote that


10. Ibid., 64.

In this passage Kant was getting at the fact that in the ordinary course of lived human experience, there arise moments when we act simply from duty — from a sense of what is right — and not from other motivations. For example, while in the act of spontaneously helping a stranger out of a difficulty — say, stepping forward to steady a stranger who is slipping on a patch of ice — you do not expect any recognition or other benefit for what you are doing. Although afterward you may feel personally gratified by thanks you receive, by a sense of having been agile and aware, or by satisfaction in having prevented a problem, the only motivation you can point to in your experience of your moment of spontaneous practical action is duty — your sense that you must help other people in need or that you must act in the best interest of humanity. And while such experiences of spontaneous goodness-in-practice do not provide the satisfactions associated with pragmatic completion of a project, upholding of the social order, proving the validity of an ideology, or pleasurable exercising of power over others, they do offer another, different kind of satisfaction — the satisfaction of seeing clearly in oneself both a present possibility of worthy, valuable living, and a future, potential worthiness or value whose focused growth is sensed as implied in the experience. One has a sensibly hopeful feeling for how humans, in Kant’s words, may “become worthy of happiness.” This feeling refutes the proposed criticism.

Neiman’s account of Kant also illuminates the way Kant’s effort to legitimize the struggle between the actual and the possible by rejecting an ethics based
solely on empirical experience connects with an idea in Kant that is both philosophically and morally crucial, as well as radical and far-reaching in its criticism of mental habit and convention (so radical that, according to Neiman, Kant himself sometimes lost sight of its significance [UR, 3]). This idea is Kant’s antirationalist and anti-ideological conception of reason as not providing definite moral knowledge of concrete particulars of empirical experience but, rather, as providing only moral guidance. According to Kant, Neiman writes, “reason’s role is to provide laws that tell us what ought to happen, even if it never does, not laws of nature, which tell us what does happen” (UR, 108). Elsewhere Neiman asserts that Kant’s view of empirical experience as

inadequate to the principles of reason … poses no threat to Kant’s repeated insistence that significant statements be responsible to the claims of experience… The demand that reason set the standards by which experience is to be judged is a reinterpretation, not an abdication, of responsibility. Now reason must have some relation to experience which ensures that its activities are not arid, idle fantasies. Yet … this relation must enable reason to maintain sufficient independence from experience to function as the creator of ends. So Kant introduces the notion of a regulative principle, which guides the human search to constitute experience without constituting it for us antecedently. Regulative principles ensure that reason’s activities are grounded in the world without being determined by it. (UR, 6)

In these passages, Neiman lucidly explicates Kant’s critical distinction between [1] reason, which — through the Categorical Imperative and other means — provides guidance toward distinctly different and potentially better human futures, but not empirical knowledge; and [2] understanding, which provides knowledge but cannot reach beyond present experience. Her summary is useful for supporting the point that human rights advocacy, rather than claiming or assuming knowledge of an already existing, perfect world, instead should be understood as significant insofar as it follows the model of Kant’s reason — insofar as it prompts us to be guided by our sense for present and future possibilities of freely and spontaneously emerging, morally worthy, and progressively more humane action and living on the part of both individuals and societies.

Having discussed Kant’s account of challenges to human cognition as it encounters diverse pressures associated with the evidence of empirical experience, on the one hand, and compelling concepts of the understanding, on the other hand (pressures associated with the conflicting “empiricist” and “rationalist” schools of philosophy whose polemics Kant aimed to de-legitimate), I move next to a discussion of a different (though related) challenge and moral obligation of human cognition represented in Kant’s philosophy — the challenge and obligation to respond responsibly and mindfully to individual, community, and global levels of concern in morality and, by implication, in matters of human rights.

**Kant’s Imperative Simultaneously to Respect and Attend to the Individual, Community, and Global Levels of Concern**

My discussion of Kant so far has outlined two dimensions of intellectual and moral engagement that his philosophy requires: (1) an individual dimension of reflection on one’s own cognitive powers and limitations as a human being diversely engaged in the making of concepts, the receiving of sense
intuitions, and striving for morality; and [2] a universal or global dimension implied in the sense that all people can potentially be guided by a universal Categorical Imperative that prescribes respect for humanity as an end in itself. To these two dimensions of intellectual and moral engagement may be added a third dimension also discussed by Kant — a social or community dimension. Contrary to a common perception of Kant as coldly individualistic [a perception arising from passages in his philosophy that emphasize autonomy and detached judgment], Kant viewed human association and mutuality as essential for human life and for moral and intellectual reflection. He asserted that “company is indispensable for the thinker,” and his sense of the importance of communication among people for the development of strong understanding is evident both in his philosophy and in the way he lived his life.

These three dimensions of engagement must, in Kant’s view, all be given significance and considered together, rather than any one superseding the others, as in a misguidedly individualistic reading of Kant that shuts out all values except individual autonomy, or a reading that exaggerates the importance of detachment in Kant’s morality and shuts out all values except transcendent universals. Kant explicitly asserted that all three levels together [individual, global, and community] must be engaged, both in educational practice and in the establishment of social order. For example, in his essay on education, he wrote,

> We must encourage the youth … [i]n love towards others, as well as to feelings of cosmopolitanism. There exists something in our minds which causes us to take an interest [a] in ourselves, [b] in those with whom we have been brought up, and [c] there should also be an interest in the progress of the world. Children should be made acquainted with this interest, so that it may give warmth to their hearts. They should learn to rejoice at the world’s progress, although it may not be to their own advantage or to that of their country.

These three integrated levels of educational concern — the individual level, the community level, and the global level — also appear in Kant’s philosophy of government. He wrote that any rightful constitution is, with regard to the persons within it,

1. one in accord with the right of citizens of a state, of individuals within a people (ius civitatis) [this right operates at the individual level],
2. one in accord with the right of nations, of states in relation to one another (ius gentium) [this right operates at the social group or community level],
3. one in accord with the right of citizens of the world, insofar as individuals and states, standing in the relation of externally affecting one another, are to be regarded as citizens of a universal state of mankind (ius cosmopoliticum) [this right operates at the global level]. This division is not made at will but is necessary with reference to the idea of perpetual peace. For if only one of these were in a relation of physically affecting another and were yet in a state of


nature, the condition of war would be bound up with this, and the aim here is just to be freed from it.\textsuperscript{13}

This passage shows clearly that, for Kant, human, associated living that is humane and peaceful requires that none of the three levels — individual, community, or global — be permitted to overwhelm the other two, but rather that the three must be considered in balanced interrelation. This belies conceptions of Kant as being \textit{only} concerned with the individual level (that is, with individual autonomy) or \textit{only} concerned with the global or universal level (that is, with universal moral imperatives that are unrelated to people's experiences at the individual and community levels).

Thus, the ideas in these passages, when fused together, generate a single, fruitful human rights imperative: Simultaneously in education and in the organization of political life, we must be sure that on none of the three levels — the individual level, the community level, or the global level — do we revert to a disorderly state where the law of “might makes right” prevails, violence is sanctioned as normal, and absolute dominance is sought.

This idea of a triad of interrelated levels of awareness contributes to a productive critical framework for identifying and valuing well-executed human rights thought and education. In my view, the best human rights thought and education supports full and nonviolent interrelation among the individual level (the level of feelings, thoughts, self-image, and attitudes), the community level (the level of responsibilities and benefits that come with people’s membership in social groups), and the global level (the level of the ideal of universal human rights). When we do not work to integrate these levels, or when we neglect any of them, serious problems can occur. For example, here are three ways in which this can happen: (1) efforts at human rights advocacy can be conducted in ways that are insensitive to, and irrelevant within, particular social contexts; (2) socially established traditions can be used to justify extreme violations of personal dignity and rights; and (3) narrowly self-regarding rights-advocacy narratives created by individuals can lose connection with important societal and global dimensions of rights struggles.

Human rights thinkers and educators seeking to balance and interrelate the individual, community, and global levels of awareness often cannot follow prescribed procedures. Rather, our notions about how to weigh and balance the three levels are developed and enriched unpredictably by each distinct rights-related conception, problem, plan, or story that we encounter. As I perceive it, the task that we face as thinkers, students, and educators is to follow the model of Kant’s antirationalism by working to accept this unpredictability — this impossibility of prescribed, surefire “right” ways of thinking and acting — and yet not to lose our idealistic drive to make a world where human rights and human dignity are

universally respected. For this difficult problem — one that arises when human rights thinkers and educators take seriously the individual-community-global triad — Kant’s approach has something valuable to offer.

So far my discussion has emphasized that much of the best insight emerges where practically engaged and experienced thinking and efforts at goodness can be considered and reflected upon. In a given situation, we can consider whether people are avoiding getting stuck at blind “rationalist” and empty “empiricist” extremes of thought, and whether the humanity of all the people involved is being treated as an end and not merely as a means in our responses to experience at individual, community, and global levels.

In the next section, I demonstrate the usefulness of this conceptual framework for understanding and appropriately valuing successful human rights education in action as I respond to an essay by educator Michiko Hase. Hase sensitively and judiciously negotiates tensions that can usefully be described, in Kantian terms, as empiricist and rationalist, and as pertaining to individual, social, and global levels of concern. This account of Hase’s educational work demonstrates the value of the conceptual vocabulary developed in the preceding discussion in helping us to recognize and appreciatively describe successful human rights education.

**Human Rights Education in the Classroom**

In a reflective essay, Michiko Hase, a Japanese-born professor working in a U.S. college, describes her struggles to teach about international-level human rights violations and related topics. In this section I use the Kant-derived conceptual lens that I have developed to analyze and appreciate Hase’s skillful negotiation of the problems she encountered as she struggled to teach effectively. My discussion of her experience emphasizes the ideals of (1) avoiding excesses of empiricism and rationalism, and (2) attending to the individual, community, and global levels of concern, without letting any of the three unduly dominate.

Hase’s American students initially responded in a non-receptive manner when she introduced two human rights–related issues. The first of these was the history of the Korean “comfort women” who were used as sexual slaves by the Japanese military during World War II, and the second was the rights-violating, international effects of exercises of U.S. corporate and military power. In response to her students’ initial reaction, Hase went through a process of trial and error in order to overcome student resistance and to create the conditions for a valuable educational experience around these difficult issues.

Hase’s early efforts to introduce her subject matter in class were poorly received. In her words,

14. Michiko Hase, “Student Resistance and Nationalism in the Classroom: Reflections on Globalizing the Curriculum,” in Twenty-First Century Feminist Classrooms: Pedagogies of Identities and Difference, ed. Amie A. MacDonald and Susan Sanchez-Casal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 93. This work will be cited in the text as SRN for all subsequent references.
A disturbing pattern emerged: the American students I taught showed lack of interest in the negative impact of policies and actions of the U.S. government, U.S. corporations, and U.S.-dominated international agencies [like the IMF and the World Bank] on the rest of the world. By contrast, these students showed marked interest in topics like female genital surgeries and dowry deaths — namely, practices that concern sexuality and control/violation of woman’s body and that are perpetrated by native men against native women in some distant societies. … I became increasingly troubled by my students’ attraction to these particular issues and the matching lack of interest in and curiosity about the exploitative or unethical actions of their own government…. This recurring pattern seemed to me to be a sign of American students’ sense of superiority, mixed with their missionary attitude [they have to “rescue” “poor third-world sisters” from oppressive local cultures], their voyeurism, and their binary view of “us” vs. “them.” ([SRN], 93)

In this account, students showed the wrong kind of “individual-level” interest in human rights abuses abroad. They voiced narcissistic and simplistic rescue fantasies, and they became disturbingly fascinated with the details of sexual torture. This calls to mind Kant’s observation that “intuitions [of sense experience] without concepts are blind.” Not having adequately conceptualized their felt responses from a moral standpoint, the students lacked both self-understanding and understanding of the international context. Further, by misguidedly assuming sentimental attitudes of privileged moral knowing, by their troubling fixation on the torture stories, and by their simultaneous refusal to look at their own implication in human rights abuses arising from U.S. policies, the students also failed to reflect responsibly on the community level — the level of memberships in and relations among particular social groups.

Dissatisfied with this result, Hase modified her teaching. She introduced her students to critics of Western feminism such as Chandra Mohanty, who analyzes Western feminists’ “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality” ([SRN], 91) in their writing about third-world women.15 Through this approach, she tried generally “to problematize western-defined, western-imperial notions of ‘global feminism’ and ‘global sisterhood’” ([SRN], 95) developed by Western feminists. However, the students “clearly identified with” the Western feminists being criticized, and they “reacted … negatively and defensively” ([SRN], 94).

This moment in the educational process calls to mind Kant’s observation that “thoughts without content are empty.” Hase and her students were locked in an empty ideological standoff: the students sided with the rigid and unfounded idea that the West and Western influence are always good, and Hase appeared to the students to side with the rigid and unfounded idea that Western influence is always harmful.

Dissatisfied again, Hase made another change. Judging that her students may resent criticism of the United States from a Japanese-born outsider, she worked to defuse this resentment by sharing her reflections on her own privileged position as a Japanese national:

I talked about my experience of listening to horrific firsthand accounts by survivors of the “comfort women” system at the NGO [nongovernmental organization] Forum on Women held in China in 1995, and how I felt being at an international gathering of women hearing about heinous crimes committed by “my country.” My students listened intently and with obvious interest. Following my presentation, the class had a very thoughtful discussion about positionality, accountability, nation, and the tension between feminism and nationalism. ([SRN, 88])

This encouraging change came about because students realized that Hase “had not been ‘bashing’ the United States but had been applying [her] critical analysis to all countries and issues” ([SRN, 89]). Hase also noted a positive development in student writing: a student who had initially disliked hearing the United States criticized wrote a paper containing “honest self-reflections and thoughtful insights about her positionality as a privileged upper-middle-class white American woman learning about global issues” ([SRN, 89]). At the end of the semester, Hase writes, “to my relief and satisfaction, I received good student evaluations. I attribute much of this success to the impact of that one lecture that helped reframe the students’ understanding” ([SRN, 89]).

By attending responsively to the play of mind in her classroom between extremes of blind sensation and empty, groundless conceptualization, Hase’s teaching enacts what could be described as [in terminology from Kant’s philosophy] being guided by the ideal of treating humanity always as an end and never as a means only. Hase’s valuing of her students, of herself [her own moral standards and experience], and of the wider, interrelated global community emerge as a responsible appreciation, and a setting into play, of expanded thinking. And, not coincidentally, her humane flexibility and commitment draws her and her students toward a balanced and integrated awareness of the individual, community, and global levels of concern.

**Conclusion**

Because they often relate to situations defined by conflict, human rights thought and advocacy frequently gravitate toward polemics.16 People involved in human rights education, in turn, can tend toward extreme positions characterized by excessively ideological loyalties, excessive empiricism or political “realism,” and excessive or exclusive emphases on the individual, the community, or the global level of concern. For example, in U.S. schools students often are taught the personal [individual-level] story of Anne Frank’s life in hiding without discussing or understanding the global significance of that story: that fact that, as a result of the Nazi Holocaust in which Anne and millions of others were killed, the world community realized the need to intervene promptly when nations become involved in genocide, leading to the establishment of a variety of international standards and institutions, including international courts and human rights treaties. Conversely,

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16. Jack Donnelly usefully describes the nature of rights as follows: “rights are important enough to talk about, and they have their real place and value, only when their enjoyment is in some way insecure. Rights are put to use, claimed, exercised only when they are threatened or denied.” See Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 11.
it is also possible to err on the side of attention to the “global” level, calling for conformity with international human rights standards in ways that are not sensitive to individual and community concerns. At a 2002 “Women for Afghan Women” conference at Barnard College in New York City, Riffat Hassan pointed out an example of socially insensitive human rights education while speaking about health-care education in postwar Afghanistan. According to her, when trying to teach Afghan women about their right to health care, it is usually not engaging to say something like, “All human beings in the world inherently possess the right to health care, and therefore you and your family have the right to health care.” However, Afghan women are more likely to become interested if an educator appeals to their Muslim faith by saying, “Allah loves you and wants you and your children to be healthy, and so you have a right to health care.” The first of these statements fails as effective human rights education because it only emphasizes the global level — staying in the realm of universal ideals — without attending to the personal and social levels. The second statement, in contrast, is more effective because it takes the global ideal of the right to health care and connects it meaningfully to the personal level (the women’s religious faith) and the social level (the women’s Islamic culture and communities). The second statement also suggests a connection between the universalism of human rights and the universalism of mainstream Islam, which is a religion that contains an ideal of good will toward all people.17

In contrast to these and other imaginable examples of unsuccessful human rights education, and with the help of Kant’s conceptual framework, the success of Hase’s teaching — with its skillful and morally sensitive negotiation of challenges posed by empiricist, rationalist, personal, community, and global pressures — stands out.

One lesson of this study, in its progression from philosophy to hands-on education, is that the value of the proposed Kant-derived conceptual frame does not lie only in a neutralizing, innocuously balancing, or standardizing influence. On the contrary, this analysis demonstrates that the various elements of thought and experience that Kant endeavored circumspectly and justly to interrelate — rationalism and empiricism, on the one hand, and the individual, community, and global levels of concern, on the other — assert themselves, and may be expected to continue asserting themselves, powerfully, unpredictably, and in ways that can appear to be of overriding importance.

These powerfully moving outcomes of experience are inevitable. Our experiences of sensations and concepts affect us forcefully in their confoundingly different ways. To be human is to know, to feel, and sometimes to be swept along in currents that pull toward an extreme empiricism at one moment and toward an extreme rationalism at another moment. Similarly, we are, at different moments

of our moral experience, strongly drawn by different, and differently compelling, concerns on the individual, community, and global levels.

As human rights thinkers committed to using what is most valuable from the Enlightenment heritage — a heritage that has essentially [though not exclusively] formed Westerners and international legal standards — we should not seek to use Enlightenment-style detachment and circumspection permanently to achieve some kind of stasis or Aristotelian "mean" [as if a single mean could actually be arrived at and sustained between empiricism and rationalism, or among individual-level, community-level, and global-level concerns]. On the contrary, we stand to learn most, and we can do our best practical work for universal human rights, if we accept and humanely involve ourselves in the play of strong assertions on behalf of the various, divergent aspects of cognitive and moral experience. Related to this, human rights thought may find value in sources such as Hase's account. Her attentiveness to the importance of the individual level, demonstrated by her effective responses to her students' individual processes of thought and feeling, enabled her to teach effectively about a global human rights context. Hase's pedagogy exemplifies the work of respectfully and mindfully interrelating concepts, sensations, and the individual, community, and global levels of awareness for the sake of human rights.

In this essay, I hope to have shown how Kant's philosophy provides useful resources for describing and appreciating what happens, and what needs to happen, in successful human rights education efforts. My aim has been to provide, and to illustrate the usefulness of, a Kantian vocabulary of concepts, rather than to advocate for a specific human rights cause or to call for a specific human rights education curriculum or program. I hope to have provided a useful envisioning of human rights education that is responsive to the ways in which, in human rights thought and education, it is [1] necessary to work flexibly and responsively among biases that are empiricist, rationalist, individual-oriented, community-oriented, and globally oriented; and [2] useful to retain a never-achievable ideal of simultaneously respecting and embracing all these crucial aspects of the experiences in which people learn to value humanity. For these purposes, it is helpful to consider human rights problems in interaction with Kant's philosophy, and specifically (1) his philosophical approach to experienced sensible intuitions, concepts, and human morality; and (2) his delineation of the importance of the individual, community, and global levels of concern in cosmopolitan moral thought and education. This approach can help us to see more clearly and experience more fully the actual and potential value in efforts of human rights thought, advocacy, and education in which we take an interest and participate.

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