



Research Article

© 2025 Blerina Karagozi

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Virtue, Responsibility, and Sustainability: A Kantian Perspective on Environmental Ethics and Intergenerational Justice

Blerina Karagozi

Department of Philosophy, University of Tirana

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ajbals-2025-0008>

Abstract

This paper is about Kant's doctrine of virtue and its applicability in the context of environmental ethics and sustainable development. The analysis starts with the concept of the categorical imperative and the importance of moral action based on reason and individual responsibility. This approach will be compared with philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Critical thought, through the imperative of responsibility contributing to shaping a contemporary ethical framework that integrates virtue, sustainability and intergenerational responsibility in the need for a new ethical paradigm. Environmental ethics and sustainability in the context of virtue and moral law, are based in an ethic that supports the preservation of environment and the sustainable use of natural resources. Changing the ethical paradigm is an essential process to face today's environmental challenges and requires a redefinition of the virtues and values that guide moral action, making them suitable for the environmental context. In conclusion, this paper highlights the importance of environmental ethics in facing global development challenges and the need for a philosophical approach that integrates with everyday practices to protect the planet.

Keywords: environmental ethics; sustainability; virtue; biodiversity; natural resources.

1. Introduction

The scope of this study is to explore the relevance of Kantian virtue ethics in today's environmental ethics and sustainable development. The research seeks to analyse whether Kant's ethical principles provide a solid moral foundation for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Additionally, the study aims to compare Kant's approach with modern ethical perspectives that integrate environmental considerations into moral philosophy.

The methodology used in this research is primarily philosophical analysis through text review and comparison. The study involves a critical examination of primary texts by Immanuel Kant, particularly *The Metaphysics of Morals*, alongside secondary

literature that discusses Kantian ethics and its applicability in environmental discourse. A comparative approach is utilized to assess the contributions of later philosophers, such as Hans Jonas and the Frankfurt School, to ethical paradigms concerning environmental responsibility.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the key concepts referenced in this study, analysing their contributions to ethics, philosophy, and environmental responsibility. This literature review highlights how moral theories continue to influence modern debates on environmental responsibility, providing theoretical tools for addressing issues related to climate change, ecological justice, and sustainable development. The texts reviewed provide diverse perspectives on ethics, with Kantian deontology offering a rigorous moral framework, while thinkers like Jonas and MacIntyre expand ethical discussions to include environmental sustainability, virtue, and justice. The Frankfurt School's critique of rationality and Jonas's imperative of responsibility contribute to shaping a contemporary ethical framework that integrates virtue ethics, sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that instrumental reason, which originated in the Enlightenment, has led to the domination of both nature and humanity, reinforcing oppressive social structures. This work is one of the most influential critiques of the Enlightenment and modern rationality. Their analysis of instrumental reason and the culture industry provides a foundation for critiquing anthropocentric ethics and unsustainable development models. This perspective is particularly relevant when comparing Kantian virtue ethics with contemporary environmental ethics, as it highlights the dangers of reducing morality to a rational, rule-based system that disregards the broader ecological consequences.

Jonas introduces a new moral imperative, shifting ethical focus from human-centered obligations to a duty to future generations and nature. He critiques Kantian ethics for being overly anthropocentric, arguing that technological advancements have created ethical challenges that Kant could not have foreseen. His concept of responsibility ethics suggests that moral obligations extend beyond present human interactions to long-term environmental sustainability. Jonas's work is crucial for bridging Kantian deontology with contemporary environmental ethics, offering a precautionary principle that prioritizes the preservation of life on Earth over immediate human interests.

Critique of Practical Reason, Kant's major work in moral philosophy, in which he develops the doctrine of practical reason and elaborates on the categorical imperative. Kant argues that moral action should be guided by pure reason rather than empirical considerations. This provides the theoretical foundation for Kantian virtue ethics, emphasizing moral autonomy, duty, and universality. While Kant does not explicitly discuss environmental ethics, his principles of moral law and duty can be extended to sustainability discussions, particularly regarding intergenerational justice.

In his work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant establishes the fundamental principles of moral philosophy, introducing the categorical imperative as the foundation for ethical reasoning. He emphasizes that actions are moral only if they can be universally willed, laying the groundwork for modern deontological ethics distinguishing between duty ethics (deontology) and virtue ethics. He presents a systematic approach to moral law, focusing on how individuals cultivate moral character. His discussions on moral duty and self-improvement are relevant to environmental ethics, as they imply that moral agents have an obligation to act responsibly toward nature. However, Kant's anthropocentric approach has been criticized for not granting essential moral worth to non-human life.

Heidegger examines Kant's transcendental philosophy, arguing that Kant's concept of reason is fundamental for understanding modern metaphysics. He reinterprets Kant's ideas on autonomy and moral law, emphasizing the limitations of rationalism. Heidegger's critique is relevant to environmental philosophy, as he highlights the dangers of technological rationality, echoing concerns raised by Jonas and the Frankfurt School. This work is significant for understanding the philosophical foundations of modern critiques of anthropocentrism and the need for an ethics that considers nature as more than a resource for human use.

MacIntyre provides a critique of modern moral philosophy, arguing that ethical thought has become fragmented due to the rejection of Aristotelian virtue ethics. He advocates for a return to community-based moral traditions, where virtues are cultivated through social practices. MacIntyre's work is significant for contemporary virtue ethics, as it emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural contexts in shaping moral behavior. His perspective is useful in discussions on environmental responsibility, as he promotes a more holistic, practice-based approach to ethics, in contrast to Kant's abstract moral rules.

3. Virtue and Environmental Ethics: A Contemporary Kantian Dialogue on Sustainable Development

Ethics has gained special significance in guiding individual and societal actions, in today's world, marked by environmental crises and sustainability challenges. The demand for a balanced approach to nature and sustainable development has led to a re-examination of classical ethical concepts in a new dimension. One of the most influential philosophers in moral thought, Immanuel Kant, proposed an ethical theory focusing on duty and virtue. Kant's doctrine of virtue, based on the categorical imperative and moral obligation, remains one of the most compelling approaches for understanding morality and responsibility toward others and the world around us. The doctrine of virtue is a central theme in moral philosophy, addressing the nature of virtues and moral duties that help shape individual character and actions. Kant, offers a unique and systematic approach to virtue, linking it to duties and moral imperatives. Virtue is a moral disposition achieved through reason, requiring commitment to our duties towards ourselves and others. He describes virtue as the

strength to act according to duty, placing morality in a universal and obligatory context.

In his work *The Metaphysics of Morals*, introduced a distinct approach to virtue, constructed around the concept of duty and the universal moral law. Kant's philosophy represents a significant departure from previous traditions, prioritizing reason and moral obligation over emotions and passions. For Kant, virtue is not defined by character traits or innate qualities but by an individual's ability to follow reason and act in accordance with the inner moral law.

Kant divides ethics into two important parts: the ethics of duty (deontology) and the ethics of virtue. The ethics of duty focuses on the human obligation to follow moral laws regardless of consequences, while the ethics of virtue concerns the cultivation of attitudes and virtues that make an individual worthy of this obligation. Virtue, according to Kant, represents a continuous commitment to fulfilling the duties derived from moral law. Virtue is the ability to act in accordance with reason and to overcome natural temptations or passions that may divert us from moral duty.

At the core of Kant's doctrine of virtue lies the "connection between virtue and duty" as, moral duty is what guides us toward moral actions. A person is not virtuous simply because one acts in accordance with passions or temporary interests but because one follows the moral duty determined by reason. Kant argues that we have a "moral obligation" to act in accordance with a certain principle, the universal principle, represented in the "categorical imperative". This principle requires that we act in such a way that the maxims of our actions can become universal laws.

Kant views virtue as an ongoing process of moral self-improvement, an active state in which the individual strives to fulfil their duties without deviating from the path of moral law.

"Virtue is not a temporary experience of being moral, but a continuous commitment to fulfilling the duties determined by reason" (Kant, 1998).

This quote reflects on virtue as a continuous commitment and a permanent duty for every individual, not simply a quality that can be easily acquired or a natural feature of human character.

3.1 The Categorical Imperative and Universal Law

One of the most central ideas in Kant's moral philosophy is the categorical imperative, which serves as a guiding principle for ethical decision-making. The categorical imperative asks us to act based on principles that could be applied universally, meaning they should hold true for everyone in every situation, regardless of personal interests or outcomes. According to this principle, our actions must be guided by principles that can become universal laws for all. This principle forms the foundation of Kantian ethics, as it does not consider the consequences of actions but instead focuses on the motive and nature of the guiding principle behind the action.

The categorical imperative has several different formulations, but one of the most significant is the one that requires treating people as ends in themselves rather than as means to achieve other goals. This non-instrumental approach to morality

is fundamental to Kantian ethics because it distances morality from pragmatic or utilitarian logic and establishes it in an absolute conception of virtue and duty.

Another important formulation of the categorical imperative is the “law of nature” principle. According to this formulation, we must act as if our moral principles could become laws of nature. This is a powerful concept because it links morality with the universe and elevates it to an absolute, universal, and eternal level. In this sense, moral duties are not limited by the specific contexts or circumstances of the individual but are always valid for everyone and in all places.

Kant presents three key formulations of the categorical imperative, each offering a slightly different perspective on the same moral principle:

- ***The Universal Law Formulation***

This formulation instructs individuals to act only according to maxims that they could become universal laws. In simpler terms, it asks: What if everyone acted this way? Would it still be morally acceptable?

Kant expresses this principle clearly in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785): “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Kant, 1998, p. 52)

A classic example is truthfulness. Suppose someone considers lying to gain a personal advantage. If lying were a universal law, trust in communication would collapse, making lying ineffective in the first place. Therefore, the act of lying contradicts itself when applied universally, making it morally unacceptable.

- ***The Humanity as an End Formulation***

This formulation emphasizes respect for human dignity, stating that we should never treat people only as a means to an end, but always as ends in themselves: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (Kant, 1998, p. 66)

This principle implies that people should never be exploited or manipulated for personal or societal gains. For instance, in environmental ethics, this could mean ensuring that workers involved in sustainable industries are treated fairly, rather than simply as instruments for economic or environmental profit.

- ***The Kingdom of Ends Formulation***

Kant’s third formulation envisions an ideal society where every individual acts according to universal moral laws, treating one another with inherent dignity and respect. In this “kingdom of ends,” people act both as moral legislators (deciding what is right) and moral subjects (following the moral laws they establish).

He describes this vision as follows: “Every rational being must act as if by his maxims were at all times a legislative member in the universal kingdom of ends.” (Kant, 1998, p. 80)

This formulation encourages long-term ethical thinking. Applied to sustainability, it suggests that moral laws should be established in a way that ensures the preservation of resources for future generations, recognizing that those who come after us are also moral agents whose dignity must be respected.

3.2 Connection Between Virtue, Moral Freedom, and Autonomy

Another essential aspect of Kant's doctrine of virtue is its connection to "moral freedom" and "autonomy." For Kant, an individual is morally free only when they act in accordance with reason and with the moral law they have set for themselves. Moral freedom is, in essence, the ability to follow the laws of reason and overcome natural tendencies or empirical interests. Only an individual who acts in accordance with the moral law they have determined for themselves can be considered morally free. (Kant, I. 1948)

In this context, "autonomy" is a fundamental concept that represents the individual's ability to create and follow moral laws that arise from reason rather than from external influences or personal interests. Kant considers autonomy to be the cornerstone of morality, because only individuals who act according to the laws created by their own reason can be morally responsible.

Autonomy and freedom are essential to understanding virtue. A person is virtuous when acting in accordance with the moral laws of autonomy and freedom. In this sense, virtue is a continuous process that requires self-discipline and commitment to reason.

Also, "virtue is the free exercise of rational will" meaning that virtue cannot be imposed or influenced by external factors but must be the product of the individual's autonomous will that follows moral reason.

Virtue is not a permanent or innate quality but rather a "continuous process of moral self-improvement." Kant emphasizes the importance of striving to fulfil moral duties and developing the proper awareness of them. According to him, a person can only be virtuous if they are continuously engaged in fulfilling their moral duties and following the laws of reason. This is a long-term process that requires dedication and self-discipline.

3.3 The Role of Good Will and the Sense of Duty in Virtue

Kant places particular emphasis on good will and the sense of duty, considering them the fundamental elements of morality (Kant, 1948).

Good will is the only thing that can be considered morally good without condition. This means that even if the results of actions are not good, the will behind them can still be good, if it is motivated by duty and not by self-interest or natural inclinations. Therefore, morally correct actions are not determined by consequences but by the intent and principle guiding them.

Kant argues that an action is morally right only when it is performed for the sake of duty, rather than for any other motivation, such as feelings or personal gain. This sense of duty is linked to the idea that individuals must act by the moral law, which is universal and must be applied by all. The motive of duty is essential for moral action because an act based on the desire for personal benefit or happiness does not hold the same moral value as an act performed out of duty.

Kant presents the formal principle of duty through the concept of the categorical imperative, which is a universal rule for moral actions. According to this principle,

individuals must act only according to those maxims that could become a universal law. In other words, moral duty is to act so that the principle behind one's action can become a universally applicable law.

Virtue is not an end that can be achieved once and for all; rather, it is a continuous state of moral effort. Kant states that virtue is a "capacity to fulfil duties" and that it requires constant effort to overcome temptations and obstacles that prevent us from following the path of morality (Heidegger, 1962).

In essence, goodwill and the sense of duty are central to Kant's ethics, as he argues that an action is morally good only when performed for the sake of duty, according to a universal principle.

4. Returning to Nature and Biodiversity in the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School, a group of philosophers and theorists who studied social behaviour during the 20th century, represented a powerful critical movement against the Enlightenment and classical philosophers, including Immanuel Kant. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two of the leading figures of this school, offer a significant critique of Kant's pure reason and moral idealism, arguing that these concepts, instead of leading to emancipation, had contributed to the development of instrumental reason, which in turn helped shape the technological and authoritarian societies of the 20th century.

For the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, the reason followed by Kant and the Enlightenment thinkers had ultimately reduced morality to a means for achieving utilitarian goals, particularly in the context of capitalism and industrial society. Unlike Kant, who saw reason as the source of morality and virtue, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that reason had deviated from its emancipatory goals and had turned into an instrument for controlling individuals and nature.

In their famous work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the pursuit of instrumental and technological reason led to the rupture between humans and nature, reducing everything to a logic of domination and exploitation. This critique is important in the context of comparing it with Kant, as his doctrine of virtue, despite its emphasis on moral autonomy, appears to be based on a reason that serves utilitarian purposes and is dominated by social power structures (Adorno, 1947).

In a world dominated by technology and capitalism, they saw Kant's approach and his prioritization of moral principles derived from universal law as incomplete and even dangerous. For them, virtue cannot exist without a strong critique of the social and economic conditions that shape the individual. They warned that virtue and morality, when following only instrumental reason, lead to a rupture between humans and nature, creating a moral void that modern societies still struggle with.

Unlike Kant, Adorno and Horkheimer believed that moral salvation could not come from pure reason alone, but rather from a combination of awareness of oppression and exploitation, as well as a social critique of late capitalism. They argued that

morality and virtue in an industrialized and technological society require more than simply following rational rules—they demand a deep awareness of the historical and social circumstances that condition the individual. In this sense, the comparison with Kant highlights that morality cannot be reduced to universal formulations but must consider the specific contexts of individuals in the modern world.

4.1 Hans Jonas and the Ethical Responsibility Toward Nature

Furthermore, Hans Jonas, also a 20th-century German philosopher known for his theory of ethical responsibility in a world filled with technology and environmental challenges, conceptualized ethics in a way that surpasses traditional moral philosophy. Confronted with the transformative power of technology, Jonas believed that a new ethics was necessary to address humanity's responsibility toward nature and future generations. He argued that technological advancements, especially those that affect ecosystems and nature, require a profound reassessment of moral responsibility and virtue.

This approach stands in contrast to Kant's philosophy, which is primarily focused on interpersonal relationships and moral duties that individuals owe to one another as rational beings. Jonas, recognizing the power of technology to radically alter how humanity interacts with the world, expands moral duties to include not only our contemporaries but also the future and all forms of life on the planet.

In his work, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas presents a new version of the moral imperative, which focuses on protecting nature and preserving the conditions for human life. Unlike Kant's categorical imperative, which requires that our actions be suitable to become universal laws for all, Jonas proposes that our actions should be evaluated based on their long-term consequences on nature and the future of life on Earth (Jonas, 1984).

Jonas formulates this imperative in a way that encompasses a much broader responsibility: *"Act in such a way that the effects of your actions are compatible with the continuity of human life on Earth."*

This imperative defines a new ethical goal, which is not only the fulfilment of moral duties toward other human beings but also the responsibility to protect and preserve our planet as an ecological whole for future generations.

4.2 Differences Between Kant and Jonas in the Concept of Responsibility

For Kant, morality is the result of the proper use of reason. Through reason, we understand our duties and can distinguish between what is right and wrong. Moral duty is universal and always applies to everyone, as long as we are rational beings. For Kant, the goal of every moral action is to respect the dignity of human beings and the rational principles that can become universal norms.

In contrast, Jonas believes that the threat posed by modern technology and its impact on nature requires an ethical approach that focuses on the consequences of our actions, particularly their long-term effects. According to Jonas, it is no longer sufficient for our actions to be rational or universally valid for all people. Instead, we must ensure

that the effects of our actions are compatible with the preservation of life on Earth for future generations. This focus on consequences represents a major departure from Kantian ethics, which does not consider the concrete results of actions in the same way.

Jonas proposes that humans must take responsibility not only for other people but also for nature. This is a fundamental difference from Kant, who sees moral relationships only as relationships between rational beings, i.e., humans. For Kant, nature is a means to be used for human purposes, and virtue consists in treating human beings as ends in themselves, not as means. Jonas, on the other hand, argues that morality must expand to include responsibility for nature and our planet. Technology has made humanity so powerful that we now have the capacity to destroy nature on an unprecedented scale, making it imperative to establish a new ethics that includes respect and responsibility for the natural world.

Jonas also emphasizes that modern technological developments have created unprecedented risks, including environmental pollution, depletion of natural resources, and global threats to ecosystems. While Kant did not face these issues, Jonas considers them to be fundamental concerns that any new ethics must address and find solutions for. He argues that these issues cannot be dealt with using traditional ethical approaches that focus solely on duties toward other individuals; instead, they require a global ethics that protects life.

Another essential aspect of Jonas's imperative of responsibility is the inclusion of future generations within our moral obligations. Kant focuses on moral relationships between individuals in the present, based on universal laws, but Jonas stresses that our actions today will have profound and irreversible consequences for future generations. Our moral responsibility extends beyond our own generation, requiring a continuous concern for the future of humanity and nature.

Jonas argues that indifference toward the future is a serious flaw in traditional ethical approaches. For him, the central issue of modern ethics is ensuring the continuation of life for future generations, a problem exacerbated by technology and its ability to transform the environment in ways that could harm or even eliminate the possibility of future life. This concern for the future represents a major innovation compared to Kant, who did not specifically address moral duties toward future generations.

The contrast between Hans Jonas and Immanuel Kant becomes evident in the core principles of their ethical philosophies and in how they understand moral responsibility.

For Kant, morality is closely linked to reason and the duties that arise from it. He argues that individuals must act according to moral laws that can become universal laws, meaning that every action must be such that it can be established as a norm for all. This makes Kant focus primarily on interpersonal relationships and the duties individuals owe to one another as rational beings. In this sense, he emphasizes that individuals must treat each other as ends in themselves, respecting the dignity of every person. Kant viewed morality as a system of shared duties that result from rational reasoning, rather than from the consequences of actions.

In contrast, Hans Jonas proposes a broader ethical approach that goes beyond human relationships. Jonas takes ethics a step further, permanently shifting the focus away from anthropocentrism and logocentrism, placing the entire biodiversity of life on Earth at the center of moral considerations. He emphasizes that in the modern era, with the immense power that technology has over nature and human life, ethics must be redefined in terms of responsibility for the long-term consequences of our actions. Jonas argues that we have a duty not only to maintain relationships of justice and respect among individuals but also to protect nature and ensure suitable conditions for life for future generations. In this sense, Jonas expands the concept of moral responsibility to include a duty toward the natural world and toward future generations, prioritizing the consequences of our actions on nature.

For Jonas, the imperative of responsibility is a significant innovation, reflecting the need for an ethics that not only respects individuals in the present but also considers the long-term impact of our actions on ecosystems and life. While Kant focuses on principles of reason and the universality of moral duties, Jonas urges humanity to develop a deeper and more responsible awareness of nature and the future, thus creating an ethics that sees morality as a shared responsibility for all.

4.3 Application of the Categorical Imperative to Environment as a Moral Responsibility

The principles of sustainability and ecological responsibility serve as foundational guidelines for maintaining a balance between human development and environmental preservation. These principles ensure that present needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. What are the key principles that align with both environmental ethics and Kantian moral philosophy?

- ***The Principle of Intergenerational Justice***

Future generations should have access to the same opportunities and resources as the present generation. Therefore, current policies and actions must prioritize long-term sustainability to preserve natural resources for the future. From a Kantian perspective, applying the universal law formulation, depleting natural resources to the detriment of future generations would constitute a violation of moral duty, as it would create a world in which future individuals are unfairly deprived of essential means for their well-being.

- ***The Precautionary Principle***

Precautionary measures should be taken by societies towards activities that may cause harm to human health or the environment, even if scientific certainty is lacking. Such harming actions could lead to irreversible environmental damage, such as deforestation or excessive carbon emissions. Kant's moral duty to act rationally supports the idea that we should avoid actions that, if universalized, would create irreversible harm.

- ***The Principle of Ecological Integrity***

The health of ecosystems must be preserved by maintaining biodiversity and natural

processes by protecting wildlife, restoring degraded habitats, and preventing pollution. Although Kant primarily focused on human dignity, ecological responsibility can be seen as an extension of moral character, nurturing virtues like responsibility and respect for life.

- ***The Polluter Pays Principle***

Those who cause environmental harm should be responsible for its mitigation. Industries that contribute to pollution should invest in cleanup efforts and transition to greener technologies. This aligns with Kant's view that individuals and societies should take moral responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

- ***The Principle of Sustainable Use***

Natural resources should be used in a way that ensures their long-term availability by encouraging renewable energy, water conservation, and reforestation. The kingdom of ends formulation supports the idea that we must act as if we are part of a society where moral laws ensure sustainability for all.

- ***The Principle of Participation and Inclusion***

Sustainable development requires active involvement from all members of society, including marginalized communities. Sustainability can be achieved when implementing environmental policies through democratic decision-making and ensuring equal access to natural resources. Kantian ethics values autonomy and moral action, meaning that people should be included in decisions that affect their environment and future.

- ***The Principle of Climate Responsibility***

Actions should minimize climate change impacts and prioritize mitigation and adaptation strategies. Societies should engage in reducing carbon footprints, investing in green infrastructure, and supporting climate resilience policies. Under the categorical imperative, we should act in ways that ensure the planet remains habitable for all.

By integrating these principles into environmental ethics and sustainability, societies can align their moral duties with ecological responsibility. Kant's philosophy, particularly the categorical imperative, supports the idea that sustainability is not just a practical necessity but a moral obligation to ensure justice for present and future generations.

5. Key Conclusions

Kantian ethics provides a compelling moral foundation for sustainable development by emphasizing universal moral duty and intergenerational justice. Kant's principle that our actions should be guided by universal laws extends to future generations, reinforcing the need for environmental responsibility. This perspective highlights the ethical obligation to preserve natural resources and ensure a sustainable and just future for those who come after us.

The doctrine of virtue, as developed by Kant, offers a structured approach to environmental ethics, urging individuals to cultivate moral responsibility, honesty,

and respect for nature. At a time when the world faces urgent environmental crises—including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution—virtue ethics becomes increasingly relevant in shaping sustainable behavior and policy-making.

The categorical imperative remains a profound and adaptable moral principle. While originally formulated with human ethics in mind, its universal approach to moral duty makes it highly relevant to environmental ethics and sustainability. By promoting moral consistency, human dignity, and long-term responsibility, Kant's philosophy offers a strong foundation for addressing modern challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and intergenerational justice.

Kant focused primarily on human rationality and autonomy and did not explicitly develop environmental ethics. However, as environmental ethicists we can apply his principles to sustainability and ecological responsibility.

Intergenerational Justice – If we apply the universal law formulation, we should ask: *What if every generation consumes resources without considering the future?* This would lead to environmental destruction. Therefore, a Kantian ethic encourages sustainable practices that can be universalized across time.

Animal Welfare and Nature – While Kant argued that animals do not have direct moral rights, he did assert that cruelty toward animals reflects poor moral character in humans. A Kantian environmental perspective suggests that respecting nature and living beings cultivates virtues such as compassion and responsibility, aligning with environmental ethics.

Climate Responsibility – Under the kingdom of ends formulation, a society that values long-term ecological balance would not permit destructive environmental policies that harm both current and future generations. In this way, Kantian ethics supports frameworks such as sustainable development goals and climate justice.

Thus, a Kantian approach to sustainability is not just about protecting nature—it is about maintaining a coherent moral framework that upholds justice, respect, and responsibility for all, now and in the future.

In contrast, Hans Jonas and the Frankfurt School critique traditional anthropocentric ethics, arguing that modern technology and capitalism have intensified environmental degradation. Jonas expands Kantian ethics by introducing an ethic of responsibility, which calls for long-term environmental protection beyond immediate human interests. His work shifts the focus from human-centered morality to a broader duty toward nature and future generations.

By integrating Kantian ethics with contemporary perspectives from Jonas, Adorno, and Horkheimer, a more comprehensive ethical framework emerges—one that balances moral autonomy, ecological responsibility, and sustainable development. This synthesis emphasizes that ethical decision-making must account for both universal moral duties and the practical consequences of human actions on the planet. In conclusion, sustainable development requires a fusion of moral principles and practical action, combining Kant's rational duty-based ethics with Jonas's long-term environmental responsibility. Ethical awareness, policy reform, and individual commitment to sustainability are all essential in ensuring the protection of our planet

for future generations.

References

- Adorno, Th. and Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). Kant e il problema della metafisica, Editori Laterza.
- Jonas, Hans (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kant, Immanuel (1948). *Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Taylor & Francis <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203981948>
- Kant, I. (1997). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*. University of Notre Dame Press.