

# How To Apply Dignitarian Thinking to The Gaza War and Gaza Campus Protests

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From a broadly Kantian dignitarian point of view (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018a, 2023a, 2023b), how should we think about The Gaza War and Gaza campus protests? Here's a brief up-to-the-present summary of The Gaza War, starting with the attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023 and the retaliatory invasion of the Gaza Strip by Israel on 27 October:

On 7 October 2023, Hamas and several other Palestinian militant groups launched coordinated armed incursions from the Gaza Strip into the Gaza envelope of southern Israel, the first invasion of Israeli territory since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Hamas and

other Palestinian armed groups named the attacks Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (or Deluge; Arabic: عملية طوفان الأقصى, romanized: ‘amaliyyat ṭūfān al-’Aqṣā, usually romanised as "Tufan Al-Aqsa" or "Toofan Al-Aqsa"), while in Israel they are referred to as Black Saturday (Hebrew: השבת השחורה) or the Simchat Torah Massacre (הטבח בשמחת תורה), and internationally as the 7 October attack. The attacks consequently started the ongoing Israel– Hamas war.

The attacks began early on 7 October with a barrage of at least 3,000 rockets launched against Israel and vehicle-transported and powered paraglider incursions into Israel. Hamas fighters breached the Gaza–Israel barrier, attacking military bases and massacring civilians in Gaza envelope Kibbutz settlements, including in Be’eri, Kfar Aza, and Nir Oz, and at the Nova music festival. The attackers killed 1,139 people: 695 Israeli civilians (including 36 children), 71 foreign nationals, and 373 members of the security forces. About 250 Israeli civilians and soldiers were taken as hostages to the Gaza Strip, including 30 children, with the stated goal to force Israel to exchange them for imprisoned Palestinians, including women and children. Reports of rape and sexual assault also emerged. Hamas officials denied the involvement of their fighters.

Hamas said its attack was in response to the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, the blockade of the Gaza Strip, the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements, rising Israeli settler violence, and recent escalations.

At least 44 countries denounced the attack as terrorism, while some Arab and Muslim countries blamed Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories as the root cause of the attack. The day was labeled the bloodiest in Israel’s history and the deadliest for Jews since the Holocaust. Some have called the attack a genocidal massacre against Israelis. (Wikipedia, 2023)

On 27 October 2023, Israel launched an invasion of the Gaza Strip with the stated goals to destroy Hamas, a military and political movement that led an attack on Israel earlier in the month, and to free hostages it took. The effort is ongoing. Before the invasion, dubbed Operation Swords of Iron, Israel declared war, tightened its blockade, and ordered the evacuation of the northern Gaza Strip.

More than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since the start of the Israeli operation, including more than 7,800 children and 4,900 women, with another 10,000 people missing and presumed dead under the rubble of destroyed buildings. By mid-December, Israel had dropped 29,000 munitions on Gaza, destroying or damaging 70 percent of homes, destroying hundreds of cultural landmarks, and damaging dozens of cemeteries. Hamas's military infrastructure was largely built beneath civilian settlements, which some experts say is part of a deliberate strategy to cause Palestinian civilian casualties. Experts say that the scale and pace of destruction in Gaza is among the severest in recent history.

A severe humanitarian crisis has developed, with healthcare in a state of collapse, shortages of food, clean water, medicine and fuel due to the blockade, electricity and communications blackouts, and the UN warning of potential famine. It was widely reported that there is “no safe place in Gaza,” as Israel struck areas it had previously told Palestinians to evacuate to. The widespread civilian deaths have led to accusations of war crimes against both Israel and Hamas. Nearly all 2.3 million Gazans have been internally displaced and 250,000 to 500,000 Israelis were internally displaced, while Israel has detained thousands of Palestinians and said it lost 288 additional soldiers in its invasion as of 27 May 2024.

As a result of the invasion, South Africa instituted proceedings against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), charging that Israel was committing genocide and requesting that the ICJ render provisional measures of protection. (Wikipedia, 2024)

These events have also been accompanied by a wave of campus protests in the USA during late April 2024:

The past week has seen a growing wave of protest encampments and other demonstrations on university campuses across the United States, many of which have been met by mass arrests and other forceful police actions, as well as intense media scrutiny. And the demonstrations continue to spread....

Protests, like many forms of group behavior, can be contagious.

One way to understand how protest movements spread is the “ovation model,” said Omar Wasow, a political science professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies how protest movements can affect politics.

In a theater audience, “if some people in the front stand up, then other people start to stand up, and it’s a cascade through the auditorium,” he said.

In this case, he said, it is not surprising that the “ovation” began last week at Columbia University. The university’s proximity to national media in New York and its status as an Ivy League institution give it a position of prominence, he said, that is similar to someone in the front row of an auditorium. So pro-Palestinian protests there drew wider attention than they might have elsewhere. In addition, the campus is also home to a large population of Jewish students, many of whom have said that they feel afraid of antisemitic harassment or attacks from protesters. This expression of fear fueled more media coverage and political scrutiny.

More than 100 demonstrators were arrested on April 18 after Columbia called in the police to empty an encampment of pro-Palestinian protesters, fulfilling a promise to Congress

by Nemat Shafik, the university's president, that she was prepared to punish people for unauthorized protests on campus. (NYT, 2024a)

Now, broadly Kantian dignitarianism holds the two following doctrines:

1. *Moral dignitarianism*, the anti-egoistic, anti-utilitarian, and anti-relativistic universalist ethical idea that every rational human animal possesses *dignity*, i.e., an absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, objective value or worth, beyond every merely hedonistic, self-interested, instrumental, economic, or utilitarian value, which entails that we always and everywhere ought to treat everyone as *persons* and never as mere means or mere things, and therefore always and everywhere with sufficient respect for their dignity, no matter what merely prudential reasons there are to do otherwise (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018a, 2023a, 2023b), as per this equally famous Kant text:

In the realm of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity* (*Würde*). What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has dignity. What is related to general human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; that which, even without presupposing a need, conforms with a certain taste, that is, with a delight in the mere purposeless play of our mental powers, has an *affective price* (*Affectionpreis*); but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is, *dignity*. Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the realm of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. (Kant, 1785/1996: p. 84, Ak 4: 434-435)

2. *Political dignitarianism*, the anti-despotic, anti-totalitarian, and anti-Hobbesian-liberal yet also liberationist, radically enlightened idea that all social institutions based on coercion and authoritarianism, whether democratic or not-so-democratic, are rationally unjustified and immoral, and that in resisting, devolving, and/or transforming all such social institutions, we ought to create and sustain a worldwide or cosmopolitan ethical community beyond all borders and nation-States, consisting of people who who think, care, and act for themselves and also mutually sufficiently respect the dignity of others and themselves, no matter what their race, sex, ethnicity, language, age, economic status, or abilities (see, e.g., Hanna, 2016, 2017, 2018b, 2023c).

In view of broadly Kantian moral and political dignitarianism, it's obvious that oppressing and intentionally killing innocent people, especially including oppressing and killing civilians during wars, is always rationally unjustified and immoral (Hanna, 2023d). Therefore, **first**, the attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023 was rationally unjustified and immoral, and **second**, the Israeli invasion on 27 October and its murderous occupation of the Gaza Strip since then are also rationally unjustified and immoral. Two wrongs don't make a right: even despite the powerful motivating forces of the psychology of vengeance and the widespread belief in retributive punishment (Hanna, 2024a), Hamas is in the wrong and Israel is in the wrong. Moreover, given broadly Kantian moral and political dignitarianism, free speech for the purposes of resisting oppression and violations of sufficient respect for human dignity is rationally justified, always permissible, and often obligatory (Hanna, 2024b). Therefore, **third**, campus protests demanding an immediate end to the Israeli occupation and permanent peace in Gaza, for example, by putting pressure on college and universities to divest their holdings in corporations that supply arms to Israel, are rationally justified and at the very least morally permissible or even obligatory, and **fourth**, censoring, suppressing, silencing, or punishing dignity-respecting free speech about the Gaza War, from *either* side of the conflict (NYT, 2024b), whether this censoring, suppressing, silencing, or punishing is carried out by college or university administrations, or by the State, or by student protesters themselves, are all rationally unjustified and immoral. Merely being offended by someone else's free speech, or finding it to be at odds with one's own authoritarian or otherwise moralistic assertions, is *not* a violation of sufficient respect for human dignity.

Nevertheless, what explains the overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian character and the vehemence of the Gaza campus protests? My own view is that it's principally caused by a resurgence of post-1960s identitarian multi-culturalist social justice politics in the USA, leavened by anti-semitism, baited and primed by ultra-conservative Republican attacks on "cancel culture" and "wokeism" in higher education, and then projected onto the latest installment on the longstanding and ongoing tragedy of Israeli-Palestinian relations since the founding of Israel in 1948 (Hanna, 2023e, 2024d; NYTM, 2023). More generally, contemporary higher education is pervasively *commodified*, *mechanized*, and *moralized* (Hanna, 2024d), and this unhappy triple whammy has effectively shaped the Gaza campus protests.

Correspondingly, from the standpoint of broadly Kantian moral and political dignitarianism, do I think that The Gaza War is the most important thing in the world? No, I don't. The Russia-Ukraine War is equally important. Moreover, from a broadly Kantian moral and dignitarian standpoint, (i) the existential threat for humankind of *disastrous climate change*, (ii) what I've called "Gun Crazy," or *the problem of guns and gun*

*violence* (Hanna, 2015, 2024c)—which obviously subsumes the Gaza War and the Russia-Ukraine War alike, (iii) the existential threat for humankind of what I’ve called *the myth of artificial intelligence* (Hanna, 2024e), and (iv) how to create and sustain a dignitarian post-Capitalist world in the face of *neoliberal global corporate capitalism* (Hanna, 2023c) are each individually and all collectively of greater moral and political importance than either The Gaza War or The Russia-Ukraine War.

Therefore, I think that the students participating in the Gaza campus protests ought to speak out just as loudly and vigorously, or even more loudly and vigorously, about *those* four problems—namely, disastrous climate change, Gun Crazy, the myth of AI, and neoliberalism—as they are about bringing about an immediate end to the Israeli occupation and permanent peace in Gaza. And then focus on their studies. Correspondingly, the teaching faculty at contemporary institutions of higher education ought to be wholeheartedly trying to convey this core thought to their students: *human dignity*, not *group identity*, is what’s ultimately of fundamental moral and political importance (Hanna, 2023b, 2023d, 2023e).<sup>1</sup>

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