



## Human Rights and the Question of Universality: Between Dominant Paradigms and Indian Ontological Ethics

### Direitos Humanos e a Questão da Universalidade: Entre os Paradigmas Dominantes e a Ética Ontológica Indiana

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**Abstract:** This article critically interrogates the dominant conceptualisation of human rights and its universalist claims by tracing its epistemological and historical foundations in modern European liberal thought. It argues that the dominant view roots the notion of *rights* in a particular understanding of *personhood*—defined through autonomy, reason, and self-awareness—and emerged in response to the experience of oppressive institutions. While liberatory within its original context, the global imposition of this framework introduces significant philosophical and cultural problems, particularly when applied to societies with alternative ontologies and moral orders. In contrast, the article explores the classical Indian worldview, which does not distinguish between *human* and *person*, nor does it perceive all institutions as inherently oppressive. Rooted in the interconnected principles of *Rta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (duty), *R̥ṇa* (debt), and *Dāna* (generosity), this tradition presents an organic, holistic, and relational understanding of life. The Indian perspective emphasises *self-reliance* over *independence*, and sees human flourishing as emerging from harmony with social, natural, and cosmic structures, rather than resistance to them. Through this comparative philosophical analysis, the article makes a broader case for epistemic pluralism in human rights discourse. It contends that the future relevance of human rights depends on pluralising its originary narratives and recognising alternative frameworks that offer equally valid conceptualisations of dignity, autonomy, and justice. The work concludes that genuine universality in human rights can only emerge through intercultural dialogue, not through the dominance of a single civilizational paradigm.

**Keywords:** Human Rights, Universality, Dominant Paradigms, Ethic.

**Resumo:** Este artigo questiona criticamente a conceituação dominante dos direitos humanos e suas reivindicações universalistas, traçando seus fundamentos epistemológicos e históricos no pensamento liberal europeu moderno. Argumenta que a visão dominante enraíza a noção de direitos em uma compreensão particular da personalidade — definida por meio da autonomia, da razão e da autoconsciência — e surgiu em resposta à experiência de instituições opressoras. Embora libertadora em seu contexto original, a imposição global dessa estrutura introduz problemas

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filosóficos e culturais significativos, particularmente quando aplicada a sociedades com ontologias e ordens morais alternativas. Em contraste, o artigo explora a cosmovisão indiana clássica, que não distingue entre humano e pessoa, nem percebe todas as instituições como inerentemente opressoras. Enraizada nos princípios interconectados de Rta (ordem cósmica), Dharma (dever), R̥ṇa (dívida) e Dāna (generosidade), essa tradição apresenta uma compreensão orgânica, holística e relacional da vida. A perspectiva indiana enfatiza a autossuficiência em detrimento da independência e vê o florescimento humano como algo que emerge da harmonia com as estruturas sociais, naturais e cósmicas, em vez da resistência a elas. Por meio dessa análise filosófica comparativa, o artigo defende de forma mais ampla o pluralismo epistêmico no discurso dos direitos humanos. Argumenta que a relevância futura dos direitos humanos depende da pluralização de suas narrativas originais e do reconhecimento de estruturas alternativas que ofereçam conceituações igualmente válidas de dignidade, autonomia e justiça. O trabalho conclui que a genuína universalidade dos direitos humanos só pode emergir por meio do diálogo intercultural, não pela predominância de um único paradigma civilizacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Direitos Humanos, Universalidade, Paradigmas Dominantes, Ética.

## Introduction

*“The future of human rights is serviced only when theory and practice develop the narrative potential to pluralise the originary metanarratives of the past human rights beyond the time and space of the European imagination, even in its critical postmodern incarnations.”*

(Upendra Baxi, 2002; 26)

The origin and development of most concepts are grounded in innocence and ignorance, coupled with a stimulating inquisitiveness to transcend the present self, space, and time of epistemic beings. This inquisitiveness is sometimes rooted in a genuine “quest to know,” and at other times, in a desire to control or colonise the other. The pursuit of transcendence drives and enables the transition from ignorance to both knowledge and non-knowledge. Often, humans are either genuinely unaware or willfully ignorant of this process and its limitations. This *innocent ignorance* encourages the universalisation of limited conceptions—concepts that are themselves merely conceptualised interpretations. The quest for transcendence is also a quest for immanence. It is both objective and subjective, just as it is an outward and inward journey. Recognising this dynamic helps expose the limitations of one’s conceptual frameworks and fosters the development of epistemic humility. Within this broader philosophical framework, I situate the discourse on human rights, examining its dominant conception by tracing its foundational roots.

The theoretical perspective of ‘right’ by the dominant view evolved out of a worldview that is of the form of an empty abstract universal. Although it appears to be inclusive, it fails to accommodate alternative worldviews. In contrast, the classical Indian conception offers an integrated, interrelated, harmonious, and

holistic worldview that exposes the limitations of the dominant view. By embracing this holistic perspective, the Indian conception does not consider it necessary to adopt the notion of “rights” in the Western sense. It makes no distinction between “human” and “person,” and it does not assume that all institutions are inherently oppressive.

Before delving into the discussion on human rights, I would like to offer a few clarifications. In human rights discourse, it is common to treat the “West and Non-West” distinction as universally accepted and self-evident. However, this distinction warrants closer scrutiny. I prefer the term *dominant view* over *Western perspective*, as the “West” functions more as an epistemological category than a geographical one—a category that has become dominant within global epistemologies (Panikkar 5; Dallmayr 17). I also find the term *non-West* problematic for several reasons, which I outline below.

Firstly, *non-West* is a negative designation; it frames the identity of vast regions and cultures as a mere negation or absence of the West. Such framing fails to affirm the identity and contributions of these cultures on their own terms. Secondly, as mentioned, the West is not simply a geographical region—it is an epistemological construct. This construct dominates the consciousness of individuals in the so-called East and South just as much as it does in the West. Unless this dominance is either discarded or critically deconstructed through alternative methods, theoretical frameworks, and forms of rationality, it will continue to exert significant global influence (Mutua 9–11). Therefore, addressing the internalized dominance of the West within the non-Western mind is imperative.

Additionally, the concept of *non-West* is problematic in terms of definition. It is often framed as a condescending evaluative category. For instance, Susan Browning defines the non-West as “those states/cultures that did not share or experience the ideas, values and transformations of the West” (Browning 7). This definition disregards the reality that ideas, values, and transformations can be—and often are—uniquely expressed across different cultures. Framing them in relation to a Western benchmark invites hierarchical evaluation and erodes cultural specificity.

It is also important to question whether *West* and *non-West* are self-referential or other-referential categories. The concept of the *West* presupposes the *East*, just as *non-West* presupposes the *West*. In both cases, identity is defined in relation to the other. This external reference risks impeding a true understanding of the self, as it may reduce self-definition to an absence of the other. If these categories are seen as self-referential, *non-West* ends up identifying itself as “the absence of the West”—a negative form of self-reference (Dallmayr 22–24).

I do not intend to provide an exhaustive historical account of human rights and its activism. Instead, my focus lies in exploring the *philosophy* of human rights and the evolution of related ideas, albeit within the constraints of this work. It is widely acknowledged that six main critiques of human rights dominate the

discourse: Realist, Utilitarian, Marxist, Particularist, Feminist, and Post-colonial (Donnelly 87). While my response does not align strictly with any one of these, it draws from and engages with all of them.

This article undertakes a normative inquiry into the philosophical assumptions underpinning human rights discourse. The first part of this article interrogates the roots of the dominant human rights discourse by analysing concepts such as *human*, *person*, *rights*, and *universality*. This analysis demonstrates that these terms carry multiple meanings even within the European liberal tradition (Moyn 45; Donnelly 18). The dominant conception of human rights is rooted in a historical context in which institutions were perceived as inherently oppressive. This section critiques the limitations of universalising such a context-bound worldview. The second part of the article presents an alternative perspective—one in which the distinction between *human* and *person* is not emphasised, and where institutions are not assumed to be inherently oppressive. This section explores the unique features of an integrated worldview that encompasses physical, psychological, spiritual, and cosmic dimensions (Panikkar 10–11). It argues that any notion of freedom or rights only becomes meaningful when situated within the broader cultural frameworks that shape a society’s understanding of life (Sen 35).

### **Purvapaksha – The Dominant Perspective**

Given the earlier clarification regarding the Western—or more accurately, the *dominant*—perspective, this section critically analyses how the dominant conception of human rights has evolved. Human rights, within this view, are generally understood as inalienable and innate entitlements of humans. They are also considered universal, inclusive, pluralistic, and legal in nature. Given such a wide-ranging conceptual framework, one might assume that there is a clear and unambiguous understanding of who qualifies as human and how universally these rights are applied. However, a close examination of the intellectual history of human rights reveals a more troubling and exclusionary narrative (Moyn 2; Mutua 10).

The endeavour here is not only to describe how the dominant view emerged but also to question its moral adequacy as a universal framework. This critical scrutiny raises an essential question: *Who qualifies as human, and what constitutes ‘being human’?* While the term *human* is widely used to refer to members of the species *Homo sapiens*, its meaning is far from consistent across cultures. Even within dominant global traditions, a human being may be referred to differently—as a *citizen* in the political domain and as a *person* in the moral realm (Nussbaum 91). This fragmentation of identity leads to further ambiguity.

### **What is Human? Are There Any Humans Left Out?**

A simplistic species-based definition—“those born to humans”—fails to capture the philosophical complexity within the dominant human rights discourse.

Historically, personhood has been the benchmark for possessing rights, rather than mere biological birth. This effectively shifts the question from *who is human* to *who is a person*.

Across history, *personhood* has been linked to various traits: self-awareness, self-consciousness, reason, autonomy, freedom, and dignity. However, these standards have often functioned more as tools of exclusion than inclusion. For example, children, people with disabilities, and others lacking one or more of these traits at a given moment could be considered outside the realm of personhood—and therefore outside the scope of human rights (MacIntyre 1–3).

The philosophical preference for traits like autonomy and reason was shaped by the moral frameworks of Enlightenment thinkers. For instance, Kant viewed autonomy and rational moral will as the basis of human dignity, while Locke tied personhood to consciousness and memory as grounds for individual rights and property claims. These frameworks established a normative threshold that privileges abstract capacities over embodied or relational existence.

Upendra Baxi, a prominent critical voice in human rights theory, notes: “Only those beings were to be regarded as ‘human’ who were possessed of the capacity for reason and autonomous moral will. What counted as reason and will varied in the course of the long development of the European liberal tradition” (*Future* 29). Despite this internal inconsistency, the reliance on fluctuating liberal conceptions of reason and will has been central to excluding groups from the domain of rights.

This exclusion was not accidental but often reinforced through concrete historical practices. For example, the transatlantic slave trade was justified by denying full rational capacity to enslaved people. Colonial regimes framed indigenous populations as lacking the moral and cognitive faculties to govern themselves. Women’s suffrage was delayed on the basis of alleged emotional instability and lack of rational maturity. Each of these exclusions relied on a philosophical hierarchy of traits rooted in liberal thought.

This raises a troubling question: *Are new humans continually being “discovered” as history progresses?* Historically, the domain of rights has expanded to include slaves, women, children, Indigenous peoples, the disabled, minorities, immigrants (legal and illegal), the unborn, and more. While the term *extension* might suggest an inclusive evolution, it actually reveals a problematic pattern of selective inclusion (Moyn 11; Mutua 13).

Baxi illustrates this well: “in its major phases of development, ‘slaves,’ ‘heathens,’ ‘barbarians,’ colonized peoples, indigenous populations, women, children, the impoverished, and the ‘insane’ have been at various times and in various ways, thought unworthy of being bearers of human rights” (*Future* 29). This historical record reveals a constructed *ontological exclusivity* masked as universalism.

*Universality or Abstract Emptiness?*

The dominant perspective resorts to an abstract universal notion of “human,” which in theory includes everyone but in practice excludes many. Over time, specific groups were gradually added to this universal through piecemeal inclusion. This process reflects a paradoxical shift—from *inclusive exclusion* (claiming universality while excluding some) to *exclusive inclusion* (granting rights selectively to particular groups). This pattern of selective inclusion reveals not conceptual inconsistency alone but also raises serious normative concerns about justice, fairness, and the moral legitimacy of the dominant framework. At the heart of this paradox lies a politics of exclusion (Brown 98).

This politics leads us to consider two fundamental questions:

*The Right to Be Human:* More than 70 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the fight to be *recognised* as human continues. Who determines the qualifications for being human? How does one *become* human in the eyes of the law or moral philosophy?

*Authorship and Ownership of Rights:* Are you an insider or outsider to the “universal”? This question speaks to the origins and ownership of the human rights narrative.

Baxi comments that the human rights discourse is often seen as “the gift of the West to the rest” (*Future* 24). Non-Western traditions are typically viewed as lacking indigenous notions of human rights, and the West is cast as the rightful author and owner of this discourse. This framing turns the non-West into a passive recipient, or at best a consumer, of rights developed through Western historical struggles (Panikkar 5; Dallmayr 25).

Such authorship marginalises alternative worldviews. The dominant perspective emerges from a particular socio-political context—the rise of modernity and Enlightenment rationality in 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. This period was characterised by a deep distrust of institutions, which were viewed as inherently oppressive. Human rights, in this context, emerged as a mechanism to protect the *individual* from such oppression (Taylor 105–06; Donnelly *Universal* 18–20).

This logic, however, becomes problematic when universalised. For example, family and monarchy—seen as oppressive in Western contexts—were resisted through child rights and democratic reforms. But this same assumption, when exported via human rights education to non-Western contexts, may dismantle institutions that function positively in those societies. As a result, human rights can sometimes disempower rather than uplift non-Western societies (An-Na’im 23–25; Mutua 21).

Jack Donnelly maintains that human rights are “almost universally accepted—at least in word, or standards” and are supported by a widespread legal

framework. He argues that consensus, not philosophical reasoning, is the bedrock of their validity (*Universal* 19). But a consensus shaped by dominant powers can be coercive. As Goodhart points out, “to ask whether human rights are Western is to ask whether they reflect the values and beliefs of European cultures... Within the essentialist framework, all questions about the origin or the universality of human rights become questions about their validity; if human rights are Western, they cannot be universal” (Goodhart 940–41).

### *The Philosophical Anthropology Problem*

Another key issue is that cultural relativism challenges the uniform definition of “human.” Different traditions conceptualise *being human* differently. These conceptions might not be aligned with liberal individualism, nor might they assign moral significance to the traits prioritised by the dominant perspective. Donnelly acknowledges this tension but asserts that moral distinctions based on cultural insiders and outsiders have largely eroded due to globalisation and increased mobility (Donnelly 89–91).

Still, the dominant view ties the essence of being human to external constructs and institutions, often seeing all of them as inherently oppressive. Even later expansions of rights to groups and communities retain the original individualistic framework and institutional scepticism (Ibhawoh 19).

To sum up, this discussion reveals a flawed logic: the dominant view accepts that context shapes human rights, but does not grant that other contexts might generate equally valid rights discourses. The failure to imagine non-Western origins for rights reveals a civilizational arrogance. Ronald Dworkin’s *Taking Rights Seriously* attempts to shift the conversation to fundamental (constitutional) rights, but even here, the bearer of rights becomes not just a *person*, but a *citizen*, again introducing exclusion by formal membership (Dworkin 184). This analysis urges us to move beyond the dominant paradigm rooted in exclusive inclusion and inclusive exclusion, and to open up space for truly pluralistic, culturally grounded conceptions of human dignity and rights.

### **An Alternative Perspective – Indian Worldview and the Question of Rights**

Given the above discussion, we can understand that the dominant perspective’s conceptualisation of human rights evolved out of a specific historical context that developed a worldview in which Artificial institutions were mostly seen as oppressive. This conceptualisation and worldview, however, may not be the same for other cultures of the world. What follows is a presentation of the classical Indian tradition—a tradition that developed a radically different conceptualisation of human life and its institutions, which are not necessarily oppressive (Panikkar 7; Dallmayr 26).

At the outset, it must be noted that there is no directly corresponding concept for *right* in the classical Indian tradition. As discussed earlier, the historical

context that facilitated the emergence of *rights* in modern Europe was culturally specific. It should not be surprising, then, that other cultures may not possess a similar concept. However, Sanskrit literature offers an interesting parallel in the term *adbikāra*, which broadly means “authority, ownership, competence, power, and right” (Pollock 500). Given that English and Sanskrit are both distinct, culturally evolved languages, it is often difficult to locate equivalent terms that carry the same semantic and cultural referents.

### ***Ṛta, Ṛṇa, Dharma and Dāna as the Classical Indian Framework***

Discussing rights is meaningful only within an understanding of life’s limitations and its embeddedness in broader laws that govern human survival, social obligation, and moral conduct. The Vedic tradition, one of the world’s oldest continuous civilisations, evolved a distinct worldview grounded in *Ṛta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (duty and moral law), *Ṛṇa* (debt), and *Dāna* (giving or donation) (Radhakrishnan 53–55; Ganeri 118). This section attempts not merely to offer a descriptive account of an alternative worldview but also advances it as a normatively robust framework that reimagines human dignity and ethical responsibility outside the grammar of rights. Each of these terms names a moral function: *Ṛta* refers to the principle of natural and moral order that sustains and aligns both the cosmos and society; *Ṛṇa* articulates the idea that every person is born into obligations toward others, which must be acknowledged and honoured; *Dāna* expresses the ethical requirement to give, often to those in need — acting as socialist instrument of wealth distribution — as a way of balancing the social fabric and sustaining the interdependency. This worldview does not view life as an isolated individual’s project, but as deeply enmeshed within cosmic, social, and ancestral responsibilities.

Each individual is born into a web of obligations—to the gods, sages, ancestors, and the community—known as *Ṛṇa*. These debts are to be honored through action and moral conduct (i.e., *Dharma*) and through acts of giving (*Dāna*), particularly toward those in need. Rather than focusing on claims and entitlements, the individual is socialised into a duty-based structure, where one’s station in life comes with a corresponding moral role.

Indian tradition conceptualises life not merely as physical, but also psychological, spiritual, and cosmic. Human life is perceived as an interaction of psycho-physical-spiritual dimensions with natural and cosmic forces. This integrated understanding generated distinct lived experiences that in turn shaped thought, language, and ethical consciousness (Bharati 88; Panikkar 10).

This leads to a worldview that is holistic, harmonious, integrated, and organic. Human life is not fragmented into binaries like body/mind, individual/community, or rights/duties, but is conceived in relational terms. This communitarian framework is reflected in Vedic ideas of *sahavāsa* (coexistence), *sahakāra* (cooperation), and *sahabhōga* (shared experience or collective enjoyment).

Against the common misconception that Indian tradition is world-negating, it is more accurate to say that it makes a distinction between *śreyas* (the good) and *preyas* (the pleasurable), and between *pravṛtti-mārga* (path of external engagement) and *nivṛtti-mārga* (path of internal withdrawal). The former acknowledges worldly pleasure but prioritises ethical goodness; the latter values spiritual pursuit without rejecting worldly life. Both are considered valid paths, depending on an individual's nature and disposition (Devarakonda 2604; Radhakrishnan and Moore 93–94).

In this worldview, institutions are not universally seen as oppressive but are often interpreted as potential facilitators of individual flourishing. This interpretation is not without limits. Hierarchical institutions such as caste have historically undermined the very ethical ideals these frameworks claim to support. However, the conceptual point remains that the classical framework sees social institutions as necessary sites of moral development rather than inherently illegitimate. The framework of *Rta*, *R̥ṇa*, *Dharma*, and *Dāna* does not impose arbitrary limitations but provides the cosmic and social structure within which human autonomy is possible and meaningful. To impose Western ideas of “rights” on this worldview and to judge its absence as underdeveloped reflects the narrow cultural lens of the dominant paradigm. This critique is directed at the universalising tendencies of Western liberalism, not at critiques such as those of Mutua and An-Na'im, who themselves challenge Western dominance but do not evaluate Indian alternatives directly.

### ***Personhood, Humanity, and the Indian View***

The dominant view struggles with the question: *Are there non-person humans?* Given the history of selectively discovering “new humans,” the category remains unstable and contested (Baxi 29). Recent legal shifts across jurisdictions extending personhood to rivers, towns, and ecosystems (e.g., Ganges and Yamuna in India, Whanganui River in New Zealand) show that even the dominant discourse is evolving toward new personhood constructs (Boyd 144).

Indian culture does not confront this confusion, because it does not distinguish sharply between “human” and “person.” Rather than anthropocentric individualism, it promotes a relational ontology that encompasses animals, rivers, mountains, and other cosmic entities. The human is not separate from the natural world but a participant in a greater cosmic whole (Panikkar 9; Dallmayr 47).

This ontological inclusivity avoids the pitfalls of exclusion-based human rights discourse. It fosters a harmonious integration of the self with others—human and non-human—and situates human flourishing within a cosmic continuum.

### ***Self-Reliance vs. Independence: A Conceptual Clarification***

The Indian worldview promotes *self-reliance* rather than *independence*. The dominant conception constructs the individual as perpetually oppressed—needing

independence from family, society, state, and even nature. New tools and institutions are created to enable this independence, only to become new sources of oppression (Brown 102). This cycle never ends, nor does it lead to authentic freedom.

In contrast, classical Indian thought sees social and natural institutions as enablers, not barriers, to flourishing. A normative exploration through the Indian thoughts renders an impression that self-reliance, as envisioned in the Indian tradition, offers a more ethically sustainable vision of freedom than the dominant ideal of independence. They are integrated into a larger harmony that supports the individual's journey toward *mokṣa* (liberation) through *svatantrya* (self-governance) and *svarājya* (self-rule) (Vivekananda 273).

Here, *self-reliance* means a positive engagement with the self and the world. While *independence* negates dependence, *self-reliance* affirms the self in relation to others. The former implies disjunction; the latter, conjunctive continuity. Independence is exclusive—it must always be from something; self-reliance is inclusive—it always entails being with others.

To sustain a whole (totality), the parts must function together harmoniously. Independence without relational harmony leads to fragmentation. Self-reliance ensures that the parts work together to maintain the well-being of the totality (Ganeri 122; Daya Krishna 177).

Thus, while modern liberalism celebrates independence, Indian tradition places emphasis on *ātmanirbharta* (self-reliance)—a more holistic and sustainable vision of autonomy.

To sum up, whether a culture has a concept of *rights* depends on the ontological-ethical framework through which it views the world. Classical Indian tradition does not reject the need for protection, fairness, or justice. But it addresses these through a duty-based, relational, and cosmically attuned worldview structured around *Ṛta*, *Ṛṇa*, *Dharma*, and *Dāna*.

This worldview avoids the binary of oppressor/oppressed and instead embraces a participatory ethics where individual flourishing is achieved not against institutions, but through them. The emphasis on *self-reliance* over *independence* further clarifies how Indian thought envisions freedom: not as the absence of constraints, but as the integration of the self into a meaningful and interconnected world.

## Conclusion

This work has interrogated the dominant perspective's conceptualisation of human rights and its overarching claims to universality. By tracing its philosophical and historical roots, we highlighted how the dominant view situates the concept of *human* within a contested and exclusionary definition of *person*, and how the emergence of *rights* itself is tied to a reaction against oppressive institutions specific to the European modern experience.

While these notions were liberatory within the context in which they arose, their universalisation across diverse cultures has introduced significant conceptual and ethical challenges. The persistent ambiguity over who qualifies as a *person*—and thus who can be a bearer of rights—has led to a history of exclusion, wherein entire groups and communities were only gradually admitted into the category of the “fully human.” This politics of extension has often functioned less as a celebration of inclusion and more as an index of prior exclusion.

In contrast, the classical Indian worldview offers an alternative framework grounded in *Rta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (duty), *R̥ṇa* (debt), and *Dāna* (generosity). It envisions life not as a contest between the self and oppressive institutions, but as a holistic, harmonious, and integrated reality in which individuals flourish through mutual responsibility, spiritual awareness, and cosmic participation. This perspective does not distinguish between *human* and *person*, nor does it view institutions as inherently oppressive; rather, institutions are seen as necessary and facilitative for human growth and self-realisation.

Furthermore, the Indian tradition’s emphasis on *self-reliance*—as opposed to *independence*—presents a more sustainable and inclusive model of autonomy. It suggests that true flourishing is possible not through isolation from others, but through cooperative interdependence within a larger moral and cosmic order. This notion moves beyond the atomistic individualism of liberal thought and instead affirms the self in relation to the whole.

Therefore, the future of human rights discourse must embrace epistemic pluralism. As noted in the opening of this work and echoed by scholars such as Upendra Baxi, the legitimacy and relevance of human rights depend on our ability to pluralise the originary narrative beyond the dominant Eurocentric imagination. If the discourse continues to be shaped solely by the assumptions, histories, and anxieties of Western liberal modernity, it risks becoming irrelevant to the vast majority of the world’s peoples and traditions.

Instead, a truly global human rights framework must open itself to the wisdom of diverse civilisational worldviews—those that conceptualise dignity, duty, autonomy, and interrelation differently, but no less meaningfully. Human rights will not be secured by enforcing a uniform standard, but by allowing for intercultural dialogue, ontological diversity, and shared ethical grounding. Rather than offering a cultural supplement, this work presents a normative intervention into how we conceptualise human rights in a fashion that challenges the moral centrality of dominant paradigms and advocates the ethical legitimacy of plural frameworks.

In this light, both the critique and the alternative offered here call for a shift—from epistemic dominance to epistemic dialogue, from *rights as entitlement* to *life as mutual responsibility*. Only then can human rights truly become universal—not by imposition, but by invitation.

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