Canadian Journal of Philosophy (2026), 56: e45, 1–17
doi:10.1017/can.2026.10122

SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

Kant and Political Activism

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Abstract
Immanuel Kant's account of justice is no enemy of potent political activism. Claims that seem to condemn any but the most bloodless and measured protest are better read as cautions against actions that forsake justice for violence, fraud, or whim, that spurn rather than elevate moral assessment and critique, that undermine public trust in the rule of law, and that advance individual lust for power or personal gain at the expense of justice. Most fundamentally, Kantian political activism is committed to vigorous social and political justice reforms respectful of the civic agency of persons and duly sensitive to worldly conditions.

Keywords: political activism; Kantian justice; civic respect; social and political justice reforms; rule of law; force; fraud

1. Introduction

As I intend it in what follows, political activism encompasses reform-oriented activity designed to further meaningful progress, under prevailing conditions, toward justice in laws, policies, institutions, and domestic and foreign relations more generally.[1] It is fair to say, I think, that the name Immanuel Kant and political activism, so understood, do not evidently walk hand in hand. Certainly, some Kantians argue that a Kant-based theory of "right" would support causes that often are the subject of such activism, for example, social welfare programming, or effective protections for freedom of thought and expression, or asylum for victims of foreign persecution. Indeed, interpreters often agree that Kant's work, well-read and unaltered, recommends significant support for aims like these (though equally often they disagree about why this is true and the level of support on offer).[2] Providing reasoning friendly to such aims is one thing though. Grounding the vigorous efforts that may be required to realize them is another. Even those most optimistic about what I will term a Kantian account of political justice as a source of support for the substance of such objectives may have reservations when it comes to method.[3] Because Kant expresses, often and in varied ways, a commitment to slow progress, gradual change, and no sudden or dramatic moves.

[1]I am grateful to the organizers of the May 2025 UIUC conference on "Kant and the isms," to fellow participants, to the *Pariah* manuscript group, to my RA, Manon de St. Amant, and to two anonymous reviewers for invaluable comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2]Whether we best understand Kant's account of "right" in domestic, international, and cosmopolitan contexts to expound a legal, political, or broadly moral theory is a matter of dispute. But that disagreement does not bear centrally on my discussion, and I do not take it up here. As noted below, I will understand Kant to offer an account of political justice.

[3]I will typically use the term "political justice" or "justice" to describe Kant's concern in relevant writings. These identify, explore, and apply criteria whose satisfaction would render laws, institutions, and social and political relationships justifiable to all because they duly address morally essential features, whether of persons or of states. In contemporary terms, these are broad

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In the realm of social and political progress, though, questions of method (how do we get there?) arguably are as important as those of substance (where should we go?). In matters that range from program design to implementation to advocacy, the "how" question is crucial. Our choices here affect the pace and breadth of change and our ultimate success in realizing social and political relationships that are not simply different, but morally better. If Kant's own account of political justice, or reasonable amendments to it, do (and must) embrace more-or-less anemic methods, we might properly deem it inadequate. Moreover, we might conclude, with justification, that the inadequacy is not merely a matter of workable application but signals a deep problem with Kantian theory itself.

For those of us who hold that Kant offers valuable (even invaluable) guidance in the realm of political justice, then, it is crucial to address the "how" question. It is incumbent on us, in other words, to critically consider the prospects for designing and implementing a Kantian political activism. Taking up that challenge, in what follows I explore prospects for such activism and argue for guiding standards, though not for detailed activist principles.[4] I begin just below with further explication and a pair of examples. These provide a better sense of the nature of political activism as I am conceiving it, as well as the range of contexts in which we might undertake it, and the methods for doing so. Against this clarificatory backdrop, I review some main reasons for skepticism that political activism—in an effective form—is a brand of response that Kant's work on justice (or even Kant-based extensions or amendments) could embrace.

With these concerns in mind, I turn next to several foundational elements of Kant's account of political justice broadly conceived. These provide reason to interpret earlier, guarded passages as more nuanced (and more courageous) than first seems warranted. Taken together, I argue, our discussions in fact suggest a practically compelling Kantian perspective. It is one that gives pride of place not to caution and temperateness but to due regard for persons as civic agents and to genuine progress toward laws, institutions, and policies realizing that regard on the ground. A return to examples—now an expanded set designed to illustrate both the strengths and boundaries of Kant's account of justice—drives home the point. Kantians may, and indeed should, endorse and advocate a form of vigorous political activism that is both sensitive to considerations of Kantian political justice (ones that first seem to enfeeble activist prospects) and likely to prove potent in the realm of practice.

2. Conceptual Clarifications and Practical Examples

2.a. Clarifications

Let us start by further clarifying the notion of political activism as it figures here. First, and again, political activism takes *reform* in the cause of political justice as its defining goal. It does not seek foremost to maintain a just, or reasonably just, status quo (though it may seek that outcome as a preliminary step). Neither is it concerned simply to identify and advocate for an understanding of what justice demands (though it almost certainly will depend on such advocacy and may well incorporate it). Importantly, while the activist's aim is not merely to maintain current practice or raise awareness or commitment, she need not advocate for laws, institutions, or policies that are wholly new. Where those in power have ignored the just laws on the books or the just institutions in place, a demand for implementation is one for reform. Political activism, to emphasize once more, aims most centrally at reform-oriented change.

The focus of this change, to expand further on our initial characterization, is the realization of *political justice*, and its locus will be the laws, policies, and social and political institutions that shape

questions of political justice. As this is not Kant's language though, in quotations I preserve the term "right." For a more thorough discussion of justice so conceived, see Rawls (2001).

[4]Such principles, which would be extensions of Kant's work rather than an interpretation of it, are a project for another day.

and govern human relations in domestic, international, and cosmopolitan contexts. Because our topic is *Kantian* political activism, the driving conception of political justice will be Kant's (or one interpretation of it). As I am conceiving it, justice in a Kantian frame covers a wide array of issues—among them, matters of basic liberty (freedom of expression and opportunity for political participation), assurances of due process and equal treatment, and adequate access to basic material goods and social supports as fundamental conditions of civic agency.

Political activism does not merely aim at change, however. It is itself *dynamic*. It may consist in lobbying efforts, protests, targeted campaigns for discrete legislative or institutional reforms, strikes, or boycotts, just to offer a handful of examples. Its methods, moreover, may be more or less disruptive in the immediate or longer term and more or less destructive—though the aim must be reform that ultimately supports just social and political relations in a reasonably stable environment, and the method in play must be reasonably designed to serve that aim. Finally, political activism as here conceived is *sensitive to prevailing conditions*. Political activists proper, we might say, are not idealists who eschew practical considerations or extant persons in the name of achieving quixotic ends no matter the cost. Further, because they aim at realizable ends, activists' methods typically are multiple, and their work occurs in many stages over time and at a variety of levels. For this reason, political activism can include instances, for example, of maintenance, advocacy, and education. Political activism does not reduce to any of these, but each may be an element of a larger activist program.

2.b. Opening examples

With these details and distinctions in place, we can appreciate—and benefit from—concrete examples. Chosen to illustrate the range of activist venues, methods, issues, and circumstances, neither those just below, nor even the larger set with which I ultimately conclude, can exhaust the possibilities. Taken together, they rather offer a sense of activism as expansive in concept and rich and varied in practice.

Aneurin Bevan. We most immediately conceive of political activism, I suspect, as undertaken on the street (or in another widely accessible public venue) and by those with limited power to effect change themselves (as opposed to influencing those who do). But activism as I have characterized it, and as we often speak of it, can be the work, for example, of public officials or private-sector policymakers operating as such. It may likewise take place in traditional governmental or organizational venues (offices, lawmaking chambers, etc.) and through relatively standard legal, policy-setting, and similar methods.

Aneurin Bevan and his legislative and administrative work fit this bill. Labour member of the House of Commons from 1929 to 1960, Minister of Housing and then of Health in the 1940s, and the recognized force behind the 1948 founding of Britain's National Health Service, Bevan sought social justice reforms through the skillful use of governmental processes and with a renowned gift (or an infamous aptitude) for political rhetoric. The latter was regularly present in speeches and editorials, both during official discussions and debates and in campaigns to inform the broader public and win support for the cause at hand or Bevan's agenda more generally. That agenda was nothing less than the fundamental reform of Britain's social welfare institutions, accompanied by swift, ground-level impacts. Though wedded to established legislative and administrative processes at least in spirit, moreover, Bevan often sought markedly to expand the boundaries of traditional practice and employed rhetoric deemed at least rude, and sometimes shockingly disrespectful, to his opponents. These methods helped render him a controversial figure—though one whose dynamic, reform-oriented, context-sensitive work arguably was dedicated to just ends that Kantians could embrace.[5] Were his methods, however, ones that committed Kantians could likewise endorse?

[5]On Bevan, see generally Foot (1963).

Barbara Johns. In 1951, more than 10 years before Martin Luther King, Jr. penned his letter from Birmingham jail, Barbara Johns, a student at Farmville, Virginia's racially segregated Robert Russa Moten High School, employed first deception and then violation of the state's truancy laws (and of the school superintendent's orders) to protest the egregious conditions that she and fellow black students endured. The overcrowded building housed double the students for which it was designed; expansion efforts consisted of tarpaper shacks inadequately heated with open stoves and posing imminent risk of fire; school buses were broken-down cast-offs. Parents' efforts to elicit funding for improvements from the all-white school board were repeatedly sidelined. A ruse allowed Johns to bring students and teachers to the school's auditorium where she proposed, with energy and detail, strike plans aimed at effective negotiation. The goal was the equality of educational access (in the form of buildings, materials, and transportation) promised but not provided under the then-current "separate but equal" interpretation of the US Constitution's 14th Amendment. Initial negotiations were unsuccessful, and the recalcitrant school board met later events with a building plan backed by questionable intentions.[6] Our concern, though, is not the effectiveness of dynamic, reform-based, justice-oriented work alive to the context at hand. It is rather, again, with Johns's method and with a Kant-based evaluation of it.[7]

2.c. Next steps

Before passing any Kant-based judgment, of course, we need a better grasp of grounds for assessment and of the activist methods at work. But a Kantian account of justified activist method that excludes either Bevan or Johns will likely seem problematically anemic indeed. With this concern at the fore, I turn next to initial grounds for worry and then to more hopeful fundamentals.

3. Grounds for Worry

3.a. Problematic passages and a globally passivist reading

Why think that Kant's theory of justice would be less than friendly—or outright unfriendly—to activism as we have now characterized and illustrated it? For those familiar with Kant's work, reasons come readily to mind. To chart the relevant terrain, I turn first to passages that seem at least to frustrate an account of Kantian political activism and then to Kantian grounds for accepting activism (as characterized above) in some forms though not in all. The latter inquiry provides us with a more nuanced grasp of Kant's position. Ultimately, it encourages us to a still-more-searching examination of his texts and to meaningful progress toward a vigorous activism with an evidently Kantian pedigree.

The first ground for doubt about prospects for Kantian political activism lies in Kant's famous (or infamous) position on revolution. Even when launched to counter evident and intransigent injustice on the part of state authorities, revolutionary activity, says Kant, is forbidden. As he expresses the view in *On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice:*

> [A]ny resistance to the supreme legislative power, any incitement to have the subjects' dissatisfaction become active, any insurrection that breaks out in rebellion, is the highest and most punishable crime within a commonwealth, because it destroys its foundation. And

[6] On Johns, see generally Smith (1964). The student strike ultimately sparked a lawsuit, one of the consolidated cases at issue in *Brown v. Board of Education.*

[7] There is no question that Kant himself expressed notoriously racist and sexist views, as well as reprehensible bigotry of other varieties. Whether his theories of morality and justice also embrace those is a matter of debate. Here, I take Kant's own bigotry to be inconsistent with his larger accounts of morality and justice and advance my inquiry into Kantian activism on that assumption. This does not mean, of course, that there is nothing more to be said on this count.

> this prohibition is *unconditional*, so that even if that power or its agent, the head of state, has gone so far as to violate the original contract and has thereby, according to the subjects' concept, forfeited the right to be legislator inasmuch as he has empowered the government to proceed quite violently (tyrannically), a subject is still not permitted any resistance by way of counteracting force. (Kant, 1996d, TP 8:299)[8]

On one reading, the prohibition Kant intends here is narrow. It applies only to acts of political violence (physical force threatening persons and material supports) aimed at removing the lawmaking authority in place. But Kant lists resistance to such authority and incitement of active dissatisfaction as among forbidden measures. Each of these may fall well short of what we might broadly term efforts at forceful regime change, and each might encompass at least some standard activist methods. So, this and similar remarks must at least give us pause.

We find a second ground for concern in the famous (or again infamous) essay *On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy*. Even faced with a would-be perpetrator bent on murdering an innocent, Kant argues, we may not resort to bald-faced untruth to protect the intended victim. Responding to Benjamin Constant's criticism that a duty to tell the truth "would, if taken unconditionally and singly, make any society impossible" (Kant, 1996c, VRML 8:425), Kant counters that society in fact is impossible without this principle. One is left to wonder what this means for activist reform efforts where deep injustice is afoot. Force and dishonesty are not the only productive tools in pursuit of such a cause. Still, depending on the circumstances, they might be the only (or most) effective ones available. This is especially likely where activists possess limited wealth or political power, and their opposition enjoys an abundance of each. As with violence, we also may wonder precisely what the parameters of truth and deception might be. Again, a broad prohibition might threaten to cripple or thwart warranted reforms.

Finally, consider Kant's equally famous (but less infamous) commitment to gradual progress, achieved in small increments and over time (potentially a great deal of time). *Toward perpetual peace* expresses this commitment most profoundly. Ongoing peace among persons and nations—the realization of justice (domestic, international, and cosmopolitan)—Kant emphasizes, is neither quickly nor easily attained. In apparent testimony to his sincerity, half the preliminary standards for achieving peace are ones rulers may delay if conditions are less than propitious for success.

The drivers (or better, the achievements that define success)—realization of a republican state, an international league of peace, and universal hospitality—are what we might term guiding ideals. We aim for their gradual realization over time and approach them as a kind of limit. Statespersons designing and implementing policies toward these aims should be vigilant for justice-threatening defects in domestic constitutions and international agreements. Their principle of action, though, is merely one of concern to determine how these relationships "can be improved as soon as possible and brought into conformity with natural right" (Kant, 1996e, ZeF 8:372). Underscoring the significance of slow, careful progress, Kant adds:

> [I]t would indeed be absurd to require that those defects be altered at once and violently; but it can be required of the one in power that he at least take to heart the maxim that such an alteration is necessary, in order to keep constantly approaching the end (of the best constitution in accordance with laws of right).

[8]All citations to Kant's works use the volume and page numbers of the German Academy Edition. Quotations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Abbreviations are as follows: "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (WA); *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU); *The Metaphysics of Morals* (MS); "On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy" (VRML); "On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice" (TP); *Toward Perpetual Peace* (ZeF).

(Kant, 1996e, ZeF 8:372). Kant's reassurances, moreover, are unlikely to comfort those dispirited by his emphasis on caution. How many committed activists are buoyed up, much less inspired to effective action, by assurance that the "great artist nature," who lets "concord arise by means of the discord between human beings even against their will," ultimately guarantees our success? (Kant, 1996e, ZeF 8:361).

It is no wonder non-Kantians—consequentialists, Marxists, and social justice advocates of varying stripes—see Kant and his contemporary followers as ineffectual where action is needed. It is likewise no wonder that even some of Kant's fans have thought his practical philosophy wanting where genuine commitment to justice evidently demands potent and decisive action.

3.b. Sanctioned activism and further concerns

Still, some instances of political activism as we have so far defined it are consistent with the cautions just detailed. Most obviously, many reformist legislative campaigns undertaken by sitting representatives, court challenges brought by persons with legal standing, and even constitutional reform efforts on the part of civil society members may fall within the bounds of permissible activist work on a Kantian model. Provided these involve neither force nor deception and employ vehicles for change that the legal system recognizes, or at least tolerates, it seems such activists might successfully navigate Kant's warnings and prohibitions. However pallid Kant's description, after all, his moral politician has a positive moral obligation to determine ways of advancing toward greater justice in legal systems, international agreements, and the like. This, perhaps timid, call to positive action in the name of justice, moreover, extends beyond the moral politician to the citizenry.

We see this, for instance, in Kant's brief essay on enlightenment. Most famously, *An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?* encourages individuals to speak in their scholarly capacities on a range of issues of public interest and urges states to respect a broad individual freedom to do so—all in the name of the enlightenment of individuals and society at large, and ultimately the justice of legal and institutional frameworks. Kant is quite explicit that questions concerning laws and governmental institutions are among those this freedom to speak and debate should cover. The head of state who best serves the cause of just governance, he emphasizes, is one who actively recognizes this freedom "even with respect to his legislation" and allows subjects "to make public use of their own reason and to publish to the world their own thoughts about a better way of formulating that legislation, even candid criticism of legislative measures already given" (Kant, 1996a, WA 8:41). Kant no doubt has in mind, of course, that those exercising this freedom will be educated male citizens of some means—especially academics, clergy, attorneys at law, and other professionals. But here at least he places no limit of this kind on the value of such freedom in the cause of justice or on prospects for individual enlightenment—for the developed capacity to grapple with an issue in discussion with others, to exercise one's own judgment in reaching a reasoned conclusion, and to act wisely on that conclusion.

As with other passages we have examined, though, there seems to be a hitch—perhaps several. First, although Kant advocates freedom of thought and expression, the same does not go for freedom of action. Just political arrangements are ones that recognize freedom to "argue as much as you will and about whatever you will" but also to "obey" (Kant, 1996a, WA 8:41)—presumably to debate and advocate vigorously but always within the bounds of existing laws and institutions. Yet legal and institutional strictures often have aims well beyond the prohibitions on violence or deceit that earlier passages advocated, perhaps further curtailing permissible activist prospects. (These may include notions of public safety, morals, or offense quite broadly defined, and might forbid, e.g., wearing clothing offensive to some or disrupting neighborhood quiet or residents' composure.) It takes little imagination, moreover, to see that the laws on the books or the institutions and agreements in place may also take a narrow view of thought and expression themselves. Erecting shanties or tents, holding a sit-in, a teach-in, a silent vigil, none of these fit Kant's scholarly address

model without some argument. Peaceful civil disobedience, meanwhile, seems evidently forbidden. What characterizes it as a means of reform-minded protest, after all, is the breaking of a legal standard in place, albeit on many accounts one that is unjust.

We may properly worry too about Kant's distinction, only implicit in our discussion thus far, between critical expression undertaken in one's private as opposed to one's public capacity. The second, which Kant endorses, I undertake in my own name, "as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers" (Kant, 1996a, WA 8:37). I engage in the first, by contrast, in the context of some "civil post or office," and this private use of reason, on Kant's account, may "often be very narrowly restricted without this particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment" (Kant, 1996a, WA 8:37). Depending on my position and especially on its notoriety, though, it may be difficult for me to separate myself from it such that others understand me to speak only as an individual. I thus may be cut off from participating in at least some reformist activity. Alternatively, and at least as bad, separated from my position, I may be deemed unworthy of notice or may lack effective means of communication. This could be a consequence of my natural limitations, of course. But in the world as we know it, many lack such communicative prospects because they lack training, name-recognition, or financial backing. In short, on the one hand, Kant's view may seem to threaten the effective activism of those who possess the power and advantages that promise success. On the other, it may seem to deprive those who lack these assets of the boost that some position, however modest, might afford.

3.c. Taking stock

Where do we stand, then, in our pursuit of a satisfactory Kantian political activism? On the side of limitations, we have determined that, for Kant, reform-minded methods must be neither deceptive nor violent, nor violative of extant laws, nor perhaps of professional standards even if otherwise peaceful and forthright. Further, when we undertake activism not encompassed by our institutional role (for example as a legislator or statesperson), we must do so in our personal rather than our professional or institutional capacities. Finally, pursued in keeping with these strictures, Kant apparently believes that we should expect activist efforts to make progress that is incremental in the present moment and that bears significant fruit in the shape of reform only gradually with the progress of time. Kantian political activism, it seems, is peaceful, honest, law-abiding, and measured. Kantian political activists, we might add, are perhaps best characterized as patient rule followers. Good examples are the dutiful legislator who adheres carefully to the norms of the chamber and the conscientious citizen who politely petitions her government or, on occasion, brings a studiously crafted lawsuit or offers a thoughtful speech in the public square after taking care to check on all relevant laws and professional norms. These limitations have their source, moreover, not notions of effectiveness or cost avoidance. Rather, they are requirements of justice (addressing, e.g., prospects for violence, disruption, or dishonesty). Kantian theory, in other words, only endorses political activism that is just both in its ends and its means and, it thus far appears, embraces standards for just means that are highly restrictive.

Neither of our earlier examples, importantly, conforms to the Kantian activist method so described or to the characterization of the model Kantian activist on offer. Bevan's aim, as we have understood it, was to recast Britain's laws and institutions in ways both swift and striking. "We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run down" (a castigation aimed at Labour colleagues he deemed too hesitant to effect needed reforms) famously reflects both the aim and Bevan's aggressive method of pursuit (Foot, 1974, 393). While his yet more biting (and perhaps more personal) remarks violated no laws on the books, moreover, they seem evidently to have run afoul of accepted methods of advocacy and debate within the norms of British governance. By way of example, his characterization of the "Tory Party" as "lower than vermin" (in a speech delivered as the NHS prepared to launch) met with vehement rebuke in Parliament, in the press, and on the street (Foot, 1974, 238). Johns's activist work, meanwhile, seems to depart yet further

from Kantian strictures as we have so far understood them. It incorporated not only dissembling and refusal to obey the orders of an established superior (the school superintendent), but violation of validly enacted state attendance laws. If Bevan and Johns are appropriate test cases, then the adequacy of political activism on a Kantian model seems seriously in doubt.

4. Beyond First Impressions

4.a. A plea for fundamentals

But wait. True as our discussion may be to Kant's texts, taken as a kind of smorgasbord, it is hardly one that boasts, at least at this juncture, a firm grounding in the fundamentals of his account of political justice. We have taken a claim here and a conclusion there but have not made a careful study of the bases for Kant's commitments in these various pieces. Nor have we sought to explain the relationship among them by appeal to such fundamentals. Kant, however, is a systematic philosopher who develops a complex account of just social and political relations. To grasp the account of political activism that his theoretical work commends (explicitly or implicitly), we must recognize and analyze the fundamentals rather than selectively surveying more intermediate comments and conclusions. Three fundamentals, particularly central to Kant's account of the civic agents who might engage in political activism and the nature of just relations among them, thus to the substance of such activism and the activist methods we undertake, will suffice for the present discussion. In the order in which we will consider them, they are: Kant's basic conceptual characterization of justice; his account of innate right (or, as I term it, of civic character) and of the appropriate decision-making perspective where matters of justice are concerned; and his delineation of the basic standards of justice that follow from these. Together, they support a fuller characterization of Kant's position on just civic relations toward renewed inquiry into a Kantian stance on political activism.

Justice in concept. Kant's introduction to the *Rechtslehre* (the fullest statement of his account of political justice) opens with a basic conceptual characterization of justice (or right). As he describes them, the requirements of justice are principled, general standards, addressed to agents capable of grasping and following them, and backed by coercive threat. Applicable to all, they also impose the same requirements on all. They seek to regulate the choices and actions of those to whom they apply, though not the grounds on which they act. Kant terms the most basic of these standards (in its imperative form) the Universal Law of Justice: "[S]o act externally that the free use of your choice can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law" (Kant, 1996b, MS 6:231).

Beyond these features of justice in concept, Kant's introductory discussion addresses three obligations of justice, ones he likewise deems elements of a shared understanding of the concept. These are duties to assert "one's worth as a human being in relation to others," not to wrong anyone, and, if one cannot avoid associating with others, to "enter into a society with them in which each can keep what is his" (Kant, 1996b, MS 6:236–37). In Kant's view, it is important to note, we specify the content of just laws and the shape of just institutions, and realize the requirements of justice, only within political communities—that is, within states, international relations among them, and cosmopolitan relations between states and their citizens and the citizens of foreign states.

Civic character. We might read Kant's discussion of the innate right of freedom—most fully expressed in the *Rechtslehre*—as delineating the potential claims that one agent may make against others in civic contexts or the violations against which each justly may defend herself. I think, though, that we best understand innate right (the only right belonging to each simply in virtue of humanity) to identify and briefly examine core features of those persons or agents who are potential subjects of just laws and part of the membership of just states and just international and cosmopolitan relationships. We properly conceive such persons as having the capacity and disposition to evaluate and shape their own lives (as *sui juris*); as possessed of equal political

standing (or innately equal); as responsible for, but only for, their own actions (or *beyond reproach*); and as beings for whom the opportunity not only to act freely, but to think and speak freely, is essential for development and for a life appropriate to their agency (see Kant, 1996b, MS 6:237–38). These "authorizations" are interrelated, suggesting an integrated account of what we can term civic agency. Describing equality as a kind of independence from others, for example, Kant relates it to being both one's "own master" and "beyond reproach." Understanding to what extent anyone can bind another, it seems—thus what equality of persons allows—also requires acknowledging that each is at once *sui juris* and properly deemed responsible only for chosen actions (Kant, 1996b, MS 6:237–238).

Civic perspective and foundational principles. The authorizations Kant references are apparently ones to view ourselves and others through this lens—as free, equal, *sui juris*, responsible agents—and to act accordingly. From this civic perspective, as Kant's earlier writings (e.g., *Theory and Practice* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*) likewise suggest, we view ourselves as joined with fellow civic agents in a project of together determining what justice demands in human circumstances and how justly to achieve its realization.[9]

Appeal to this perspective, Kant further makes clear, allows us to appreciate not rights themselves but "the various bases for rights" (Kant, 1996b, MS 6:238). Kant's description of those agents who are the subjects of justice, then, grounds basic principles of justice. These, in turn, guide the development of concrete legal standards appropriate to realizing it. Basic standards of justice would include those securing the expression of critical and reform-minded thought that an earlier Kant flagged as central to the development of enlightened citizens and just states. They presumably also encompass standards securing the opportunities for social engagement and creative experimentation that support the building and implementation of life-plans. Far from all that there is to innate freedom, the acknowledgment of freedom in this more conventional sense is likewise essential to recognize and treat persons as possessed of civic character. It provides, moreover, the foundation for familiar protections—for example, for physical security—associated with the prohibitions on force and fraud often deemed the central focus of justice as Kant understands it (see Kant, 1996b, MS 6:238).

Beyond grounding foundational principles, for example, of free expression and bodily integrity, the accounts of civic character and civic perspective provide the basis for others—ones Kant suggests are likewise part and parcel with the very concept of justice as he understands it. Among these are general standards of what we might term reciprocal assurance, mutual decision-making authority, normative determinacy, and followability. The first requires that obligations of political justice be mutual and that civic agents acknowledge this mutuality. The second demands that such obligations likewise recognize the authority of each to govern her own life and be a full and equal participant in any scheme for mutual governance. Each follows from the account of civic character just considered and also, Kant suggests, from the fundamental obligations to self and others that are elements of the very concept of justice. The third grounding standard requires that norms governing persons in a just state be sufficiently determinate to ensure that decisions can be made (whether by those to whom the laws apply or those applying them) based on principle rather than whim or bias. The fourth demands that standards of justice be followable by those whose actions they seek to guide and acknowledges the significance of, among others, epistemological, motivational, and psychological constraints on choice and action. Again, we can trace these requirements not only to the elements of civic character, viewed from the civic perspective, but to the concept of justice as Kant understands it.

[9]Consider, for example, Kant's analysis of the public will that grounds just legislation as combining freedom, equality, and "the *unity* of the will of *all*" (Kant, 1996d, TP 8:295, italics original) and the *Critique of Judgment*'s characterization of the sensus communis, one paralleling and arguably illuminating his political philosophy (Kant, 2013, KU 5:294).

Just civic relations. What can we take from these justice basics that may inform our inquiry into a Kantian approach to political activism? Relevant insights, I suggest, include the following:

1) Just human relations are standard-governed, not regulated by force, deceptive tactics or practices, or whim (whether self-serving or simply capricious);
2) Standards of justice—including the laws and agreements that give voice and content to justice on the ground—must apply and apply equally to all within the class of persons they address and must be general (the class cannot be defined in terms of named individuals);
3) These standards and official interpretations of them must be public, so that those to whom they apply can use them as guides to action, assert them on behalf of others or themselves, or challenge their legitimacy;
4) They must be standards that respect each as a self-regarding agent, thus ones that each could accept, singly and as a set, from the standpoint of considered and unbiased judgment as harmonizing with status as a civic agent;
5) Both those charged with applying these standards and those charged with compliance must be committed, at least in practice, to adhering to them wherever they are applicable;
6) Those to whom standards apply must be justified in concluding that others in general are so committed.[10]

4.b. Problematic passages again

With this foundational analysis in place, let us return to the passages that seemed to raise issues for potent political activism in a Kantian vein. The first, recall, not only announces an apparently unbending prohibition on violent revolution but also on resistance to legislative authority and on incitements to active dissatisfaction. The ground for this position, again, is concern to preserve the very foundation of the state (Kant, 1996d, TP 8:299). The second, places the same prohibition on dishonesty as a method of resistance, and presumably of reform efforts more generally, that passages on political violence place on the use of force (Kant, 1996c, VRML 8:425). A third position advocates commitment to reform where necessary, but apparently also to a progress that is gradual, slow, no matter it would seem the deep injustice afoot and its bearing on the lives and prospects of living, breathing civic agents (see, e.g., Kant, 1996e, ZeF 8:372). Finally, and despite seeming promise for a more vigorous activism, even the plug for courageous public criticism in the cause of enlightenment is worryingly (perhaps self-destructively) tempered. What are we to make of its focus on expression rather than action, its fixation on obedience to the laws on the books and the institutional practices in place, and its insistence on voicing disagreement "as a scholar" before the public—a demand that might hobble critics, whether known and relatively powerful or unknown and of limited means (see Kant, 1996a, WA 8:37).

Taking these worries in order, and with an eye to theory basics, note first the requirement, our first, that standards of justice be principled and thus distinct from the rule of force, deception, or whim. This is perhaps the most fundamental feature distinguishing a regime of justice as Kant conceives it. It derives both from the conceptual account he offers and the duties to self and others that it encompasses, and from the substantive characterization of civic agency that grounds, among others, principles of mutual decision-making authority, bodily integrity, and due process. When Kant references resistance, incitement, and insurrection that breaks out in rebellion as acts that *destroy the foundation* of the commonwealth, I suggest, it is reasonable to understand his concern, importantly, to be with this fundamental distinction between the principled rule of justice and the arbitrary one of force, fraud, and impulse. It appears further to emphasize that such principled rule

[10]In this, Kant's account of justice bears more than passing similarity to Rawls's. See Rawls (1999).

must be action-guiding and open to civic agents' considered assessment and adoption, as well as to their critical challenge.[11]

If the roots of Kant's concern lie here, though, then at least regarding political activism there are distinctions to be made. Because the Kantian activist, as we are conceiving her, resists and incites aiming to reform structures in place, toward greater social justice, through active measures sensitive to conditions on the ground. As a true Kantian activist, moreover, she must be committed to justice not only as an end, but as a means-shaping requirement. Her active methods may be forceful—designed to garner attention, spark concern, goad conscience, pierce attitudes of arrogant condescension and self-focus. Her aim, though, is not the abandonment of principle or of what is required for civic agents' considered assessment. It is, instead, adherence to and support for each. If aptly shaped—more on this in the discussion of examples below—such activism threatens neither a domestic commonwealth nor international or cosmopolitan relations. It is rather an ally in their greater realization.[12]

And what of the prohibition on lying, an action that likewise threatens the very existence of just political relations in Kant's view? Here, we should note not only that just Kantian relations rest on principled standards and institutions that are guides to action and products of reasoned assessment. This fact and the standards themselves must be recognized by (or readily accessible to) members of the civic community. Both members and officials, meanwhile, are charged with compliance and can be generally counted on to fulfill that charge, and these facts too must be readily discernible by community members at large. The latter features of just relations and regimes have their roots most evidently in the duties to self and others that are elements of justice in concept and in the conception of civic agents as equal and responsible. These foundational aspects of Kantian justice ground, among others, the standard of reciprocal assurance and those of equal treatment, and (it is reasonable to conclude from Kant's later discussions) of fair and public judicial process. The first (the duties) require us to assert our humanity, to shape our actions to honor the humanity of others, and to fulfill these joint obligations by joining in a community that honors both. The second (the features of civic agency) ground standards of justice and attendant institutions and policies that acknowledge equal standing within the political community and the responsibility of each to fulfill these, as well as the demand that each be accurately recognized as having succeeded or failed in this endeavor. In each case, joint responsibilities to self and others demand reasonable assurance that fulfillment rests on sure footing.

But again, if the heart of Kant's concern is, as we have reason to believe, one of assurance or trust, together with ongoing commitment to civic agents' assessment, critique, and reasoned endorsement, our Kantian activist can not only meet the challenge but arguably be part of the justice-supporting program. Even if her methods include some element of deception—more on this too in the examples below—her commitment is to bolster justice through just means sensitive to surrounding conditions. Her methods may skirt or outright violate some rules in place, but if they are apt, they will also be a testament to her trustworthiness and her support for reasoned endorsement and critique, each essential to just governance, making public her commitment to justice and evidencing the fact that others reasonably can count on her to serve it.[13]

[11]Thanks to Fred Rauscher for urging me to emphasize this point.

[12]At issue in the current discussion, it is worth noting, is not whether Kant's theory requires justice in ends as well as in means. It is what constitutes just means. The argument here is that means that are forceful, but principled, can satisfy that requirement in the activist context as we initially characterized it. What might be true for the revolutionary is a separate question not here at issue.

[13]The suggestion is not that this is the only concern of Kant's many discussions of lying but that it is the chief concern where political justice is at issue. For further argument on this point, see Holtman (2025). For an alternative interpretation of Kant's essay on lying as an element of Kant's political philosophy, see, for example, Varden (2010). Shapiro (2006) offers an interpretation of the moral prohibition on lying that likewise recognizes less rigoristic prospects.

As for the moral politician, pallidly committed to gradually approaching greater justice, these demands for commitment and actions that are testimony to it (together with the crucial distinction between justice and force, deception, or whim) seem again to explain Kant's characterization. Kant's aim, after all, is importantly to mark the difference between this moral politician and the political moralist with his self-serving maxims of *fac et excusa* (take action, then make excuses), *si fecisti, nega* (if you do wrong, deny it), and *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) (see Kant, 1996e, ZeF 8:374–375). Although the progress of justice may often be slower than we would like, Kant's warning is not to make certain to proceed with plodding caution. It is to refuse to resort, in frustration, to unjust quick fixes or, especially, to what serves to increase one's own power and prestige under pretense of public commitment. This is a warranted exhortation for persons in general, warped wood that we are. It is not one, though, that must halt the activist in her tracks.

The foregoing also offers us insight into a reasonable Kantian view on sanctioned modes of expression and our earlier concerns regarding obedience. What counts here, again, are assurances that methods will not devolve into force, fraud, and caprice, and that disobedience will not warrant lack of trust or undermine reasoned assessment, endorsement, and critique. Many modes of expression, including speech-free actions, are compatible with such limits. As for matters of association with one's position, forthright statements should suffice on the one hand and a biography that supports one's personal commitment on the other. Though again more needs to be said, putting the facts before one's audience for full evaluation is consistent with the demand that laws, rules, and institutions take due account of civic character, and that civic agents may exercise the opportunities for free expression that follow from them as a matter of principle on Kant's account.

5. Practical Examples Reexamined and Expanded

5.a. Bevan and Johns again

With this revised and enriched conception of reform-oriented standards of Kantian justice now in mind, consider our earlier examples again. Aneurin Bevan, recall, seemed to transgress Kantian standards through aggressive pursuit of precipitous social reform. An apparently easy case at first blush—an elected legislator and minister engaged in his appointed tasks—Bevan ran afoul, it earlier seemed, of the call for gradual, context-sensitive reform efforts and of the warning that sanctioned freedom of expression must honor the limits of both laws and professional norms.

Bevan's earlier-noted commitment to working within Parliament's legislative processes goes some way toward answering these criticisms. But even on our revised reading, we may worry that his goading comments were inconsistent, from a Kantian perspective, with commitment to just means as well as just ends under the conditions at hand, that he worked through self-interested quick-fixes like those of the political moralist, and that his willingness to flout norms of respectful discourse risked undermining the shared sense of trustworthiness required for joint lawmaking efforts well-informed, duly considerate, and in the cause of justice.

Precisely what was true of Bevan the historical figure is bound to be controversial. For our illustrative purposes, though, what matters is to mark features plausibly attributed to Bevan's practice and bearing on reasonable Kant-based assessment of activism more generally. For Bevan, such features were three. First, his institutional task (both as MP and later as a minister within the Labour government) was, in Bevan's view, one of advocacy. For a political leader who hailed from and represented one of the poorest districts in the country (the mining town of Ebbw Vale in southern Wales), this demanded "mak[ing] articulate the wants, the frustrations and the aspirations of the masses" (Foot, 1963, 97). Second, it required the joint effort with those of like commitment that the Labour Party, as he saw it, represented and made possible. This meant ongoing but always critically minded and critically outspoken support for the movement despite the errors of individuals within it (Foot, 1963, 98). Last, but hardly least important, it demanded that harsh criticism of

state laws, institutions, and fellow legislators and officials—offered in language with which constituents could identify—be accompanied by a readiness to hear, appreciate, negotiate, and craft policy and legislation with the opposition (whether in one's own party or elsewhere) (see, e.g., Foot, 1974, 389).

With these further details in evidence, and our more nuanced account of Kantian political activism expressed and detailed, there is every reason to see Bevan (as we have described him) as a model adherent. His sometimes-rude language and ironic and biting criticisms indeed were harsh. Their aim, however, was not merely to prompt legislative action *for* his constituents. It was to make them party to that pursuit and participants in it. The language he chose (in speeches, debates, and editorial pieces) thus sought to express constituents' felt needs and justified resentments in terms they could grasp and share. His, then, was a style of representation and legislative action dedicated both to recognizing and serving deep and legitimate civic interests and to demonstrating and realizing commitment to mutual governance in the form of shared assessment and critique of public standards. It sought to shape both ends and means in the cause of basic essentials of Kantian justice. Bevan further joined his harsh political critiques with sure signs of a resolve to work with both party and opposition toward just and joint governance. His demonstrated readiness for this kind of shared political labor belied charges of self-serving opportunism or of the lack of due regard for fellow persons or just governing processes that might justifiably undermine others' trust. Aggressive advocacy and blunt or biting oratory, in short, were, on Bevan's analysis, the tools of justice suited to the conditions at hand. Assuming the facts as we have presented them, they are ones a committed Kantian activist can, and indeed should, embrace.

We concluded earlier, and more decisively than in Bevan's case, that anyone following Kant's lead would reject Barbara Johns's activism as a failure of justice. She was, after all, a liar who refused to obey the orders of an established superior and violated valid state laws in the bargain. As with Bevan, though, our revised textual analysis suggests a quite different conclusion. Johns' ruse, we now can recognize, was no enemy either to principled governance and the reasoned assessment of mutually regarded civic agents nor to the publicity of standards and the reasonable assumption of shared commitment that ground the shared and warranted sense of trust that Kant champions in the essay on lying. It was rather a means of gathering the unjustly subjugated to affirm their civic agency, encourage their enlightenment, and call on them to pursue vigorous means to move those in power to act in keeping with their responsibilities as civic agents and public officials. Understood in the full (and publicly available) context in which it was undertaken, Johns's small deception in fact was testimony to her commitment to political justice in a Kantian vein. Meanwhile, the continued student strike—in violation of school authority and of the laws on the books—was no abandonment of justice for the rule of force, fraud, or whim. A forceful means (though not an act of force), it was (again) designed and publicly advertised as an instrument to prompt reasoned negotiation toward both justice and legal compliance with as-then-articulated Constitutional standards.

What Kant the person would say, of course, is up for grabs. But what the theory, well-interpreted, supports is, I think, quite clear. When we view Johns's activism from the perspective of fundamentals, we find (as with Bevan) none of the threats that provoke Kant's scattered anti-activist passages. We find instead regard for Kantian justice in concept and substance, both in Johns's aim and in her method.

5.b. Examples expanded

That Kantianism can condone (perhaps recommend) the political activism of a Bevan or a Johns may seem a small victory though. Granted, critics might concede, the theory's failings are less significant than many have imagined. But this is far from morally adequate, and very far from the foundational account of justified Kantian activism promised at the start.

Our discussion, I think, in fact supports a richer and more versatile Kantian account than is evident so far. We can appreciate this more readily, though, by considering methods more

controversial than either Bevan's or Johns's and political contexts that extend beyond the boundaries of a single state and relatively uncomplicated relationships of domestic citizenship. Two final examples—involving more controversial activist methods and (in one case) a complex international context—suggest the reach of Kantian activism but also, and importantly, its limits. Together with those already on offer, they ground a foundational account of potent political activism in a Kantian vein.

Emmeline Pankhurst. If there is space in a Kantian framework for aggressive methods, disparaging words, dishonesty, and rule-breaking, is there also room for activism that includes, as it controversially but not uncommonly can, damage or destruction to physical objects or spaces, at least in some forms and within certain contexts? Here, the answer must be more cautious and must consider, too, the important distinction between objects and persons. Caution is necessary, in part, because we often rightly understand such action as a resort to force rather than an application of principle. Relatedly, it may be difficult—for reasons that go beyond regard for action-guiding principle—to square such methods with respect for persons as civic agents. For Kant we know (as for any political theorist worth his salt), we properly understand these agents not only as free, equal, *sui juris*, and responsible fellow society members. They are embodied beings possessed of physical and psychological features and capacities essential to that agency. Regard for Kantian civic character must be regard for the possibilities and vulnerabilities of beings so understood, and physically destructive action frequently puts these at risk.

Speaking on the heels of her release from prison for just such "militant" activism, British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst suggests both the justice-relevant dangers of a resort to destructive action and its justice-relevant strengths. Human life, including physical safety, could never for her be an activist target. "[E]ven from the point of view of public policy," she maintains, "militancy affecting the security of human life would be out of place" (Pankhurst, 1912). The same is not true of security in property though. In their disregard for women's "liberty" and their "dignity and welfare," says Pankhurst, governments evidence a greater concern for property than for human life. While states concede the justice of suffragists' cause, moreover, they nevertheless require proof that activists are "earnest in their demands" (Pankhurst, 1912). Damage to property in the name of human liberty, dignity, and welfare, she suggests, is one means of establishing sincerity of commitment. It is also one of subduing, in those whose attention and support activists seek, very human tendencies to ignore and perpetuate injustice.

We thus can understand Pankhurst to share significant ground with Kant as we have characterized him. This includes commitment to a shared understanding of civic agency—both in general concept and in broad physical and psychological import. Likewise shared is the fundamental place of respect for that agency in determinations of justice. Just laws, policies, and institutions must give regard to each element of agency and must not place other concerns, for example, for accumulation and protection of property, ahead of these. Indeed, property, one might understand Pankhurst to say with Kant, is of concern in the substance and design of just standards only insofar as it is central to demonstrating and effectuating that regard. Pankhurst is also alert to the sometime need to prick conscience, or pierce self-importance or self-interest, so as to assert the equal civic agency of those forgotten or ignored. Guilty of some of these failings himself, Kant too is nevertheless alert to them, not least, for example, in his condemnation of the political moralist's maxims. And here, as Pankhurst sees, the damage or destruction of property, well aimed and well designed, may be a powerful means. If Kantian theory can share Pankhurst's broad standards and concerns of justice, and her emphasis on ground-level attention to common human failings, can it also share her endorsement of a "militant" activism that embraces property damage as a tool to awaken those perpetrating or tolerating injustice to the need for reform?

The smashing of windows in well-heeled shops on well-heeled streets for which Pankhurst was arrested, and in which she intended again to engage, was an instance of dynamic, reform-oriented activism that she deemed warranted and indeed just in both means and ends under the circumstances at hand. But it is far from certain that its message against placing self-interest, wealth, and

power over civic agency in fact was clear or well-aimed. Such destruction may easily seem to attack society members in their individual capacities rather than to challenge the laws, policies, and institutions that permit, endorse, and give voice to unjust actions and attitudes. Readily mistaken for (or perhaps in the moment reduced to) ill-targeted rage, these acts may convey neither a principled commitment to just standards, as opposed to force or whim, nor a reliable resolve to adhere to standards duly and equally respectful of the civic agency of each in the pursuit of greater justice. Leaving onlookers uncertain about motives and future acts, this kind of imprecisely targeted attack may signal that the activist is unworthy of trust and justifiably instill fear. So far from encouraging thoughtful mutual progress toward context-sensitive social reform, moreover, it may sow confusion (or hostility) regarding the demands of justice on the ground.

The American Indian Movement. Our takeaway from Pankhurst is not that damage to objects and spaces—like significant injury to persons—can never play a part in genuinely Kantian political activism. Where such damage is evidently designed publicly to encourage principled reforms toward greater justice, and to support rather than undermine assumptions of shared commitment to justice and its pursuit, it may for the Kantian too be an appropriate activist method. That damage neither targets nor appears to target a private individual, as opposed to a legal or institutional standard or general practice, or the authority responsible for these, will be one criterion in designing or identifying justified Kantian activism of this stripe. Clear signs that challenges to laws, policies, practices, or authorities indeed aim at just reform (not irreparable institutional damage or the venting of anger without more) will be others. While the methods Pankhurst endorses will not carry the day despite her apparent agreement with Kant on other matters, those providing the assurances just mentioned well may do so.

Consider finally, then, the American Indian Movement (AIM) and its occupation (in 1972) of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington, DC.[14] Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1968, AIM sought, *inter alia*, Presidential and Congressional action to address past violations of US treaties with Native American tribes as sovereign nations, the renewal of federal authority to enter into additional treaties, the restoration of Indian land, water, and natural resource rights, and extensive funding and support for community development efforts around health, housing, employment, and education for tribal communities (Trail of Broken Treaties, 1972). Having developed and shared a 20-point proposal to ground negotiations with federal officials, over 1,000 activists drove across the United States (in four caravans) for pre-arranged meetings. When they arrived in the capital to find engagements cancelled and promises of food and housing withdrawn, AIM members occupied the BIA, employing the building as both shelter and the headquarters for their continued pursuit of negotiation and reform (A Good Day to Die, 2013). The building and its offices, after all, existed to foster the very relations and support members sought and housed a wealth of files and documents relevant to their activist goals.

AIM's refusal to permit entry to agency higher-ups and employees, as well as demands for rescheduled negotiating meetings, appropriation of documents regarding broken treaties and unmet US obligations, and affirmations of the independent sovereign status of Indian nations and the dual citizenship of their people, characterized the BIA takeover. So too did moderate damage to the property and brief but unrealized portents of more violent action (A Good Day to Die, 2013). The takeover, in short, itself became an element of AIM's political activism. It thus added features of lawbreaking and destructive force to what members originally had intended as a peaceful effort to undertake reformed relations between nations in the cause of justice.

Significantly for our purposes, this change in plan and method responded to evidence that federal officials neither viewed AIM members as fellow citizens of the United States, or of the world more broadly, nor understood Indian nations as independent states due to the kind of regard that Kant embraces or the good faith dealings that such regard demands. Successful activism toward just

[14]Thanks to Andrea Sullivan-Clarke for wisely suggesting this example.

reforms, the movement's members concluded, would require a level of consciousness raising and self-respecting advocacy not previously anticipated. The BIA occupation arguably was well (if hastily) designed to serve these goals. The building was no random structure, but one symbolizing both the appropriate status of Indian nations and their people and the US government's failure to honor these. That material damage was limited, and more serious violence was condemned and prevented by activists themselves, further evidenced a genuine focus on just aims and just (though forceful) means. Activists' decision to appropriate documents central to reform efforts did the same, as did the clear 20-point position paper that publicly announced the movement's ongoing and ultimate objectives in the name of due regard for fellow civic agents and sovereign nations.

The takeover and surrounding actions were an indication neither that activists were unworthy of others' trust nor of destructive intentions or personal animus counter to just reforms. Instead, they evidenced AIM's commitment to just norms, domestic and international, its status as a representative not only of independent nations and their people as civic agents but of the people as domestic US citizens, and readiness to view the United States and its officials and citizens on these terms as well. Importantly, nothing in the Kantian playbook demands purity of action or motivation at every moment. That there was incidental, if not insubstantial, material damage as well as the sometime threat of unjustified violence, moreover, does not by itself remove the takeover from the realm of justified Kantian activism as we have so far understood it. The standards to which we have appealed throughout are more or less foundational elements of Kant's account of political justice, ones we must put to work in the messy world as we know it. In that world, as Kant's texts often attest, there will be complexities to address and judgments to be made. The question is not whether AIM undertook model activism but whether it adhered to broad standards of Kantian political justice in the context at hand. There is a strong argument that the movement did precisely this.

6. Conclusion

Indications to the contrary, I have argued, Kant's account of political justice is no enemy of potent political activism. Claims that may first seem to condemn any but the most bloodless, polite, and measured protest are better read as cautions against actions that forsake justice for violence, fraud, or whim, that spurn rather than elevate moral assessment and critique, that sow a justifiable sense of public distrust in fellow civic agents and the rule of law, and that advance individual lust for power or personal gain at the expense of justice. The political activism that we might term Kantian (recognizing that what the theory supports its author might question), I have further claimed, is committed to vigorous efforts in the cause of social and political reforms toward greater justice and through just means, always with due sensitivity to conditions in play on the ground. Such efforts may be forceful; they may include deceptive elements; they may involve violations of extant laws, or institutional rules, or authoritative orders; they may involve a range of expressive acts (not mere scholarly words); and they may sometimes be destructive of things but never of persons.[15]

What I have offered, again, is not a precise activist canon setting forth timeless Kantian methods but instead a set of broad standards that each must seek to interpret in good faith and in conversation with others likewise committed. We might profitably seek to develop Kant-based standards tailored more precisely to certain activist aims and conditions. But my concern here has been to show that robust activism is not only consistent with Kant's account of political justice but a vehicle good Kantians should embrace. Most fundamentally, and in broad strokes, Kantian activists must, from a shared civic perspective and on reasonable, context-sensitive interpretation,

[15]Thus, Kantian political activism does not require "clean hands" as some understand this expression (see, e.g., Walzer, 1973). But neither does it deem every ground-level departure from rule-adherence, honesty, and the like violative of just standards. Provided activists adhere to demands of civic respect as we have developed them, their hands are clean, and their methods and aims in harmony with justice.

demonstrate regard for persons as possessed of civic character and for the essential principles that follow from the concept of justice as Kant's theory presents it. We might term the political activism to which these together give rise activism as civic respect.

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Cite this article: Holtman, S. W. 2026. Kant and Political Activism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 56: e45, 1–17, doi:10.1017/can.2026.10122