

Epicurus vs Kant and Modern Idealism - Introduction

Post by “Cassius” of March 19, 2026 at 9:02 AM

This thread and its timing was prompted in part by the following post which I saw recently on Twitter/X. I am not posting to approve or disapprove of the writer of the post or the person whose death is being referenced - Ari Larijani, an Iranian military leader. This thread should not be diverted into an assessment of Larijani, the situation in the Middle East, or any other political theme.

But the post is relevant because I was shocked to see that Larijani was apparently a strong admirer of Kant and his categorical imperative. The post states that Larijani *authored multiple works on Kant's philosophy*. For those who in opposition to Muller don't like Larijani, I am not trying to imply that Kant should be viewed negatively on a "guilt by association" basis. I post this not to comment on Larijani but to provide a stark example of how Kantian idealism is being explicitly incorporated in consideration of key practical events in the world today.

Quote

[Blunt @Shinamuller 12h](#)

As an avid reader of Immanuel Kant during my teenage years, I disciplined myself morally in ways that external chaos could never achieve. Kant's categorical imperative became my inner compass: act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. This pure reason-based ethics grounded me, turning personal turmoil into a commitment to principles that transcend circumstances.

The loss of Ali Larijani, a true Kantian thinker who authored multiple works on Kant's philosophy, including explorations of mathematical method, metaphysics, and synthetic a priori judgments in his thought, feels profoundly personal to me. Here was a man who confronted what he saw as a materialist, genocidal empire on high moral ground, much like Kant's insistence on treating humanity always as an end in itself, never merely as a means. His death is not just a political event; it is a blow to that rare fusion of philosophical rigor and principled action.

The United States, through its Rewards for Justice program, placed a bounty of up to \$10 million on Larijani's head (along with other senior Iranian officials, including Mojtaba Khamenei) just days before his reported killing in an Israeli strike. This act reduces a human being, regardless of political role, to a price tag, a means to an end in geopolitical maneuvering. If this practice were to become a universal principle, no head

of state would ever be safe again. Imagine Donald Trump, or any leader, subject to the same logic: bounties issued by adversaries, turning political opposition into licensed assassination markets. The world would descend into a state where dignity evaporates, reason is subordinated to power, and perpetual insecurity reigns, precisely the antithesis of Kant's vision of a kingdom of ends, where rational beings coexist under laws they give themselves. Larijani, this committed Kantian (Syed Kantian, as some might say), left a piercing question for the Muslim world in his final public message before his martyrdom: Which side are you on? He framed the confrontation as one between America/Israel on one side and Muslim Iran/forces of resistance on the other, urging Islamic nations to unite rather than remain silent or complicit. He emphasized that true security, progress, and independence come not from narrow nationalism but from solidarity across the Ummah, echoing a bloc-like unity similar to the European Union.

Today's EU stands, in many ways, on Kant's anti-nationalist philosophy. Kant viewed nationalism as outdated, a relic of particularism that must yield to cosmopolitan right and perpetual peace through federations of free states. Larijani, in his last message, similarly rejected narrow nationalism for Iran or the Muslim world, advocating instead for a collective strength akin to a supranational bloc that could guarantee dignity and autonomy for all, much like Kant's ideal of a federation transcending sovereign rivalries. I am in no position to write a full obituary for him yet; the shock is still too raw, the grief too immediate. But I will write one, in time. For now, this is simply an acknowledgment: a Kantian light has dimmed, yet the imperative he lived by, and that he helped instill in me, remains undimmed. We must will a world where such principles prevail, not bounties and eliminations.

Also, in preparing the initial post, I ran AI searches to validate the key points being made. This is a discussion forum and discussion of the points made in the first post are welcome. The issues revolve around the following points, in this case analyzed by Grok:

Outline Of Areas Of Difference Between Epicurus and Kantian Modern Idealism

Core Goal of Life / Highest Good

- Epicurus (Hedonist / Egoistic eudaimonism):
The ultimate goal is happiness (eudaimonia), defined as a pleasant, undisturbed life. Pleasure is the highest intrinsic good; pain the only intrinsic evil. He prioritizes stable, long-term pleasures — freedom from bodily pain (aponia) and mental disturbance (ataraxia) — through moderation, satisfying natural/necessary desires, friendship, and simple living over luxury or excess.

- Kant (Deontological rationalism):

The highest good (in terms of moral worth) is a good will — acting purely from duty for duty's sake, independent of inclinations, pleasure, or consequences. Happiness has value but no moral worth unless it flows from virtue/moral action. The good life is one guided by autonomous reason following the moral law.

Basis of Morality

- Epicurus:

Morality is instrumental/prudential. Rules like justice, honesty, and non-harm promote personal (and communal) pleasure/minimization of pain reliably. There's no absolute, categorical duty detached from consequences — ethical behavior is wise self-interest in a social contract that benefits everyone involved.

- Kant:

Morality is absolute, a priori, and derived from pure reason via the Categorical Imperative:

- Act only on maxims you can will as universal laws.
 - Treat rational beings always as ends in themselves, never merely as means.
- Empirical factors (pleasure/pain, consequences) play no role in determining rightness — only reason does.

Role of Pleasure & Desire

- Epicurus: Pleasure is the starting point, criterion, and end of ethics. Manage desires rationally: pursue natural/necessary ones, enjoy natural/non-necessary ones moderately, avoid vain ones.
- Kant: Inclinations (including desire for pleasure) are heteronomous and can undermine moral motivation. Actions done for pleasure or inclination lack moral value. True morality requires acting from respect for the law despite inclinations.

Differences / Incompatibility (fundamental and deep):

- They are largely incompatible at the core level. Epicurus is consequentialist/hedonist (morality serves happiness as the sole intrinsic good), while Kant is strictly deontological (morality is independent of happiness; happiness can even follow virtue but never grounds it).
- Kant explicitly critiques Epicurean ethics as "self-love" or "selfishness" because it makes morality hypothetical/conditional on empirical pleasure — something he sees as incapable of producing truly universal, necessary moral laws.
- Epicurus would view Kant's duty-based system as unnecessarily austere and disconnected from human nature (why ignore pleasure/pain when they're the natural guides?).

- No hybrid is straightforward: You can't fully merge them without undermining one or the other. A "Kantian Epicurean" might try to argue that duty aligns with long-term happiness, but that risks reducing Kant to hypothetical imperatives (which he rejects). Conversely, making Epicurean pleasure secondary to duty would betray Epicurus's hedonism.
- In essence: Epicurus asks, "What rationally maximizes a pleasant, secure life?" Kant asks, "What does pure reason demand of any rational being?" They point in different directions — one naturalistic and empirical, the other rationalist and absolute — so their views are mostly incompatible, though with intriguing points of overlap in promoting rational tranquility and ethical consistency.