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Normative Foundations of Human Rights Obligations in International Legal Discourse

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Abstract

Human rights obligations constitute a fundamental component of contemporary international law, yet their normative foundations remain the subject of ongoing theoretical and legal debate. This study aims to examine the normative foundations of human rights obligations in international legal discourse and to develop an integrated understanding of the relationship between moral principles, legal authority, and state responsibility. The study employed a qualitative research design using a Library Research approach. Data were collected from scholarly journal articles, academic books, international legal instruments, and other reputable academic sources addressing human rights, legal theory, and international law. The collected literature was analyzed through Thematic Analysis to identify recurring concepts, theoretical perspectives, and normative patterns. The findings reveal that human dignity functions as the primary source of normative legitimacy, while international legal frameworks provide the legal authority that transforms moral claims into binding obligations. The study further identifies state responsibility, particularly through the respect-protect-fulfil framework, as the principal mechanism for implementing human rights obligations. In addition, contemporary developments in global governance demonstrate the expanding relevance of human rights obligations beyond traditional state-centered contexts. The study concludes that human rights obligations are best understood as a multidimensional normative structure emerging from the interaction between moral principles, legal norms, and institutional mechanisms. This study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated analytical framework for understanding the foundations and evolution of human rights obligations within contemporary international legal discourse.

Keywords: International Law; Human Rights; Human Dignity; State Responsibility; Legal Legitimacy



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1. Introduction

Human rights constitute one of the most important normative foundations of contemporary international law. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, international human rights law has developed into a comprehensive legal framework that imposes obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfil fundamental rights and freedoms (United Nations, 1948). According to Donnelly (2013), human rights provide universal standards for evaluating state conduct and promoting human dignity. The growing complexity of global issues, including armed conflicts, migration, climate change, technological transformation, and public health emergencies, has intensified debates concerning the nature and legitimacy of human rights obligations. Consequently, understanding the normative foundations of these obligations remains essential for both international legal theory and practice.

Theoretical discussions concerning human rights obligations are primarily shaped by natural law theory, legal positivism, and human dignity theory. Griffin (2008) argues that human rights derive from the inherent dignity and normative agency of individuals, whereas Besson (2020) emphasizes the role of legal norms, treaties, and institutional recognition in establishing binding obligations. Similarly, Alston & Goodman (2013) contend that contemporary human rights law reflects an interaction between moral principles and legal commitments. These perspectives demonstrate that human rights obligations are not merely legal requirements but also normative constructs grounded in broader philosophical and ethical considerations.

Recent scholarship has examined human rights obligations from various perspectives. Añón (2021) demonstrated that states remain bound by fundamental human rights obligations even during periods of crisis. Birchall (2026) proposed a structural obligations approach that views human rights obligations as interconnected legal responsibilities rather than isolated duties. In the context of technological governance, Prabhakaran et al. (2022) highlighted the relevance of human rights principles in regulating artificial intelligence, while Ligthart et al. (2023) explored the ethical and legal foundations of neurorights. Furthermore, Natorski (2023) emphasized the role of normative negotiations in shaping contemporary governance frameworks. Although these studies provide valuable insights into specific applications of human rights obligations, they largely focus on particular sectors and contemporary challenges rather than examining the broader normative foundations that justify such obligations within international law.

The existing literature therefore reveals a conceptual gap. Human dignity, legal obligation, state responsibility, and international accountability are often discussed separately, resulting in a fragmented understanding of the normative basis of human rights obligations. Limited attention has been devoted to integrating these concepts into a comprehensive analytical framework capable of explaining why human rights obligations exist and how they derive legitimacy within contemporary international legal



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discourse. To address this gap, this study offers a normative analysis that synthesizes philosophical, legal, and international law perspectives. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which reconstructs the relationship between human dignity, legal legitimacy, and state responsibility as interconnected foundations of human rights obligations.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the normative foundations of human rights obligations through a qualitative library research approach. The study seeks to analyze the principal theories underlying human rights obligations, explore contemporary scholarly debates concerning their legitimacy and scope, and develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding their role in international legal discourse. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of international human rights scholarship by providing a clearer theoretical explanation of the foundations and significance of human rights obligations in the contemporary international legal order.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Human Rights, Human Dignity, and the Moral Foundations of Human Rights Obligations

Human rights are generally understood as fundamental entitlements inherent to all human beings by virtue of their humanity. Donnelly (2013) argues that human rights constitute universal moral and political claims that protect individuals against abuses of power and provide standards for evaluating state conduct. Similarly, Beitz (2009) views human rights as norms of international concern that establish conditions under which the international community may legitimately scrutinize state behavior. Freeman (2017) further emphasizes that human rights combine moral values, political principles, and legal mechanisms, making them distinct from ordinary legal rights that derive solely from domestic legal systems. These perspectives collectively demonstrate that human rights possess both moral and legal dimensions.

The emergence of international human rights law transformed human rights from moral aspirations into legally recognized obligations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), followed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966a) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966b), established a normative framework that imposes obligations upon states. According to Joseph & Castan (2023), these instruments significantly expanded the legal responsibilities of states by creating standards for accountability and mechanisms for monitoring compliance. Shelton (2021) similarly notes that contemporary international human rights law has evolved into a comprehensive legal system that regulates state conduct and strengthens the protection of individual rights at the international level.

The moral foundations of these obligations are commonly explained through natural law theory and human dignity theory. Griffin (2008) argues that human rights derive from normative agency, namely the human capacity to make autonomous choices



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and pursue meaningful lives. A similar position is advanced by Tasioulas (2012), who contends that human rights are grounded in objective moral values rather than solely in legal or political arrangements. Human dignity therefore functions as a central normative principle that legitimizes human rights claims and corresponding obligations. Nickel (2019) further argues that human rights protect essential interests necessary for human well-being, freedom, and participation in society. Although scholars differ regarding the precise source of human rights, they generally agree that human dignity provides the primary moral foundation from which human rights obligations derive legitimacy.

2.2. Legal Authority, State Responsibility, and International Human Rights Obligations

While natural law theory explains why human rights deserve protection, legal positivism focuses on how human rights obligations acquire legal authority. According to Besson (2020), human rights become legally binding through formal recognition within legal systems, treaties, and institutional arrangements. Klabbers (2023) similarly argues that international obligations emerge through the consent of states and the development of international legal norms. From this perspective, the legitimacy of human rights obligations depends on their incorporation into treaties, customary international law, and international institutions.

However, legal positivism has been criticized for its limited ability to explain the moral significance of rights. Raz (2010) argues that legal recognition alone cannot adequately justify why certain rights deserve protection or why states should comply with obligations beyond formal legal requirements. Consequently, many contemporary scholars reject a strict separation between morality and law and instead emphasize the interaction between normative principles and legal institutions. This interaction is particularly visible within international human rights law, where moral claims concerning human dignity are translated into legally enforceable obligations.

The relationship between rights and obligations constitutes a central issue within this framework. Dworkin (1977) argues that rights function as fundamental principles that constrain political authority and generate corresponding duties. Within international human rights law, these duties are commonly expressed through the respect-protect-fulfil framework. Alston & Goodman (2013) explain that states are required to respect rights by refraining from interference, protect rights against third-party violations, and fulfil rights through positive measures. Moeckli et al. (2022) argue that this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of state responsibility because it incorporates both negative and positive obligations. Moreover, Nollkaemper (2011) highlights the increasing interaction between domestic and international institutions in ensuring compliance with human rights obligations. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (United Nations, 1993) further reinforces this perspective by affirming that the promotion and protection of human rights constitute a legitimate concern of the international community as a whole. These developments



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demonstrate that state responsibility has become a central mechanism through which human rights obligations are implemented and enforced.

2.3. Universality, Sovereignty, and Contemporary Developments in International Legal Discourse

One of the most enduring debates within human rights scholarship concerns the relationship between universality and state sovereignty. Donnelly (2013) maintains that human rights are universal because they derive from shared characteristics of human existence. In contrast, concerns regarding sovereignty often emphasize the authority of states to regulate their internal affairs without external interference. Henkin (1990) argues that the growth of international human rights law has transformed sovereignty from an absolute principle into one conditioned by responsibilities toward individuals. Similarly, Rawls (1999) suggests that respect for fundamental human rights constitutes a minimum requirement for political legitimacy within the international community.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that individuals occupy a more prominent position within international law than in traditional state-centered frameworks. Peters (2016) argues that individuals are increasingly recognized as subjects of international law rather than merely objects of state protection. This development reflects broader changes within international legal discourse, where accountability, human dignity, and individual rights have become central normative concerns. The growing influence of international courts, monitoring mechanisms, and transnational institutions further supports this shift toward a more human-centered legal order.

Recent studies have expanded these debates into new areas of global governance. Añón (2021) demonstrates that human rights obligations remain applicable during periods of crisis, challenging claims that emergencies justify the suspension of fundamental protections. Birchall (2026) proposes a structural obligations approach that conceptualizes human rights obligations as interconnected legal responsibilities rather than isolated duties. In emerging technological contexts, Prabhakaran et al. (2022) argue that human rights principles provide an important framework for governing artificial intelligence, while Lighthart et al. (2023) highlight the relevance of human rights discourse in addressing ethical and legal issues associated with neurorights. These developments illustrate that human rights obligations continue to evolve in response to contemporary global challenges. Collectively, the literature suggests that the normative foundations of human rights obligations cannot be explained solely through moral philosophy, legal positivism, or state-centered theories. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between human dignity, legal authority, state responsibility, and contemporary governance structures. Accordingly, this study adopts an integrative analytical perspective that synthesizes these dimensions in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the normative foundations of human rights obligations in contemporary international legal discourse.



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3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a Library Research approach. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining complex legal and philosophical issues because it focuses on interpreting concepts, meanings, and theoretical perspectives rather than measuring numerical variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of normative legal research, library research enables a systematic examination of legal doctrines, theoretical frameworks, and scholarly debates concerning the normative foundations of human rights obligations. Accordingly, this study relied exclusively on secondary data derived from academic literature and international legal instruments.

The sources analyzed in this study consisted of scholarly journal articles, academic books, book chapters, research reports, and international legal documents related to human rights, international law, legal theory, and state responsibility. Particular attention was given to works discussing natural law theory, legal positivism, human dignity, and international human rights obligations. Key references included Donnelly (2013), Griffin (2008), Nickel (2019), Beitz (2009), Alston & Goodman (2013), Moeckli et al. (2022), and Joseph & Castan (2023). The study also examined major international legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966a), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966b). Sources were selected based on their relevance, scholarly credibility, and contribution to understanding the normative foundations of human rights obligations.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic review of relevant literature obtained from academic databases, scholarly repositories, university library collections, and international legal documentation sources. The collected materials were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify and interpret recurring patterns within data. The analytical process involved reviewing the literature, coding key concepts and arguments, grouping similar ideas into broader themes, and interpreting these themes in relation to the research objectives. The analysis resulted in several interconnected themes, including human dignity, legal legitimacy, state responsibility, universality, and international accountability.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation by incorporating diverse academic materials from different theoretical perspectives. The systematic selection, evaluation, and synthesis of literature enhanced the transparency and reliability of the research process. Through this approach, the study developed a comprehensive understanding of the normative foundations of human rights obligations and their significance within contemporary international legal discourse.



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4. Result

This study employed a qualitative library research approach with thematic analysis to examine the normative foundations of human rights obligations in contemporary international legal discourse. Through a systematic review of scholarly literature, international legal instruments, and theoretical works, four interconnected themes were identified: human dignity as the source of normative legitimacy, international law as the source of legal authority, state responsibility as the mechanism for implementing obligations, and contemporary global governance as the evolving context in which human rights obligations operate. These themes collectively demonstrate that human rights obligations are neither purely moral nor exclusively legal; rather, they emerge from the interaction between ethical principles, legal norms, and institutional practices.

The analysis reveals that human dignity constitutes the primary normative foundation of human rights obligations. Across the reviewed literature, dignity is consistently presented as the moral basis upon which rights claims are justified and corresponding obligations are established. Griffin (2008) argues that the protection of normative agency provides the central justification for human rights, whereas Nickel (2019) emphasizes the role of rights in securing the conditions necessary for human well-being and social participation. Although these approaches differ in emphasis, both identify human dignity as the source of legitimacy underlying human rights obligations. This finding indicates that the obligation to respect human rights originates not merely from legal rules but also from broader moral commitments concerning the value of human beings.

The findings further indicate that moral legitimacy alone is insufficient to generate enforceable obligations. International legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights transform normative principles into legally recognized commitments. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that international law serves as the mechanism through which moral claims become binding legal obligations. Consequently, legal legitimacy emerges as a second foundational dimension of human rights obligations.

Another significant finding concerns the role of state responsibility in operationalizing human rights obligations. The literature consistently identifies the respect-protect-fulfil framework as the dominant model for translating abstract rights into practical obligations. This framework establishes both negative and positive duties, requiring states not only to refrain from violating rights but also to take active measures to ensure their realization. The findings therefore suggest that state responsibility functions as the bridge between normative principles and practical implementation.

Finally, the reviewed literature demonstrates that contemporary human rights obligations are increasingly shaped by global and transnational challenges. Recent scholarship highlights the relevance of human rights principles in crisis governance,



technological regulation, and emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and neurorights. These developments indicate that human rights obligations are evolving beyond traditional state-centered frameworks and are becoming increasingly responsive to complex global governance issues.

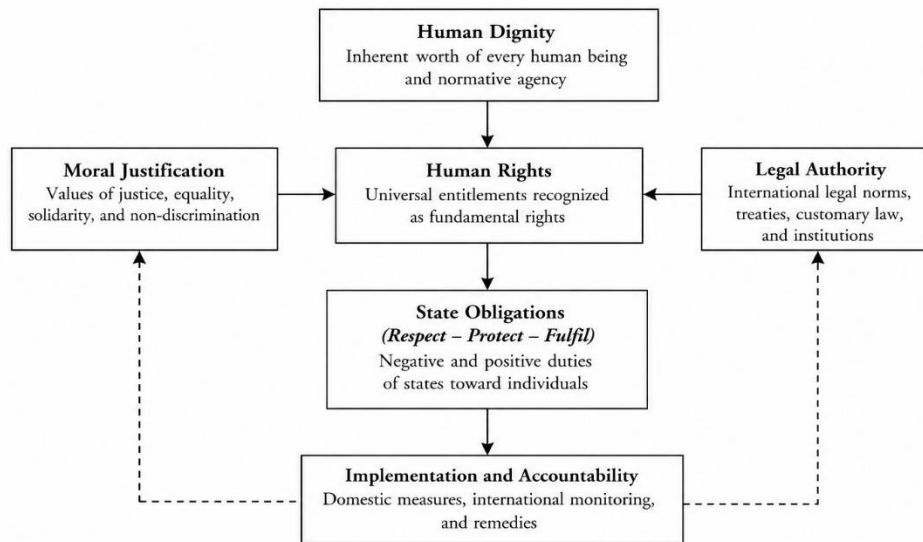
Table 1. Synthesized Themes of the Normative Foundations of Human Rights Obligations

| Theme | Core Concept | Normative Function | Key References |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| Human Dignity | Inherent human worth and normative agency | Moral justification of rights and obligations | (Griffin, 2008; Nickel, 2019) |
| Legal Legitimacy | International legal norms and institutions | Transformation of moral claims into binding obligations | (Besson, 2020; Joseph & Castan, 2023; Klabbers, 2023) |
| State Responsibility | Respect–Protect–Fulfil framework | Operational implementation of obligations | (Alston & Goodman, 2013; Moeckli et al., 2022) |
| Contemporary Governance | Global and technological challenges | Expansion of human rights obligations beyond traditional contexts | (Añón, 2021; Birchall, 2026; Ligthart et al., 2023; Prabhakaran et al., 2022) |

Source: Developed by the author based on thematic analysis of the reviewed literature.

The thematic findings demonstrate that human rights obligations are best understood as a multidimensional normative structure. Human dignity provides moral legitimacy, international law provides legal authority, state responsibility provides practical implementation mechanisms, and contemporary governance challenges provide the context in which these obligations continue to evolve. These findings form the basis for the conceptual framework developed in this study.

Figure 1. Integrated Framework of the Normative Foundations of Human Rights Obligations



5. Discussion

5.1. Human Dignity and the Moral Legitimacy of Human Rights Obligations

The findings demonstrate that human dignity constitutes the primary normative foundation of human rights obligations. This result reinforces the arguments of Griffin (2008), who identifies normative agency as the central basis of human rights, and Nickel (2019), who emphasizes the protection of fundamental human interests. Although these scholars employ different conceptual approaches, both reject the view that human rights derive solely from legal institutions or political arrangements. Instead, they argue that human rights possess an underlying moral foundation rooted in the intrinsic worth of human beings.

This finding is also consistent with Donnelly (2013) argument that human rights function as universal standards because they protect values shared by all human beings regardless of nationality, culture, or political affiliation. Similarly, Tasioulas (2012) maintains that human rights derive legitimacy from objective moral considerations rather than merely from legal recognition. The convergence of these perspectives suggests that moral legitimacy remains indispensable for understanding why states are obligated to respect and protect human rights.

At the same time, the findings indicate that dignity should not be interpreted as an abstract moral concept detached from legal practice. Rather, dignity functions as a normative principle that provides justification for legal obligations. This interpretation extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how moral legitimacy and legal authority operate as interconnected dimensions of human rights obligations rather than as competing foundations.



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5.2. The Interaction Between Natural Law and Legal Positivism

A significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of the complementary relationship between natural law theory and legal positivism. Traditional debates often portray these perspectives as competing explanations of human rights obligations. Natural law scholars emphasize moral principles and inherent human dignity, whereas positivists focus on legal recognition, treaties, and institutional authority.

The findings suggest that neither perspective independently provides a complete explanation of human rights obligations. Natural law theory explains why rights deserve protection, but it offers limited guidance regarding the mechanisms through which obligations become legally enforceable. Conversely, legal positivism explains how obligations acquire legal force but does not fully explain why certain rights should be recognized in the first place. This observation supports the arguments of Besson (2020), who emphasizes the relationship between legal authority and normative legitimacy, as well as Klabbers (2023), who highlights the role of international legal institutions in creating binding obligations.

The study therefore supports an integrative perspective that combines moral and legal foundations. Human rights obligations derive normative legitimacy from human dignity while acquiring practical authority through international legal frameworks. This synthesis contributes to contemporary human rights scholarship by moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between natural law and legal positivism.

5.3. Reconstructing State Responsibility in International Human Rights Law

Another important finding concerns the central role of state responsibility in translating normative commitments into practical obligations. The respect-protect-fulfil framework emerged as the dominant mechanism through which human rights obligations are operationalized. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Alston & Goodman (2013), who emphasize that states bear both negative and positive duties in relation to human rights.

The results also support Moeckli et al. (2022), who argue that effective human rights protection requires more than governmental non-interference. States must actively create social, legal, and institutional conditions that enable individuals to enjoy their rights. This broader conception of state responsibility reflects a significant development in international human rights law, shifting the focus from preventing violations to promoting substantive human well-being.

Moreover, the findings illustrate the gradual transformation of sovereignty within contemporary international law. Henkin (1990) argues that sovereignty is increasingly constrained by international human rights standards, while Peters (2016) observes that individuals are becoming increasingly recognized as subjects of international law. Similarly, Rawls (1999) suggests that respect for fundamental human rights constitutes



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a minimum requirement for international legitimacy. These perspectives collectively support the conclusion that state sovereignty and human rights obligations should not be viewed as opposing principles but as mutually reinforcing elements of a legitimate international legal order.

5.4. Human Rights Obligations in Contemporary Global Governance

The findings further demonstrate that human rights obligations continue to evolve in response to contemporary global challenges. Recent scholarship increasingly examines the application of human rights principles beyond traditional state-centered contexts. Añón (2021) demonstrates that human rights obligations remain applicable during periods of crisis and emergency, challenging assumptions that exceptional circumstances justify the suspension of fundamental protections.

Similarly, Birchall (2026) proposes a structural obligations approach that conceptualizes human rights obligations as interconnected legal relationships rather than isolated duties. This perspective is particularly relevant in addressing contemporary governance challenges characterized by complex interactions among states, international organizations, corporations, and technological systems.

The relevance of human rights obligations has also expanded into emerging technological domains. Prabhakaran et al. (2022) argue that human rights principles provide an important framework for regulating artificial intelligence, while Ligthart et al. (2023) identify similar concerns regarding neurorights and technological innovation. These developments demonstrate that the normative foundations of human rights obligations remain adaptable and capable of responding to new forms of social, political, and technological risk.

5.5. Theoretical Contribution and Academic Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature by developing an integrated normative framework that connects human dignity, legal legitimacy, state responsibility, and contemporary governance challenges. Previous studies have often examined these dimensions separately. Philosophical scholarship has focused primarily on moral justification, whereas legal scholarship has concentrated on institutional enforcement and legal authority. More recent studies have explored specific issue areas such as crisis governance and technological regulation.

In contrast, this study synthesizes these diverse perspectives into a unified analytical framework. The findings suggest that human rights obligations should be understood as a multidimensional normative structure in which moral principles provide legitimacy, legal norms provide authority, and institutional mechanisms provide implementation. This integrative perspective represents the primary novelty of the study and offers a more comprehensive explanation of human rights obligations than approaches relying exclusively on moral or legal foundations.



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The broader implication of this study is that future research should continue exploring the interaction between ethical principles, legal institutions, and emerging governance challenges. Such research may contribute to the development of more comprehensive theoretical frameworks capable of addressing the increasingly complex nature of human rights obligations in contemporary international legal discourse.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the normative foundations of human rights obligations in contemporary international legal discourse through a qualitative library research approach. The findings demonstrate that human rights obligations are best understood as a multidimensional normative structure that emerges from the interaction between moral principles, legal norms, and institutional mechanisms. Human dignity was identified as the primary source of normative legitimacy, providing the moral justification for the recognition and protection of human rights. At the same time, international legal instruments and institutions transform these moral claims into legally binding obligations, thereby establishing their authority within the international legal order. The study further found that the respect–protect–fulfil framework serves as the principal mechanism through which states operationalize their human rights obligations. Moreover, contemporary developments in global governance have expanded the scope of human rights obligations beyond traditional state-centered contexts, demonstrating their continuing relevance in addressing emerging challenges. By integrating insights from human dignity theory, natural law theory, legal positivism, and state responsibility theory, this study contributes to the literature by developing a comprehensive analytical framework that explains both the moral and legal foundations of human rights obligations.

The findings have important implications for the advancement of international human rights scholarship and contemporary legal discourse. The study highlights the need to move beyond fragmented approaches that examine moral legitimacy, legal authority, and state responsibility separately, and instead adopt a more integrated understanding of human rights obligations. Such an approach can provide a stronger theoretical basis for interpreting and implementing international human rights norms in increasingly complex global contexts. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on qualitative library research and its primary focus on theoretical and normative analysis. Future research may extend the present study by examining the practical application of human rights obligations in specific legal regimes, regional human rights systems, or emerging areas such as digital governance, artificial intelligence, climate justice, and transnational accountability. Further comparative and interdisciplinary research would also contribute to a deeper understanding of how normative foundations influence the interpretation, implementation, and evolution of human rights obligations within the contemporary international legal order.



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