



Nova Science Press

Journal of Psychology & Education

Vol. 1, No. 4 (2026)

A Defense of Kantian Deontology Against Critiques from Virtue

Ethics

Xinyu Liu^{1*}

1 Guizhou University, Guiyang, China

*Corresponding author: Xinyu Liu; email: 1976776854@qq.com

Funding Statement: This work was supported by the National Natural Science

Foundation of China (Grant No. 25BZX059)

Journal of Psychology & Education • Vol. 1, No. 4 (2026)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66581/bcxg8z98>

Received 29 April 2026 • Accepted: 6 May 2026 • Published 31 May 2026

CITATION

Liu, X. (2026). A Defense of Kantian Deontology Against Critiques from Virtue Ethics. Journal of Psychology & Education, 1(4), 23. <https://doi.org/10.66581/bcxg8z98>

COPYRIGHT

© 2026 Xinyu Liu. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Abstract

This paper explores the enduring debate between deontology and virtue ethics. Focusing on the critiques leveled against Kantian deontology by proponents of virtue ethics, this study provides a corresponding defense from a Kantian perspective. The first section outlines the fundamental principles of Kantian deontology, emphasizing the significance of universal laws in moral action. The second section elucidates the core tenets of virtue ethics, highlighting the central role of virtue as an internal disposition in moral judgment and behavioral choice. The third section provides a detailed analysis of virtue ethics' refutations of Kantian deontology, noting that virtue theorists argue their framework offers superior action-guidance. In the final section, the paper offers a three-pronged defense of Kantian deontology and discusses the comparative value and significance of both frameworks in modern ethics. Through this analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of the divergent perspectives held by Kantian deontology and virtue ethics within moral theory is achieved.

Key words: Ethics; Moral Philosophy; Virtue Ethics; Deontology

Introduction

In the vast landscape of ethics, the debate between reason and virtue remains a focal point of scholarly attention. Kantian deontology and virtue ethics, as two major ethical approaches, offer distinct perspectives. While Kantian deontology emphasizes universal moral laws and rational principles, virtue ethics prioritizes the cultivation of an agent's internal character and moral refinement. Some virtue theorists argue that their framework provides a sturdier foundation for agents, contending that deontology over-relies on rigid rules and neglects the essence of virtue. In this paper, I shall offer a defense of Kantian deontology in response to these critiques.

I. Fundamental Principles of Kantian Deontology

The roots of contemporary deontology are found in Immanuel Kant. Kant approached morality with profound seriousness, viewing it as a constant—much like a mathematical absolute—that does not yield to individual whims. However, he distinguished between "what we ought to do morally" and "what we ought to do for others for non-moral reasons." He noted that most of the time, our actions are not moral choices but are dictated by desires. For example, if you desire to earn money, you ought to find a job; if you desire to graduate, you ought to study. Kant observed: "When I conceive a hypothetical imperative, I do not know beforehand what it will contain until the condition is given to me."^① This pertains to prudential choice, not moral law. In short, if you lack the desire to graduate, you are not bound by the imperative to study.

^① Kant, I., & Schneewind, J. B. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Yale University Press.
Published by Nova Science Press, HK

Kant, however, evaluates morality not through hypothetical imperatives but through the Categorical Imperative. A categorical imperative is a requirement you must follow regardless of your desires. Derived from pure reason, it is an absolute command. Thus, we do not require religion to discern moral law; right and wrong are matters of reason alone. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative provides the Formula of Humanity (or the Teleological Formula): "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."^② This proposition emphasizes respect for persons, asserting that every rational being possesses inherent value or dignity and must never be treated merely as a means to achieve other goals, but always as an end in themselves.

This principle comprises three core implications. The first one is respect for Inherent Value. As beings endowed with reason and free will, humans possess an intrinsic dignity. This dignity dictates that every individual should be regarded as an end-in-themselves, rather than a tool serving the interests or objectives of others. The second one is prohibition of Manipulation. One must never exploit or manipulate others to achieve a goal, even if that goal is ostensibly "good." In other words, a legitimate end does not justify violating the respect due to another person as an end. For instance, deception remains immoral even a "white lie" intended to spare someone's feelings because it fails to respect the other person's rationality and

^② Kant, I., & Schneewind, J. B. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Yale University Press.
Published by Nova Science Press, HK

freedom. The third one is Equal Moral Status. Every rational being holds equal moral standing. No one should be treated differently based on external conditions such as social status, wealth, or power.

We can better understand this through the following two case studies. Imagine a bookstore owner in financial crisis. Coco runs an independent bookstore on the brink of bankruptcy. To pay next month's rent and sustain her livelihood, she desperately needs funds. A veteran book collector visits the store and takes an interest in a rare, out-of-print ancient volume. Coco is aware that the book has a flaw—internal pages have subtle, hard-to-detect repair marks. If she is honest, the price will be significantly reduced, or the deal may fall through entirely. If she conceals the flaw and guarantees it as a "perfect original," she can secure the rent money immediately.

From the perspective of the Hypothetical Imperative, if Coco decides to hide the truth out of a desire to pay rent and save her store, her maxim would be: "To make money, I should deceive my customer." Kant would argue that this is not a moral choice. The logic of this action is: If you want X (rent), then do Y (deception). If you no longer care whether the bookstore survives, this "command" loses its binding force over you. This constitutes a "prudential choice" which is a tool for achieving personal desire and has nothing to do with the true moral law.

From the perspective of the Categorical Imperative, Coco must ask herself: "Can I will that 'lying for profit' become a universal law?" Clearly not, for if everyone lied, the very concepts of promises and transactions would collapse. If Coco tells the truth, she is respecting the collector's right to information and choice as a rational being.

The collector can then decide autonomously, based on factual information, whether to purchase the book.

Merely as a Means: If Coco lies, she is using the collector's money to solve her own financial problems. At that moment, the collector is no longer a dignified person in Coco's eyes, but merely a "cash machine" or a "tool to solve a rent problem." Coco deprives the other party of the opportunity to make a judgment based on reason, thereby violating the respect due to them. Thus, even if honesty leads to the bookstore's closure, Kant maintains that Coco must be honest. The value of morality resides in the "Good Will" that follows rational law, not in the result of saving the store.

The second case is a white lie. Dr. John is treating an elderly gentleman diagnosed with late-stage cancer, with only a few months to live. The patient's children privately plead with John: "Doctor, please do not tell our father the truth. He is psychologically fragile and will collapse if he knows. Just tell him it's a severe inflammation so he can spend his final days in happiness." If judged by consequences, John might choose to lie. This would avoid the patient's immediate suffering and seemingly increase the "total happiness" of the family. However, Kant strictly opposes this approach.

Kant argues that every rational being (including this elderly man) possesses inherent dignity, the core of which is reason and free will. When the children and the doctor decide to withhold the truth "for his own good," they are engaging in paternalistic manipulation. They assume the old man lacks sufficient reason to process

the truth, thereby stripping him of his right to autonomously arrange the final stage of his life.

Even if Dr. John's motive is pity, he is, at that moment, treating the patient as an "emotional reactor" rather than a "rational person." The elderly man is being used as a means to achieve the goals of "family harmony" or "psychological peace." Kant believes that as a human being, the "humanity" within the patient's personhood demands that he be told the truth. To withhold the truth is to strip him of his status as a subject. Everyone has the right to know the truth about their own life; this is a requirement of reason. Dr. John's moral responsibility is not to predict the result of a "collapse" and use it as a pretext for manipulation, but to respect the elderly man's moral standing as a person.

Consequently, Dr. John should disclose the truth in a respectful and caring manner. For Kant, respecting the rational dignity of others is an absolute command. Deception should not be employed out of fear of the outcome (sorrow or collapse). True respect involves acknowledging the other party's capacity to face the truth and treating them as an equal.

Based on this, through this proposition, Kant further strengthens the unconditionality and universality of his moral law. This principle not only emphasizes equality between individuals but also demands that every action consider the moral rights and dignity of others; one must never sacrifice another person to achieve one's own ends.

So we can understand the core of Kantian deontology: the morality of an act does not depend on its results, but on whether the act springs from a Good Will and whether it adheres to the moral law—the so-called Categorical Imperative.

II. Basic Principles of Virtue Ethics

I shall now proceed to discuss the fundamental principles of virtue ethics, while maintaining the stance that deontology remains a more compelling theory. We inhabit a society that operates through a moral system, which endeavors to delineate the boundaries of right and wrong. Every society is governed by moral codes that serve to guide human conduct. To enable society to exist and function in a state of harmony, numerous esteemed philosophers, such as Aristotle, formulated moral theories grounded in the principles of virtue.

We might envision an individual who consistently conducts themselves with perfect propriety—someone sincere, confident without being arrogant, courageous without being reckless, distinguished, excellent, benevolent, non-maleficent, equitable, cordial, and appreciative. Such a person appears to have mastered the "art of being human." Aristotle maintained that, although exceedingly rare, such individuals do exist, and they represent the ideal toward which we should all aspire. We ought to be virtuous.

Within the scope of virtue-based thought lies a distinctive ethical theory known as Virtue Ethics. Unlike other schools of thought that devote significant effort to prescribing specific actions, virtue theory focuses entirely on character. Rosalind Hursthouse, in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, advances the following proposition:

an action is right if, and only if, it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances.^③ Aristotle's exposition in the *Nicomachean Ethics* concerning the virtuous agent as the "standard or measure" of moral truth allows us to conclude that: provided the reasons a virtuous person chooses a particular action are independent of the fact that other virtuous individuals would act similarly, then such a choice is equitable.^④ Aristotle and fellow virtue ethicists reason that if we focus solely on how to become a good person, we will naturally engage in correct behavior. Within this framework, rules are unnecessary; by simply becoming a good person, one will naturally do what is good.

Aristotle maintains that nature endows us with the desire to pursue virtue. What, then, is virtue? Aristotle conceives of virtue as a robust set of character traits that, once fully developed, lead to predictably good conduct.^⑤ Take courage as an example: suppose Xiao Ming witnesses a robber snatching someone's wallet while on his way home from work. How should he respond? In this context, the virtue of courage does not mandate rushing forward recklessly to intervene; rather, it requires a rational assessment. If Xiao Ming determines that his strength far exceeds that of the robber, he may act to intervene; however, if he assesses that his abilities are insufficient, he should call the police for assistance instead of confronting the criminal directly.

Courage here refers neither to extreme recklessness nor to extreme cowardice; the former is an excess of bravery, while the latter is a deficiency. Aristotle perceives courage as the perfect mean—the balance point—between these two extremes. Thus,

^③ Hooft, S., (Ed.). (2014). *The handbook of virtue ethics*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.

^④ Rowe, C. J., & Broadie, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Nicomachean ethics*. Oxford University Press.

^⑤ Rowe, C. J., & Broadie, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Nicomachean ethics*. Oxford University Press.

courage does not entail plunging headlong into danger. A courageous individual evaluates the circumstances at hand. A virtuous person is cognizant of their own capabilities, acts appropriately within specific contexts, and identifies the perfect balance between two extremes.

We can observe the same logic regarding honesty: according to Aristotle, honesty is the perfect mean between blunt frankness and the failure to disclose what ought to be said. Honesty entails knowing what must be elucidated and what should remain unspoken. Consequently, virtue is often indefinable and resistant to fixed standards, as the virtuous choice varies according to the specific situation. This is, in essence, the exercise of practical wisdom.

III. Critiques of Virtue Ethics Against Kantian Deontology

Based on the general principles of virtue ethics, certain virtue theorists adopt a critical stance toward Kantian deontology. First, virtue ethicists may contend that Kantian deontology places excessive emphasis on duties and rules, thereby neglecting the significance of virtue within moral conduct. Yuval Eylon elucidates this perspective in a chapter of *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*. He primarily points out that rules, in and of themselves, are incapable of imbuing moral requirements with profound meaning; furthermore, they fail to address questions regarding the specific situational application of such rules or the complexities surrounding an agent's motivational layers.^⑥ Deontology adheres to a set of rigid moral standards, most notably exemplified by Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. These standards

^⑥ Hoof, S., (Ed.). (2014). *The handbook of virtue ethics*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.

remain static and do not adjust to shifts in scenario or context. When rules conflict or when situations present subtle nuances, this rigidity can lead to morally adverse outcomes.

In contrast, Virtue Ethics emphasizes situational adaptability and the paramount importance of the moral agent's practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Take honesty as an example: while it is regarded as a virtue, virtue ethics maintains that in certain specific circumstances—such as the protection of human life— withholding the truth may be the moral choice. When faced with conflicting duties, deontological ethics often struggles to provide an effective resolution. For instance, consider a scenario where Xiao Ming and Xiao Mei are having breakfast when a stranger knocks on the door, inquiring about Xiao Ming's whereabouts with the intent to cause him harm. In this moment, virtue ethics might suggest that Xiao Mei lie to protect Xiao Ming, whereas a strict deontologist would hold the exact opposite view.

Furthermore, virtue theorists may argue that Kantian deontology overemphasizes reason to such an extent that it overlooks the role of an agent's emotions and intuitive judgments in moral decision-making. Because Kantian ethics establishes reason as the sole determinant of morality, whether an action is judged as "good" is not the deontologist's primary concern. Rather, if the action conforms to the prioritized duty, it is deemed "right." This stands in sharp contrast to the principles of virtue ethics, which explicitly emphasize the Highest Good (*Summum bonum*) of humanity. Virtue ethics values the interplay between reason and emotion, positing that emotions—if properly cultivated—can guide moral behavior. The deontological rejection of

emotional judgment risks causing morality to become excessively detached from human reality.

We can gain a clearer understanding of virtue through the following cases including the entrepreneur's donation dilemma and the subordinate's mistake.

Lily is the founder of a medium-sized enterprise. One year, her hometown is struck by a severe natural disaster, and urgent aid is required. Although Lily is successful, she faces capital pressures from business expansion and bears the responsibility for the livelihoods of hundreds of employees. If Lily were to donate only a symbolic, minuscule amount (such as a few hundred dollars), she would not be in violation of any laws or rules. However, from the perspective of virtue ethics, this is "stinginess." Possessing excess wealth while remaining indifferent to the suffering of others reflects a deficient and closed character, failing to manifest the excellence expected of a member of society. Conversely, if Lily were to donate tens of millions regardless of her company's financial state—perhaps even misappropriating employee bonuses—simply to chase the reputation of a "great philanthropist," virtue ethics would label this "reckless prodigality" rather than true generosity. She would be sacrificing her fundamental responsibilities to others to satisfy an excessive, irrational impulse.

As a virtuous person, Lily would exercise her practical wisdom. She first assesses the company's financial health to ensure the donation does not jeopardize employee wages; next, she investigates the actual needs of the disaster area to ensure the funds are used effectively. Ultimately, she decides to donate an amount that

provides significant aid while remaining within her means, personally organizing the logistics for the supplies. Here, "generosity" is not a fixed sum but a balance point found according to Lily's identity, capability, and the specific context. She demonstrates not an obedience to rules, but a "just right" strength of character: possessing both compassion and rational prudence.

The second case is the subordinate's mistake. Luck is the head of a critical project. During the final stage of the project's launch, a new subordinate's oversight leads to a technical bug. Although it was fixed in time, the error forced the team to work three hours of overtime. Luck is exhausted and must respond to the subordinate's behavior.

If Luck, wishing only to maintain a pleasant relationship, says, "It's fine, just be careful next time," he fails to address the severity of the issue. Aristotle would view this as a lack of a sense of justice and moral courage. Such a "boundaryless" character leads to a breakdown in team discipline and does not constitute an excellent personality. If Luck were to fly into a rage in the office, using harsh language to humiliate the subordinate or even threatening termination, this reaction would be an emotional excess. He would be using anger as a tool for venting rather than a means of problem-solving. This irascibility destroys team trust and demonstrates a lack of self-control. A virtuous Luck would choose the "gentle" yet "firm" middle ground. He would first take a deep breath to calm down, then speak seriously with the subordinate in private. He would clearly identify the cause and consequences of the error and

demand an improvement plan, while allowing the individual a chance to rectify their mistake.

Luck's reaction demonstrates the "art of living." He is neither blinded by anger nor does he abandon his principles out of weakness. His actions are rooted in respect for others and the pursuit of professional excellence. This "just right" criticism reflects a mature leadership character—expressing the correct degree of negative emotion to the right person, at the right time, and in the right way.

IV. A Defense of Kantian Deontology

From the perspective of the relationship between duty and virtue, virtue theorists may contend that Kantian deontology places excessive emphasis on duties and rules while neglecting the vital role of virtue in moral conduct. However, the laws within Kantian deontology differ significantly from rules in the conventional sense. Furthermore, Kant does not deny the value of virtue; rather, he maintains that virtue is a natural consequence of moral action. I shall respond to the critiques of virtue ethics from three perspectives: first, the core of Kantian deontology is the affirmation of human dignity rather than mere duties and rules; second, the rules Kant describes are not imposed by external authorities but are the result of an autonomous will operating out of reason's respect for the moral law; and third, Kant's positive and guiding duties encompass virtue and actively facilitate its practice.

Firstly, the essence of Kantian deontology is the emphasis on human dignity rather than rules. Kant's categorical imperative is manifested in his "Formula of Universal Law": "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time

will that it should become a universal law."⁷ This formula requires that, in our actions, we must adhere to maxims that are capable of universalization. That is to say, if every individual were to act according to such a maxim, the action would remain free of logical and practical contradiction. While this formula has become the hallmark of Kantian ethics, this very status has often excluded its deeper and more nuanced dimensions. To a certain extent, Kant himself bears some responsibility for this, as he proposed the Formula of Universal Law as the primary metric for evaluating the morality of our conduct. This is precisely the point of departure for virtue ethics' critique of Kantian deontology.

However, the genuine core of Kantian ethics lies in its emphasis on human dignity. This is manifested in the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, known as the Formula of Humanity (or the Teleological Formula): "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." As previously noted, this proposition underscores a profound respect for persons, asserting that every rational being possesses intrinsic value or dignity and must never be treated as a mere instrument to achieve external objectives. Every individual possesses the autonomy to make choices based on their own reason. Simultaneously, each person must recognize that others possess equal dignity and autonomy. It is here that human dignity is situated. This gives rise to a potent sense of reciprocity inherent in the requirement for universalization; thus, while universalization serves as a direct

⁷ Kant, I., & Schneewind, J. B. (2002). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Yale University Press.
Published by Nova Science Press, HK

procedural test, it is ultimately a reflection of this underlying dignity. Consequently, the kernel of Kantian deontology is the affirmation of human dignity rather than a mere obsession with duties and rules. The true essence of Kantian ethics is frequently obscured or distorted by the popular preoccupation with the Formula of Universal Law.

Consider the following case: Andy is a leading oncology expert heading a team in the development of a breakthrough drug for a rare form of leukemia. If this drug successfully passes clinical trials, it will save tens of thousands of lives annually—undoubtedly a "virtuous" undertaking. In the final stages of the trial, Andy discovers that five participants from remote mountainous regions do not truly comprehend the complex risk clauses in the "informed consent" forms due to educational and language barriers. Although they have signed the documents, they joined primarily out of a blind trust in "big-city doctors" and a desperate hope for free treatment.

At this juncture, the project team faces immense pressure: if they halt the trial to re-explain the risks and allow withdrawals, the sample size will become insufficient, potentially delaying the project by a year. This delay would mean that more patients elsewhere would lose their lives in the interim. Some virtue theorists might argue that if Andy insists on pausing the trial for further communication, he is stubbornly adhering to rigid scientific protocols. They might suggest that a "benevolent" physician should weigh the pros and cons, concluding that it is acceptable to temporarily overlook the nuances of informed consent for these five individuals in

order to save thousands of others. In their view, such Kantian persistence appears cold and devoid of practical wisdom (phronesis).

However, if we examine Andy's true motivation through the lens of the "Formula of Humanity," the situation is transformed: Andy realizes that if he intentionally exploits the ignorance of these five patients to save thousands, then at that moment, these patients cease to be individuals with independent wills and become merely "means for data generation" or "tools for a grand scientific objective." Deep within Andy, a sense of awe for the moral law arises: "These people are ends in themselves; they are not stepping stones to my great achievement." Consequently, Andy's decision to re-initiate the informed consent process is not a result of what a "Medical Management Regulation" dictates, but a result of the autonomous operation of his rational will. Through rational reflection, he recognizes that if "deceiving vulnerable groups for the benefit of the majority" were to become a universal law, human rational dignity would vanish.

This is not a "rule" imposed by an external authority, but an action principle he has established for himself as a rational being out of respect for the moral law. As stated, this embodies the sentiment of "I follow my rules," representing a high degree of moral autonomy. In his interaction with these patients, Andy demonstrates a profound sense of reciprocity. He acknowledges that despite their lack of professional expertise, they possess—as humans—a rational autonomy equal to his own. This dignity is non-negotiable and cannot be discounted based on social status or lack of knowledge.

By adhering to procedure, Andy is actually safeguarding the core of Kantian deontology: human dignity. In this scenario, the "honesty," "justice," and "humility" Andy ultimately displays are not virtue titles he sought to acquire, but the natural manifestation of his steadfast commitment to the Categorical Imperative and his respect for human dignity. Andy does not view his choice as a "difficult rule-application problem"; he views it as a fundamental requirement of being a "human." This is the essence of the Kantian defense: duty does not stifle character; rather, it infuses character with its most resilient rational foundation—the absolute defense of dignity.

Secondly, the rules Kant describes are not imposed by external authorities but are the result of an autonomous will operating out of respect for the moral law. The prevalence of the universality formula has fostered a misperception of Kantian deontology as being preoccupied with rules, giving his ethics a legalistic tenor. However, "rule" is an impersonal term, and a distinction must be made here. In the context of "I follow the rules," the rule is imposed on the agent by an external authority, and the agent lacks autonomy. Conversely, "I follow my rules" reflects self-legislation, where the rules are not constraints from an external power.

Undoubtedly, Kant aligns with the latter. He believes that a person's duty truly belongs to themselves, and Kantian duty is the manifestation of a will operating autonomously out of respect for the moral law. The foundation for exploring the supreme principles of morality resides in reason. Kant consistently maintained this stance in both his published works and his lectures. In his Lectures on Ethics, he

emphasized: "Moral principles are rooted in the human heart and must be sought solely in pure reason."[®] Consider the case of an accountant named Alex, who faces a moral dilemma in his professional career. To attract more clients and maintain high profit margins, Alex's accounting firm suggests that employees make "technical adjustments" to financial statements to make the data appear more attractive to investors. While such a practice may violate the strict standards of the accounting profession, it is not uncommon within the field and is often regarded as an "unspoken industry rule."

In this scenario, Alex chooses to uphold his professional ethical principles and refuses to participate in any form of financial fraud. In making this decision, the phrase "I follow my rules" signifies that Alex is acting based on his own rational judgment and out of respect for the moral law, autonomously deciding his course of action. He recognizes that the primary responsibility of an accountant is to ensure the truthfulness and accuracy of financial information—a commitment that maintains public trust and preserves his own professional integrity. Here, Alex's action is not one of blind obedience to an external authority, but is instead grounded in a rational moral imperative. Through Alex's example, we can discern the pith and marrow of Kantian ethics: true moral behavior is not predicated on external rules or the requirements of authority; rather, it originates from an individual's rational identification with and respect for the moral law.

[®] Kant I. Lectures on Ethics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Published by Nova Science Press, HK

Finally, Kant's positive and guiding duties encompass virtue and facilitate its practice. Kant draws a distinction between perfect duties (or narrow duties) and imperfect duties (or wide duties). Perfect duties typically take a negative form, such as "do not kill" and "do not lie." These duties allow for no exceptions and are the only obligations that can be externally enforced by the state. In contrast, imperfect duties (or wide duties) are not defined by specific required actions or omissions; instead, they require the agent to adopt and strive toward certain attitudes or ends to the greatest extent possible.⁹ Imperfect duties constitute a salient feature demonstrating that Kantian deontology is not merely a system of rule-worship. The most prominent example is the duty of beneficence (the duty of providing aid). This obligation requires that we assist others while simultaneously ensuring that we do not neglect our other duties, including those we owe to ourselves.

It is noteworthy that Kant grounds morality in reason. He maintains that through reason, we are capable of unveiling universal moral laws. In this framework, an agent's conduct is no longer a sentimental or arbitrary choice, but rather the culmination of rational reflection. Adhering to duties under the guidance of reason facilitates the cultivation of an individual's moral judgment and self-discipline—both of which are indispensable components of virtue. Furthermore, within Kantian ethics, virtue is not merely an external display of behavior; rather, it is the internal respect for and adherence to duty. Kant posits that true virtue exists when a moral agent acts out of respect for the moral law itself, rather than from personal inclination or self-interest.

⁹ Kant's Doctrine of Obligatory Ends[J].Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik / Annual Review of Law and Ethics,1993.
Published by Nova Science Press, HK

This internalized conception of virtue renders moral action purer and less susceptible to the interference of external factors. Kantian deontology emphasizes that individuals should fulfill their moral obligations even in the absence of any external reward. This perspective promotes the practice of virtue by requiring individuals to make correct moral choices without the need for external incentives. Indeed, the act of conscientiously obeying the moral law is, in essence, the very manifestation of virtue.

Reflecting on the prior discussion concerning rules, while Kant does derive general rules or duties from the moral law, these are not intended to be applied mechanically to the dilemmas of real life; they serve primarily as a compass for right action. In their execution, imperfect duties possess a degree of flexibility that perfect duties lack; consequently, we are afforded a latitude of judgment to assist in making choices and weighing various factors. Therefore, to determine our course of action in any given situation, we make choices based on both morality and the specific context of the circumstances. This effectively addresses the second critique posed by virtue ethics.

V. Conclusion

Ethical research is a perpetual endeavor. It aims to analyze and scrutinize human conduct to guide humanity toward correct moral values. The significance of ethical and moral values in both personal and social life is self-evident, and the pursuit of noble and higher moral values represents an attempt to establish a better life. On this basis, the primary objective of this article has been to review two major ethical approaches: Deontological Ethics and Virtue Ethics.

In response to the critiques of Kantian deontology from the perspective of virtue ethics, I have offered a defense across three dimensions. From this discussion, it is evident that Kantian deontology and virtue ethics are not entirely antithetical. In fact, both share a common objective in the pursuit of a perfected moral life. Kantian deontology, founded upon the bedrock of human dignity, provides a universally applicable standard for moral conduct, within which true virtue is inherently contained. Therefore, in moral practice, we may draw upon the universality and objectivity of Kantian deontology while integrating the practical wisdom and humanistic care characteristic of virtue ethics. In doing so, we may achieve a moral judgment that is both comprehensive and accurate.

Reference

Kant, I., & Schneewind, J. B. (2002). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*. Yale University Press.

Hooft, S. (Ed.). (2014). *The handbook of virtue ethics*. Acumen Publishing Limited.

Rowe, C. J., & Broadie, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Nicomachean ethics*. Oxford University Press.

[Kant, I. (1997). *Lectures on ethics*. Cambridge University Press.

Kant, I. (1993). Kant's doctrine of obligatory ends. *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik / Annual Review of Law and Ethics*.