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Issue Overview

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This issue of *Journal of Psychology & Education* brings together five articles that examine moral philosophy, bioethics, public ethics, and AI-supported education. The issue opens with a defense of Kantian deontology against critiques from virtue ethics, clarifying how universal moral law, the categorical imperative, and respect for persons remain important resources for contemporary moral reasoning.

The second article turns to Cartesian moral philosophy by analyzing the concept of generosity in Descartes. It shows how generosity integrates will, rational judgment, and the regulation of passions, and how this concept functions as a bridge between moral practice and first philosophy.

The issue then examines active euthanasia from the dual perspectives of Confucian filial piety ethics and Kantian moral philosophy. By distinguishing nourishment from respect in end-of-life care, the article explores how dignity, autonomy, family obligation, and rational moral law may be reconsidered in difficult medical contexts.

A fourth contribution addresses public rescue after elderly fall incidents. It argues that bystander assistance should not be reduced to either moral praise or moral blame, but should be understood through a framework of rational benevolence that combines ethical concern, legal awareness, first-aid competence, risk perception, and social trust.

The issue concludes with a study of AI-enabled reform in a philosophical academic writing course. Drawing on the Confucian idea of teaching in accordance with students' aptitude, the article discusses how generative AI, structured arguing-with-AI activities, peer tutoring, and process-oriented assessment can support individualized writing instruction while preserving academic integrity and human authorship.

Taken together, these articles reflect the journal's interdisciplinary orientation. They connect classical and modern ethical thought with contemporary educational practice, public responsibility, medical decision-making, and the governance of emerging technologies.

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**A Defense of Kantian Deontology Against Critiques from Virtue
Ethics**

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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.
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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.
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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.[®] Deontology adheres to a set of rigid moral standards, most notably exemplified by Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. These standards

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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.
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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.
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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.

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On Generosity: The Integration of Practice and Rational in Descartes'

Morality

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Abstract

The concept of generosity occupies a central position in Descartes' later Morality, reflecting the integration of will, rational, and passions in moral practice. Based on an analysis of *The Passions of the Soul* and *Discourse on the Method*, this study systematically examines how generosity regulates passions, guides the exercise of will, and achieves the unity of rational, focusing on its practical implementation in moral practice. The study finds that generosity requires individuals to recognize the controllable scope of their own will, direct passions through rational, and ensure that actions conform to moral standards; simultaneously, it emphasizes equal benevolence toward others and humility before God, achieving the unity of thought, volition, and behavior. Generosity not only governs moral behavior but also provides a philosophical framework for harmonizing self and others, maintaining moral stability. This study argues that generosity is the core concept of Descartes' Morality and serves as an essential bridge between moral practice and first philosophy, offering significant insights for a deeper understanding of Descartes' philosophical system and moral thought.

Keywords: Descartes; generosity; rational

1. Introduction

Cartesian philosophy is renowned for its rationalism, with its metaphysical and epistemological inquiries long dominating scholarly attention, while morality has often been regarded as a subsidiary discipline. However, Descartes himself explicitly emphasized in *Discourse on the Method* that morality is "the highest of all sciences," highlighting the equal importance of moral practice and rational cognition. "Générosité" as a central concept in Cartesian morality, embodies the unity of will, rationality, and the regulation of passions. It not only reflects personal virtue but also serves as a key point of integration between philosophical thought and practical action. This paper aims to explore the concept of generosity, its practical mechanisms, and its contemporary implications, thereby revealing the profound value of Cartesian morality.

2.The Philosophical Connotation of Descartes' Concept of "Generosity"

The concept of "Generosity" in Descartes' morality constitutes the core of his later ethical thought and serves as an indispensable key to understanding his morality. The term originates from the French word "générosité", traditionally translated as "generosity." However, in a philosophical context, "générosité" extends beyond mere benevolent actions, emphasizing the individual's mastery over their own will and the rational exercise of judgment. Descartes explicitly presents generosity in *The Passions of the Soul*, linking it closely with the will, rational, virtue, and benevolence toward others (2016), generosity embodies the central tenet of Cartesian morality: moral practice depends not only on rational deliberation but also on the exercise of the will, through which the regulation of passions realizes individual virtue. For Descartes, the only faculty that humans can fully control is the free governance of their own will and the rational deployment of that will.

The intellectual origins of generosity can be traced back to Aristotle and the Stoic school. Aristotle's conception of generosity primarily emphasizes external honors and social status. he contends that a generous person should adopt different attitudes according to their social position, making this form of generosity predominantly a social virtue. In inheriting Aristotelian thought, Descartes removes the determining influence of external conditions and shifts the focus to the inner will and rational judgment, thereby transforming generosity into a virtue centered on intrinsic goodness. Meanwhile, the Stoicism emphasize self-governance and the rational control of passions; however, their notion of generosity is primarily concerned with the individual's path to personal perfection, often neglecting the welfare of society and others. Descartes transcends this limitation by proposing that the cultivation of generosity through self-perfection should simultaneously extend toward others, thus realizing a moral practice that moves from the self to the other. This extension from the individual to others renders generosity not only a form of personal moral cultivation but also an ethical responsibility.

In terms of its specific characteristics, generosity encompasses self-respect,

humility, and compassion, as well as the harmonious coordination of rational and passions. Self-respect entails that an individual fully comprehends the scope of their own will and consciously exercises it to form resolute determination. Humility enables the generous person to interact with others without arrogance arising from social status or external conditions, and without falling into detrimental self-deprecation due to personal shortcomings. Compassion involves recognizing that others' limitations and mistakes stem from cognitive deficiencies rather than deficiencies of will, thereby allowing for appropriate sympathy guided by benevolence and rational judgment. Through the rational governance of passions, the individual manifests virtue in action, achieving inner moral perfection. Generosity not only emphasizes personal cultivation but also stresses equal benevolence toward others. This outward extension from the self to others endows generosity with significant moral relevance in practical ethical life.

Descartes also holds that generosity is closely connected to the awareness of God. In moral practice, a generous person, by recognizing the freedom of their own will, understands the uncontrollable limits of the external world, and thus maintains humility and reverence toward God in their actions. With God at the top and the self and others on an equal level, this structure not only shapes an individual's self-understanding but also guides their behavior toward others, achieving a harmony between virtue and thought. This philosophical insight shows that Cartesian morality is not merely personal ethical cultivation, but an integrated system that combines reflection with practical action.

2.The Unity of Will, Passions, and Rationality

In Descartes' system of thought, passions are not merely emotional reactions; rather, they are the product of the interaction between rationality and the will. In *The "Passions of the Soul"*, Descartes categorizes passions into three types: bodily sensations (e.g., pleasure and displeasure), will-driven passions (e.g., determination and courage), and social-affective passions (e.g., compassion and affection). Each passion is morally neutral in itself, but its ethical value depends on whether it is

guided by rationality and the will (2016). The realization of generosity requires establishing a dynamic balance among passions, will, and rationality. The will serves as the foundation for the practice of generosity. Individuals must recognize their own capacities and limitations, restricting their actions to the scope that rationality can govern. Rationality provides evaluative judgment, the will determines the direction and intensity of action, and passions, as motivating forces, are guided into practice, thereby ensuring the stability of moral behavior (2022). This process can be understood as a unity: the interaction of rationality, will, and passions constitutes the fundamental mechanism of generous moral practice.

The will occupies a central position in Cartesian morality. Generosity requires that individuals, when exercising their will, accurately recognize their own capacities and limitations, avoiding actions that exceed the scope of what rational knowledge can govern. Rationality provides guidance for action, the will selects the direction and intensity of action based on rational judgment, and passions are regulated in the process to ensure that behavior aligns with moral standards. This logic can be divided into three stages: first, the rational stage, which evaluates the value and appropriateness of an action; second, the stage of the will, which determines whether to act and the degree of commitment; third, the stage of passions, which implements the judgments of rationality and will into practice, realizing moral behavior. Through this mechanism, individuals can maintain moral autonomy in complex social environments while follow to rational principles, achieving a unity of thought and action.

Regarding specific types of passions, emotions such as fear, anger, and affection can sometimes get in the way of moral behavior. For instance, without guidance from rational thinking, fear may cause people to avoid their moral duties or give in to outside pressures. When practicing generosity, rational judgment helps a person understand the true limits of what they fear, while the will decides how to act, allowing emotions to follow moral guidance. Similarly, anger might lead to revenge, but generosity encourages individuals to think carefully about who or what they are

angry at and what they are capable of, turning anger into positive actions or preventing harm to others. Affection and compassion, when guided by generosity, are lifted to a moral level; they are no longer just uncontrolled feelings, but acts of kindness directed by rational thought and the will.

Analyzing different types of passions can further reveal their role in moral practice:

Fear: Without guidance from rationality, fear may lead individuals to avoid responsibility. Under a state of generosity, rational analysis of the object of fear and its possible consequences allows fear to be transformed into cautious decision-making.

Anger: If left unchecked, anger can result in acts of revenge. Generosity requires individuals to evaluate the outcomes of their actions using rationality, turning anger into justified action or self-control, thereby avoiding harm to others.

Compassion: Without rational guidance, compassion can become excessive or uncontrolled. Within generosity, compassion is tempered by rationality, ensuring that actions reflect benevolence without straying from moral standards.

Love and courage: Guided by the will and rationality, these passions are integrated into the motivation for moral practice rather than mere emotional impulses (2012).

In terms of logic, the will, rationality, and passions work together in a continuous feedback loop: rationality helps evaluate goals and make moral judgments, the will decides what to do based on these judgments, and passions provide the energy that drives action. People constantly adjust their behavior in this process to keep their moral actions consistent and stable. For example, when facing social injustice or someone's wrongful behavior, generosity prevents a person from reacting with blind anger or revenge. Instead, they can use rational thinking to choose a response that is morally right, making their actions match their sense of virtue.

Based on this, Descartes highlights the main features of generosity. First, self-respect: a person recognizes the uniqueness and control of their own will and can

use rational thinking to form strong, determined intentions. Second, humility and compassion: a generous person does not become arrogant because of others' status, wealth, or mistakes, nor fall into harmful self-doubt because of their own limits; instead, they treat others with reason and goodwill. Finally, the balance of rationality and passions: rational thinking guides emotions so that actions follow moral standards (2022). This combined approach not only focuses on personal growth but also emphasizes social moral responsibility, showing the real value of generosity in everyday moral practice.

The heart of moral practice is turning generosity into real actions. This means knowing your own abilities and constantly practicing self-discipline. People should avoid doing things beyond what they can handle, so that their emotions don't lead them away from moral goals. At the same time, generosity means treating others with the same care and respect you give yourself, acting with goodwill toward everyone. In this process, rational thinking and the will are the main guides: rationality helps evaluate what is right, the will makes firm decisions and directs action, and passions provide the energy to act. This way, moral practice and philosophical ideas come together in everyday life.

In addition, generosity involves being humble before God. Descartes believes that our will and rational abilities are God's greatest gifts, and using them to develop virtue is a way of following God's intentions. A generous person does not let outside honors, wealth, or other people's opinions change their decisions. Instead, they make choices guided by their will and rational thinking, aiming to act in the most virtuous way. This approach not only helps a person grow morally but also keeps their actions steady and consistent, creating a full cycle of thought, will, and action. Practicing generosity means staying humble in self-control, decision-making, and actions, forming a kind of triangle: God at the top, with oneself and others on an equal level. Moral self-discipline and the unity of rational thinking and virtuous action are achieved within this three-part relationship.

3.The Integration of Generosity and Moral Practice

In Descartes' morality, generosity is the highest virtue, and its main goal is to bring moral actions and rational thinking together. It also works as a practical system, helping people combine their will, rational judgment, and emotions into steady, consistent moral behavior (2022). As we have seen, moral practice is not just about what we do—it is also about how our thoughts, will, and emotions work together. With generosity as a guide, people can turn their decisions and rational thinking into real actions, keeping their behavior moral even in complex social situations or inner struggles.

In real moral practice, generosity is not just about treating yourself and others equally; it also creates steady behavior through the way rational thinking, will, and emotions work together. Descartes points out that a generous person understands that we cannot fully control the world around us—the only thing we truly control is the freedom of our own will. So, the first step in moral practice is to clearly know your own abilities and keep your actions within what your rational judgment can handle. This helps people avoid being led off track by strong emotions or the unpredictability of the world. This idea reflects Descartes' advice in *Discourse on the Method*: "strive to overcome yourself, not fate," meaning that in a world we cannot control, we should focus on controlling our own actions and will.

The main task of generosity in moral practice is to regulate and guide passions. In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes discusses in detail the relationship between passions and the will, emphasizing that passions themselves are neither good nor bad—the key is whether they are guided by rationality and the will. Take compassion as an example: without rational guidance, compassion can become excessive, leading to misguided actions such as over-involvement or uncontrolled emotional responses. In moral practice guided by generosity, compassion is directed by rational thinking, allowing individuals to help others appropriately while maintaining control over their own will and judgment. The same applies to anger, fear, and affection; generosity requires individuals to use rational judgment to evaluate their emotions, and the will to decide the direction and intensity of their actions, ensuring that behavior remains

virtuous while also supporting stable social interactions.

The will plays an important role in turning generosity into real moral action. It is not just the ability to make free choices, but also the force that turns rational thinking into actual behavior. Descartes points out that a generous person can stick to their decisions and act morally, even when facing temptations or strong emotions. This can be seen as a three-part unity: rational thinking sets the standards, the will chooses what to do, and passions give the energy to act. Generosity comes from keeping all three in balance. By doing this, people can practice morality in their everyday lives, not just understand it as an abstract idea.

Furthermore, putting generosity into practice also depends on understanding both yourself and others. Descartes points out that we need to recognize the limits of our own actions and will, and also realize that others' limitations come from a lack of knowledge, not from a flaw in their character. This understanding helps people stay calm and kind when others make mistakes, and avoids the stress of being too hard on themselves. Generosity allows a person to keep a moral balance: not being too harsh or arrogant with themselves, and not being dismissive or overly controlling toward others. By following this approach, generosity spreads inner self-discipline into social life, making moral practice a balance between the individual and others, and between the individual and society.

Practicing generosity also involves seeking knowledge and constantly improving rational judgment. Descartes believes that virtue is not something we achieve instantly, but develops over time through practicing the connection between rational thinking and the will. In daily life, a generous person should think carefully about their abilities and the situation before acting, keeping their actions within what they can control and choosing the best option based on rational judgment. This helps strengthen the will and makes sure emotions are used properly in moral actions, showing how thought and behavior can work together. For example, when facing social injustice or someone else's wrongdoing, a generous person does not act out of blind anger or seek revenge. Instead, they use rational thinking to consider their own abilities and the

consequences of different actions, picking the response that best fits virtue and keeping their moral behavior steady and consistent.

The main goal of practicing generosity in moral life is to bring personal virtue and steady action together. This means not only acting morally, but also keeping thought, will, and behavior in harmony. Descartes emphasizes that by practicing self-discipline and using rational thinking, people can make the most moral impact within their abilities and bring their moral ideals into everyday life. This gives us a fresh way to understand Descartes: moral practice is not just an add-on to his first philosophy, but a clear example of how thinking and acting can work together in a philosophy focused on the individual.

Overall , Descartes' idea of generosity is at the center of moral practice. By balancing the will, rational thinking, and emotions, it helps turn personal virtue into real actions. Generosity allows people to act morally even in complicated social situations, and it brings together morality and rational thought in everyday life. This shows that Descartes' morality is not just abstract theory—it gives a practical guide for self-discipline, making wise choices, and acting virtuously. Through generosity, Descartes links thinking and acting, will and reason, and the individual with others, creating a complete moral system that still has lessons for us today.

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**Nourishment or Respect: Ethical Reflection on Active Euthanasia
from the Dual Perspectives of Confucian Filial Piety Ethics and
Kantian Moral Philosophy**

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Abstract:

Under the combined influence of filial piety emphasizing “nourishment” and technical rationality, patients at the end of life often face a predicament of diminished subjectivity and dignity, while the continuation of life may be alienated into a burden of numerical life-sustaining indicators. Although active euthanasia has gained some moral justification based on autonomy and dignity, it remains highly controversial globally. Particularly in the context of Chinese filial piety culture, where the practice of filial piety in end-of-life care often tends to prioritize nourishment over respect, active euthanasia struggles to gain normative acceptance. Through a contextualized reconstruction of Kantian moral philosophy, this paper explores the limited moral permissibility that active euthanasia might obtain under certain extreme conditions. It attempts to point out that the key to resolving this normative dilemma lies in carefully distinguishing the value hierarchy between “nourishment” and “respect”, and in shifting the core of filial piety from an absolutized adherence to “nourishment” toward compliance with “respect” as subsumed under rational laws in end-of-life medical situations, thereby offering a possible approach to addressing the normative challenges of active euthanasia.

Keywords: Confucian Filial Piety Ethics, Kantian Moral Philosophy, Active Euthanasia

1. Introduction

As the aging of China's population intensifies and the incidence of cancer continues to rise, end-of-life medical decisions for terminally ill patients are

increasingly becoming a core issue in bioethics. Increasingly urgent, according to data from the International Agency for Research on Cancer in 2024, cancer deaths in China reached 2.56 million in 2022, and according to demographic projections, this number will rise to 4.5 million by 2050 (Teng et al., 2024). Given that the vast majority of cancer patients will experience irreversible functional decline and dignity impairment at the end of life, and face the decision of whether to continue life-sustaining treatment, this implies that, in the end-of-life situation faced by such a large group of terminally ill patients, although the doctrine of the sanctity of life is lofty in its intent, its absolutist demands may not be beneficial. In this context, especially when palliative care is exhausted and the process of decline is protracted, and irreversible suffering continuously erodes subjectivity to the brink of annihilation, active euthanasia, aimed at preserving the dignity of life, thus becomes an ethical appeal for the last line of defense of subjectivity. Although it has gained some attention in international ethical discussions, it has no institutionalized space for expression in China, and is often dissolved in end-of-life medical practice due to the excessive emphasis on “nourishment” in the concept of filial piety, resulting in the silencing of patients’ subjective will and a profound ethical dilemma.

To this end, it is particularly necessary to deepen the theoretical ethical discussion concerning its rationality and moral permissibility. Taking as its ethical premise the clarification of conceptual boundaries of active euthanasia and the examination of the limits of Kant's prohibition against suicide in the context of terminal illness, this paper attempts then to explore the moral permissibility of active

euthanasia under the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity. On this basis, tracing back to the core of Confucian filial piety as expressed in the saying, “without reverence, what is there to distinguish the support given to parents from that given to dogs and horses?” this paper attempts, through a modern interpretation of “respect” (jing), both to carry forward its original meaning of respect for personhood and to engage in dialogue with Kant's rational law. It argues that in the end-of-life medical context, the ethical core of filial piety should perhaps shift from the absolutized adherence to “nourishment” (yang) to the observance of rational “respect”, thereby attempting, through such rational reconstruction, to offer a possible path of cross-cultural dialogical justification for the subjective claims of patients with limited rationality.

2. How Is It Possible: Clarifying the Preconditions of Reflection

Given the premise of whether there exists interpretive flexibility in extreme situations, directly appealing to Kant's moral philosophy to deliberate on active euthanasia may easily lead to conceptual confusion and trigger moral condemnation. Therefore, it is necessary to first clarify the scope of discussion of active euthanasia as addressed in this paper, and at the same time to examine the limits of applicability of Kant's prohibition against suicide in the specific context of terminal illness.

2.1 Conceptual Boundaries: Distinguishing Active Euthanasia from Suicide and Physician-Assisted Suicide

The term “euthanasia” originates from the ancient Greek word “euthanasia”, which is formed by the combination of “eu” (good) and “thanatos” (death),

representing a happy and painless death. Clearly, this expresses people's ideal of a “good death”. However, introducing this concept into the field of medical practice requires more specific distinctions. For this purpose, Western medical circles have divided euthanasia into two types: active and passive. So-called active euthanasia refers to the use of active measures such as injection of toxic agents or administration of toxic drugs to end the life of a terminally ill patient suffering in pain. Passive euthanasia, in contrast, focuses on discontinuing life-sustaining treatment, allowing natural death. In the conventional context, euthanasia usually refers to the former, with its core characteristic being active intervention for terminally ill patients who cannot be cured and wish to die(Wang, 2001). However, a brief distinction merely from a medical perspective is still insufficient to address the deeper ethical issues that may be involved. Professor Zhai Xiaomei in China has conducted an in-depth analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for euthanasia. She argues that euthanasia refers to, under conditions where there is no possibility of cure with current medical treatment, a competent terminally ill patient who is experiencing unbearable suffering, based on a rational decision and with the purpose of relieving suffering, sincerely requests the doctor to perform an active medical intervention(Zhai, 2000). Subsequently, with the advancement of research by many scholars, a consensus has gradually formed on the ethical boundaries and conditions for the application of euthanasia, namely, that it is a medical intervention initiated by the terminally ill patient who is in extreme suffering and suffering from an incurable disease, in which the doctor uses analgesic drugs to relieve pain or withdraws medical equipment to

allow the patient to die with dignity(Wang & LI, 2020). It can be seen that the understanding of euthanasia in different historical contexts is not entirely the same, yet each has its own characteristics. Following Professor Zhai Xiaomei's perspective, and in light of the common value concepts of the aforementioned definitions, this paper embeds them into the modern context of death, pointing out that the active euthanasia addressed in this paper is limited to patients with incurable terminal illness, for the purpose of relieving unbearable and irreversible suffering and preserving the dignity of their own lives, based on a rational decision, voluntarily and sincerely requesting the doctor to perform a medical intervention to accelerate the end of their lives.

When we advocate for death, the behavior behind it typically presupposes two motivations: rational and irrational. It is evident that the active euthanasia discussed in this article does not encompass individuals who have lost their personal subjectivity due to mental illness or various psychological pressures, but rather refers to decisions made by terminally ill patients as limited rational agents. However, caution is warranted: despite attempts to establish discussion boundaries for active euthanasia, this concept is frequently overgeneralized and easily conflated with similar concepts such as suicide and physician-assisted suicide. Therefore, it is necessary to make brief distinctions here. The core of suicide lies in an individual's autonomous termination of life, whereas active euthanasia involves rational decision-making and is not completed by the patient alone. It is clear that active euthanasia is not suicide in the general sense; it represents a more stringent form of life decision-making across

multiple dimensions including applicable subjects, rational motivations, and implementing agents, and should not be simplistically and crudely equated with suicide. Furthermore, active euthanasia is not equivalent to physician-assisted suicide; the former emphasizes active measures taken by physicians, while the latter involves patient self-administration with doctors serving only an assisting role.

2.2 Applicable Limits of Suicide Prohibition: From Absolute Ban to Conceptual Reconstruction

Before attempting to employ Kantian moral philosophy to deliberate on the permissibility of active euthanasia, it is necessary to carefully explore whether the prohibition of suicide advocated by Kant allows for any interpretive flexibility or room for category revision within the extreme context of terminal illness. It must be emphasized that this inquiry does not imply that Kant himself acknowledged exceptions; rather, it attempts to examine, from within the perspective of Kantian moral philosophy, the applicability and ethical boundaries of his core principles under extreme conditions, so as to reveal possible misinterpretations in traditional arguments against active euthanasia. In examining Kant's view on suicide, one finds that he regards the preservation of one's life as a "necessary duty." In his later major work of ethics, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (hereinafter referred to as *Groundwork*), he states: "If he destroys himself in order to escape from a painful condition, then he makes use of a person merely as a means for maintaining a tolerable condition up to the end of life. But a human being is not a thing, hence not something that can be used merely as a means, but must in all his actions always be

regarded as an end in itself'(Kant, 2005, p. 437).It can be seen that he considers suicide to be a destruction of personhood, a means of escaping a painful condition, and a violation of the law that "humanity is an end in itself". However, existing research has keenly pointed out that Kant' s true rationale for opposing suicide may not stem solely from the principle of autonomy that "humanity is an end in itself", but is more likely attributable to an implicit "theological and heteronomous" orientation in his thought. At the same time, Kant regarded this argument as valid based on his presupposition that moral maxims must be simple and clear; yet, in fact, there exist many maxims that are not simple but nevertheless possess universality (Hare & Shang, 2023).The issue of active euthanasia presents precisely such a borderline situation: for a terminally ill patient suffering from both physical and mental torment, whose bodily functions have irreversibly deteriorated and whose dignity has been completely lost in exchange for only the mechanical maintenance of vital signs, his personhood as a human being may have substantially disintegrated, and the capacity of the rational being for self-legislation and moral action may also have been suspended. At this point, preserving biological life itself may no longer be the vehicle for realizing "humanity as an end in itself", but instead has become alienated into a meaningless, purely physiological prolongation of suffering. In such a context, the patient' s choice to end his life does not consist in using personhood as a means to escape from suffering; rather, it is a refusal to allow personhood to be forcibly reduced to a carrier of suffering. Ending suffering itself is a defense of the last respect for humanity, not an instrumentalization.Therefore, under conditions of irreversible and extreme

suffering, if this universal principle of Kant's is rigidly applied to mere biological existence, it may instead violate the original intent of "humanity as an end in itself". By way of inference, a more rationally self-conscious choice of active euthanasia can be regarded as a dialectical return to the connotation of "humanity as an end in itself" in the end-of-life context, serving as an embodiment of the rational patient exercising autonomy as a moral agent and preserving his ultimate dignity, thereby obtaining a moral justification based on reason and the form of universalizability.

In summary, having clarified the above content, we are thus able to explore the possibility of active euthanasia on the premise of reconstructing, rather than deviating from, Kantian moral philosophy.

3. The Basis of Grounding: A Dual Deliberation on Principles

3.1 The Basis of Form: Deliberating on the Universalizability of Active Euthanasia

The deliberation on the justification of active euthanasia is often met with resistance from opponents who invoke the slippery slope fallacy derived from its consequences. Their concern is that once an individual's right to end life is recognized, the overall social evaluation of the value of life will inevitably shift downward, vulnerable groups may be led toward death under implicit pressure, and medical practice may also turn from treating illness and saving lives to efficiency-based disposal. Such concerns are not entirely unfounded, but their fundamental presupposition is that the moral judgment of active euthanasia should take the possible social consequences as its primary measure.

However, in Kant's view, one does not simply deny the morality of an action by

considering only its one-sided consequences. He emphasizes that an action done from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it, but in the maxim according to which it is determined (Kant, 2005, p. 406). The profundity of Kant's view lies in the fact that the morality of an action has nothing to do with the external consequential tendencies it realizes; rather, the fundamental point is whether its maxim can pass the requirement of universalization of pure practical reason, that is, whether it can be willed as a universal moral law. This establishes the core of moral judgment: the purity and universalizability of the maxim. In other words, only when an action proceeds from the autonomous will of a rational agent and its maxim can be consistently willed as a universal law does the action possess moral worth. It can be seen from this that the crux of the normative controversy surrounding active euthanasia does not lie in what social consequences this practice might bring about, but rather in whether the specific maxim on which the terminally ill patient's request to end life is based can be consistently willed as a universal law by rational agents.

As stated above, the connotation of active euthanasia does not imply that anyone who suffers may end his life; rather, the formulation of its maxim must be internally connected to the patient's prudent decision as a finite rational agent. Proceeding from the premise that the patient is a finite rational agent, it emphasizes that the core of the maxim is not driven by emotion, but is based on a rational assessment of his pathological condition and quality of life. By inference, seeking death merely due to pain is clearly not a valid universalizable maxim, meaning that a finite rational agent would not emotionally decide to end his life merely because of suffering. As is seen in

end-of-life medical practice, a 93-year-old patient who is a veteran of the War of Resistance against Japan, despite his overwhelming pain, still chooses to receive life-sustaining treatment in order to fulfill his children's filial piety (Sun & Chen, 2025). It can be seen that suffering itself is difficult to serve as a sufficient reason for self-legislation. That is to say, if the maxim underlying such a choice is to be conceived as a universal law, it would be necessary to exclude the irrational factors arising from mere emotional impulses caused by sensible inclinations such as suffering. By the same token, the same end-of-life decision made by a finite rational patient in the terminal stage of illness, after a prudent rational assessment, should be recognized as having an equal moral standing. Taking the first euthanasia case in Hanzhong, Shanxi Province, China, in 1986 as an example, the patient, Xia Suwen, suffering from advanced liver cirrhosis complicated by hepatic encephalopathy, endured the torment of ascites ulceration and maggots in bedsores, and cried out for death many times while conscious. Although the act of active euthanasia performed by her family members and doctors based on compassion and professional judgment was once prosecuted by the judicial authorities as "intentional homicide", the appeal was ultimately rejected in the second instance, and the persons involved were acquitted (Wang, 1990; "First Euthanasia Case Concluded," 1992). Evidently, Xia Suwen's repeated requests for death while conscious were not merely impulsive needs for relief triggered by momentary pain, but a lucid expression of her rational cognition regarding her life condition as a moral agent herself. In this sense, such a rational will that transcends mere sensible needs possesses the possibility of universalizability if it

is refined into a universal maxim containing strict limiting conditions. As Kant emphasized, “the moral worth of an action lies not in the effect expected from it, and so too not in any principle of action that has to borrow its motive from this expected effect”(Kant, 2005, p. 408). Thus, it can be seen that this proposition can be universalized in form without leading to self-contradiction at the level of the will. It is precisely on this basis that the Kantian approach does not deny the external consequential tendencies that active euthanasia might produce, but rather distinguishes the content of the maxim from its generalized understanding in the ordinary sense. By establishing the principle of rational autonomy, it seeks to dispel the concern about unconditionally permitting choices of death, thereby finding a universalizable moral approach for active euthanasia. As for the concerns arising from the slippery slope argument, they should be regulated by delineating rigorous legal rules and enforcement procedures, rather than using them to deny the universality of its moral justification.

3.2 The Basis of Substance: Deliberating on “A Human Being as an End in Itself” in Active Euthanasia

It is well known that in Kant’s moral philosophy, the principle “a human being is an end in itself” is a substantive proposition of central importance. Kant emphasizes, “a human being is not a thing, hence not something that can be used merely as a means, but must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in itself” (Kant, 2005, p. 437). On this basis, traditional arguments against active euthanasia have long invoked this principle, criticizing at the transcendental level that if active euthanasia

were universalized, it would alienate a human being into a tool subordinated to sensible preferences, thereby not only dissolving the status of human subjectivity but also fundamentally negating the absolute moral law that a human being is an end in itself. Admittedly, by the above approach, we can simply examine the universality of its moral justification; however, if we ignore the transcendental category, it would be difficult to achieve moral perfection. In this regard, we may first proceed to examine the end in itself.

In the perspective of Kant's moral philosophy, an end is by no means an object of desire at the empirical level, but rather an existence that possesses transcendental and absolute value. Just as Kant delineated the essential distinction regarding ends in the Groundwork, he pointed out that "those subjective ends, whose existence has a value for us merely as a result of our action, are not objective ends, that is, things whose existence in itself is an end, and indeed one for which no other end can be substituted, and which all other things ought merely to serve as means" (Kant, 2005, p. 436). It can be seen that subjective ends are merely sensible orientations of the results of action, possessing a relative value that migrates with desires, whereas objective ends point to the true moral law. It is precisely this distinction that constitutes the transcendental foundation for our understanding of ends. On the surface, the traditional arguments against active euthanasia appear to be an absolute adherence to its moral law. In fact, however, although they adhere to logical universality, they overlook the essential point that objective ends are inherent in rational beings as such, and fail to take into account the particularity of the patient-subject in the end-of-life medical

context, thereby possibly falling into a category mistake. As a result, they misinterpret a human being as an end in itself as meaning that life itself is an end, and consequently regard the biological continuation of life as a transcendental, inalienable objective end. What follows from this orientation is that, in the name of the justifiability of biological life-sustenance at the noumenal level, they carry out the instrumentalization of techno-rationalism at the phenomenal level, thereby indefinitely prolonging the biological life of terminally ill patients, and in reality encroaching upon the rational patient-subject's autonomy over the end of life. As reflected in the interview data of existing research, a 77-year-old patient with liver cancer said: "I felt unwell yesterday morning, and then the pain was so severe that I could not bear it. At that moment, I thought: stop tormenting me like this, let me die sooner, I wish I could die sooner" (Wang, 2023). Moreover, if this inference is accepted, it would mean that prolonging biological life under any circumstance should be regarded as a moral duty, even though continuous tracheal intubation may gradually disintegrate the patient's personhood, reducing the rational subject to a mere medical digital sign devoid of autonomy. Clearly, the objective end established on the basis of this inference would then lack its transcendental and absolute value. The ultimate reason lies in the fact that the core concept in the moral domain is not that the continued existence of life is an end in itself, but rather the rational subject's self-legislation regarding its own state of existence. If one departs from this connotation and speaks of ends merely in terms of the fact of continued existence, then one conceptually mistakes the carrier for the source of value. In other words, one

should not rashly equate biological life in the phenomenal world with the personhood of the rational subject, nor arbitrarily include all individuals who retain vital signs into the category of finite rational beings. For a terminally ill patient who continuously receives life-sustaining treatment, it is difficult to maintain the integrity of consciousness structure, autonomous judgment, and moral action merely by means of a biological shell. When the individual's existence is completely taken over by instruments, the presence of personhood can no longer be realized.

It can be seen from this that, in the extreme end-of-life medical context, active euthanasia may be consistent with the principle of "a human being as an end in itself". Its maxim is not motivated by the sensible preference to end physical suffering through death, but rather aims to refuse the continuous reduction of the finite rational subject to a mere appendage of life-sustaining technology. Therefore, active euthanasia might be understood as the finite rational subject's ultimate affirmation of its own personal dignity. The essence of its moral character lies in the rational subject's final purposive act of autonomy out of personal dignity, intending to prevent its further instrumentalization, rather than originating from a mere sensible preference for arbitrary or conflicting disposal of the biological carrier.

4. The Path of Approach: Addressing the Challenge of Normative Acceptance of Active Euthanasia from "Nourishment" to "Respect"

4.1 The Normative Challenge of Active Euthanasia from the Dimension of Filial Nourishment

Although we have already examined, in the strict sense of Kant's moral

philosophy, the justifiability of self-legislation by a patient as a finite rational subject in the end-of-life medical context, based on the fact of extreme suffering, for the sake of maintaining the integrity of rational personhood, it should still be noted that pure reason alone is not sufficient to fully drive moral practice. As some scholars have pointed out, human beings are not purely rational beings; they cannot act in accordance with moral laws solely by virtue of rational cognition. In the practice of human morality, emotion is indispensable (Hui, 2023). Furthermore, the sentiment of “Bu Ren” has long been deeply rooted in the Chinese ethical landscape. As Mencius states in *Gongsun Chou Shang*, “All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others... If men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain favor with the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor from a dislike of the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing”. Thus, “Bu Ren” can be regarded as the germ of *ren* (benevolence), while filial piety is the root of *ren*. Consequently, the sentiment of “Bu Ren” naturally constitutes the primal motivation for filial piety. What children or relatives, imbued with this sentiment, often desire is the presence of a morally complete loved one, as exemplified by the story of “Tasting Decoction for the Mother” in *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars*: “Emperor Wen of Han, named Heng, the third son of Emperor Gaozu, was initially enfeoffed as the King of Dai. His birth mother was Empress Dowager Bo. The emperor served her without any remissness. When his mother was ill for three years, the emperor did not

close his eyes in sleep and never removed his girdle. He would not allow any decoction to be administered unless he had personally tasted it. His benevolence and filial piety were renowned throughout the realm”. In the traditional ethical context, the act of children serving their parents day and night without removing their clothes during prolonged illness is often regarded as the ultimate expression of filial piety. However, in the current end-of-life medical context, if children rely solely on the sentiment of “Bu Ren” while neglecting the expressed will of the finite rational patient, the practice of filial piety may deviate from respecting the patient's subjective personhood, potentially sliding into a form of paternalism wrapped in warmth. Qualitative research has also pointed out that among elderly patients with multiple chronic conditions, some, in their expectation of a good death with respect to autonomy, prefer that their family members respect their own wishes regarding end-of-life decisions. Other patients, based on reasons such as avoiding increased end-of-life suffering, saving resources, and fear of losing autonomy, express that they do not wish to receive aggressive treatment or resuscitation (Zhang et al., 2025). It is evident that the practice of filial piety based on the sentiment of “Bu Ren” by children may conflict with the patient’s autonomous wishes. If the children’s decision is taken as absolutely dominant, this sentiment of “Bu Ren” may also easily slide into paternalism, plunging life-and-death decisions into a moral game. Consequently, it becomes difficult to effectively safeguard the end-of-life medical rights of the finite rational patient-subject, thereby creating an antinomial moral dilemma between emotional care and autonomous rights in the end-of-life medical context.

In fact, the crux of this normative acceptance dilemma lies in how, within the framework of rational logical principles, the emotions of diverse “ji” (selves) belonging to patients, children, and family members can be realized comprehensively. To address this ethical problem concerning ji, one may first appeal to the profound insights of Confucian ethical wisdom. In *The Analects*, “Wei Ling Gong”, when Zi Gong asked Confucius, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?”, the Master replied, “Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others”. This ethical method of extending oneself to others allows one’s own emotional experience, including that of filial care, to be cautiously extrapolated to the end-of-life situation of others, thereby establishing a measure of empathy to reconcile the emotional conflicts among the multiple ji. At the same time, however, some scholars have pointed out that although extending oneself to others and Kant’s moral law are similar in form, the former does not indicate that it is based on logical principles, and thus it may still be disintegrated by the emotional differences among various “ji” (Deng, 2020). It can be seen that extending oneself to others, though providing a methodological prototype to some extent, is not sufficient to fully resolve the ethical problem of ji. Then, it may be worthwhile to further trace the origin of the emotion of ji. It is not difficult to find that filial emotion is intrinsically connected to the value orientation of clinical care for terminally ill parents, and it often exhibits a tendency to emphasize nourishment over respect. In theory, this practical tendency not only reflects a certain value of the concept of filial piety in contemporary end-of-life medical care, but may also, in long-term practice,

lead to a shift in the connotation of filial piety, transforming it from the traditional connotation centered on respect and based on nourishment into a modern tendency that overemphasizes nourishment and may thereby marginalize or even obscure respect. That is, it focuses more on the value dimension of “nourishment”, the continuation of the parents’ biological life at the end of life, while relatively neglecting the value dimension of “respect”, the autonomous will of the patient.

4.2 From “Nourishment” to “Respect”: A Possible Response to the Challenge of Active Euthanasia

If the value hierarchy of filial nourishment and filial respect can be sufficiently clarified in end-of-life medical practice, it may be possible to alleviate the above-mentioned antinomic moral dilemma. Conversely, if the value hierarchy of the two is blurred, and the relatively weighty sentiment of filial nourishment and the family members’ sentiment of reluctance to see the patient suffer, which is called “Bu Ren” in the Confucian tradition, come to dominate in the context of Eastern Familism, they will be difficult to reconcile with active euthanasia. In other words, we may attempt to appeal to an adjustment of the value hierarchy from “Nourishment” to “Respect” in order to explore a possible way to mitigate the normative challenge of accepting active euthanasia.

The concept of “respect” stands as one of the core tenets of Confucian filial piety. The hierarchical relationship between “respect” and “nourishment” is explicitly articulated in *The Analects*, specifically in the chapter “Wei Zheng”. It records: “Zi You asked about filial piety. Confucius replied, “Nowadays, filial piety is considered

to be merely the ability to provide nourishment. However, dogs and horses are also provided with nourishment. Without respect, what is the distinction?" In the view of Confucius, the distinction between human beings and dogs or horses lies not in the capacity to provide "nourishment", but in the capacity for "respect". Therefore, the essence of filial piety does not merely emphasize the "nourishment" that sustains the biological existence of parents; rather, on the basis of nourishment, it should prioritize "respect" as its core value orientation, thereby manifesting concern for the personal dignity and emotions of one's parents. Furthermore, the complete implication of filial piety should encompass not only the practice of filial nourishment at the level of maintaining the parents' biological life, but also, more importantly, the practice of filial respect in the process of respecting and understanding the parents as finite rational subjects. This means that in the special context of the parents' terminal illness, children indeed have an obligation to perform filial nourishment, but they should also be mindful of its limit, namely, recognizing that "nourishment" is not based on an absolute or unlimited value scale, and that the value hierarchy between "nourishment" and "respect" should be carefully assessed. Patients in the terminal stage often find it difficult to achieve a state of comfort and ease associated with peacefully ending one's days. At this stage, if children rely excessively on medical technology to forcibly maintain biological life, the patient's existence may have only a symbolic presence on a purely technological level. Given the irreversibility of the disease, the irrational reluctance to let go may, to some extent, deviate from the core requirement of "respect" in filial piety. As a result, it can neither fulfill the children's original intention of filial

nourishment nor meet the terminally ill patient's expectation of a good death. As relevant research has pointed out, when family members, due to an excessive emphasis on filial piety, neglect the patient's own demands, forcing them to undergo treatments such as intubation and mechanical ventilation to sustain and prolong a life filled with suffering, this effectively constitutes an injustice to the patient (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, in the end-of-life stage, specifically under the premise that a patient with finite rationality actively expresses a will for active euthanasia, we might look back to the emotions extended from the core hierarchical value of filial "respect" in Confucian thought. This involves attempting to restrain the emotional impulses originating from the "nourishment" of the parents' biological life. Consequently, children should perhaps not merely stop at the level of "nourishment" that sustains biological life, but may instead embody this sentiment of filial "respect" rooted in blood ties within their end-of-life filial practices. In doing so, they may attempt to mitigate, to a certain extent, the emotional limitations resulting from an insufficient moral drive under the rule of rational law, thereby providing a possible line of thought for addressing the normative dilemma of active euthanasia.

Furthermore, we may also draw on the moral feeling evoked by the concept of "respect" in Kant's moral philosophy to attempt a further supplement to the problem of insufficient moral motivation. In the end-of-life medical context, a situation may arise in which children, even though they cognitively affirm the value hierarchy of "respect", may still experience an inner moral conflict arising from the sentiment of "Bu Ren" rooted in blood ties, making it difficult for them to fully comply with the

parents' autonomous will. The crux of this problem lies in the fact that sensible emotion cannot transcend its own emotional preferences and cannot easily serve as a universal moral motive, and thus may be insufficient to lead to a consistent choice. It is worth noting that although Kant's emphasis on "respect" and the Confucian emphasis on the question "without respect, what is the difference?" share a certain resonance in value orientation, namely, that both point to a moral feeling that transcends one's own sentiment of "Bu Ren" and emphasize regarding the finite patient as a moral subject, they are nonetheless different, because the sources of these two feelings are significantly different.

In Kant's philosophy, "respect" is the only emotion acknowledged as having legitimacy on moral grounds. This emotion is entirely aroused by pure practical reason; its source is not any sensible object or empirical inclination, but the direct presentation of the pure moral law itself within the consciousness of the rational subject. As he points out, "only that which is connected with my will merely as a ground, but never as an effect, that which does not serve my inclination but outweighs it, or at least excludes it entirely from calculation in choice, and hence the mere law itself, can be an object of respect and thus a command" (Kant, 2005, p. 407). In short, the essence of "respect" lies in the rational subject's transcendence of the domination of sensible inclinations, realizing a pure obedience to and intrinsic identification with the moral law. Relevant research, based on a reconstruction of Kant's doctrine of respect, has pointed out that so-called respect is respect for the moral law itself, which in sensible experience manifests specifically as a moral feeling accompanying the

recognition of duty. Respect does not arise out of nothing; rather, it is the result of the joint practical effect of three susceptible predispositions: conscience, love of humanity, and respect, which respectively stimulate, extend, and personally confirm the subject's moral feeling (Zhan, 2025). Therefore, when this is projected onto the end-of-life context, children may begin with the feeling of respect that bears pure moral motivation. By gradually eliminating the tendency toward self-conceit arising from the feeling of filial nourishment, and by attempting to suppress the sensible preference that transfers their own sentiment of "Bu Ren" onto the patient's autonomous will, they may be able to form, in their own minds, an attitude of respect that transcends blood ties, thereby making a moral choice that is more balanced and more respectful of the autonomous will of the finite rational patient-subject.

It is particularly important that Kant profoundly pointed out: "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without limitation, except a good will"(Kant, 2005, p. 400). This means that the "good" possesses uniqueness and supremacy, and should not be presupposed on any other empirical end. By drawing on Kant's concept of respect, we may provide a philosophical justification for the legitimacy of "filial respect" as a good. In the discussion of active euthanasia, if children, as significant stakeholders in end-of-life decisions, still insist on maintaining equipment or constantly administering resuscitation when the patient's life course has become irreversible, their actions may appear to be good deeds motivated by filial piety, but from Kant's perspective, they may not arise from a pure good will. Such actions may in fact be an attempt to reverse

the parents' terminal condition by means of blindly employing excessive medical treatment at a high cost. Clearly, an action based on such sensible material may disregard the parents' physical and mental suffering as well as their autonomous will, and thus does not meet the fundamental requirement of the "good will" as articulated by Kant. Conversely, if children, out of the feeling of respect, always regard their terminally ill parents as ends in themselves possessing rational autonomy, rather than as objects to be "saved" or as means to satisfy their own emotional need for filial nourishment, their actions may then approach the good will emphasized by Kant. This practice of filial piety, motivated purely by respect, aims at the recognition and preservation of the parents' complete personhood as finite rational subjects, and may therefore be regarded, in the end-of-life context, as a good act in the sense of a higher rationality.

From this perspective, "respect" that integrates emotional concern and rational self-consciousness may not dissolve traditional filial piety, but rather represents an exploratory attempt within the context of modern end-of-life ethics. It seeks, on the basis of respect for the personhood of the subject, to find a prudent moral choice and the possibility of balance for the finite rational patient-subject under certain strict conditions, thereby perhaps reconciling the moral conflicts among multiple "ji" and offering a possible path for addressing the normative challenge of active euthanasia. Of course, beyond this, if the finite rational patient-subject has not expressed a wish for euthanasia, children should not impose it; rather, on the basis of grasping the value hierarchy between "nourishment" and "respect", they should continue to provide

appropriate medical care, which is itself an expression of “respect”.

5. Conclusion

Admittedly, it is undoubtedly a heavy matter for children to discuss their parents' good death, and even more so to discuss active euthanasia. Yet if children, due to an incomplete understanding of “filial piety”, avoid this heaviness and choose life-sustaining treatments that forcibly maintain their parents' lives, then this heaviness will be transferred onto the parents, causing them to endure unnecessary suffering in irreversible illness. This paper attempts, through a dialogue between Kantian moral philosophy and Confucian filial piety ethics, to clarify the value hierarchy between “nourishment” and “respect” in the contemporary end-of-life context. It emphasizes that if a finite rational patient-subject has clearly expressed his or her will and meets the conditions of strict rational self-determination, then the Confucian notion of “respect” may be taken as the core value orientation of filial practice, while Kant's concept of respect can provide a legitimate moral motivation on the basis of moral grounds, thereby offering, to a certain extent, a possible approach to the normative challenge of accepting active euthanasia. It should be emphasized that this exploratory analysis is limited to theoretical ethical discussion. Active euthanasia has not yet attained general legal legitimacy under current legal frameworks, and this paper neither intends to evaluate nor advocate for any legal system, but merely attempts to provide a possible cross-cultural comparative ethical perspective for understanding value conflicts in end-of-life decision-making.

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**Moral Rationality in Modern Public Rescue: An Ethical Examination of
Bystander Assistance in Elderly Fall Incidents**

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Abstract

Public assistance after an older adult falls is not merely a matter of individual moral choice. It is a composite issue in which ethical motivation, legal responsibility, risk perception, first-aid competence, and social trust intersect. Building on and substantially revising the original manuscript, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on ethics, social psychology, law, and public health. It examines why bystanders hesitate in fall-related rescue situations and how a modern public assistance framework can be developed without abandoning the traditional moral resource of benevolence. The paper argues that Confucian ideas of compassion and care remain important ethical foundations for helping behavior. Yet in a highly mobile society where responsibility is complex and risk information travels quickly, moral condemnation alone cannot reliably increase rescue willingness. Hesitation arises mainly from four sources: perceived legal uncertainty, limited trust among strangers, insufficient first-aid knowledge, and the amplification of risk through memorable media cases. In response, this paper proposes an ethical model of rational benevolence. Under this model, a rescuer should assist while ensuring personal safety, respecting the recipient's will, preserving necessary factual records, following basic first-aid principles, and connecting the person to professional emergency services. Rational benevolence does not weaken traditional moral concern; rather, it gives benevolence a sustainable form under modern conditions of risk.

Keywords: public rescue; elderly falls; rational benevolence; risk perception; social trust; Good Samaritan protection; first-aid education

1. Introduction

Whether a bystander should assist an older adult who has fallen appears at first to be a simple everyday decision. In substance, however, it condenses several tensions in modern

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public ethics. For the person who has fallen, the incident may involve fracture, head injury, loss of mobility, or even life-threatening complications. The World Health Organization defines a fall as an event in which a person inadvertently comes to rest on the ground, floor, or another lower level, and identifies falls as a major global public health problem, especially for older adults who face a higher risk of severe injury and death (World Health Organization, 2021). Assistance after a fall is therefore not an abstract moral topic; it concerns life protection, public safety, and the practical capacity for mutual aid.

In actual situations, however, bystanders do not always act immediately. Hesitation, observation, avoidance, recording, or calling emergency services before direct intervention is often simplified in public discussion as indifference or selfishness. Such moral judgments may be intuitively understandable, but they also obscure the structural conditions behind the behavior. Rescue in modern public space usually occurs among strangers. Information at the scene is incomplete, the injury is uncertain, responsibility is unclear, and the rescuer may fear misunderstanding, legal liability, or secondary harm caused by inappropriate movement. Rescue hesitation is therefore not equivalent to moral failure. It is better understood as moral motivation constrained by legal, cognitive, technical, and social conditions.

The central question of this paper is as follows: When traditional benevolent ethics enters a highly mobile society of strangers, why do individuals oscillate between “I should help” and “I should protect myself”? How can risk awareness be recognized without allowing it to develop into a general withdrawal from public responsibility? The paper argues that public rescue must move from a single moral appeal to a coordinated framework of ethics, law, skills, and technology. Only when goodwill is supported by operable procedures, predictable legal boundaries, and learnable skills can moral impulse become stable public action.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

First, traditional benevolence provides the value foundation for rescue behavior. Confucian ethics emphasizes compassion, reciprocity, and the extension of care from familiar relations to broader human relations. Its core is not a demand for reckless self-sacrifice, but an effort to cultivate sensitivity toward the suffering of others. Fei Xiaotong's analysis of the differential mode of association shows that moral responsibility in traditional society was often structured through kinship, locality, and familiar social networks (Fei, 1992). The difficulty is that modern urban public space is no longer organized primarily by familiar relations. Stable interaction, reputational constraint, and long-term reciprocity are often absent. Traditional moral resources must therefore be institutionalized and proceduralized if they are to operate among strangers.

Second, the theory of risk society helps explain the modern background of rescue hesitation. Beck (1992) argues that modernity does not simply eliminate risk; it makes risk more widely identified, communicated, and calculated. Research on risk perception likewise shows that risk judgment is not determined solely by objective probability, but is also shaped by visibility, memorability, and affective intensity (Slovic, 1987). In elderly fall rescue situations, a small number of highly publicized disputes may be remembered more easily than a large number of uneventful acts of assistance. Through the availability heuristic, such cases can magnify the perceived probability of negative consequences (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Third, social psychology reveals the situational mechanisms of bystander behavior. Darley and Latané's classic study demonstrated that the presence of others in an emergency may diffuse responsibility and reduce the likelihood of immediate intervention (Darley &

Latané, 1968). Helping is not merely a direct expression of character. It is influenced by the number of bystanders, ambiguity of the situation, perceived responsibility, self-efficacy, and expectations of social evaluation. Dovidio et al. (2006) further argue that prosocial behavior is shaped by emotional empathy, normative pressure, cost-benefit estimation, and perceived competence. The question of whether to help an older adult who has fallen cannot be adequately addressed through the binary of conscience versus selfishness; it requires analysis of the decision process itself.

Fourth, moral philosophy offers several normative perspectives. Kantian deontology stresses that helping a person in distress expresses a generalizable moral duty (Kant, 1785/1993). Utilitarianism asks how different courses of action affect overall well-being (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1863/2001). Virtue ethics highlights the cultivation of courage, prudence, and benevolence (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/2009). The ethics of care reminds us that concrete relationships, vulnerability, and contextual sensitivity are central to moral judgment (Gilligan, 1982). Taken together, these perspectives support the analytical framework of this paper: public rescue requires both benevolent motivation and prudent judgment; it must avoid both indifference and recklessness.

3. The Action Structure of Elderly Fall Rescue

Assistance at the scene of an elderly fall is not a single instantaneous act. It is a sequence of decisions. The first step is situational recognition: the bystander must determine whether the older adult is in danger, conscious, bleeding, breathing abnormally, or exposed to vehicles or other environmental threats. The second step is responsibility activation: the bystander must translate “someone needs help” into “there is something I can do.” The third step is competence assessment: the potential rescuer must determine whether they can call

emergency services, maintain scene safety, reassure the person, or organize help from others. The fourth step is responsibility management: the rescuer must consider how to prevent misunderstanding, preserve factual records, and involve other witnesses.

This structure indicates that rescue is not simply an outburst of moral passion. It is the combination of moral motivation and practical reason. If the older adult is conscious, the rescuer should first ask about their condition and needs, assist with contacting emergency services, reach family members or community staff if possible, and invite other bystanders to participate. If head, neck, or spinal injury is suspected, first-aid guidance commonly advises that the person should not be moved unless there is a greater danger at the scene or movement is necessary for CPR or control of severe bleeding (American Red Cross, n.d.). This means that “lifting the person up” is not always the best form of assistance. In some situations, not moving the person, calling professional help, remaining present, and monitoring the condition are more responsible forms of care.

Public discussion should therefore move from the binary of “to lift or not to lift” to the practical question of “how to assist safely, lawfully, and effectively.” Binary language produces moral shame but rarely provides an action plan. Procedural knowledge lowers the threshold for action: ensure scene safety, ask and explain one’s intention, call emergency services, ask another person to record or guide traffic, avoid unnecessary movement without proper training, and remain with the person until professional assistance arrives. Such procedures do not weaken moral passion. They provide it with a proper channel.

4. Typical Cases and Social Memory

The hesitation surrounding public rescue is often shaped by social memory. Social memory is not identical to the facts of a case. It refers to the collective impression formed through media coverage, online retelling, and everyday conversation. The Peng Yu case is frequently invoked in public discourse as an example of the possible legal risks of helping. Academic discussion has shown that the long-term influence of the case lies not only in the case itself, but also in the way it was repeatedly narrated as a warning about the risks of assisting strangers (Young, 2013). This paper therefore does not treat the case as statistical evidence for the actual probability of liability. It treats it as an example of how risk imagination is formed and circulated.

The Wang Yue incident presents another dimension of bystander behavior and public emotion. In 2011, a two-year-old girl in Foshan, Guangdong, was hit by vehicles and several passers-by failed to intervene promptly, leading to broad public debate (Al Jazeera, 2011). Although this incident is not identical to elderly fall rescue, it reveals how diffusion of responsibility, situational ambiguity, and delayed action can have severe consequences in emergencies. It also reminds us that public rescue cannot depend solely on individual moral courage at the scene. It requires clearer social norms and lower-cost paths of action.

The lesson from these cases is twofold. On one hand, individual cases should not be exaggerated into sweeping judgments about the morality of a whole society. On the other hand, cases do shape public scripts of risk. Once such a script forms, a bystander who sees an older adult fall may not first ask “How can I help?” but instead “Will this create trouble for me?” This psychological shift is a practical expression of the availability heuristic. Moral criticism alone is unlikely to reverse it. Legal education, positive case communication, public

first-aid training, and on-site cooperation mechanisms are needed to rebuild the expectation that help can be protected, understood, and properly performed.

5. Structural Sources of the Dilemma

First, there is a gap between legal protection and public awareness. Article 184 of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China provides that a person who voluntarily provides emergency assistance and thereby causes harm to the recipient bears no civil liability (Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, 2020, art. 184). This article establishes an important legal foundation for Good Samaritan assistance. Yet the existence of a legal rule does not automatically become public confidence. Ordinary people at an emergency scene do not necessarily recall specific provisions, nor do they always understand the conditions, evidence issues, or remedies involved. Legal protection must therefore enter everyday cognition through accessible legal education, case explanation, and community-based public communication.

Second, assistance among strangers faces a weak trust foundation. In traditional communities, helping behavior is supported by shared relations, reputation, and long-term reciprocity. Modern urban life is marked by mobility, anonymity, and short-lived relations. Giddens (1990) argues that trust under modernity increasingly depends on abstract systems rather than face-to-face relations alone. In other words, for mutual aid among strangers to occur reliably, there must be institutional endorsement, public rules, and verifiable procedures. Without these mediating structures, individuals tend to place self-protection ahead of the impulse to assist.

Third, insufficient skill transforms a moral issue into a competence issue. Many bystanders are not without sympathy; they do not know how to help without causing harm. Research in moral psychology and neuroscience suggests that empathy can arouse moral concern, but empathy itself does not necessarily supply the correct course of action (Decety & Cowell, 2014). When assisting an older adult who has fallen, a bystander who lacks basic knowledge about fractures, stroke, hypoglycemia, cardiac arrest, or spinal injury may become trapped in the condition of wanting to help but not daring to act. First-aid education is therefore not a technical supplement outside moral education. It is a necessary condition of modern moral practice.

Fourth, media communication alters the structure of risk perception. Negative cases are more conflictual and dramatic, and therefore more likely to circulate widely. Ordinary successful rescues without dispute rarely become news. Over time, the sample that the public receives is not equivalent to the real distribution of events; it is a high-emotion sample filtered through the logic of communication. Risk perception may then drift away from actual probability. Public discussion that repeatedly highlights extreme cases can intensify rescue hesitation. A more constructive approach is to present legal protections, professional guidance, and successful mutual-aid cases together.

6. Coordinating Law, Technology, and First-Aid Skills

The protection of Good Samaritan assistance requires attention to both legal boundaries and behavioral procedures. In the United States, all states have some form of Good Samaritan law. The general idea is to protect unpaid, good-faith emergency assistance from ordinary negligence liability under specified conditions, while excluding intentional harm and gross negligence (West & Varacallo, 2022). This experience shows that modern law does not ask

rescuers to assume unlimited responsibility. Rather, it creates a boundary between encouraging assistance and preventing reckless conduct. Article 184 of the Chinese Civil Code provides a basic basis for immunity. The next task is to improve public awareness and reduce perceived uncertainty through case explanation, legal aid, and accessible legal communication.

Technology can reduce information asymmetry at the scene, but it cannot replace ethical judgment. Mobile phone recording, surveillance footage, emergency call records, and the presence of property managers or community workers may help establish facts. Yet the purpose of recording should not be voyeuristic observation or secondary online dissemination. It should be the protection of both the recipient and the rescuer. A reasonable approach is to ask a third party to help record the scene, call emergency services, maintain order, and provide information to professionals, provided that privacy is respected and rescue is not delayed.

First-aid education is the most direct and practical path for improvement. Schools, communities, workplaces, and public service institutions can teach basic knowledge such as how to check consciousness and breathing, when to call emergency services, when not to move an injured person, how to control bleeding, and how to locate an automated external defibrillator. The goal is not to turn ordinary citizens into medical professionals. It is to teach the minimum correct action. When people know what they can do, what they should avoid, and when to hand over to professionals, willingness to help is more likely to become action.

Community support mechanisms are equally important. Communities can establish first-aid volunteer networks, maps of publicly available AEDs, emergency contact procedures for property management, and registration systems for emergency contacts of older residents.

Where individuals incur reasonable costs because of assistance, legal consultation, psychological support, and necessary compensation mechanisms may also be explored. These arrangements do not fully institutionalize morality. They tell individuals that they are not alone in bearing risk. The more public assistance receives institutional recognition and collective support, the less likely it is to be overwhelmed by individual risk calculation.

7. Rational Benevolence as an Ethical Model

Rational benevolence is the central concept clarified in this revision. It contains two dimensions. Benevolence means that the suffering of another person cannot be treated as completely irrelevant to oneself. Rationality means that rescue must be guided by safety, evidence, competence, and consequences. Rational benevolence rejects two extremes: one treats unconditional impulsive rescue as the only moral option; the other withdraws entirely from public responsibility in the name of risk. A mature public ethic should enable people both to want to help and to know how to help within clear boundaries.

At the individual level, rational benevolence can be translated into five principles. First, safety comes first: determine whether there are vehicles, fire, crowding, or other immediate dangers. Second, respect the person's will: when the person is conscious, ask whether assistance is needed and explain what one intends to do. Third, use the minimum necessary intervention: when the injury is uncertain, do not move the person casually; prioritize emergency services and supportive presence. Fourth, create cooperative witnessing: ask other bystanders to call, record, contact family members, or maintain order. Fifth, hand over to professionals: when emergency personnel, relatives, or community staff arrive, explain what was observed and complete the transfer of responsibility.

At the social level, rational benevolence requires public systems to reduce the threshold of goodwill. Moral education should not merely emphasize that one ought to help; it should teach how to help. Legal education should not merely list provisions; it should explain common situations. Media coverage should not only amplify disputes; it should also report successful assistance and professional advice. Community governance should not place all responsibility on isolated individuals; it should provide mechanisms for on-site cooperation. In this way, benevolence becomes not only a demand on the inner character of the individual but also a learnable, supportable, and sustainable public capacity.

Rational benevolence also reconciles the tension between duty-based and consequence-based ethics. From a deontological perspective, helping a person in distress expresses respect for persons. From a consequentialist perspective, prudent assistance reduces inappropriate movement, misunderstanding, and dispute. From the perspective of virtue ethics, rational benevolence combines courage with prudence rather than celebrating rashness. From the ethics of care, it recognizes both the vulnerability of the recipient and the limits of the rescuer. Rational benevolence is therefore not a downgrading of traditional morality. It is the practical renewal of benevolence under modern conditions.

8. The Limited Use of International Experience

International experience can provide a comparative perspective, but it cannot be copied mechanically. The Good Samaritan laws in the United States show that legal systems can explicitly protect good-faith rescuers while retaining limits for intentional harm and gross negligence (West & Varacallo, 2022). This design recognizes that ordinary people in emergencies cannot be expected to meet professional medical standards, while also requiring basic reasonableness. In the Chinese context, the existing civil-law immunity provision can

serve as a foundation. The crucial task is to help the public understand its boundaries and transform legal text into a perceptible expectation of safety.

Public health experience also shows that fall rescue should not be understood only as on-site assistance. Fall prevention matters. The World Health Organization emphasizes education, training, safer environments, and policy support as part of fall-prevention strategies (World Health Organization, 2021). Improving elderly fall assistance therefore requires attention not only to whether bystanders reach out, but also to living environments, barrier-free public space, community health management, and family care. The more effectively falls and severe injuries are prevented, the less pressure is placed on emergency bystander response.

This paper therefore adopts a limited approach to international comparison. It draws on legal immunity, first-aid training, and public-health prevention, but it does not treat any external model as a complete answer. Reconstructing public rescue ethics in China must take account of local family culture, community structure, urban lifestyles, and legal realities. The more feasible question is not which society is morally superior in the abstract, but which concrete mechanisms can enable ordinary people to help others more willingly, more safely, and more competently when the moment arrives.

9. Discussion and Future Research

This paper attempts to move beyond the binary opposition between moral condemnation and self-protection. Criticism of bystander indifference has its place, because public life cannot lose responsiveness to human vulnerability. Yet if criticism remains emotional and does not provide legal, technical, and cooperative mechanisms, it is unlikely to change behavior. Conversely, explaining all hesitation as rational self-protection weakens the ethical

foundation of mutual aid. The key is to recognize the limits of individuals while requiring institutions and education to assume their proper responsibilities.

Future research can proceed in three directions. First, more rigorous empirical studies are needed to distinguish the effects of perceived legal risk, first-aid competence, self-efficacy, number of bystanders, and scene environment on rescue willingness. Second, policy evaluation should examine public awareness of Article 184 of the Civil Code, the influence of media reporting, and the behavioral effects of community first-aid training. Third, cross-cultural research can analyze how different societies balance individual liberty, legal responsibility, and public mutual aid.

Writing and public discussion should also be cautious about using unverifiable data to manufacture certainty. Articles on public ethics must distinguish between cases and statistics. A case can sharpen problem awareness, but it cannot by itself justify a general conclusion. Statistics can support an argument, but only when the source, measurement, and scope are clear and reviewable. Evidence-based caution prevents ethical discussion from sliding into moralized accusation or emotional mobilization.

10. Conclusion

The dilemma of assisting older adults after a fall does not show a simple failure of traditional morality. It reveals the practical transformation required when traditional benevolent ethics operates within modern conditions of risk. Individuals still possess moral capacities for sympathy and assistance, but those capacities must be supported by legal protection, first-aid skills, factual transparency, and community coordination before they can

reliably become action. The key question is not whether morality is needed, but how morality can become practicable in complex situations.

The model of rational benevolence proposed in this paper offers a middle path. It maintains concern for the life and dignity of the person in need while recognizing the safety, competence, and responsibility boundaries of the rescuer. It inherits the core spirit of benevolence while incorporating practical knowledge from law, public health, and social psychology. Only when goodwill no longer depends solely on isolated individual courage, and instead receives institutional, technical, and cooperative support, can mutual aid among strangers become more stable.

Ultimately, elderly fall rescue should not be treated as a moral test for any single group. It should be understood as a test of modern public competence. A more mature public ethic does not require every person to take unlimited risks in every situation. It enables more ordinary people to take timely, benevolent action under conditions that are bearable, understandable, and protected.

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Confucius' "Teaching in Accordance with Students' Aptitude" Realized Through AI: A Case of Philosophical Academic Writing Course Reform

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Abstract

Large philosophy classes make it difficult to realize Confucius' ideal of teaching in accordance with students' aptitude. Conventional assessments poorly capture growth in higher-order writing skills. This article reports a 16-week reform of an undergraduate philosophical academic writing course that integrated an AI "learning companion," structured "arguing-with-AI" activities, and peer-supported clinical tutoring. Drawing on work in intelligent tutoring, stealth assessment, and emerging research on generative AI in philosophy teaching, we designed an 8-week conceptual module plus an 8-week clinic-style supervision module. Using a quasi-experimental historical cohort design ($N = 79$), we compared rubric-based writing scores, process data from AI interaction logs, and student self-reports across cohorts. The AI-supported design was associated with greater increases in argumentative coherence, evidence use, and originality in this sample than a traditional design, and it expanded individualized feedback coverage. We discuss how generative AI can extend—but not replace—instructors' capacity to enact individualized instruction at scale in a philosophy context, and outline implications for AI governance and academic integrity.

Key words: individualized instruction; generative AI; philosophy writing; higher education; stealth assessment

1.Introduction

In Analects 11.22, Confucius offers different answers to different students regarding the same question., illustrating his pedagogical maxim of teaching "in accordance with the student's aptitude". The underlying idea—that instruction should

be responsive to individual learners' needs rather than uniformly delivered—is widely shared in contemporary educational psychology and pedagogy. Research on differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and adaptive technologies all converges on the view that learning improves when teaching connects with learners' prior knowledge, interests, and difficulties.

Yet in mass higher education, particularly in writing-intensive humanities courses, this ideal remains hard to realize. In many institutions, academic writing courses serve large cohorts and are taught by a small number of instructors with limited time for individual supervision. Students may receive only one or two rounds of feedback on a term paper, and that feedback often focuses on surface-level mechanics or broad comments rather than the fine-grained reasoning and textual engagement that philosophical writing demands. As a result, some students complete such courses having learned the formalities of citation and structure but still lacking confidence in constructing and defending a philosophical argument.

1.1 Challenges in philosophical academic writing

Philosophical writing poses distinctive challenges. Beyond form, students must learn to:

Formulate clear, focused questions in a dense conceptual landscape;

Map existing positions and arguments with textual accuracy;

Make the inferential structure of their own arguments explicit;

Anticipate and respond to objections;

Balance fidelity to texts with critical originality.

These abilities are inherently developmental and deeply personal: different students struggle with different parts of the process. Some can generate ideas but fail to structure them; others can recite texts but hesitate to take a position; some write fluently but loosely, with hidden assumptions and gaps in reasoning.

Traditional assessment formats—one major paper plus a handful of assignments—are ill-suited to tracking such development. They capture a snapshot of performance but reveal little about how students arrived at it, which strategies they used, and where they improved or regressed. Furthermore, feedback in such settings is often generic (“clarify your argument”) rather than specific to the student’s evolving pattern of strengths and weaknesses.

1.2 AI-supported individualized instruction and stealth assessment

Research on artificial intelligence in education (AIED) has long explored ways to deliver individualized support at scale. Intelligent tutoring systems (ITSs) adapt problem sequences, hints, and feedback based on estimated learner states. Meta-analytic work suggests that some ITSs can rival, and occasionally match, the effectiveness of human tutoring in procedural domains such as mathematics and physics (VanLehn, 2011). Koedinger et al. (1997) showed that ITSs can be integrated into ordinary school settings and still produce meaningful gains.

A complementary strand, stealth assessment, embeds unobtrusive measures of competence within ongoing activity rather than relying solely on separate tests (Shute & Ventura, 2013). Process data—such as sequences of actions, time on task, and choice patterns—are used to infer underlying skills and update learner models. While most stealth assessment work has focused on games and STEM learning environments, the basic logic—using rich process traces to understand and support learning—can, in principle, extend to writing.

1.3 Generative AI in academic and philosophical writing

The emergence of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT adds a new dimension to AIED. Unlike domain-specific tutors, LLMs are general text generators that respond to natural language prompts. They can brainstorm ideas, suggest outlines, rephrase sentences, and even mimic argumentative styles. Early empirical work indicates that students, especially second-language writers, use LLMs to generate ideas, improve organization, and refine language (Cheng et al., 2025). At the same time, LLMs are prone to “hallucinations,” producing plausible-looking but false information and fabricated references (Oertner, 2024), and can encourage a form of superficial engagement where students accept fluent prose without critically evaluating its content.

Within philosophy education, scholars have begun to explore more reflexive uses of AI. Mouser (2024) suggests that ChatGPT can be treated as a “student” to be taught: by attempting to explain philosophical concepts and arguments to the model and then critiquing its paraphrases, human students are pushed to clarify their own understanding.

Lemanek (2025) proposes using ChatGPT to generate “artificial referee reports” on student drafts, which students then must answer, thereby rehearsing the skills involved in responding to peer review. These designs align with a view of AI as a fallible interlocutor whose outputs are raw material for critical thinking rather than authoritative answers.

1.4 Gaps and research questions

Despite this emerging body of work, three gaps remain relevant to philosophical writing instruction:

Domain specificity. Most AI-in-writing studies focus on general composition or language learning, not on the particular epistemic and argumentative norms of philosophy.

Course-level integration. AI is often used for single tasks (e.g., generating a draft) rather than integrated across an entire course with aligned pedagogy and assessment.

Integrity and agency. There is limited empirical evidence on how AI-mediated support interacts with academic integrity norms and students’ sense of authorship in credit-bearing, high-stakes contexts.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining a reform of an undergraduate philosophical academic writing course at a large Chinese university. Rather than testing an isolated intervention under laboratory conditions, we analyze how an AI “learning companion,” structured “argue-with-AI” tasks, and a peer-supported clinical tutoring

model functioned in a real institutional context.

We asked:

To what extent was the AI-supported design associated with increased individualized feedback and more differentiated writing support in a large philosophy class?

How were key philosophical writing competencies — argumentative coherence, evidence use, originality — related to participation in the AI-supported design, compared with a previous, non-AI cohort?

How did students and tutors perceive the role of AI in relation to academic integrity and authorship?

Given the quasi-experimental, historical cohort design, we treat our analyses as providing evidence of associations rather than strong causal claims. Our aim is to offer a theoretically informed and empirically grounded case study that can inform, and be refined by, future work on AI-supported philosophy writing instruction.

2. Methods

2.1 Design and participants

We used a quasi-experimental historical cohort design. Participants were third-year undergraduate philosophy majors at Guizhou University enrolled in the compulsory course “Thesis Writing and Academic Norms.”

Reform cohort (AI-supported condition). 2025–2026 academic year, 41 students

(22 female, 19 male). The course used the AI-supported design described below.

Comparison cohort (traditional condition). 2024–2025 academic year, 38 students (21 female, 17 male). The course followed a traditional design, emphasizing lectures on formats and norms, one term paper, and limited written feedback.

Students in both cohorts had similar admission scores and prior GPA; institutional records showed no statistically significant differences on these indicators. No students withdrew from either course, and all completed major assessments.

The choice of a historical comparison was driven by ethical and practical constraints: the department preferred not to randomize students within the same cohort to substantially different experiences in a compulsory course. We thus interpret findings conservatively as associations conditioned on cohort-level differences.

2.2 Course intervention

2.2.1 Overall structure and design principles

The reformed course spanned 16 weeks (32 contact hours), divided into two phases:

Weeks 1–8: Conceptual and norms module. Students developed core skills in problem formulation, literature review, argument structure, citation, and AI literacy.

Weeks 9–16: Clinical supervision module. Students iteratively drafted, critiqued, and revised their papers, engaging in “argue-with-AI” activities, peer review, and tutor consultations, culminating in a full paper and mock defense.

Four design principles guided the intervention:

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Cognitive ecology. AI, knowledge graphs, rubrics, and peer feedback were treated as cognitive tools that, together with teachers and students, form an extended reasoning system.

Problem-driven learning. Each student developed a single research question into a full philosophical paper through staged tasks (topic proposal, literature review, argument outline, draft, revision).

Adaptive plus stealth assessment. While we did not implement a full ITS, we used AI and simple analytics to support differentiated tasks and used process data (prompt logs, reference verification tables, revision histories) to infer aspects of competence.

Social collaboration and governance. A tutor team and heterogeneous peer groups provided multi-source feedback, while explicit AI governance measures addressed hallucinations and authorship concerns.

2.2.2 AI learning companion and governance

Students in the reform cohort used a university-hosted large language model configured as an “AI learning companion.” The system logged all prompts and responses with timestamps and anonymized identifiers. In designing AI use, we aimed to strike a balance: we wanted students to benefit from AI’s generative and diagnostic capacities, but we also wanted to avoid dependence and preserve academic integrity.

Three governance mechanisms were implemented:

Prompt templates. We provided structured templates for three functions: retrieval,

generation, and critique. For example, retrieval prompts required AI to list only references that could be found in CNKI or Web of Science and to provide essential metadata (author, year, journal). Generation prompts asked AI to synthesize arguments based only on a given list of verified sources. Critique prompts instructed AI to identify potential logical gaps and counterexamples in student arguments.

Reference verification. For any AI-suggested reference, students had to perform manual database searches and record outcomes in a verification table. Unverifiable items or sources that did not match AI's descriptions were to be discarded or replaced.

AI use statement. With the final paper, each student submitted a statement detailing when, how, and why AI was used, what kinds of suggestions were accepted or rejected, and how hallucinations were detected. These statements, along with prompt logs, were graded and also used for academic integrity checks.

We presented AI to students as a fallible partner rather than an authority: helpful but not trustworthy by default.

2.2.3 Weekly activities (overview)

Weeks 1–8: Conceptual and norms module

Week 1: Orientation and baseline.

The instructor introduced course goals, the writing rubric, philosophical writing expectations, and AI governance principles. Students completed a baseline 800-word essay on a philosophical prompt and a self-efficacy survey. After a brief demo of the AI

companion, they practiced inputting simple prompts and reflecting on output quality.

Week 2: Topic narrowing and knowledge graphs.

Using CiteSpace maps of selected philosophical debates (e.g., moral responsibility, personal identity), students identified potential research niches and drafted three candidate paper titles. Class discussions linked topic coherence to logical laws. Homework involved AI-assisted refinement of one topic and a 300-word rationale.

Week 3: Literature search and verification.

Sessions covered advanced search techniques, journal hierarchies, and typical AI citation errors. In groups, students collected AI-recommended references and attempted to verify them. Homework required submitting a verification table and a corrected reference list.

Week 4: Argument structure and counterexamples.

The instructor modeled how to reconstruct arguments from classic texts and design counterexamples. Students wrote short arguments for their theses and used AI as a critic. They then revised their arguments based on AI and peer feedback.

Week 5: Prompt engineering.

Students learned and practiced structured prompts for retrieval, generation, and critique. Emphasis was placed on specifying premises, constraints, and expected output format. Homework documented prompt – response iterations leading to improved paragraphs.

Week 6: Academic norms and degree regulations.

Discussions centered on plagiarism, patch-writing, self-plagiarism, and emerging norms on AI-assisted writing. Case studies illustrated AI hallucinations and misattributions. Students drafted a literature review section with fully verified citations.

Week 7: Peer review training.

Students anonymously reviewed two peers' literature reviews using the rubric and a peer-feedback template. In-class activities analyzed constructive and unhelpful feedback examples. Students then revised their work.

Week 8: Midterm presentations.

In small groups, students presented their questions, key literature, and preliminary argument outlines. A tutor panel offered suggestions, focusing on feasibility and depth.

Weeks 9–16: Clinical supervision module

Weeks 9–10: Individual consultations.

Each student had at least one 20-minute one-to-one consultation with a tutor, reviewing drafts and AI logs. Tutors asked students to explain selected prompts and justify which AI suggestions they followed or ignored.

Week 11: Public “argue-with-AI” workshop.

Students demonstrated AI-generated critiques of their arguments and formulated counterarguments in front of peers. The class and tutors then offered

additional challenges, approximating a low-stakes defense.

Week 12: Ethics and AI authorship.

Sessions focused on authorship norms, responsibility for content, and equity concerns. Students drafted AI use statements.

Week 13: Full draft submission and blind review.

Students submitted full papers, AI logs, verification tables, and draft AI use statements. Three raters blind-evaluated the papers.

Week 14: Mock defenses.

Students presented their papers and answered questions from a mixed panel of peers and tutors. Oral feedback targeted clarity, structure, and engagement with objections.

Week 15: Final revision and submission.

Students revised papers based on feedback and submitted final versions, including polished AI use statements and short reflective essays.

Week 16: Posttest and portfolios.

Students completed a posttest essay on a new prompt and a post-course survey. They assembled portfolios documenting progress in argumentation, literature use, and AI literacy.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Writing rubric

Our four-dimension rubric (0–20 per dimension, total 80) was adapted from existing work on analytical writing and philosophical argumentation, refined through local pilot testing:

Argumentative coherence. Criteria evaluated whether the paper articulated a clear thesis, explicitly laid out supporting reasons, avoided major logical fallacies, and engaged with at least one objection.

Conceptual and textual accuracy. Items assessed the correctness and consistency of key concepts and the fidelity of textual interpretations.

Evidence use and citation integrity. Items examined the relevance of sources, integration of textual evidence into argument, and correctness of citations (including verification against databases).

Originality and critical depth. Items captured the extent to which the student articulated a defensible position, identified tensions among views, and offered non-trivial reasoning rather than mere summary.

Each dimension comprised 4–5 behavioral indicators rated on a 5-point scale; scores were summed and rescaled. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale at posttest was .86.

2.3.2 Process indicators

For the reform cohort, we derived:

Prompt iteration count: Number of distinct prompts issued for key assignments (topic selection, literature review, argument drafting, revision).

Hallucinated reference rate: Proportion of AI-suggested references marked as unverifiable in students' verification tables.

Revision depth: Revision depth: Approximated by the number of tracked changes between draft versions and the qualitative categories of those changes (local edits vs. structural revisions).

Peer feedback quality: Ratings on a short rubric assessing specificity (e.g., references to particular sentences), constructiveness (suggestions, not just criticism), and alignment with rubric criteria.

2.3.3 Surveys and interviews

Writing self-efficacy was measured by a 6-item scale adapted from existing writing research (e.g., "I am confident that I can construct a clear philosophical argument in writing"), rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha at pretest was .79 and .83 at posttest.

Attitudes toward AI were measured using items on perceived usefulness, perceived risk (e.g., "AI might make me lazy in my thinking"), and perceived control ("I feel I can decide when and how much to rely on AI"), also rated on a 5-point scale.

Semi-structured interviews with 12 reform cohort students and 4 tutors probed:

How they used AI at different stages;

How their views of AI changed;

How they understood authorship and responsibility in AI-assisted writing.

2.4 Data analysis

Quantitatively, we used paired-sample *t* tests to assess within-cohort pre/post changes in rubric scores and self-efficacy. Independent-samples *t* tests compared final rubric scores across cohorts. To adjust for potential cohort differences, we ran multiple regression models with final total scores as outcomes and cohort (reform vs. comparison), baseline scores, admission scores, and prior GPA as predictors. For robustness, we conducted propensity score matching (PSM) to create matched subgroups based on baseline writing scores and GPA, then re-estimated cohort differences.

We reported Cohen's *d* and 95% confidence intervals along with *p* values. Statistical analyses were performed in R. Qualitative data were thematically coded by two researchers; disagreements were resolved through discussion. We used qualitative findings to interpret quantitative patterns and to illustrate mechanisms, not as independent outcome measures.

3. Results

3.1 Individualized feedback and process engagement

One aim of the reform was to increase individualized feedback coverage. In the comparison cohort, course records showed that only 3 of 38 students (7.9%) received

more than two substantial, paper-specific feedback episodes beyond generic comments (e.g., a margin note such as “needs clearer structure”). Such episodes typically involved a face-to-face meeting or detailed written comments.

In contrast, in the reform cohort, all 41 students received at least four distinct feedback episodes targeting their own work, combining: Clinical consultations with tutors; Structured peer reviews.

The mean number of feedback episodes per student was 4.8 (SD = 1.2). AI logs indicated that 100% of students engaged the AI in at least one retrieval, one generation, and one critique function across the term. The median number of prompt–response rounds related to the term paper was 16 (IQR = 12–21), suggesting sustained, rather than incidental, AI use.

Students’ qualitative accounts corroborated these patterns. Several noted that in the traditional course they “barely spoke” with the instructor about their actual arguments, whereas in the reformed course they had opportunities to “test ideas with both AI and tutors” and felt “seen” as individual learners.

3.2 Writing outcomes

Descriptive statistics for writing rubric scores are summarized in Table 1 (not shown here).

In the reform cohort, total rubric scores increased from $M = 47.3$ (SD = 8.1) at baseline to $M = 61.9$ (SD = 7.4) on the final paper, $t(40) = 9.15$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.43$, 95%

CI [0.99, 1.86]. Gains were observed on all four dimensions, with Cohen's d ranging from 0.62 (originality and critical depth) to 1.13 (argumentative coherence).

In the comparison cohort, total scores improved from $M = 46.0$ ($SD = 7.9$) to $M = 52.1$ ($SD = 8.0$), $t(37) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$, 95% CI [0.37, 1.02]. Dimension-level gains were smaller, particularly in evidence use and originality.

An independent-samples t test on final scores showed a significant reform cohort advantage, $t(77) = 3.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.89$, 95% CI [0.44, 1.33]. In regression models controlling for admission score, prior GPA, and baseline writing performance, cohort (reform vs. comparison) remained a significant predictor ($\beta \approx 4.8$, $p < .01$). PSM analyses yielded similar estimates (average treatment effect on the treated ≈ 4.2 points, 95% CI excluding zero), suggesting that baseline differences alone are unlikely to account for the observed performance gap.

3.3 AI governance and reference integrity

We next examined how the AI governance measures related to reference integrity. In the first substantial writing assignment (early literature review drafts), 137 AI-suggested references were recorded in students' verification tables. Of these, 20 (14.6%) were classified as unverifiable—either not found in CNKI or Web of Science, or present but with mismatched metadata (e.g., wrong journal or year). Common patterns included plausible-sounding but nonexistent journals and authors with no publications on the given topic.

After repeated verification practice and explicit classroom discussions about hallucinations, the number of unverifiable AI-suggested references decreased substantially. In later drafts (Weeks 10–12), across 124 AI-suggested references, only 4 (3.2%) were deemed unverifiable. No unverifiable references remained in final papers. Instead, when AI suggested questionable sources, students increasingly replaced them with verified ones or omitted them altogether.

Students' AI use statements and interviews further illustrated changes in behavior. Early in the semester, some students described a kind of epistemic deference to AI:

“At the beginning, I just believed whatever reference AI listed. It looked so formal that I didn't think to question it. I assumed the problem was with my search, not with the AI.” (Student 7)”

As the course progressed, many students reported that the mandatory verification procedures had reshaped their habits:

“The verification table was annoying at first, but it forced me to slow down and actually check. Now I feel I have a kind of ‘second sense’ for suspicious references. I'm less easily impressed by a long list of sources.” (Student 19)”

“Because I knew I had to explain my AI use to the tutor, I became more careful. I started to ask myself: if I can't find this article, should I trust any of AI's other claims here?” (Student 3)”

At the same time, several students pointed out that reference verification added

workload and occasionally diverted attention from other aspects of writing:

“Sometimes I felt I spent more time chasing after bad references than improving my argument. It helped my research skills, but there were weeks when the technical checking felt heavier than the philosophical thinking.” (Student 12)”

These mixed reflections suggest that governance mechanisms can indeed foster more critical and individualized use of AI—students learn to distinguish between reliable and unreliable outputs and to adjust their behavior accordingly—but they also introduce cognitive and temporal costs that need to be balanced against other instructional priorities.

3.4 Student perceptions

Reform cohort students showed significant gains in writing self-efficacy (pre: $M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.7$; post: $M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.6$ on a 5-point scale), $t(40) = 6.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$. Changes were especially pronounced on items related to structuring arguments and responding to objections. Students who initially reported that they “didn’t know where to start” in philosophical writing often described, by the end of the course, a clearer sense of how to break a broad question into manageable moves.

Interviews highlighted that many students experienced the AI-supported design as a form of individualized instruction that had previously been unavailable in large classes. One student commented:

“In other courses, I feel like the teacher only sees the final version of my work.

Here, the AI and the tutors saw my messy thinking step by step. The AI wouldn't get tired of my questions, and the tutor would focus on the parts where I seemed really stuck. It felt closer to Confucius' idea of teaching different students differently." (Student 5)"

Another drew a contrast with more traditional courses:

"Usually, I just get one set of general comments at the end. This time, I could ask AI very specific questions about my own topic and get an immediate response. Then in the consultation, the tutor reacted to my prompts and drafts, not just to a generic problem set. I felt the course was built around my learning trajectory, not around a fixed script." (Student 21)"

At the same time, not all perceptions were unambiguously positive. Some students expressed ambivalence about the psychological effects of easy access to AI:

"AI is like a calculator for arguments. It's great because it shows me patterns and counterarguments I didn't think of. But I also worry that if I use it too much, I might stop trying to think things through myself." (Student 9)"

Others noted that the presence of AI sometimes made it harder to judge what "counts" as their own work:

"When I read my draft, sometimes I honestly couldn't remember which sentences started from me and which came from AI suggestions I had edited. That made me uncomfortable. I don't want my final paper to feel like it belongs to the machine."

(Student 14)"

A few students also pointed to subtle equity concerns:

"Students who already have strong logic skills seem to use AI to go even deeper—they know how to push it. Some of us who are weaker can become too passive, just accepting what it gives us. So AI can widen gaps if we are not careful." (Student 2)"

These comments resonate with our quantitative findings and with broader concerns in the literature. On the one hand, students experienced AI as a means of receiving more tailored, immediate support than a single instructor could provide, especially when combined with clinical tutoring and peer review. On the other hand, they recognized risks of over-reliance, blurred authorship, and the possibility that those who are already more skilled may benefit disproportionately from AI tools.

Taken together, student perceptions underline the central claim of this study: generative AI can contribute to realizing individualized instruction at scale in philosophical writing, but only when embedded within a carefully governed ecology that attends both to opportunities (rich, personalized feedback) and to emergent risks (dependency, inequity, and erosion of authorship).

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpreting the findings

Within the limits of a quasi-experimental historical comparison, our findings suggest that the AI-supported design was associated with both expanded individualized

feedback and larger gains in several dimensions of philosophical writing than those observed in a prior cohort under a traditional model. Students in the reform cohort received more frequent, more varied, and more targeted feedback, and their final papers, on average, exhibited clearer argument structures, more appropriate use of evidence, and somewhat greater originality.

From a theoretical standpoint, these patterns align with ideas from AIED and stealth assessment. Rather than implementing a full ITS, we created a hybrid ecology in which AI, tutors, and peers each played specific roles. The AI companion supported brainstorming, organization, and critique; tutors provided higher-order guidance and ethical framing; peers offered perspective-taking and audience awareness. Process data—prompt logs, verification tables, revision histories—functioned as both learning artifacts and assessment evidence, consistent with stealth assessment's emphasis on continuous, embedded measurement (Shute & Ventura, 2013).

Our results also speak to current debates about generative AI in writing. They suggest that harmful patterns—such as uncritical acceptance of hallucinated references or overreliance on AI-generated prose—are not inevitable. Under structured conditions, with explicit verification routines and reflective AI use statements, students can learn to treat AI outputs as starting points and objects of critique rather than as authoritative sources. This is in line with Mouser's (2024) and Lemanek's (2025) calls to position AI as a “student to be taught” or an “artificial reviewer” whose contributions must be interrogated.

4.2 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the historical cohort design lacks randomization; as such, we cannot definitively attribute cohort differences to the AI-supported design. Unmeasured cohort-specific factors (e.g., broader departmental culture, external stressors) may have played a role, even though we controlled for admission scores, GPA, and baseline writing performance and used PSM.

Second, the sample was limited to philosophy majors at a single Chinese university. Cultural factors may influence both students' receptivity to AI and their interpretations of Confucian notions like individualized instruction. The generalizability of our findings to other disciplines, institutions, or countries is therefore uncertain.

Third, our measures capture short-term outcomes within one course. We do not yet know whether the observed gains in writing and self-efficacy persist over time or transfer to other contexts, such as capstone theses or professional writing. Longitudinal research is needed.

Fourth, although our process indicators are richer than those in many writing studies, they remain relatively coarse. For instance, we counted prompt iterations but did not systematically code prompt quality or characterize AI responses beyond reference hallucinations. More fine-grained computational linguistics or protocol analyses could yield deeper insights into how specific patterns of AI use relate to learning.

Finally, while many students reported becoming more critical in their AI use, some

still described strong temptations to “let AI think for me,” especially when under time pressure. Our design mitigated but did not eliminate this risk, highlighting the need for ongoing attention to students’ epistemic habits and moral agency.

4.3 Implications and future directions

Despite these limitations, the study offers several implications for research and practice.

For instructors in philosophy and related disciplines, the findings suggest that generative AI can be integrated into writing pedagogy in ways that support, rather than undermine, core disciplinary values. Key design choices include:

- Framing AI as a fallible interlocutor whose outputs must be checked and debated;
- Embedding AI use within a broader system of human tutoring and peer review;
- Requiring students to log and reflect on their AI interactions, thereby making the “invisible work” of thinking more visible.

For educational researchers, our work illustrates the value of combining product-based measures (blind-rated essays) with process-based evidence when studying AI-mediated learning. Future research could investigate how different prompt strategies, degrees of AI reliance, or patterns of verification correlate with learning gains or with changes in epistemic beliefs.

Two avenues of future work seem particularly important. One is comparative: implementing similar designs in other humanities and social science courses (e.g.,

history, law, sociology) to identify which elements are discipline-specific and which are transferable. The other is longitudinal: following cohorts into their capstone projects and early careers to see whether AI-supported writing instruction has sustained effects on reasoning and communication practices.

Finally, from a broader perspective, our case contributes to ongoing debates about the role of AI in education. Confucius' notion of individualized instruction rests on respect for students as persons with distinct capacities and trajectories. If designed and governed well, AI can extend teachers' ability to recognize and respond to these differences; if designed and governed poorly, it can encourage homogenization, passivity, and dependence. The challenge, and opportunity, for educators is to shape AI use in ways that are compatible with—and perhaps even deepen—the humanistic aims of higher education.

5. Conclusion

Confucius' dictum of teaching in accordance with students' aptitude has often been honored in rhetoric but frustrated in practice, particularly in large university classes where time and attention are scarce. In this article, we reported on a case in which generative AI was embedded in an undergraduate philosophical writing course in ways intended to support more individualized instruction without displacing human judgment.

Within the limits of a quasi-experimental historical comparison, the AI-supported design was associated with both expanded opportunities for individualized feedback

and larger gains in several key dimensions of philosophical writing than those observed in a prior cohort under a more traditional model. Process data and interview accounts suggest that many students came to treat AI less as an answer-providing oracle and more as a fallible interlocutor and diagnostic tool. At the same time, concerns about overreliance and hidden AI use remained, underscoring the importance of explicit governance and continued ethical reflection.

These findings do not demonstrate that generative AI, by itself, improves philosophical writing. Rather, they indicate that when AI is carefully configured—through prompt templates, verification routines, and AI use statements—and when it is combined with human clinical tutoring and peer review, it can contribute to an instructional ecology in which students' reasoning is made more visible and open to critique. In that sense, AI can extend instructors' capacity to approximate individualized instruction at scale, while still relying on teachers and peers for high-level judgment, ethical framing, and discipline-specific guidance.

Realizing the constructive potential of AI in philosophy education will require more rigorous designs, multi-site and longitudinal studies, and ongoing normative discussion about authorship, responsibility, and the aims of philosophical training. Our contribution is modest: a context-bound case study that illustrates one way in which Confucius' ideal of individualized instruction might be interpreted and partially instantiated in the age of generative AI, and a set of design principles that others may adapt, refine, or challenge.

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Ethics Approval

This study involved human participants (undergraduate students). All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Philosophy, Guizhou University. Participation in research components (surveys, interviews, and use of de-identified course data for analysis) was voluntary. Students provided written informed consent, were informed that non-participation would not affect their course grades, and could withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were anonymized prior to analysis.

Research Transparency Statement

This study was not preregistered. All measures, conditions, and analytic decisions are reported. No observations were excluded after data collection. De-identified materials (rubric, sample prompts, survey items) and analysis code are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to institutional data-protection rules and local data-protection regulations.