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POSSIBILITIES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF IMMANUEL KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the feasibility of introducing Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative into preschool education, addressing the intersection between moral philosophy and early childhood pedagogy. The research began by developing a theoretical framework grounded into two key elements: the good will and the categorical imperative – which were considered essential to understanding the ethical foundation of the study. A theoretical-analytical method was employed in combination with two focus group studies conducted in preschool institutions. The empirical component explored children's cognitive predispositions, ethical intuition and their readiness to comprehend and engage with basic moral principles. Through structured discussions and carefully designed ethical scenarios, the study observed how children articulated their understanding of moral choices and obligations. By aligning the findings with Kant's deontological ethics, this paper demonstrated the existence of innate cognitive capacities necessary for moral reasoning and ethical reflection. Based on the insights, the paper proposed pedagogical strategies for gradual and selective integration of Kantian moral principles in preschool education.

Keywords: Categorical imperative, education, upbringing, autonomy, reason, Kant

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INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant, widely regarded as one of the most profound and influential thinkers in human history, fundamentally reoriented the trajectory of the Western thought with the publication of his magnum opus *Critique of Pure Reason*. It has often been remarked that no philosopher's intellectual maturation unfolded with such quiet deliberation and measured depths as that of Kant's. He stands as a unique thinker who does not fully belong to any established philosophical school, rather, his thought occupies an intermediary between rationalism and empiricism. However, unlike the empiricists, Kant did not merely accepted the notion that human beings are born *tabula rasa*, but argued that all possible experience is actively shaped through a priori structures and faculties of human cognition. In more accessible terms, this can mean the presence of innate cognitive frameworks or genetic predisposition, that part of the way we understand the world comes from how our minds are naturally structured, and not only through experience. On this foundation, the processes of upbringing and education serve as formative forces that further refine, direct and develop these innate cognitive capacities.

It is a noteworthy observation that, prior to Kant, no philosopher had explicitly questioned or doubted the assumption that the truth stands in direct correspondence to objective reality (Putman, n.d.). Kant was the first to challenge this view, contending that we do not experience or apprehend reality as it exists in itself – purely and objectively – but it appears to us through the innate structures of what he called the *pure mind*.

Kant distinguished human beings from all other species by positing that they alone possess the distinctive faculty of rationality and reason. On this basis, humans as rational agents are capable of bearing responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Hence, Kant asserts that education is a privilege to human beings alone, whereas other creatures may only be conditioned or trained (Gulevska, n.d.). Building upon this, he grounded the aims of pedagogy in his ethical theory, which is why his philosophical legacy is often examined within the domain of ethics when educational questions are addressed. His ethical framework, however, extends far beyond pedagogy and can be applied to a wide range of human experience and dimensions of existence.

Throughout history, it has been a well-established reality, that children have little to no agency over the education they receive, whether situated within the formal institutions or that of more informal context. As a result, the nature and quality of the child's education are, in nearly all cases, determined by external forces such as the economic means and convictions of the parents, the cultural and ideological climate, racial prejudices, and the educational policies and regulations of the established state (Ramaswamy, 2018). From this understanding, one inevitable conclusion emerges, precisely because children lack genuine autonomy, society bears an ethical obligation to structure the processes of education and upbringing in a way that fosters the holistic development of every child equally, while striving to minimize ideological manipulation or indoctrination.

The aim of education – particularly in the context of early childhood, both formal and informal – should be to create the conditions through which the child may develop into a morally autonomous being, capable of shaping and guiding its own principles of conduct. Such moral development must arise from an independent and self-formed system of values, rather than one derived from pre-established or imposed ideological systems. Nevertheless, this task is not without complexity. It is neither possible nor desirable to grant children absolute freedom in constructing their moral universe, for such an approach risks the formation of misguided beliefs and value systems.

On the other hand, since children play no role in the decision to be brought into the world – that is a decision made exclusively by their parents – the parents, as their primary caregivers, bear the fundamental moral obligation to provide for their children in ways that genuinely serve their best interests. It is common sense that children are incapable of taking

care of themselves. Therefore, parents necessarily hold both the rights and duties to their children. However, this authority must not be mistaken for limitless power. While caregivers may possess the freedom to shape the upbringing of their children, that freedom should be restrained by the simple, self-evident understanding that no human being can claim ownership over another, and they arise from the very nature of human dignity and mutual respect. When these boundaries are ignored, the relationship easily slips into a form of domination that can resemble a master-slave dynamic (Ramaswamy, 2018).

Thus, the true aim of education is not to dictate, but to provide initial moral foundation, like a springboard, upon which the child may build a self-directed ethical life.

In order to examine the validity of Kant's claim regarding the possession of innate cognitive capacities, two focus group studies will be conducted involving children in preschool education. However, before undertaking these examinations, it is necessary to engage more profoundly with Kantian ethics to clarify the conceptual framework underlying his assertion. Within his philosophy – more precisely, his ethical system – there are two key elements that must be understood for the purpose of this research: *the good will* and *the categorical imperative*. The subsequent analysis will focus on unpacking and interpreting these two core elements.

Before proceeding to the next chapters, it is important to note that there is no definitive evidence that Kant was a religious man in a conventional sense. Nevertheless, traces within his work reveal that he often engages with, and at times appear to affirm, the idea of God. This inclination may be partially explained by his upbringing, as his mother was known to be deeply religious, and a factor that likely shaped certain dimensions of his thought. The argument outlined is clearly reflected here:

“...if the consciousness of ethical [moral] duty provides justification for faith in a future reward, then the postulate of immortality must also give rise to the corresponding assumption of a cause for such action. Put differently, the existence of God must be acknowledged.”

(Gulevska, n.d.: 17)

THE GOOD WILL

“It is impossible to think of anything else in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except *the good will*.”

(Kant, 1785: 103)

There are many qualities of the temperament, such as understanding, adaptability, self-control, patience, wit, courage and judgment, that are commonly valued as good and even desirable, yet, without the guidance of the good will, these very traits can become profoundly evil. The good will is good by itself, not because of what it achieves:

“A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclinations.”

(Kant, 1785: 104)

According to Kant, the good will is an inherent cognitive capacity, a divine gift present within all beings capable of reason. It is good unconditionally and in itself, incomparable to any other form of moral worth, but all moral actions derive their value only in relation to it. Because of its innate nature, the good will cannot be taught or externally instilled, rather it can only be awakened, clarified and elevated.

To explore the concept of the good will, we may consider the example of lying. It is a situation familiar to many, wherein an individual believes that a falsehood could protect themselves from trouble or spare another from suffering. Although such an action might appear morally defensible, its true moral value is questionable. When lying emerges from

self-serving motives that merely coincide with personal desires or inclinations, the act remains morally void, for it does not proceed from duty. Likewise, when one lies in the hope of protecting another, the act still lacks moral worth, since its justification rests upon uncertainty, that is, no one can know with assurance that the falsehood will, in fact, avert harm. Even when an individual abstains from lying solely out of fear of repercussions, the act cannot be called moral – it is once again bound to empirical motives such as self-interest and the awareness that lies eventually come to light.

Simply stated, moral worth cannot be determined by an individual's desires or inclinations, for such motives are devoid of moral value. Instead, it is evaluated by the underlying principle that guides the action. The good will is considered pure because it represents the intention to act morally for the sake of morality itself. For this reason, Kant rejects actions that may conform to duty in appearance but are driven by personal motives or self-interests.

This principle applies broadly to many areas of human behavior. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant presents the example of a merchant to distinguish between acting from duty and acting from self-interest. The merchant, who charges fair prices to all customers, including the inexperienced, may at first appear to act from a sense of moral duty. However, as Kant explains, this may not be so. If his behavior is driven by the practical benefit of maintaining a good reputation and securing long-lasting business, then the act does not arise from duty, and therefore lacks genuine moral worth.

Having established what moral worth does not constitute, we can now turn to a case that illustrates what genuine moral worth entails. Imagine a person who is naturally compassionate but is experiencing deep personal sorrow and hardship. Their suffering has left them emotionally numb to the pain of others, yet they continue to help despite their detachment. For Kant, this is what it means to act from duty: do to what is right because one recognizes it as a moral obligation. Moreover, if their suffering deprives them of all hope for their own life, but they nonetheless choose to endure and continue living out of a sense of duty, this decision would represent the *highest* realization of moral duty.

It becomes evident that favorable consequences alone do not endow an action with moral goodness. Its moral worth arises from the rational will's deliberate choice of the good. The essence of morality, therefore, resides not in the outcome but in the autonomy of reason that determines the maxim of action.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

In his attempt to understand the nature of human behavior and moral action, Kant grounds his analysis in the distinction between two fundamental kinds of motives: *the hypothetical* and *the categorical imperative*. We can define these imperatives as guiding formulae for understanding the reasons behind human action.

“Now, if the action would be good merely as a means *to something else* the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, then it is *categorical*.”

(Kant, 1785: 108)

To cultivate a more profound comprehension of these imperatives, we will continue with a comparative analysis to clarify their respective characteristics and theoretical differences.

To will is invariably an act in accordance with a maxim. Every volitional act operates under a guiding principle, even when the individual is not consciously aware of it. Thus, willing is inseparable from *means-end* reasoning, wherein the subject's rational capacity orders action directed by a self-imposed rule or intention. The *hypothetical imperative* arises from a form of conditioning and, by its very nature, assumes the character of an *analytical*

imperative. It is termed as such because the agent, prior to acting upon it, engages in deliberate analysis to assess whether the anticipated outcome aligns with their desired objective.

More precisely, the source of the action lies in empirical conditioning based on previous experience rather than from the dictates of pure reason. The subject refrains from lying not out of reverence for truth as a moral principle, but because experience has demonstrated that lies, sooner or later, are uncovered and bring undesirable consequences. Their behavior, therefore, is guided by pragmatic calculation. Such behavior is external and learned, belonging to what may be characterized as *a posteriori* structures. While the action may appear good, it lacks intrinsic moral worth. Even when one's intention is directed toward another's happiness, the deed cannot be deemed moral if the motive is conditioned. All action governed by the hypothetical imperative thus constitute acts of utility, in which the individual gains something in return. In this respect, the hypothetical imperative corresponds to the notion of *ought to*, expressing a sense of conditional obligation.

Once we remove all personal motives – emotions, desires, hopes, rewards – the only thing left to guide the will is whether the action fits universal moral law. This leads to the formation of the *categorical imperative*. Ramaswamy (2018) proposes four categorical imperatives as a framework through which the moral legitimacy of any act may be examined. Each serves as a rational criterion through which the universality and moral integrity of a maxim may be critically examined. Through this systematic examination, a clearer understanding of the true categorical imperative can be attained.

The formation of the *first* categorical imperative emerges as a response to the moral implications of human coexistence. If people lived entirely in isolation, any possible action could be considered permissible, since it would have no impact on others. Yet, human life is unavoidably social, and our actions intersect with the freedom of others who possess their own rational wills. By requiring that the maxim of an act be capable of universal application, Kant establishes a moral principle based on equality of all rational agents – no individual's will carries greater moral authority than another's, and all must be treated with equal respect. In this sense, the categorical imperative assumes that all moral agents are bound by the same universal law. Therefore, the first categorical imperative can be summarized as follows: one should act only in a way that would remain rational and acceptable if everyone were to do the same.

The *second* categorical imperative naturally follows from the principle introduced in the first. Once we acknowledge that no individual's will possess superior moral authority, it necessary follows that no person may be coerced into serving the will or purpose of another. This principle underlies the moral rule that human beings must never be treated merely as tools to achieve someone else's goal. In this way, the second categorical imperative provides the philosophical foundation for the concept of human dignity, that each person should be respected as an end in themselves. Therefore, one may ask others for help but cannot demand it, as every individual retains the right to accept, refuse, or negotiate. Thus, the second categorical imperative can be formulated as follows: treat every human, including yourself, as someone with inherent value – an end in themselves – and never merely as a means to fulfill your own purposes.

According to the *third* categorical imperative, any maxim opposing the natural will common to all rational beings cannot possess moral legitimacy. This natural will represents the universal moral inclination toward life and self-preservation. However, this principle must work in balance with the second and forth categorical imperatives – the second requiring that every person be treated with dignity and the forth emphasizing respect for individual autonomy. Applied without regard to these, the third could conflict with the very values it seeks to protect. It can be expressed as follows: the rule behind your action should respect the will of all rational beings and never oppose freedom or dignity.

Beyond its political formulation, the *fourth* categorical imperative can also be viewed as a moral principle. Politically, it aims to protect the freedom through just and fair institutions, and morally, it requires individuals to respect and uphold the autonomy of others. Founded on the principle of the autonomy of the will, that is the idea that every rational being is free to act in accordance with moral law¹, this imperative elevates freedom to the status of the highest moral ideal. However, moral freedom becomes truly moral only when it coexists with the equal freedom of others. This concept provided the philosophical foundation of the early Declaration of Human Rights and expresses *freedom in coexistence*: each person's liberty is limited only by the equal liberty of others. In this regard, the fourth categorical imperative represents a moral framework for living together freely, where one's autonomy strengthens rather than threatens the freedom of all. Its formation can be understood as follows: when your action is universalized – applied to everyone – it must not contradict your own freedom or moral will, nor that of others.

Following the examination of the four categorical imperatives, it becomes necessary to consider what it means to act in accordance with duty – conversably, on the implications of acting against it. To act against duty, as Kant explains, is to act against the rational will that makes moral action possible. Such behavior represents a contradiction within reason itself, for it involves expecting others to follow principles that we ourselves are unwilling to obey. For instance, it will be irrational to demand truthfulness from others while allowing ourselves to lie for personal advantage or protection. Trust depends on honesty, and we know that truthfulness should be a universal law. However, when we fail to act by that rule, we create a contradiction between what we recognize as right and what we actually do.

In contrast to the hypothetical imperative, the categorical imperative is far more intricate and considerably stricter in its moral demands. It functions as an internal law of reasoning – a self-legislated command that guides the will toward what is universally right, independent of external motives or outcomes. Acting under this imperative involves no calculation of benefit or consequences. It is a *synthesis* grounded purely in rational duty. It is autonomous, arising from our rational recognition of duty. While the hypothetical imperative is conditional and motivated by self-interest or the pursuit of happiness, the categorical imperative demands action for the sake of morality alone, that may involve personal sacrifice. Such action belongs to what Kant refers to as *a priori* structures – reasoning independent of empirical motivation. The categorical imperative can thus be described as guided by the notion *must to*, expressing the will to act virtuously simply because it is right.

In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant examines the manner in which the human mind interprets natural phenomena that appear to exhibit purposiveness. To clarify this, he distinguishes between *efficient causes* and *final causes*. Efficient causes explain how events occur through mechanical processes in nature, whereas final causes refer to the purposive way in which the human understanding judges natural objects. The latter does not reveal how things exist in themselves, but rather how our reason must regard them in order to make sense of their organization. For instance, explaining how a tree develops through its biological processes reflects an efficient cause, whereas regarding the tree as something that bears fruit or provides shade reflects a final cause.

This analysis leads Kant to introduce the contrast between two types of intellect. An *intellectus archetypus* is a primordial, intuitive, divine intellect, one that cognizes objects immediately and whose thinking is creative in its very act. Human cognition, however, is *intellectus ectypus*, a finite and derivative form that depends on sensory experience, and can apprehend objects only as they appear, not as they are in themselves. The idea of *intellectus*

¹ The autonomy of the will refers to Kant's view that every rational being has the capacity to determine their own actions through reason rather than directed by emotion, instinct or external influence. In this sense, moral freedom is the ability to act according to the principles that one has rationally recognizes as right. To act in *accordance with moral law* therefore means to act freely out of an inner understanding and acceptance that the action is morally necessary through the use of reason.

archetypus thus serves to illuminate the inherent limits of human reasoning. Human beings do not have the capacity to comprehend the world directly. They can only organize sensory data through the structures of the mind. Objective knowledge of things as they are in themselves would be possible only for an omniscient being, that is, God².

Yet, despite these epistemic limitations, Kant argues that human beings possess an original practical intuition within moral consciousness, expressed in the form of the categorical imperative. While we cannot access the world as a divine intellect would, we can immediately recognize the moral law within ourselves, and this recognition guides the will toward universally valid moral action.

In Žižek's reading³, this moral autonomy does not overcome the gap with the *intellectus archetypus*, but stages it: the moral law appears within the subject as if from nowhere, a *pure practical spontaneity* that mimics divine intuition but remains irreducibly finite. Rather than bridging the noumenal divide, the categorical imperative dramatizes it, making freedom not a gift of reason, but its ongoing paradox.

Throughout the years, Kantian ethics has met with considerable critique, particularly from feminist philosophers who questioned its elevation of pure reason as the sole foundation of moral action. They argue that it is unrealistic to expect individuals to act entirely from reason without the influence of emotions. Scholars such as Barbara Herman⁴ and Catherine MacKinnon⁵ attack Kant's rational hierarchy, emphasizing that emotions are a fundamental part of human behavior and moral reasoning and should therefore not be excluded or diminished in the construction of ethical theory. Kant, however, steadfastly upholds his conviction that emotions cannot constitute the basis of moral philosophy, as they are unstable and lack normative consistency. Because they differ among individuals, they cannot serve as a reliable foundation for moral principles.

Kant derived the aims and tasks of pedagogy directly from the principles of this ethical system. He regarded social life as humanity's collective striving toward moral perfection. Therefore, the foundation of moral education should correspond to the human will and uphold the lasting principles that distinguish good and evil. This is particularly important, since a child may understand what is right yet still direct their will toward wrongdoing. The categorical imperative thus stands as a fundamental maxim toward which all moral instruction must aim. The aim of pedagogy, in Kant's view, is to help the child develop into a morally autonomous individual who acts according to his or her own rational principles. Kant's ethics on education can therefore be summarized as follows:

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law, and Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always as an end and never merely as a means.”

(Gulevska, n.d.)

Very few individuals in modern society demonstrate adherence to the categorical imperative, as the moral rigor it presupposes seldom finds genuine resonance within the fabric of modern ethical consciousness. In this regard, children stand as the most authentic testimony to human incorruptibility – the purest manifestation of human nature and, as Rousseau (1762) asserts, the noblest among humankind. Accordingly, this research directs its

² Gulevska, Valentina, “Immanuel Kant”, *Ethics in Education*, Lecture, 2025

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Intelektualna Intuicija I Intellectus Archetypus: Refleksivnost Kod Kanta i Hegela*, Zeničke Sveske – Časopis Za Društvenu Fenomenologiju I Kulturni Dijalogiku, no 26, 2017, pp. 17-39 <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=750608>

⁴ Herman, Barbara, Integrity and Impartiality, *Moist* vol. 66, no 2, 1983, pp 233-250, <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist198366216>

⁵ MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1987

focus toward children in preschool education, seeking to examine the presence of the categorical imperative as an innate cognitive disposition. Should such an inherit moral structure indeed exist, then society's foremost and perhaps singular duty is to preserve and nurture the categorical imperative as the essence of moral humanity realized through the processes of education and upbringing.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this research consists of two components (a) a theoretical-analytical method, applied to reconstruct and refine Kant's ethical concepts as they relate to early childhood moral development, and (b) an empirical qualitative component, based on two focus group studies conducted in preschool institutions. This dual methodological structure was necessary to examine Kant's claim that the categorical imperative represents an innate cognitive disposition present in all rational beings, including very young children.

The first stage of the research adopted a theoretical-analytical approach based on a detailed and critical reading of Kant's works such a *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral* (1785), *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgment* (1790), together with relevant contemporary interpretations. The primary objective of this phase was to construct the groundwork of the study by examining and clarifying two elements of Kant's moral philosophy: *the good will*, understood as the unconditional basis for moral value, and *the categorical imperative*, presented as the highest moral law and an *a priori* reasoning structuring rational moral deliberation. Through systematic analysis, this research delineated the core features of the categorical imperative – its universality, autonomy, and inherent respect for rational agents – and explored their implications for understanding the cognitive architecture that supports moral reasoning.

The empirical phase of the study was carried out in two preschool institutions in Bitola, North Macedonia: the private kindergarten *Tweety* and the Educational Center *Mali Istrazhivachi* ("Little Explorers"). This stage employed a qualitative research design intended to explore whether preschool children manifest early indicators of Kantian moral reasoning when they are confronted with situations that demand a moral choice.

Two focus group sessions were conducted with children aged 3-6 years in their regular preschool environment. Throughout each session, care was taken to avoid saying or doing anything that might encourage sharing, helping, or other behaviors that could intentionally trigger a response to the categorical imperative. By analyzing children's spontaneous responses, the study sought to determine whether their reasoning reveals elements aligned with Kant's categorical imperative.

RESEARCH VARIABLES

The study takes into account several independent variables that may affect the emergence of early moral reasoning in young children. Foremost among these is (1) the informal upbringing within the family, understood as the matrix of convictions, values, and habitual judgments through which the child first encounters the moral world. The second variable, (2) upbringing in a private kindergarten, is examined as a potentially distinct factor, since private institutions often operate with smaller groups, heterogonous age compositions, and individualized pedagogical approach that may affect the adoption of values and social norms. The study also recognized that (3) difference in age, and thus in maturity, influence a child's capacity to grasp notions such as fairness, reciprocity, and the universalizability of rules. Additional influence include (4) the religious background of the family, which may determine the child's exposure to particular moral narratives and obligations, and (5) patterns of social interaction through which children negotiate cooperation and conflict, and shared

decision-making. The last recognized independent variable is (6) gender, categorized as male or female.

The dependent variable of this study is (7) time of kindergarten attendance, as an indicator of the extent of each child's exposure to structured social and educational environment. Taken together, these variables form the analytical framework through which the study investigates whether preschool children display early indicators of reasoning consistent with Kant's categorical imperative.

HYPOTHESES

The study is guided by the following hypotheses, each accompanied by its practical research definition. The main hypothesis proposes that early forms of the categorical imperative in preschool children can be encouraged through the institutional upbringing in kindergarten settings. In practical terms, this means that the children who are constantly exposed to structured educational environments, daily routines, and social interactions are expected to display more frequent expressions of fairness, reciprocity, honesty, helping behavior, and an awareness of the consequences that arise when an action is applied universally.

Hypothesis 1 states that children who have attended kindergarten for longer period will show stronger tendency toward behaviors aligned with the categorical imperative. In this study, 'longer attendance' refers to the total number of months or years that the child has been enrolled, while the child's inclination toward the categorical imperative is assessed through their responses to ethically challenging scenarios involving fairness, truth-telling, and universally applicable rules.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that boys and girls will not differ significantly in the expression of such behaviors. Here gender is documented as male and female, and any differences are examined through comparative analysis of children's judgments across the same moral scenarios.

EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

Two focus group studies were conducted as a part of the empirical component. The first took place at the private kindergarten *Tweety* in Bitola, North Macedonia, and involved sixteen children between the ages of three and six. At the outset, a brief introductory conversation was held with the group, during which care was taken not to introduce suggestions or cues that might encourage prosocial behavior or otherwise prompt the children toward actions resembling the categorical imperative. Thus, any suggestion that could implicitly valorize helping, sharing, or sacrificing for another were deliberately avoided, ensuring that the subsequent actions arose from the children's own intuitive dispositions rather than external influence.

Following the introductory discussion, each child was instructed to draw themselves "happy" on a sheet of paper. To do so, they were told that they would receive special pencils brought specifically for the activity. As the children were seated, pencils were distributed one by one at random. Since only fifteen pencils were available, the last child – Teo, age five – did not receive one. Teo visibly expressed sadness and disappointment, and the facilitators briefly engaged him in conversation to acknowledge his feeling, again taking care not to provoke or encourage morally charged behavior. Shortly afterward, a six-year old girl named Iva raised her hand and stated that she wishes to give her pencil to Teo. This spontaneous act of sharing, offered without prompting, was taken as evidence of a strong intuitive capacity for the type of moral reasoning associated with Kant's categorical imperative.

The second focus group was conducted at the Educational Center *Mali Istrazhuvachi*, also located in Bitola, North Macedonia, and involved a smaller sample of four children aged

three to six. This session followed a different structure. The children first watched a short animated adaptation of one of Aesop's fables, chosen for its ethical and educational value. However, the content of the fable did not include a situation that would directly evoke behavior aligned with the categorical imperative. After a brief discussion of the cartoon, the children were asked to draw the Mouse and the Lion as happy friends. Once again, pencils were distributed randomly, and the last child – in this case Petra, age three – was left without one. Within seconds, a six-year old boy named Gordan offered his pencil to her without hesitation. His immediate and unprompted response suggested a pronounced inclination toward intuitive moral judgment consistent with the categorical imperative.

Following the pencil exchange in both settings, short group discussions were held on the themes of attending to others' feelings, supporting peers, contributing to the happiness of the others, and at times making personal sacrifices. In the larger group, several children subsequently offered their own pencils to the child who had been left without one; in the smaller group, the children began exchanging pencils among themselves with notable enthusiasm.

DISCUSSION

The empirical observations make evident that the two children who offered their pencils unprompted displayed a markedly stronger orientation toward moral goodness – an intuitive responsiveness that may be interpreted as an early expression of the categorical imperative – than peers who hesitated from acting.

Iva's gesture in the first focus group was particularly noteworthy. When asked why she wished to give her pencil to the peer who had been left without one, she responded, quite unexpectedly, "I have five hundred at home". Her decision was made without any assurance that she would receive another pencil, nor any expectation of praise or reward. Her action, therefore, appears to be guided by her immediate recognition of what she perceived as the appropriate course of action.

In the second focus group, things unfolded with remarkable swiftness. As soon as it became apparent that there were not enough pencils and Petra was left without one, Gordan offered his pencil almost immediately, without pause or deliberation. This rapid, unprompted act suggests a particularly stronger inclination toward moral reasoning. He further explained that he was willing to wait for Petra to finish her drawing before beginning with his own, indicating that his decision was motivated by concern for her needs rather than by any expectation of reward, praise or replacement. As with Iva, Gordan acted purely from what he perceived as the appropriate moral course of action, or a spontaneous sense of what needs to be done. Both situations were deeply moving to witness, and they lend support to Rousseau's claim that children embody the most genuine expression of human moral purity.

Once the initial, unprompted acts had taken place, we engaged the children in a short discussion about friendship, fairness, truthfulness, and the importance of standing by others in moments of need. After this conversation, several kids in both group offered their pencil to the child who was left without one, leading to a lively rotation of pencils among participants. These later actions, however, cannot be categorized as expressions of moral duty. Because the children had just be introduced to the ideas related to kindness, fairness, and compassion, their decisions were made with awareness of what was presented as morally desirable. In this context, their behavior reflects actions guided by the hypothetical imperative, that is acting in a certain way because they now understood it to be expected, approved, or "good", rather than from an inward recognition of duty. As such, these later acts do not meet the criteria of genuine moral worth according to Kant.

The findings provide preliminary support to our main hypothesis. In both focus groups, children who had been enrolled in a preschool environment demonstrated spontaneous prosocial behavior. These actions occurred in neutral conditions, free from moral cues, which suggests that the structured social context of the preschool may indeed

contribute to the development of early forms of moral reasoning. While the study does not establish causation, the repeated behavior indicates that institutional upbringing may play a meaningful role in fostering early moral responsiveness.

Hypothesis 1 is also fully supported by the empirical findings. The two children who demonstrated immediate moral responsiveness – Iva and Gordan – were among the oldest participants in the study, falling in the upper end of kindergarten age range. This implies to a greater cognitive maturity and a longer period of exposure to the kindergarten environment. This pattern also aligns with the main hypothesis that children with longer kindergarten attendance are more likely to exhibit behavior according to the categorical imperative.

The findings likewise support Hypothesis 2. The clearest expressions of spontaneous moral reasoning arose from one girl and one boy, both of whom responded in an almost identical manner. No observable differences emerged between boys and girls in the nature of their responses or in the reasoning behind their actions. Although the sample size is modest, the available evidence suggests that gender does not play a determining role in the expression according to the categorical imperative.

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of children drawn from two private preschool institution in Bitola, North Macedonia, which limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations. Second, the qualitative design and naturalistic settings, while valuable for capturing spontaneous behavior, do not allow for statistical testing. Third, group dynamics may influence children's responses, as interactions within a smaller group can shape individual behavior in subtle ways. Finally, because children's family backgrounds and prior moral education was not formally measured, their influence on the observed behaviors cannot be isolated. These limitations indicate that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory, rather than definitive.

The findings of the study are interpreted in the light of the variables previously identified. Although the study did not directly measure the moral values within each child's family, it is reasonable to assume that the informal upbringing influenced their spontaneous moral reasoning. Acts such as offering a pencil without prompting may reflect values implicitly acquired in the home, including generosity, empathy, and attentiveness to the needs of others. Even if unmeasured, the informal upbringing is difficult to disregard.

Both focus groups were conducted in private kindergartens that emphasize smaller class size and individualized pedagogical approach. These environments may create conditions conducive to the development of early moral reasoning and/or moral awareness. The spontaneous actions observed in both settings suggest that private kindergarten structures may strengthen children's intuitive response in situation that require moral choices. However, because no comparison group from a public kindergarten was included, interpretations remain tentative.

Age emerged as a highly relevant variable. The children who demonstrated unprompted moral behavior – Iva and Gordan, age six – were among the oldest participants. This suggests that the capacity to recognize another's need and the willingness to act upon it strengthens with age. Moreover, this pattern supports the assumption that the categorical imperative, even if present as an innate cognitive disposition, does not manifest fully on its own – it must be gradually awakened and brought into conciseness through the influence of education and upbringing.

Although not directly measured, the religious or ethical orientation of a child's family may influence their exposure to narratives emphasizing kindness, duty, or moral responsibility. However, because this variable was not empirically examined during data collection, no conclusion can be drawn from the present study. Its relevance remains theoretical and would require additional data to collect.

Children who frequently engage in cooperative play, conflict resolution, and peer learning environment may develop stronger intuitive response. The pencil exchanges

observed after the group discussion – especially in the smaller group – point to the importance of social dynamic. However, these later actions were influenced by the discussion and thus reflect the hypothetical imperative rather than the categorical. Nonetheless, the children willingness to engage socially following the activity suggests that patterns of interaction do influence the development of moral behavior.

The findings fully support the conclusion that gender does not function as a determining factor in this context. Both a girl (Iva) and a boy (Gordan) displayed almost identical spontaneous moral responses. No gender-related differences emerged in reasoning or behavior.

The significance of time spent in kindergarten environment is likewise confirmed by the findings. The children who responded with spontaneous moral responses – Iva and Gordan – were also those who had been enrolled the longest in a structured preschool environment. Their extensive participation in daily routines, cooperative activities, and social interactions appear to have contributed to the development of early moral awareness. Thus, the study affirm that longer kindergarten attendance is associated with a stronger tendency to display behaviors according to the categorical imperative.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer important insights into how moral development may begin to take shape in early childhood education. The spontaneous acts of generosity displayed by the oldest children suggest that the foundations of moral judgement can surface even before formal moral instructions. Rather than just understanding ethical education as the imposition of fixed rules or predetermined doctrines, these results point toward different interpretation: moral growth is most effectively supported when the child's own intuitive capacities for fairness, empathy, and duty are gradually cultivated.

This perspective reinforces the view that early childhood is a crucial stage for nurturing the initial forms of moral awareness. The developmental readiness of older children combined with their longer exposure to structured preschool environments, enabled them to recognize another's needs and respond without external prompting. Such behavior indicates that educational settings can play a meaningful role in awakening these early moral tendencies – yet they must do so without prescribing ideological content or directing children toward specific moral outcome. Ethical education cannot become a mechanism of compliance, its task is to preserve and strengthen the child's capacity for *autonomous judgment*.

For this reason, educators may benefit from designing open-ended situations that naturally invite moral reflection, such as moments where children encounter the consequences of their moral choices and have the opportunity to act out of principle rather than reward. These scenarios should not aim to instruct children *what* to think morally, but instead create conditions in which they may discover *how* to think morally. Education, therefore, should not impose virtue but should allow it to emerge by giving children the freedom to discover the moral law through their own reasoning.

The results also indicate promising avenues for future research, particularly long-term observational studies that would follow children across developmental stages and educational contexts. Such work may clarify how early moral intuition develop over time and how different forms of upbringing support or hinder their expression.

Taken as a whole, this study underscores the continuing relevance of Kant's ethical framework for understanding moral development in early childhood. Kant's account of autonomy, duty, and universal moral principles offers a powerful foundation for thinking how morally responsible individuals come into being. At the same time, the findings of this research reveal both the considerable promise and the natural unpredictability of moral growth: while certain children display early intuitive forms of duty-based actions, others develop

these capacities more slowly or in uneven ways. Such variations remind us that education cannot predetermine the moral trajectory of each child. What it can do is to create conditions in which moral insights may emerge – supporting, but never controlling, the developing capacities through which children learn to act freely and rightly.

The task is not to accelerate moral development, but to protect its quite unfolding. A single gesture freely made can carry more ethical weight than dozen rules followed without thought.

“...and since education only partly instructs a person and only partly develops somethings within them, it is impossible to determine the full extent of their natural abilities.”

Kant, 1801
Über Pädagogik

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