



Moral Exemplars to Autonomous Judgment: Reinterpreting the Contemporary Significance of Role Models in Kantian Moral Education

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ABSTRACT

The Kant's philosophy of moral education occupies a significant position within his broader philosophical system and continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary educational thought. At its core, Kantian moral education seeks to awaken an individual's internal capacity for moral judgment and to cultivate a good will guided by duty rather than external rewards or personal interests. Its ultimate purpose is the development of moral autonomy, through which individuals freely act according to principles that can be regarded as universally valid. In contemporary educational practice, however, moral instruction often remains influenced by utilitarian expectations, emotional persuasion, self-interest, social recognition, and other external motivations. Such approaches may encourage outward conformity but do not necessarily foster a genuine sense of moral responsibility or respect for moral law. This paper examines the meaning and educational characteristics of role models within Kant's conception of moral development. It argues that exemplary figures can support moral learning by providing concrete points of reflection without replacing the learner's independent moral judgment. By inspiring reflection, strengthening moral motivation, and encouraging autonomous choice, role models may contribute to a more meaningful form of moral education. Drawing on relevant literature and contemporary educational experience, the study explores the present-day significance of Kantian exemplary education and considers its potential contribution to the reform and innovation of moral education in universities.

KEYWORDS: Kant; Moral Education Thought; Moral Judgment.

INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant occupies a central position in the history of Western philosophy and is widely recognized as a foundational figure in German classical philosophy. [1] His major works, including *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment*, established the intellectual framework of his critical philosophy. [2] Although Kant addressed numerous questions concerning knowledge, freedom, judgment, and morality, his philosophical project repeatedly returns to the fundamental question of the human being and the conditions under which individuals can develop their rational and moral capacities. [3] From this perspective, education acquires particular importance because human beings must cultivate their capacities rather than simply rely on natural inclination. Moral education, therefore, becomes essential to the formation of a person capable of acting responsibly and autonomously.

The idea of the role model, or moral exemplar, appears in different forms throughout Kant's philosophical and educational writings. Existing scholarship has paid considerable attention to empirical examples, while the significance of what may be described as the pure or ideal model has received comparatively less discussion. Liu Fengjuan argues that empirical and pure models should not be treated as opposing elements, since both occupy necessary and interconnected positions within Kant's understanding of moral education. Zhu Yi, meanwhile, examines the philosophical basis of the "moral example" and reflects critically on its theoretical boundaries. Zhang Lin further emphasizes the practical importance of exemplary education in shaping the moral development of young people in China. [4]

Within the broader framework of Kant's critical philosophy, moral education represents one of the highest purposes of human development. The educational value of an example

does not lie merely in encouraging mechanical imitation. Rather, an exemplary figure can provide an initial basis for moral reflection and help learners recognize the possibility of translating moral principles into human action. Through observation, reflection, and voluntary engagement, learners may gradually evaluate the qualities represented by an example and internalize morally significant values. This process can contribute to the formation of an independent moral character rather than simple conformity to external expectations [5].

Some scholars consequently interpret Kantian models as representing the prototype of moral concepts, the practical expression of moral ideals, and a reference point through which individuals can better understand the demands of moral life. Such models may function as guides for public conduct and as important resources in moral education. [6] In the contemporary context, where instrumental reasoning and externally driven success often influence educational priorities, reconsidering the meaning and limits of exemplary education is particularly relevant. A careful understanding of Kant's conception of the role model may therefore offer useful theoretical resources for strengthening moral reflection, encouraging autonomous judgment, and supporting the continuing reform and innovation of moral education [7].

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The Connotation of Kant's Model Education Thought

Kant's conception of moral education can be understood as a gradual movement from exposure to exemplary conduct toward independent moral judgment and, ultimately, the development of autonomy. Within this process, a role model does not simply provide behavior for learners to copy. Instead, an example can stimulate reflection, help learners recognize moral principles, and encourage them to make their own rational choices. The educational significance of the model therefore lies in its capacity to connect abstract moral principles with concrete human conduct while preserving the learner's freedom. Previous research identifies three closely related characteristics of Kantian model education: universal legislation, treating humanity as an end in itself, and the self-determination of the will. [8]

Emphasis on Universal Legislation

A fundamental feature of Kant's moral philosophy is the requirement that one's principles of action should be capable of being regarded as universal laws. The same requirement applies when individuals evaluate their own conduct or consider the actions of others. An action should not be regarded as morally worthy merely because it is attractive, socially approved, or personally beneficial. Its moral value depends on whether the principle underlying

it can be consistently accepted as a rule for rational beings generally. [9]

From this perspective, the educational function of a role model cannot be reduced to encouraging imitation of particular behaviors. Learners need to examine the principle represented by an exemplary action and determine whether that principle has universal moral validity. Such reflection moves moral education beyond personal preference and external approval. It also helps individuals understand that moral conduct involves acting according to principles that respect the rational dignity of every person [10].

The Principle of Humanity as an End

The second defining element of Kantian model education is the principle that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves rather than merely as instruments for achieving another purpose. Because individuals possess rationality and moral agency, their value cannot be reduced to their usefulness to others or to their contribution toward an external objective. [11]

This principle has direct implications for moral education. An effective role model should demonstrate respect for the dignity, autonomy, and moral agency of others. Learners should consequently be encouraged to recognize the humanity of both themselves and those around them. When exemplary conduct embodies respect rather than manipulation, coercion, or exploitation, it provides learners with a concrete basis for understanding the practical meaning of human dignity. In this sense, the role model becomes significant not because of personal status or social prestige, but because the conduct represented by the model expresses respect for humanity as an intrinsic value [12].

Self-Discipline of the Will

The third characteristic is the autonomy or self-discipline of the will. For Kant, genuine morality cannot be established through obedience produced solely by external pressure. Moral action acquires its distinctive value when a rational individual recognizes a moral principle and voluntarily determines the will in accordance with it. The ability to act according to rationally recognized moral principles, even in the presence of competing desires or external influences, is therefore central to moral autonomy. [13]

The role model must consequently function as a stimulus for the development of autonomous judgment rather than as an authority demanding unquestioning imitation. Learners may initially be attracted to the conduct or character of an exemplary person, but lasting moral development requires them to understand, evaluate, and freely accept the principles underlying that conduct. Through this process, external examples can gradually become internal sources of moral reflection and self-regulation [14].

RESULTS

The Role of Role Models under Kant's Moral Education Thought

Kantian moral education contains an inherent tension between educational guidance and individual freedom. Education necessarily involves certain forms of discipline, instruction, and social regulation, particularly during childhood. At the same time, excessive external control may undermine the learner's capacity for independent judgment. The central educational challenge is therefore to cultivate discipline without destroying autonomy. [15]

Role models can help address this tension by providing learners with concrete representations of moral possibilities while leaving the final act of judgment to the individual. Rather than imposing a particular moral identity, exemplary conduct can create an opportunity for learners to observe, question, compare, and reflect upon different ways of acting. The example thus provides an initial orientation for moral thinking, while freedom is preserved through the learner's subsequent process of rational evaluation and choice.

This function is especially important in children's moral education. Children often encounter moral principles initially through visible actions and interpersonal relationships rather than through abstract philosophical reasoning. A trustworthy, responsible, fair, and respectful adult can therefore make otherwise abstract values more intelligible. However, moral education should not stop at imitation. Children should gradually be encouraged to understand why a particular action is worthy, whether the principle behind it can be applied consistently, and how it relates to respect for other persons (Figure 1) [16].

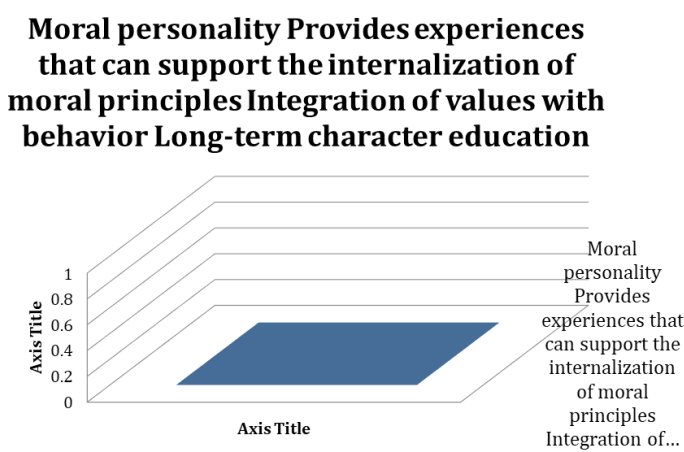


Figure 1: From Moral Exemplars to Autonomous Moral Judgment.

The Kantian role model is best understood as a bridge between moral experience and autonomous moral judgment. Its purpose is not to produce passive conformity but to encourage learners to develop the capacity to choose responsibly. When exemplary education is combined

with reflection and freedom, the learner can move from observing moral conduct to understanding moral principles and eventually to regulating conduct through an internally accepted sense of duty. In this way, the educational value of the role model lies ultimately in helping the learner become capable of moral self-direction [17].

Moral Reflection and the Development of Children's Moral Judgment

Moral education should gradually help learners develop the habit of examining their intentions and actions before acting. Rather than accepting conduct simply because it is socially praised or performed by an admired person, children should learn to ask whether a proposed action is consistent with a morally justifiable principle. This requires careful consideration of the moral rule involved and encourages children to distinguish between personal preference, social approval, and genuine moral obligation. Through repeated reflection of this kind, moral education can contribute to the gradual development of independent moral judgment [18].

Moral education, from a Kantian perspective, should primarily awaken the rational capacities already present within human beings rather than merely impose a collection of external rules. Exemplary conduct can support this process because emotionally meaningful encounters with admirable behavior may initially attract a child's attention and stimulate moral interest. Nevertheless, emotional attraction should become a starting point for rational reflection rather than the final basis of moral action. The learner needs to move from admiration of a particular person toward an understanding of the universal principle that gives the person's action its moral significance [19].

This distinction is particularly important when moral education is directed toward children. During observation of a moral example, children should be encouraged to remain thoughtful rather than being pushed toward unquestioning admiration or personal devotion to the model. The words and actions of exemplary figures need to be examined critically. Children can be guided to consider what moral principle is expressed through a particular action, whether the individual genuinely acts from respect for moral law, and whether the conduct reflects a sincere moral intention. [20]

Parents and teachers consequently have an important responsibility to provide credible examples through their everyday conduct. Children are still developing their capacity for abstract reasoning and may find it difficult to make independent judgments concerning complex moral situations. At the same time, their strong tendency to observe and imitate significant adults makes the surrounding environment especially influential. When exemplary behavior is combined with appropriate explanation and opportunities for reflection, imitation can become an initial stage in the development of moral understanding rather than an end in itself [21].

Moral Examples as an Auxiliary Means of Developing Children's Sense of Rational Duty

When moral education is directed toward children, exemplary figures can be used as supporting resources for helping learners understand why particular forms of conduct possess moral value. The purpose is not simply to present a "good person" for children to copy. Instead, educators should use examples to encourage children to examine the reasons behind an action and understand how moral obligations are established. Before introducing a particular example, educators themselves need to understand its moral significance and the principles it represents. Without such preparation, the indiscriminate use of role models may confuse learners or produce unintended educational consequences [22,23].

The manner in which examples are presented is therefore crucial. Excessive emphasis on comparison can be particularly problematic. For instance, repeatedly contrasting a child who behaves well with another child who behaves poorly may cause the latter to feel humiliated or resentful toward the supposed role model. Instead of developing a sense of duty, such practices may encourage competition, external approval-seeking, or rejection of the moral example. Moral education should consequently avoid turning exemplary figures into instruments of behavioral control [24-27].

A moral example is most valuable when it demonstrates that acting according to an obligation is genuinely possible rather than demanding that learners reproduce another person's behavior in every detail. [12] The example should provide evidence of the practical possibility of moral conduct while leaving learners sufficient space to think, evaluate, and decide for themselves. In this sense, exemplary education functions as an auxiliary means of moral development: it can stimulate the child's awareness of duty, make moral principles more concrete, and encourage reflection on responsible action [28,29].

The limitations of exemplary education must be recognized. If children are encouraged to imitate models mechanically, moral education may become dependent on external authority and weaken the development of an autonomous moral personality. The educational objective should therefore be to transform initial admiration into rational understanding and, ultimately, into freely chosen moral action. A successful role model is not one who creates permanent dependence on imitation, but one whose example helps the learner acquire the capacity to judge and act morally without requiring continuous external direction [30].

DISCUSSION

The Contemporary Value of the Role of Examples Under Kant's Moral Education Thought

The educational significance of moral examples should be

reconsidered in light of contemporary social conditions and the changing needs of learners. Kant's account of exemplary education provides a useful framework for examining how moral education can encourage autonomy without becoming an instrument of external control. The value of a role model does not simply arise from the person's social status, achievements, or public recognition. Rather, its educational importance depends on whether the example encourages rational reflection, respects human dignity, and supports the learner's capacity to make independent moral judgments. From this perspective, the contemporary relevance of Kant's model education can be considered through several interconnected principles [31].

Respect for Human Nature, Freedom, Life, and Rights

Freedom and self-discipline are closely connected within Kant's moral philosophy. Genuine freedom does not mean unrestricted satisfaction of personal desires; rather, it involves the capacity of a rational person to govern the will according to principles that can be morally justified. Self-discipline therefore becomes an important expression of moral autonomy and a foundation of human dignity (Table 1) [13].

This understanding has significant implications for contemporary role-model education. When educational institutions use administrative pressure to require learners to imitate officially designated models, exemplary education can easily become a form of behavioral control. Such an approach may overlook individual differences, personal judgment, and the learner's rights to determine which aspects of an example are morally meaningful. Instead of strengthening moral autonomy, compulsory imitation may encourage superficial compliance and gradually weaken the learner's willingness to think independently [32].

Human beings differ in their experiences, personalities, circumstances, and ways of understanding moral questions. Contemporary moral education should therefore recognize this diversity rather than assume that one model can provide a predetermined pattern for everyone. Learners should be given the opportunity to encounter exemplary conduct, interpret it in their own circumstances, and decide what can reasonably be learned from it. The responsibility of educators is to create conditions for reflection rather than dictate the precise form that imitation must take [33].

Role-model education should consequently be grounded in respect. Respect for human nature, freedom, life, and an individual right creates an educational environment in which learners can participate as moral subjects rather than passive recipients of prescribed values. Such an approach is more consistent with the Kantian emphasis on autonomy and provides a stronger foundation for the development of an independent moral personality [34].

Table 1: Core Dimensions and Contemporary Educational Significance of Kantian Role-Model Education.

Dimension	Kantian Principle	Educational Function of the Role Model	Risk of Misapplication	Contemporary Educational Value
Universal legislation	Moral action should be guided by principles capable of universal application	Encourages learners to examine the moral principle behind exemplary conduct	Mechanical imitation without moral reasoning	Develops critical moral judgment and principled decision-making
Humanity as an end	Every person possesses intrinsic dignity and must not be treated merely as a means	Demonstrates respect for the dignity, rights, and autonomy of others	Treating learners as passive recipients of prescribed values	Promotes respect, inclusion, dignity, and human rights
Autonomy of the will	Moral action requires rational self-determination	Encourages learners to move from observation toward independent choice	Excessive institutional pressure or compulsory imitation	Strengthens moral independence and responsibility
Rational reflection	Reason should guide moral judgment rather than impulse or external approval	Provides concrete situations through which learners can examine motives and principles	Emotional admiration replacing rational evaluation	Connects moral learning with critical thinking
Moral duty	Moral worth is associated with acting from duty rather than personal advantage	Makes the possibility of responsible action visible to learners	Reward-based or punishment-based conformity	Encourages responsibility and internal moral motivation
Respect for freedom	Moral education must preserve the learner's capacity for autonomous judgment	Allows learners to interpret and evaluate examples independently	Role models becoming instruments of behavioral control	Supports learner agency and democratic educational practice
Objective reality	Moral education should remain connected to actual human experience	Presents realistic and credible examples of moral conduct	Idealized or artificially perfect role models	Makes moral education practical and psychologically credible
Self-discipline	Freedom is expressed through rational regulation of one's own will	Shows how moral principles can guide conduct in difficult situations	Dependence on external authority	Develops self-regulation and responsible behavior
Moral personality	Education should contribute to the formation of an autonomous moral subject	Helps learners integrate moral principles into their own lives	Permanent dependence on exemplary figures	Supports long-term moral identity and autonomous character

Sustaining Respect for Reason

Reason occupies a fundamental position in Kant's understanding of human dignity. Human beings should never be reduced to instruments for achieving another person's purposes because they possess rational agency and the capacity to determine their own conduct. The principle that persons must be treated as ends in themselves therefore establishes an important boundary for moral and educational practice. [14]

This principle suggests that effective role-model education cannot rely primarily on emotional enthusiasm, admiration, popularity, or social pressure. A learner may admire

a successful or morally respected individual without understanding the principles that make particular actions worthy of respect. If education merely encourages emotional identification with exemplary figures, the resulting moral influence may remain external and unstable [35].

A more meaningful approach is to encourage learners to examine the reasons underlying exemplary conduct. They should be able to ask what values are expressed by an action, whether those values can be rationally justified, and how they can be applied in different circumstances. In this way, the role model becomes a starting point for rational inquiry rather than an object of unquestioning admiration [36,37].

Educators themselves also have an important responsibility in this process. Their daily conduct provides a practical example through which learners assess the relationship between moral principles and actual behavior. If educators communicate moral ideals but consistently act contrary to them, the educational credibility of the example is weakened. Effective exemplary education therefore requires a reasonable degree of consistency between what educators teach and how they conduct themselves [38,39].

The purpose of role-model education should ultimately be to strengthen learners' conscious moral awareness and their capacity for rational judgment. When learners understand the principles represented by an example, they can gradually transform externally encountered values into personally accepted commitments. This movement from admiration to understanding and from understanding to voluntary action provides a stronger basis for integrating moral knowledge with moral practice [40].

Respecting Objective Facts and the Reality of Human Experience

The educational use of role models must also remain connected to actual human experience. Learning from an example should involve observing conduct realistically, considering its circumstances, and reflecting on the practical difficulties associated with moral action. Exemplary education loses its credibility when the model presented to learners is artificially perfect or disconnected from ordinary human life [41,42].

Moral imitation should therefore not become blind replication. Education should recognize the learner's developmental stage, personal circumstances, and capacity for independent judgment. Excessive emphasis on idealized behavior may encourage children to reproduce moral language without developing a corresponding understanding of its meaning. A learner who can recite moral principles but cannot apply them appropriately in everyday situations has not necessarily achieved genuine moral development.

The authenticity of the example is consequently important. Moral models can exert a powerful influence on learners, but their influence can operate in constructive or undesirable directions. Examples that accurately demonstrate responsible conduct can reinforce moral learning, whereas exaggerated or unrealistic representations may weaken trust in the educational message. [43]

Contemporary educators should therefore avoid presenting role models as flawless personalities whose every action must be admired. A more credible model can acknowledge complexity, limitations, mistakes, and the effort involved in correcting one's behavior. Such authenticity allows learners to understand morality as an ongoing process of reflection and self-improvement rather than as the achievement of an unrealistic state of perfection.

When an exemplary figure is presented in a manner consistent with observable reality, learners are more likely to engage with the example critically and constructively. They can identify the circumstances that shaped the person's decisions, evaluate the moral principles involved, and consider how similar principles might be applied within their own lives. Thus, respect for objective facts does not diminish the educational value of a role model; rather, it makes exemplary education more credible, practical, and capable of supporting genuine moral development [44,45].

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

CONCLUSION

Kantian moral education offers a valuable framework for reconsidering the place of role models in contemporary education. This study has shown that an exemplary figure should not be treated as an object of compulsory imitation, but as a practical point of departure for moral reflection, rational judgment, and autonomous choice. The educational value of examples emerges when learners examine the principles underlying exemplary conduct and gradually connect those principles with their own moral responsibilities. Respect for human dignity, freedom, rationality, and objective circumstances is therefore essential to prevent exemplary education from becoming a form of indoctrination or external behavioral control. For children in particular, credible examples can make abstract moral principles more understandable while encouraging the development of judgment and responsibility. Ultimately, the contemporary significance of Kant's model education lies not in producing obedient imitators, but in cultivating individuals who can critically evaluate examples, recognize moral obligations, and freely govern their actions according to principles they rationally accept.

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