

MORAL BEHAVIOR IN SPORTS:
an epistemological essay from kantian ethics to applied moral psychology

COMPORTAMENTO MORAL NO ESPORTE:
um ensaio epistemológico da ética kantiana à psicologia moral aplicada

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Abstract

This work proposes a theoretical-epistemological review of moral behavior, articulating three main axes: the normative foundation of morality in Kant's practical philosophy; the transition to the empirical field of moral psychology, where morality is understood as a multidimensional construct; and sport as a privileged field for the manifestation and problematization of morality in action. Starting from Kantian ethics, founded on the categorical imperative and rational autonomy, the shift from a normative focus to developmental, affective, and contextual approaches to moral behavior is discussed. Sport is analyzed as a space in which moral values are constantly strained by interests, group norms, and competitive pressures. It concludes that understanding morality in sport requires integrating philosophical foundations and empirical investigations, recognizing it as a complex and formative ethical terrain.

Keywords: Sport and morality; Moral behavior; Kantian ethics; Moral development.

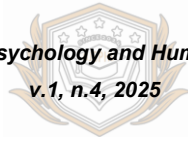
Resumo

Este trabalho propõe uma revisão teórico-epistemológica sobre o comportamento moral, articulando três eixos principais: a fundamentação normativa da moralidade na filosofia prática de Kant; a transição para o campo empírico da psicologia moral, onde a moralidade é entendida como um constructo multidimensional; e o esporte como campo privilegiado para a manifestação e problematização da moral em ação. A partir da ética kantiana, fundada no imperativo categórico e na autonomia racional, discute-se o deslocamento do foco normativo para abordagens desenvolvimentistas, afetivas e contextuais do comportamento moral. O esporte é analisado como um espaço no qual valores morais são constantemente tensionados por interesses, normas grupais e pressões competitivas. Conclui-se que compreender a moral no esporte exige integrar fundamentos filosóficos e investigações empíricas, reconhecendo-o como um terreno ético complexo e formativo.

Palavras-chave: Esporte e moralidade; Comportamento moral; Ética kantiana; Desenvolvimento moral.

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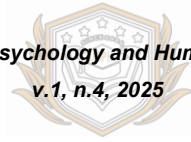
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Morality as an epistemological problem

Morality, as a philosophical and practical category, has been an important object of study throughout history. From transcendental norm to observable conduct, from personal virtue to institutional regulation, morality traverses different regimes of knowledge and forms of rationality (Turiel, 2002). In recent years, there has been a growing interest, on the part of the human and social sciences, in understanding moral behaviors, especially with regard to their origins, forms of manifestation, and contextual influences. This interest involves investigations into their ontogenetic processes and the cultural determinants that shape their expression in different societies (Nucci, 2001).

Among these contexts, sport stands out as a privileged space for the analysis of moral behavior, as it brings together elements such as competition, rules, judgment, and collective values. Attitudes such as respect for rules, empathy with other participants, and the exercise of self-control are frequently valued and encouraged, configuring themselves as potentially formative elements of moral conduct (Martinek; Hellison, 1997). These dispositions not only contribute to good coexistence in the competitive environment, but can also have a positive impact on other domains of the individual's life, such as school, family, and professional relationships.

However, sport is not, in itself, morally neutral nor univocally formative. In certain contexts, it can favor antisocial behaviors, such as cheating, intentional aggression, and strategic manipulations guided by extramoral interests (Greendorfer, 2002). This ambiguity invites critical reflection on the true impact of sports practice on moral development, requiring investigations that consider the institutional, cultural, and relational mediations that permeate its experience (Weiss; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009).



1.2 Kant and morality as rational duty: the ethics of autonomy

Kant's (1724–1804) moral philosophy represents a landmark in ethics and morality. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (2023) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (2017), Kant presents an ethics not based on interests, consequences, or inclinations, but anchored in practical reason. Moral action is guided by the categorical imperative, understood as a maxim that can be universalized.

One of his best-known formulations states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". This universalization does not depend on contexts, cultures, or feelings, but on the formal structure of reason (Paton, 1971). The Kantian moral subject is an autonomous legislator, whose freedom is expressed in obedience to the law that he himself rationally recognizes as valid.

The concept of autonomy is central to this system. Unlike freedom as the absence of impediments, Kantian autonomy consists of the capacity for ethical self-determination based on rational principles. Thus, good will - acting out of duty, not inclination - is the only unconditional moral good. This model distances itself from both consequentialist utilitarianism and virtue ethics based on character or feeling (O'Neill, 1989).

Epistemologically, Kant inaugurates a formalist and transcendental ethics, whose principles do not derive from experience, but from reason itself. It is a normative system that aims at the universalization of morality, independent of empirical contexts (Wood, 1999). However, precisely because of its abstraction, Kantian ethics has been criticized for its difficulty in dealing with the historical, affective, and situational variability of concrete morality, opening space for the emergence of moral psychology.

1.3 From morality as a norm to morality as behavior: the emergence of moral psychology

The limitations of Kantian ethics stimulated empirical investigations into morality, considering the individual's experience, cognition, and social interaction (Piaget, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Turiel, 2002). In this context, morality ceases to be merely a transcendental duty and comes to be understood as a psychological phenomenon, observable and measurable.

Moral behavior is now understood as a multidimensional construct, involving judgment (Haidt, 2001), motivation (Hardy; Carlo, 2005), emotion (Haidt, 2001), and action (Bandura, 2014). This shift allowed the development of research methods and measurement instruments applicable to different contexts, including sports (Rest *et al.*, 1999).

Piaget is a pioneer in understanding morality as a process of cognitive development, distinguishing moral heteronomy from moral autonomy. Kohlberg expands this perspective by proposing stages of moral development, culminating in the post-conventional level, inspired by Kantian universal principles. Subsequently, Gilligan criticizes the rationalist bias and proposes an ethics of care, emphasizing empathy, relationships, and responsiveness to others.

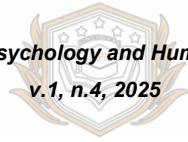
Bandura contributes by introducing the concept of moral disengagement, explaining how individuals justify immoral conduct through cognitive mechanisms such as diffusion of responsibility and minimization of consequences. This approach is especially relevant for understanding behaviors in sports.

1.4 Sport as an empirical field of morality: between principles and practices

Sports practice constitutes a privileged context for observing moral behavior in action. Situations involving respect for rules, doping, cheating, violence, or exclusion place individuals before concrete moral dilemmas (Morgan, 2006). Moral behavior in sport is not limited to judgment, but is expressed in decisions made under pressure.

Although sport is historically associated with fair play and moral formation, modern sport also presents intense ethical conflicts, especially in professionalized contexts. Authors such as Kavussanu and Boardley highlight factors such as empathy, motivational climate, and group norms in explaining pro-social and anti-social behaviors.

In this sense, sport can be a formative space for morality, provided it is intentionally structured for this purpose. Otherwise, it can reinforce morally questionable practices.



2 CONCLUSION

This review discussed different epistemological perspectives on moral behavior, from Kantian ethics to moral psychology applied to sport. It is evident that moral behavior is not inherent to the individual, but results from their experiences and social interactions. Sport emerges as a complex and potentially formative field, whose contribution to moral development depends on the cultural, institutional, and pedagogical conditions that structure it.

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