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A Duty Ignored: A Kantian Critique on the Rise of Online Gambling in the Philippines

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Abstract

The dramatic rise of online gambling in the Philippines has transformed entertainment, economic behavior, and social norms—often at the expense of moral reflection. This paper critically examines the ethical implications of this phenomenon through the lens of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics. Kant's categorical imperative, which insists on universal moral principles and respect for human dignity, provides a compelling framework for assessing the practices, policies, and cultural shifts surrounding internet-based gambling. Drawing from Kant's formulations—the formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity—this study argues that online gambling in the Philippines cannot be morally justified. It fails to meet the standards of rational

autonomy, promotes manipulation over respect, and threatens individuals as mere instruments of profit, particularly targeting the poor, the youth, and the vulnerable. The analysis further reveals that both individual behavior and institutional policy often operate on inclination and economic interest rather than duty-bound morality. While acknowledging critiques of Kantian abstraction in the face of socioeconomic realities, the paper maintains that ethical governance must prioritize the dignity and rational agency of all persons. Ultimately, this study calls for systemic reform and moral education to resist the commodification of human weakness and promote a culture grounded in reason and responsibility.

Keywords: Gambling, Social Media Influencers, Kantian Ethics, Duty, Categorical Imperative, Philippines

1. Introduction

Online Gambling has emerged as a rapidly expanding phenomenon in the Philippines, catalyzed by advances in digital infrastructure, mobility accessibility, and the proliferation of platforms such as digital casinos, mobile betting applications, and e-sabong (online cockfighting) (Alampay & Soriano, 2021; PAGCOR, 2023) ^[1, 8]. The Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) and the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) have played a significant role in regulating and promoting this sector, which has contributed substantial revenues to the government while simultaneously introducing complex ethical, psychological, and social issues (Uy, 2022; Reyes, 2023) ^[12, 11].

Despite its economic benefits, the normalization of gambling through social media influencers, celebrity endorsements, and integration into e-commerce ecosystems has led to serious consequences including addiction, indebtedness, familial disruption, and erosion of moral and cultural values (Palatino, 2022; Reyes, 2023) ^[9, 11]. These harms disproportionately affect vulnerable groups such as the youth, low-income families, and the unemployed, suggesting that the issue extends beyond regulatory oversight and into the realm of moral evaluation.

This paper aims to address the ethical dimensions of online gambling in the Philippines through the lens of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics. Kant's categorical imperative, particularly the formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity, offers a critical framework for evaluating whether gambling practices—at both individual and institutional levels—uphold or violate the principles of moral duty, autonomy and human dignity (Kant, 1785/1996) ^[4]. Previous studies on gambling have primarily focused on psychological or economic consequences; however, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the normative ethical critique of online gambling through a Kantian perspective.

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary discourse by evaluating the practices and policies surrounding online gambling in the Philippines within a Kantian ethical framework. The objectives of the research are threefold: (1) to examine the rise and structure of online gambling in the country; (2) to analyze whether such practices align with Kantian principles of moral action; (3) to recommend ethically grounded responses by individuals, institutions, and the state.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary research design grounded in Philosophical analysis, doctrinal hermeneutics, and critical social inquiry. Central to the methodology is the application of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics as an evaluative framework for understanding the moral dimensions of online gambling in the Philippines.

Primary Philosophical material includes Kant's *groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) [4], particularly the formulations of the Categorical Imperative: the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of Humanity. These were hermeneutically analyzed and operationalized as normative criteria for assessing the ethical validity of gambling-related behaviors, policies, and social norms.

Secondary sources were drawn from a curated set of peer reviewed articles, policy documents, news reports, and regulatory statements, including those published by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), major Philippine news outlets, and academic journals on ethics, digital governance, and public policy. These materials provided empirical and contextual grounding for the philosophical critique.

The interpretive method involved a layer of textual and contextual analysis: first, a descriptive mapping of the socio-cultural rise of online gambling in the Philippines; second, a normative evaluation of individual corporate, and governmental actions using Kantian principles; and third, an ethical synthesis offering implications for public policy and moral education. This method prioritizes rational coherence, internal consistency with Kant's moral philosophy, and relevance to contemporary Filipino Society.

No statistical or experimental procedures were used, as the study is conceptual in nature. However, ethical considerations included the careful treatment of vulnerable populations discussed in secondary sources, avoiding stigmatization and ensuring that philosophical arguments remained sensitive to socioeconomic realities.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 The rise of Online Gambling in the Philippines

Gambling has long been embedded in Filipino culture, ranging from traditional games of chance to widespread participation in cockfighting and local betting (Palatino, 2022) [9]. The formal regulation of gambling began with the creation of the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) in 1976, tasked with centralizing control and generating government revenue from gambling (PAGCOR, 2023) [8]. In the 2000s, the growth of the internet and mobile technologies paved the way for a new era: online gambling (Alampay & Soriano, 2021) [1].

With the issuance of licenses for online gaming operators (POGOs), the industry saw an explosion of activity. Filipinos also increasingly gained access to international gambling websites, mobile apps, and social media-integrated platforms (Alampay & Soriano, 2021) [1]. One of the most controversial developments was e-sabong, which gained massive popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns but was later banned in 2022 due to cases of addiction, corruption, and even related criminality (Uy, 2022; Palatino, 2022) [12, 9].

Despite existing laws and regulation, enforcement remains weak. Many unregulated or under-regulated sites continue to operate, while loopholes in digital transactions make

monitoring and taxation difficult (PAGCOR, 2023) [8]. The legal ambiguity and insufficient safeguards have allowed online gambling to spread rapidly with little ethical oversight.

Proponents of online gambling often cite its economic benefits. The industry has generated billions in government revenue, provided jobs for thousands, and boosted the country's digital infrastructure (PAGCOR, 2023) [8]. However, these advantages must be weighed against the social costs.

A growing number of Filipinos—especially from low-income households—are being drawn into gambling as a perceived shortcut to financial improvement. For many, what begins as casual entertainment becomes a form of dependency. Numerous cases have been reported of individuals going into debt, neglecting family responsibilities, or engaging in crime to fuel their gambling habits (Reyes, 2023) [11]. This is particularly alarming considering the lack of robust psychological support services or public education on gambling addiction (Reyes, 2023) [11].

In rural and urban communities alike, online gambling often disproportionately affects the most vulnerable: the youth, the unemployed, and those already facing economic hardship (Reyes, 2023; Palatino, 2022) [11, 9]. Instead of serving as a tool for empowerment, it frequently exacerbates cycles of poverty and social disintegration.

Gambling is not new to Filipino culture, but its digital transformation has led to its normalization on an unprecedented scale. Platforms now market themselves aggressively through social media influencers, online streamers, and even celebrities—blurring the line between entertainment and exploitation (Palatino, 2022; Uy, 2022) [9, 12].

Online gambling has also become more socially acceptable among the youth, especially as platforms integrate with digital wallets and e-commerce ecosystems (Alampay & Soriano, 2021) [1]. The cultural framing of gambling as a harmless pastime or “diskarte” (strategy or hustle) further masks its danger. This normalization diminishes critical reflection and opens the door to moral relativism, where actions are judged by outcomes—such as winning money—rather than ethical principles.

In this context the rise of online gambling in the Philippines is not merely a legal or economic issue but a deeply moral one. It calls for critical assessment not only of its tangible effects but also of the values and assumptions that underpin its growing acceptance in Filipino society.

3.2 Kantian Ethics: A Brief Overview

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804), one of the most influential figures in Western moral Philosophy, proposed an ethical system grounded in reason, autonomy, and universal moral laws (Kant, 1996) [4]. Unlike consequentialist frameworks that judge actions by their outcomes (e.g., Utilitarianism), Kantian ethics is deontological—it asserts that the morality of an action depends on whether it fulfills one's duty and respects the dignity of rational beings. In assessing the morality of human actions, Kant emphasizes what we ought to do, rather than what we want or what benefits us most (Greggor, 1996).

At the heart of Kant's ethics is the concept of the “good will”—the only thing that is good without qualification. A good will acts not out of inclination, emotion, or pursuit of

outcomes, but out of duty to the moral law. According to Kant, moral worth is found not in the result of an action, but in the intention to do what is right, guided by reason (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. An act is morally right if it is done from duty and in accordance with duty, even if it produces no favorable result.

This emphasis on duty challenges individuals to act out of respect for the moral law, regardless of personal gain or consequence. Applying this to behaviors such as gambling, Kant would question not just the outcomes (e.g., entertainment or winnings), but whether the intention behind gambling is rooted in duty or mere desire (Gregor, 1996) ^[3]. Kant's Formula of universal Law commands: "*Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*" (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. This test asks whether one's action could be universally applied without contradiction. If everyone gambled online for personal gain or escape, would that create a rational, sustainable moral order? If not, then such action is morally impermissible.

Similarly, the Formula of Humanity instructs: "*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*" (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. This principle requires respecting the inherent dignity of persons. Individuals must never be manipulated or used for others' gain. Exploiting the Vulnerable Populations through online gambling platforms—often engineered to manipulate user behavior—violates these principles by treating people as profit-generating tools, not as autonomous agents (Gregor, 1996) ^[3].

Kant maintains that true morality requires autonomy—the ability to govern oneself through reason, not compulsion or impulse (Kant, 1996; Allison, 1990) ^[4, 2]. A rational moral agent must make choices freely and reflectively. When individuals are manipulated by addictive systems, false hope, or exploitative marketing, their capacity for autonomous choice is undermined (Wood, 2008; O'Neill, 1989) ^[13, 7].

Thus, any institution or practice that inhibits rational freedom or encourages actions based on irrational desires violates Kantian Ethics (Gregor, 1996) ^[3]. In the case of online gambling, systems that foster dependency, emotional manipulation or loss of self control raise serious ethical red flags.

In summary, Kantian ethics prioritizes the dignity, rationality, and autonomy of every human being. It insists that moral actions must be done from duty and capable of being universally willed without contradiction (Kant, 1996; Wood, 2008) ^[4, 13]. As we proceed to apply these principles to the case of online gambling in the Philippines, it will become evident that many of its practices and structures fail to meet Kant's moral standards.

3.3 Applying Kantian Ethics to Online Gambling

Having established the core principles of Kantian ethics - duty, autonomy, and the categorical imperative—we now turn to evaluate the rise of online gambling in the Philippines through this philosophical lens (Kant, 1996; Gregor, 1996) ^[4, 3]. By applying Kant's moral criteria, we can assess whether online gambling, both as an individual act and a systemic practice, aligns with the requirements of moral law and respect for human dignity (Wood, 2008 ^[13]; O'Neill, 1989).

The Formula of Universal Law requires us to ask: Can the maxim "it is acceptable to gamble online for profit, escape, or entertainment" be universally adopted without contradiction or harm to rational agency? Kant Argues that moral actions must be guided by maxims that can be willed universally without contradictions (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. If everyone were to adopt gambling as a norm of behavior, several contradictions emerge.

First, gambling relies on structure in which not everyone can win; its profitability presumes that many must lose. If universalized, the system would collapse or promote self-defeating behavior (Wood, 2008) ^[13], as everyone would engage in an activity that often leads to loss, addiction, or moral compromise. Second, if gambling becomes a norm for addressing financial needs or emotional escape, it undermines rational effort, self-reliance, and meaningful labor—both of which are duties in Kantian ethics (Allison, 1990) ^[2].

Therefore, the maxim fails the test of universalization. It cannot be morally permissible to engage in or promote online gambling when its widespread adoption leads to social decay and rational inconsistency.

The Formula of Humanity demands that we *treat individuals as ends in themselves, never merely as a means to an end* (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. This principle directly challenges the business models of many online gambling platforms, which are often engineered with manipulative features—such as near-miss algorithm, variable reward schedules, and seamless wallet integration—that foster repeated use and psychological dependency (Reyes, 2023; Palatino, 2022) ^[11, 9].

These systems disproportionately affect vulnerable populations—the poor, the young, and those in emotional distress—thereby using individuals merely as profit sources. According to Kant, this violates their autonomy and intrinsic worth (Gregor, 1996; O'Neill, 1989) ^[3, 7].

Kant Also emphasized duties to oneself: preserving one's rational faculties, health and dignity (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. Compulsive gambling undermines these duties by encouraging self-deception, financial irresponsibility, and moral degeneration. These behaviors are incompatible with the rational self-governance Kantian ethics demands of moral agents (Allison, 1990; Wood, 2008) ^[2, 13].

Responsibility does not lie solely with individuals. Those who profit from the gambling industry—corporations, influencers, and even state institutions—must also be held accountable. Actions driven by profit or social approval rather than duty lack moral worth under Kantian ethics (Gregor, 1996) ^[3]. Influencers who glamorize gambling, and lawmakers who tolerate or endorse it, act not from moral principles but from inclination or financial expedience.

Kant envisioned a "kingdom of ends"—a moral community where each person is treated as a rational legislator in a universal moral order (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. In such a society, exploitative systems like unregulated online gambling would be ethically unacceptable. If the Philippine state permits or encourages such systems, it fails in its Kantian duty to protect rational autonomy and human dignity. (O'Neill, 1989) ^[7].

3.4 Ethical Implications and Policy Considerations

The application of Kantian ethics to the rise of online gambling in the Philippines reveals fundamental moral failure—not only at the level of individual behavior but also

within the structures and institutions that allow such practices to thrive (Kant, 1996; Wood, 2008) ^[4, 13]. Kant's framework demands more than philosophical reflection; it requires ethical action guided by reason, dignity, and universal principles.

From a Kantian viewpoint, each person is a rational moral agent obligated to act out of duty and self-respect. Participating in online gambling as a form of escape or easy gain violates one's duty to self-preservation and rational decision-making. When individuals gamble excessively or recklessly, they relinquish autonomy to irrational-desires—a condition Kant would regard as morally degrading (Allison, 1990; Gregor, 1996) ^[2, 3].

Therefore, ethical responsibility begins with moral self-discipline. Individuals must exercise critical reflection before engaging in online gambling, resisting the appeal of false hope and emotional gratification. In Kant's terms, this is an act of treating oneself as an end: to live with dignity and rational control rather than serve as a tool for commercial exploitation (Kant, 1996; Wood, 2008) ^[4, 13].

Governments, under a Kantian framework, are not merely regulators—they are moral guardians responsible for creating conditions in which rational autonomy and dignity can flourish. If the state allows or facilitates practices that degrade its citizens' rational agency, it fails in its moral duty (O'Neill, 1989) ^[7].

The Philippine government's tolerance—and in some cases promotion—of online gambling raises serious ethical concerns. While economic revenue may be cited as justification, Kantian ethics denies the morality of ends justifying the means. No amount of profit can ethically excuse actions that manipulate or exploit individuals, especially the poor and vulnerable (Kant 1996; Gregor, 1996) ^[4, 3].

Kantian ethics thus compels the state to enforce stringent regulations aimed at preventing exploitative gambling practices. This include imposing strict limitations on advertising, particularly those targeting impressionable groups such as minors. Transparency in gambling operations—especially in terms of financial disclosures and profit structures—must be mandated to uphold public accountability. Most importantly, access to gambling platforms should be deliberately restricted, particularly for vulnerable and at-risk populations, to safeguard their autonomy and dignity (Palatino 2022; Reyes, 2023) ^[9, 11].

Beyond regulation, a Kantian state and society must also promote moral education as a foundation for ethical citizenship. Individuals should be equipped with the knowledge and critical reasoning skill necessary to resist manipulative industries and critical reasoning skills necessary to resist manipulative industries and to make informed autonomous decisions (O'Neill, 1989; Wood, 2008) ^[7, 13]. This includes public campaigns that clearly communicate the psychological and financial risks of online gambling, as well as school-based programs that foster rational self-governance, ethical reflection, and digital literacy. Moreover, support services for those struggling with gambling addiction must be grounded in compassion, respect, and rehabilitation—rather than punishment or social stigma—thereby affirming their dignity and capacity for moral renewal (Reyes, 2023) ^[11].

In line with Kant's belief in moral development, prevention should be rooted in helping individuals realize their intrinsic worth, not merely in scaring them with consequences (Kant,

1996) ^[4].

Private gambling operators, especially those that market aggressively or operate through social media, have an ethical obligation to treat users as rational agents—not as profit sources to be manipulated. From a Kantian perspective, corporations must not design platforms or incentives that encourage irrational behavior, deception, or dependency. This includes transparency on the odds and risks, time and spending limits to prevent addictive behavior, clear and accessible self-exclusion mechanisms, and refusal to use deceptive marketing or influencer promotion tactics (Gregor 1996; Reyes, 2023) ^[3, 11].

While profit is a goal of any business, ethical profit must respect the autonomy and humanity of every customer (O'Neill, 1989).

In the face of growing digital temptations and economic rationalizations, Kantian ethics reminds us of the inviolable moral worth of every person. Online gambling, as currently practiced and promoted in the Philippines, undermines this value by reducing citizens to instruments of profit, violating duties to self and others, and normalizing irrational dependency (Wood, 2008) ^[13].

Therefore, both individual conscience and institutional design must be reoriented toward moral responsibility, rational autonomy, and respect for human dignity. Only then can Filipino society move toward a truly ethical future—one that treats every person not as a gambler to be exploited, but as a moral agent to be respected.

3.5 Criticisms and Limitations

While Kantian ethics offers a robust moral framework centered on duty, autonomy, and rationality, critics argue that its abstract universality often lacks sensitivity to material and social conditions—especially in developing contexts like the Philippines (Wood, 2008; O'Niell, 1989) ^[13, 7]. Online gambling, for many Filipinos, is not merely a form of entertainment or vice, but a perceived economic opportunity in a country marked by chronic poverty, limited job opportunities, and systemic inequality (Reyes, 2023; Palatino, 2022) ^[11, 9].

Kant's moral philosophy demands that individuals act according to principles that could be universalized and that they maintain self-respect and dignity through rational choices (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. However, this presupposes that individuals have the freedom and resources necessary to exercise such moral autonomy. In reality, those who turn to gambling are often driven by desperation, not malice or moral blindness. Thus, applying Kant's framework rigidly might fail to account for the structural injustices that make harmful choices seem like rational survival strategies (Wood, 2008) ^[13].

This raises the question: Can a person be held fully morally accountable under Kantian Standards if their agency is severely constrained by socioeconomic conditions? Critics argue that Kant's ethics must be supplemented with a deeper understanding of justice that includes social and economic realities (O'Neill, 1989; Pogge, 2007) ^[7, 10].

Opposing views from libertarian and utilitarian philosophies offer contrasting ethical assessment of online gambling. From a libertarian perspective, individual freedom is paramount; people should have the right to decide how to spend their money—even if it involves personal risk. People (Nozick, 1974) ^[6]. Under this view, gambling may be seen as a matter of personal choice, and any government

intervention is seen as paternalistic or infringing on liberty. This sharply contrasts with Kant's belief that true freedom is not doing what one wants, but acting according to rational moral law.

From a utilitarian perspective, the morality of online gambling hinges on its consequences. If gambling platforms create jobs, stimulate economic activity, or provide entertainment for the majority, then it may be justified—even if it leads to harm for some (Mill, 1863) ^[5]. This consequentialist lens conflicts with Kant's deontological framework, which insists that actions are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of outcomes (Kant, 1996) ^[4]. Kant would reject any institutional practice that treats individuals as mere instruments, even in pursuit of the greatest happiness.

These opposing views highlight a core tension in ethics: should morality prioritize duties and principles (deontology), or outcomes and happiness (consequentialism)? While Kant offers a strong moral indictment of online gambling, his system may appear idealistic or impractical in a pluralistic society with diverse moral perspectives (Wood, 2008) ^[13].

4. Conclusion

Through the lens of Kantian ethics, the rise of online gambling in the Philippines reveals deep moral contradictions. Kant's categorical imperative challenges individuals and institutions to act according to universal moral laws and to treat humanity as an end in itself, never as a means (Kant, 1996; Gregor, 1996) ^[4, 3]. Online gambling fails both tests: it encourages behaviors that, if universalized, would erode personal responsibility and social stability, and it often treats individuals—particularly the poor and vulnerable - not as rational and moral agents but as instruments for profit (Wood, 2008; O'Neill, 1989) ^[13, 7].

Moreover, the normalization of gambling culture undermines the very autonomy Kant regards as essential to human dignity. Rather than empowering individuals to make rational, duty-bound decisions, gambling platforms often explore emotional impulses, addiction, and socioeconomic desperation (Reyes, 2023; Palatino, 2022) ^[11, 9].

In light of this moral failure, several ethical and practical recommendations emerge. First, the Philippine government and relevant institutions must revisit the moral responsibilities attached to the regulation of online gambling. Policies should be informed not solely by economic considerations but by a moral commitment to protect the autonomy and dignity of all citizens (O'Neill, 1989) ^[7]. Second, educational initiatives should be launched to encourage critical thinking about gambling, its long-term consequences, and the meaning of moral responsibility. These efforts must begin at the community and school levels and extend to public campaigns that confront manipulative industry practices (Wood, 2008) ^[13].

Lastly, broader social reforms are needed to address the structural causes of gambling dependency. Access to sustainable livelihoods, mental health services and socioeconomic support must be expanded to provide real alternatives to the false promises of online gambling (Reyes, 2023; Pogge, 2007) ^[11, 10].

In a society increasingly driven by profit and convenience Kant's moral philosophy reminds us that not everything that is legal or popular is morally right. A truly ethical society is

one that resists the commodification of human weakness and instead builds systems that respect human dignity, promote rational freedom, and honor the duties we owe to ourselves and to others. The challenge is not merely to regulate online gambling—but to cultivate a moral culture where people are empowered to live not by chance but by reason.

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