

# REDUCING ACCESS BARRIERS, HIDING LEARNING BARRIERS: AN ETHICAL (KANTIAN) CRITIQUE OF THE OPEN ADMISSIONS MODEL USED IN MOOCS

**Louai Rahal**

*School of Public and Global Affairs, Fairleigh Dickinson University (Canada)*

## Abstract

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is an innovative instructional technology that promises to democratize education. For more than a decade, highly reputable universities and companies have created MOOCs and offered them on online platforms such as Coursera, EdX, and Future Learn. The MOOCs platforms use an open admissions model: Users can enroll in a course with a click of a button and without applying for admissions. The fees for enrollment vary from platform to platform but they all tend to be relatively low. The open admissions model appears to be empowering learners by removing access barriers such as high costs and selective admissions. However, there is extensive empirical evidence that MOOCs have high dropout rates and that the completion of a MOOC requires strong academic and self-regulation skills, skills that not all learners have. This reality raises ethical concerns about whether MOOCs platforms are deceiving learners by encouraging them to enroll and pay for courses without giving them information about the learning barriers that they will likely encounter. In this article, I analyze the open admissions model of MOOCs platforms based on the Kantian theory of morality. The Kantian theory of morality rests on the concept of rational freedom and the duty to protect and promote rational freedom. Correspondingly, my analysis examines the extent to which MOOCs platforms are promoting and/or constraining rational freedom. I first argue that the open admissions model can positively contribute to the freedom of learners by giving them access to opportunities for developing their talents. I then argue that while the open admissions model facilitates access to learning, it is currently not supporting learners in understanding the barriers that they will likely encounter in a MOOC (such as the tendency of novice learners to overestimate their competences, the absence of expert guidance in MOOCs, and the need for high levels of self-regulation to succeed in a MOOC). To support learners in making free rational decisions as opposed to rushed uninformed decisions, MOOCs platforms should help them better assess their readiness for a course. This could be achieved by requiring learners to complete an assessment prior to enrolling in a course. Automated feedback on the assessment can support learners in better understanding the competences they need to have and the time commitment they need to make to successfully complete the course.

**Keywords:** *MOOCs, online learning, Kantian ethics, rational freedom, deception.*

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## 1. Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is an instructional technology that aims to democratize education by making it more accessible and affordable. Unlike other types of online courses that have enrollment restrictions, MOOCs are designed to be accessible to a vast audience without any limits on the number of students who can enroll. The technology first emerged in 2011 when Stanford university offered three online courses for free to more than a 100,000 students (Ng & Widom, 2014). Since then, universities and companies from all over the world have designed their own MOOCs and offered them for free or at an affordable cost to global learners. MOOCs are usually offered through global online platforms, the most notable of which are Coursera, edX, and Future Learn. Today these three platforms host thousands of courses designed by worldclass universities (such as Harvard, Stanford, London School of Economics, and HEC) and worldclass companies (such as Google, Amazon, Meta, IBM). MOOCs platforms use an open admissions model: Learners can enroll in a course with a simple click of a button and without having to undergo a formal admissions process. The costs of enrollment vary from platform to platform but they all tend to be relatively low. For example, Coursera charges a monthly fee ranging from 39 to 79 USD, depending on the course (Bowden, 2023). Meanwhile, edX charges a one-time fee for each course, which can range from 50 to 300 USD (edX Learner Help Center, 2023).

Despite their accessibility and affordability, and despite the many success stories that they generated, MOOCs' completion rates and retention rates have been consistently low (Reich and Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that the demographic that have benefited the most from MOOCs are learners with strong self-regulation and academic competences (Alonso-Mencía et al., 2020). These findings strongly refute and put into question the claim that MOOCs facilitate the democratization of education.

The low completion and retention rates are hardly surprising. When one examines the structure of MOOCs, one can obviously see the absence of support and guidance. A MOOC typically consists of video lectures and slides, quizzes with automated feedback, and assignments that are evaluated by peers (Bates, 2022). Direct interaction with professors or with experts in the field is missing. When learners experience difficulties, they are often left to their own devices. Success in a MOOC requires that learners independently set realistic learning goals, persist when facing difficulties, and independently look for and find support. To succeed in these tasks, learners should have already developed high levels of self-regulation and a strong expertise in tackling intellectual challenges. Not all learners have had the opportunity to develop these skills. Consequently, rather than supporting and empowering all learners, MOOCs seem to be widening the gap between learners with high academic competences and learners who lack these competences.

While the open admissions model reduces access barriers for learners (by allowing learners to instantly enroll in the course they choose), it may also be deceiving them by not informing them of the difficulties that they will likely encounter and by not supporting them in assessing their readiness for the courses they want to enroll in. This raises some ethical concerns about learners' rights, in particular the right to know the truth about the learning experiences they are about to start and the right to get guidance in assessing their readiness for and ability to succeed in these learning experiences. The objective of this paper is to address the ethical concerns by conducting an ethical analysis of the open admissions model based on the Kantian theory of ethics.

Before presenting the analysis, it's important to note that the focus of this paper is on the open admissions process used by Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn. It's worth noting that other MOOC platforms may have different admission systems in place. For example, *Outlier*, a recently launched platform, integrates some guidance into their admissions process. *Outlier* requires learners to complete a survey prior to enrolling in a course and it generates instant recommendations for them based on their answers. In addition, enrollment in some of the courses requires learners to complete a knowledge test. Learners who fail the test are not allowed to enroll in the course; however, they still have the option to retake the test as many times as they want. The process followed by *Outlier* seems to be the exception not the rule in the universe of MOOCs, most if not all other platforms have a one-click open admissions process that does not include any guidance or self-assessment. This one-click open admissions process will be the focus of the current analysis.

This paper is divided to three sections. In the first section, I briefly introduce Kant's theory of ethics. In the second section, I apply Kant's theory to argue that the open admissions model is ethically problematic because, even though it reduces access barriers, it also functions to deceive learners by hiding learning barriers from them. Finally, I articulate recommendations for enhancing the moral integrity of the open admissions process.

## 2. Kant's theory of morality and freedom

Kant defined "humanity" as the capacity to freely set our own ends (Kant, 1797/2017), independently of external coercive forces and independently of internal inclinations (Dryden, n.d.). For Kant, what differentiates human beings from all other entities in nature is their freedom: the ability to be the cause of their own actions as opposed to being fully controlled by natural forces and social forces. Because freedom is the defining element of being human, it is our duty to respect freedom in ourselves as well as in others: "To be human [...] is to have the rational power of free choice; to be ethical [...] is to respect that power in oneself and others" (Mazur, 1993).

One common approach of using Kant's theory has been through the application of his infamous formula of universal law: *Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*. Several Kantian scholars have criticized the formula and argued that the emphasis on this formula misses the essence of Kant's theory of morality (Wood, 2009). The essence of Kant's theory is not universalizability, it is respect for our capacity to freely set our ends and to freely articulate the principles that guide us in setting our ends (Wood, 2009). The formula of universal law is one among many other Kantian theoretical constructs. Kant has articulated several other formulas that, according to him, reflect the supreme principle of morality. Kant has also developed a detailed taxonomy of our moral duties towards ourselves and our moral duties towards others. All of these constructs can

serve as analytical tools for the Kantian scholar and the choice of which one to focus on will depend on the context of what is being analyzed. The one common element in all Kantian moral analyses is their emphasis on respecting humanity in ourselves and in others, humanity being defined as the capacity to freely set ends.

To respect humanity is to use our freedom in such a way that it does not prevent others from exercising their freedom, to respect humanity is also to free ourselves and support others in freeing themselves from external coercion, manipulation, and the control of internal inclinations. Kant called these forces “heteronomous” and contrasted them with the condition of autonomy, the condition in which we freely set our own ends by freely using our reason without being coerced by any internal or external force (Dryden, n.d.).

A Kantian moral analysis of the open admissions system should therefore examine how the system impacts the freedom of learners and their capacity to set ends: how does it support them in growing their capacity to set ends? And how does it hinder and constrain their capacity to set ends through heteronormative forces like deception, manipulation, and misinformation?

### **3. Kantian analysis of the open admissions system: Removing access barriers, yet hiding learning barriers**

Following from the unconditional moral worth of freedom and the duty to promote it, Kant argued that human beings have the moral duty of perfecting themselves and developing their talents (Kant, 1797/2017). By developing their talents, humans widen the range of the things that they can do and, consequently, they widen the range of the ends that they can set. By widening the range of the ends they can set, they grow their capacity to set ends, their freedom, and their humanity. In contrast, when learners are deprived of opportunities to grow their talents, when the range of ends that they can realize is limited and does not grow, their choice of ends becomes restricted (Guyer, 2014) and, consequently, their freedom becomes restricted.

Through their open admissions model, MOOCs platforms can be seen as supporting the self-perfection of their learners by making available to them opportunities for growing their talents. By removing any admissions barriers between the learner and the learning opportunity, MOOCs platforms are further enabling the freedom of learners and empowering them to freely decide which learning opportunities to pursue.

However, while the open admissions process facilitates access to learning opportunities, it may also be depriving learners from getting information on their readiness for the learning opportunity. As noted previously, there is extensive research evidence that MOOCs have high dropout rates and that they benefit learners with high levels of self-regulation. Learners with low levels of self-regulation, even when they complete the MOOC, benefit much less from it (Alonso-Mencía et al., 2020).

In addition to needing high levels of self-regulation, learners also need high levels of self-awareness and a strong understanding of their own competences to correctly assess their readiness for the courses that they are interested in. Research on self-assessment has found that novice learners tend to overestimate their abilities, a phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). And when learners overestimate their abilities, they might also overestimate their readiness for a learning experience and their ability to successfully manage the challenges of that learning experience.

If MOOCs providers want to promote the freedom of learners, they must construct an admissions process that supports learners in overcoming the barriers that complicate their learning experiences. One of these barriers is low self-regulation, another one is overestimating one’s abilities. The open admissions process used by MOOCs providers does not seem to be supporting learners in knowing the barriers that may hinder their learning, rather, the platforms seem to be downplaying these barriers and/or making them invisible. This raises the question on whether the open admissions process is a form of deception.

Deception is unethical. When an agent is being deceived, whatever choice they end up making will not be their own free choice, it will be a choice that they were manipulated to make. And when an agent is manipulated, they become reduced from a free autonomous human independently setting her own ends to a mere means for the realization of the ends set by others. The degradation of the agent into a mere mean is a disrespect to their dignity and their humanity.

To assess whether MOOCs platforms are deceiving learners, we should examine whether they provide learners with all the relevant information about the learning experiences that they are planning to sign up for. Some of the relevant information about the MOOCs experience are: (1) MOOCs are difficult to complete if the learner does not have high levels of self-regulation, and (2) if learners think they are ready for a MOOC, it does not mean that they are really ready for it. A survey of the websites of MOOCs platforms shows that they do not seem to be communicating these relevant facts to their prospective learners. Difficulties are downplayed and hidden, and the language used is highly optimistic. The following is a sample of the language used on the websites of Coursera, edX, and Future Learn:

- “Launch a new career in as little as 6 months” *Coursera*
- “Propel your career, get a degree, or expand your knowledge at any level” *Edx*
- “Future-Proof your career” *Future Learn*

While the above highly optimistic language can be motivating for learners, it is also unlikely to support them in making informed free rational decisions on whether to enroll in a course or not.

In summary, MOOCs providers seem to be promoting the freedom of learners by giving them the freedom to enroll in any course they want without having to go through an admissions process. However, the absence of a formal admissions process coupled with the highly optimistic language used on MOOCs website might be preventing learners from knowing the invisible barriers that will likely hinder their learning when they enroll in a MOOC.

#### **4. Recommendations for enhancing the moral integrity of the open admissions process**

To enhance the moral integrity of the admissions process in MOOCs platforms, it is important to support learners in better assessing their readiness and better understanding the requirements of the courses that they plan to enroll in. One platform that seems to be applying this approach is *Outlier*. The recently launched platform requires learners to complete a survey prior to enrolling. The survey asks them about their educational level and their schedule. Once the learner completes the survey, she sees a recommendation about whether to take the course for credit or to audit it, and whether to take the intensive 7 weeks version of the course or the 14 weeks version. Additionally, enrollment into difficult and demanding courses (such as Calculus) requires learners to complete a knowledge test first. If learners fail the test, they are not allowed to enroll in the course immediately. Instead, they receive a message recommending that they either enroll in a prerequisite course or retake the test. By offering learners the opportunity to self-assess their readiness and by giving them the option to retake the assessment test an unlimited number of times, *Outlier* supports learners in making informed free decisions based on reason and knowledge.

While the process followed by *Outlier* is a step in the right direction, moral integrity requires that the admission process provides learners with more support in assessing their readiness. It is important that learners be given opportunities to assess their self-regulation and academic competences. This could be done by having them complete additional surveys and knowledge tests or by requiring them to complete the first module in the course as a condition for enrollment. Working on the first module and completing its required assignments will give learners a clear idea of the effort that they need to put in to complete the course. Automated feedback on the first module’s summative test can also support learners in better understanding their readiness and the commitment they need to make if they choose to enroll in the course.

Giving learners access and choice is not enough in supporting their freedom. Real freedom requires that learners make their choices and decisions based on reason, knowledge, and principles that they freely develop. When we give learners partial information or false information, when we encourage them to enroll in courses that have low completion rates without informing them of the difficulties that they may encounter and without helping them assess their readiness, we are only partially supporting their freedom. To fully support their freedom, we need to create conditions that help them make free rational and informed decisions.

Misinformed learners are not free; even when they are given the capacity to make choices, their choices will not really be theirs, their choices will be outcomes of manipulation and deceit.

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