

**Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition**

**Trinity Term 2022**

**FIRST PRIZE: SIMON DREW**

**Assess any - one or more - of the criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy made by Schiller, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel or Marx**

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This essay addresses two of Hegel's criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy. The first concerns what Hegel regards as the dualism that he finds in Kant's account of the moral agent, specifically as expressed in Kant's idea of autonomy. The second is concerned with what Hegel describes as the 'empty formalism'<sup>1</sup> of Kant's Formula of Universal Law (FUL). I intend to outline the main contours of both, evaluate them and demonstrate that although each is unsuccessful, the second criticism has the potential to reveal a possible point of convergence between both thinkers.

To demonstrate the source and authority of the supreme principle of morality and thereby guarantee its categorical nature, Kant introduces the concept of autonomy, the idea that the will that is subject to the law must take itself to be the originator of the law.<sup>2</sup> Although for Kant, this is a necessary step in his development of the supreme principle of morality, Hegel views it as deeply problematic.

Adopting Schiller's characterisation of Kant's ideal moral agent as a cold rational self which is encouraged to act not merely independently of her non-rational feelings and impulses, but actively in opposition to them,<sup>3</sup> Hegel views Kantian autonomy as celebrating an unhealthy dualism in which, 'inner harmony is destroyed' and 'dichotomy constitutes the essence of man.'<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the rational commanding aspect of the agent is placed in opposition to the non-rational and the self is essentially cleaved in two. In addition to this, Hegel goes on to argue that the divided and internally oppressed self, with 'non-identity at his very basis' is in a worse position than if it were oppressed by an external power as at least in this situation 'what is not at one with it is excluded'. The redeeming feature of a state of external oppression is that, 'an identity of character can endure; the inner nature is true to itself.'<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, a number of ways in which these points may be responded to.

Firstly, it is far from clear that there is anything *inherently undesirable* about the existence of an internal dualism. Unless one regards a unified self as a necessary condition of obtaining a coherent account of what actions one is morally obliged to perform, the rejection of dualism seems to be uncalled for.

Secondly, there is no reason to suppose, as Hegel does, that the internally divided self is in a worse position than the self that is dominated by an external force. Although he argues

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1 PR §135

2 G 430-3

3 See 'SCRUPLE OF CONSCIENCE' in Schiller 1796

4 D Chapter 2

5 D Chapter 2

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that the self is more whole when dominated by an agent external to itself, it is hard to see why in this scenario the internal division between the rational and non-rational would cease to exist or be felt less strongly. In addition to this, it is not difficult to envisage a scenario in which an enslaved consciousness finds itself divided in even more destructive ways that are generated by and inseparable from the very fact of its oppression.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, although Kant's idea of autonomy does require the will to become both the subject and source of the moral law, this does not mean that the will must *necessarily* act in opposition to non-rational inclinations. In other words, there will be occasions (hopefully many) in which the will acts at the same time both out of respect for the moral law *and* according to its inclinations and feelings; the two are not mutually exclusive.

When Kant states that the actions of the 'sympathetic character [who finds] inner gratification in spreading pleasure around them [...] have no true moral worth', it is easy to mistake this for an instruction to suppress all non-rational inclinations or even to expunge them entirely. However, in the same paragraph, Kant describes the actions of the sympathetic character as 'amiable' and states that, to an extent at least, they 'conform with duty'.<sup>7</sup> From even these few sentences of Kant's, it seems reasonable to suppose that the suggestion that he is actively hostile towards the non-rational is an exaggeration.

Although Hegel is undoubtedly correct to highlight the dualism he sees in Kant, his criticism loses much of its potency because it overestimates the extent to which the dualism can be understood as both undesirable and internally oppressive.

The second criticism that Hegel makes against Kant's moral theory targets Kant's emphasis on the importance of non-contradiction in the FUL. Kant states that individuals ought to 'act only on a maxim that [they] can also will to become a universal law'.<sup>8</sup> Kant uses the case of the individual who makes a false promise to pay back the money he borrows to illustrate this. The individual who makes the false promise would be acting according to the maxim, 'when I think I need some money I should borrow some and promise to repay it, even though I know I never will.' However, if the individual asks themselves 'how would things stand if my maxim were to become a universal law?', he would soon find that, 'it could never hold as a universal law [...] but rather must necessarily contradict itself.'<sup>9</sup> This maxim, if universalised, undermines itself. Promise-making is logically dependent on the expectation that promises are to be kept. Without this expectation, one could not make promises of any sort.

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<sup>6</sup> See Drabinski, John. 2019. "Frantz Fanon." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/frantz-fanon/>

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Hegel believes that ethical values are inscribed in, and are to be read off from, existing social realities. Kant's insistence on subjecting maxims to the seemingly abstract test of rational universalisability runs counter to this.

More specifically, Hegel argues that the driving force of normativity in Kant's work, the rejection of contradiction, is insufficient by itself to generate moral duties:

[...] if the definition of duty is taken to be the absence of contradiction, formal correspondence with itself [...] then no transition is possible to the specification of particular duties<sup>10</sup>

In order for a contradiction not to remain confined to the impotent realm of the abstract, it must be a contradiction *with something*, i.e., something with substantive content, a pre-existing idea that is, 'brought in from outside'.<sup>11</sup> Non-contradiction alone produces nothing:

The proposition: 'Consider whether your maxim can be laid down as a universal principle,' would be very good if we already had determinate principles of conduct. [...] In Kant's case, however, the principle itself is still not available and his criterion of non-contradiction is productive of nothing<sup>12</sup>

It may, however, be the case that Hegel's criticism here is based on a misunderstanding of Kant's use of non-contradiction.

In the example of the false promise, Kant does not locate the contradiction in the abstract formal realm as such. Instead, it is to be found in the *relationship between* the individual acting according to the maxim of making a false promise and the possibility of them actually being able to do so. By understanding non-contradiction as mere 'formal correspondence with itself', Hegel misunderstands how the FUL actually functions.

Interestingly, however, there may be a degree of similarity between Hegel's claim that a contradiction can only function as a successful generator of moral duty when it works against a moral norm that is already established, and Kant's development of the Categorical Imperative later in the *Groundwork*.

In *G* 425, Kant recognises that expressing the Categorical Imperative in terms of non-contradiction alone is insufficient. To remedy this, he attempts to establish what it is that we are willing when we decide to abide by the Categorical Imperative and reaches what is known as the Formula of Humanity, the imperative to treat humanity never merely as a means but always as an end.<sup>13</sup> Actions such as making false promises can now be

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10 PR §135

11 PR §135

12 PR §135

13 G 429

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understood as involving a contradiction precisely because they conflict with this, arguably more substantive, principle.

The merits or otherwise of Kant's reasoning need not concern us here. What is important is that this demonstrates both Kant's awareness of the potential limitation of relying on non-contradiction alone *and* his recognition of the need to introduce what Hegel might refer to as an 'already established'<sup>14</sup> moral principle. Indeed, it might (just) be the case that Kant's understanding of contradiction concurs with that of Hegel's in a way that Hegel doesn't recognise. The fact that both thinkers would hold very different ideas about the source of the 'already established' principle may not, perhaps, be particularly relevant here.

In conclusion, although the criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy that have been discussed can be shown to fail in a direct sense, it would be unfair to dismiss them entirely. In drawing our attention to the possible negative effects of a divided self and in highlighting the importance of engaging with substantive normative content outside of formal contradiction, Hegel provides the Kantian with a challenge, the response to which can only serve to advance the quest for a supreme principle of morality.

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<sup>14</sup> PR §135, though Kant would not describe it in this way!