

The Problem Of Abstract Thinking In The Categorical Imperative

List Of Abbreviations

CI: Categorical Imperative

FUL: Formula Of Universal Law

PR: Outlines Of The Philosophy Of Right

I. INTRODUCTION

In his pamphlet "Who Thinks Abstractly?" Hegel argues that abstract thinking is a limited way of thinking.¹ He presents abstract thinking as seeing "nothing in the murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality."² It is not coincidental that Hegel illustrates abstract thinking with an ethical example wherein a person is "abstractly" labeled an unethical "murderer" based on a single act they have committed. This instance marks the inception of Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics, a critique that becomes more apparent in his later work, namely in the *Outlines Of The Philosophy of Right* (PR). In this text, Hegel characterizes Kant's ethical framework as an "empty formalism" since Kant's framework relies on abstract judgments that subsume given particulars under a priori concepts or universals.³ According to Kant, the Categorical Imperative (CI), i.e., the supreme practical principle of morality in the Kantian framework, is an "objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle," that must be universally obeyed without exception.⁴ In his *Groundwork For The Metaphysic Of Morals*, Kant emphasizes that anyone who does not act in accordance with the universal ethical duties derived from the CI is acting unethically regardless of the particular situation.⁵

In this paper, I will contend that Hegel's characterization of the Categorical Imperative (CI) as an abstract ethical philosophy remains compelling, even when one considers Korsgaard's

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Who Thinks Abstractly?* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

² Ibid.

³ This is because ethical judgments are determinate judgments and not reflective judgments (i.e., judgements where the particular defines the universal concept). Yet, it can be argued that ethical judgements rely on reflective judgements. Regardless, the critique of the paper stands because even if the particular defines the universal (like in the case of reflective judgements), there is still a universal that is taken as the absolute. In such cases, the particular still has to be objectified/universalized and the paper argues this process of abstracting concepts from the concrete is still a limited method when it comes to ethical judgements.

⁴ Robert Johnson, and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 21, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/>.

⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, T. M. Knox, and Stephen Houlgate, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 131.

(a modern, prominent representative of Kantian ethics) rebuttal to Hegel's objection. To do this, I will commence by elucidating Hegel's concept of "abstract thinking." Subsequently, I will delineate how Kant's CI differentiates between moral and immoral actions. Following this, I will expound upon Hegel's rationale for accusing the CI of being an abstract ethical philosophy. Proceeding with an examination of Korsgaard's defense against Hegel's critique, I will subsequently offer a counter-response to Korsgaard's arguments to underscore and reinforce Hegel's critique. Finally, I will draw upon these analyses to conclude the validity of Hegel's critique, and the adverse repercussions of relying on ethical philosophies that commit abstract thinking.

II. HEGEL'S NOTION OF ABSTRACT THINKING

Peter Osborne observes that in its Latin root form, "to abstract" means "to draw away or remove (something from something else)." In the case of ethics, this extraction is a betrayal of the holistic truth present in the concrete, as an aspect of the ethical truth inevitably gets left out during the abstraction from the concrete.⁶ For instance, in Hegel's example, the man's description as a murderer is considered to be abstract since a single fact about him is used to subsume his particularity under a limited description. Abstract thinking, however, is not limited to merely descriptive cases, where the object of judgment (e.g., the deemed murderer) has their particularity (e.g., their history) subsumed under abstract concepts; one can also commit abstract thinking in normative cases (e.g., ethical decisions). Consider an irritating basketball player on your team who adheres to an abstract rule that states: "Whenever you receive the ball inside the 3-point zone, shoot it." They also consider anyone not following this rule to be a poor player. Yet, a competent coach understands that such an abstract metric is insufficient for accurately

⁶ Peter Osborne, "The reproach of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 127, (Oct 2004).

assessing a player. This is because every player has their own abilities that operate differently in various situations, and the optimal move always depends on the particular situation; therefore, an abstract formal tactic cannot always provide an absolute judgment for every particular case, yet every particular case (i.e., the concrete content) can be used to evaluate the formal tactic (e.g., whether the tactic works well in that case, why or why not, etc.). When the content is prioritized, formalities can be helpful in understanding the truth (e.g., tactics can help show what works better in different positions). However, if formalities are considered to be absolute and given priority over the content, further development regarding the truth becomes unattainable. Thus, although it is hard to give an absolute definition of abstract thinking, for the purposes of this paper it may be helpful to define it with regard to ethics as “an attitude taken towards ethical cases where judgments dismiss the primacy of the situated concrete content in favor of a presupposed formality.” Philosophical systems that engage in the error of abstract thinking depend on static formalities to pass judgment on content without regard for its contextual circumstances. Instead of synthesizing their abstract formalities with concrete content to achieve a more precise understanding of things (for instance, recognizing that their formalities are not absolute and may have limitations in specific situations), they neglect the need for such a synthesis. Hegel argues that “grounding knowledge on the limited principle of finite understanding” in such a way is “deserting the philosophical task” of reaching the absolute truth.⁷ Hegel views absolute truth as “*truth* that only exists in the shape of the *whole*”;⁸ hence no actual truth can simply be an abstraction, as that would mean it does not respect the holistic structure of the concrete content (i.e., lived worldly experience fully as it is). In Hegelian philosophy, the truth is observed only through actualized worldly experience, as “the owl of Minerva begins its

⁷ Jamila M. H. Mascot, “Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction,” *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46.

⁸ *Ibid.*

flight only with the falling of the dusk."⁹ Any ethical judgment that does not respect the entangled complex nature of the concrete experience misses an aspect of the truth, and this truth can only be retrieved by synthesizing the abstract judgment back with the concrete experience.¹⁰ Therefore, Hegel notes that anyone who does not think abstractly "traces the development of the criminal's mind" when reaching a judgment about them instead of labeling them as a "murderer" due to a single maxim they willed.¹¹

In the murderer example, Hegel critiques any ethical system that does not have the concrete worldly experience as its content since such systems are not sensitive to the particularity of situations and the changing nature of history. Any philosopher who tries to universalize an ethical system permanently presupposes that the future will resemble the past and tries to take their particular lived experience as the absolute. Hegel regards this as abstract thinking since they abstract out their ethical truths from the concrete (i.e., the lived experience), and absolutize their particular abstraction as the ethical truth over the concrete reality. Kant is precisely charged with engaging in this form of abstract thinking concerning his ethical system, which results in Hegel

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, T. M. Knox, and Stephen Houlgate, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

¹⁰ This is the step that an ethical formal system with static formulas/rules cannot achieve (e.g., the categorical imperative). There is no inherent issue with an abstract formal system, as long as it approaches ethical situations by recognizing the precedence of the concrete case over its abstract perspective. Every ethical judgment is inherently linked to concrete experience, but in most 'formal systems' (including the CI), consideration for the concrete arises solely from a formal perspective. In other words, only the concrete is assessed through its form rather than the formal system also being evaluated in light of the concrete content it is formalizing. While a formal ethical system may prove successful in many concrete cases, as Hegel notes, ethical action always necessitates prioritizing consideration of the concrete case for it to be truly ethical. The primary issue lies not in the existence of formal ethical systems, but rather in their tendency to assert themselves as absolute. Consider an ethical case examined through various abstract "formal systems" (e.g., virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, etc.); such investigation may indeed lead us closer to the ethical truth concerning the case. Yet, the limitation of all these formal systems becomes apparent, as does each system's contribution to the ethical truth we seek in a given case (this is evident from the numerous ethical scenarios imagined by philosophers to illustrate the limitations/contributions of each). Thus, if at any point, we set aside the primacy of the concrete case itself, and override its ethical truths with the judgment that an ethical system (or a few ethical systems together) provide(s) then I argue we miss an essence of the truth hidden in the concrete case. The synthesis that brings us nearer to ethical truth occurs between a formal system and a concrete case only if the formal system is not regarded as absolute; rather, any formal system serves as a means for us to discern ethical truth, not an end in itself.

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Who Thinks Abstractly?* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

deeming the CI an "empty formalism".¹² Abstracted from the concrete experience, the Categorical Imperative (CI) falls short of fully integrating worldly experiences into its ethical judgments (i.e., the abstract idea is not in a dialogue with the concrete). Consequently, all ethical judgments delivered by the CI inherently remain abstract. Hegel argues that taking the *Absolute*¹³ as a systemic "organization of propositions and intuitions" without concrete worldly experience makes it a "lost concept."¹⁴ In Hegelian philosophy, the universal ethical truth "consists of the speculative synthesis of speculation with worldly experience," as opposed to "Kant's universal law of moral reason emptied of all content," existing only as an abstract formality.¹⁵

III. KANT'S SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF MORALITY ¹⁶

Kant initially defines "the supreme principle of morality" as "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law".¹⁷ This first formulation of the CI is also known as "Kant's Formula Of Universal Law" (FUL) and it is a purely *formal* principle of ethics, "not a material one".¹⁸ With the FUL, Kant aims to discover "a system of a priori moral principles that apply the CI to human persons in all times and cultures."¹⁹ Kant's *formal* approach to ethics is driven by his aim to "reflect the categorical nature of dutiful moral action" so that the moral agent never expects to act in an immoral way as long as

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, T. M. Knox, and Stephen Houlgate, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 131.

¹³ (i.e., the ultimate reality or truth in the Hegelian framework)

¹⁴ Jamila M. H. Mascot, "Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46.

¹⁵ Jamila M. H. Mascot, "Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46.

¹⁶ Please note that the description of the CI in this section is limited to the information necessary for the reader to understand the arguments presented in this paper.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4:420

¹⁸ Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

¹⁹ Robert Johnson, and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, September 21, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/>.

they act in accordance with the CI.²⁰ According to Kant, if one acts following the FUL after reasonably assessing their maxim, one would be unable to act immorally since such a maxim would defeat itself before it is acted upon (i.e., it would lead to a *contradiction*). Kant thought "that what determines the will must be the formal properties of the maxim on which the agent acts," and that if this maxim created a contradiction when it was universalized through the FUL then it would be logically impossible to act on this maxim regardless of time and place.²¹ Therefore, the CI operates in purely formal terms, "by trying to determine what is right and wrong by testing to see whether a maxim does or does not lead to a contradiction when universalized."²² Kant's deposit example displays this idea in the following way: if one universalizes the maxim "I shall keep on a deposit entrusted to me whenever the opportunity presents," then nobody would ever entrust their deposits to others, resulting in the maxim undermining itself when acted upon since there will be no deposit for the agent to keep in the first place.²³ The contradiction emerging upon universalizing this maxim reveals its irrationality, rendering it logically impossible to act upon and consequently unethical.

Contrary to Hegel's criticism of Kantian ethics as abstract, it's essential to recognize that Kant's intention was to formulate a concrete and actualized ethical framework. This is more clear in the last formulation of the CI which states that individuals must "act in accordance with the maxims of a member universally legislating for a merely possible kingdom of ends".²⁴ This might lead one to think Kant formulated the CI in a way where it was meant to be synthesized pragmatically with worldly experience to actualize a concrete ethical utopia in the universe, i.e.,

²⁰ Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

²¹ Robert Johnson, and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

²² Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

²³ Jamila M. H. Mascot, "Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46 ; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 26-27.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4:439/50.

the kingdom of ends. However, since Kant viewed all the CI formulations as equivalent, actualizing a concrete kingdom of ends necessitates that one acts according to the FUL. Hence according to Kant, acting as if one is legislating laws in a concrete kingdom of ends is equivalent to obeying abstract duties derived from the other formulations of the CI without exception since they "are fundamentally only so many formulae of the selfsame law."²⁵ This paper mainly critiques the FUL as Kant himself takes all formulations to be an indispensable part of the same law, thus if acting in accordance with the FUL is deemed to be too abstract, so is the kingdom of ends (and the rest of his ethical law, namely the CI).²⁶

IV. HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Hegel critiques the CI for not being able to give "any *content* to morality" since it solely relies on the form of a maxim to provide an ethical judgment.²⁷ For example, in the deposit case, when stealing is universalized it leads to a contradiction, and the person who gets robbed is treated as a means. Thus the CI determines that stealing is immoral regardless of the situation. Following the logic of the CI, someone who steals is simply a "thief", the same way a "murderer" is simply a murderer in Hegel's example and the act they committed is unethical regardless of their particular situation or history. In this view, the particular is absorbed under a priori concepts and *the form precedes content* in order to establish an abstract moral judgment. On the contrary, for the murderer example, Hegel argues that one finds the ethical truth regarding this man's case not simply in the maxim he acted on but rather "in his history."²⁸ This disregard of actualized

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) 4:436/48.

²⁶ Kant's Formula Of Humanity is not specifically considered in this paper for the same reason. However, one can easily infer the duty to "never steal" from the Formula Of Humanity, which this paper argues is an abstract ethical duty. Therefore this paper already argues against the Formula Of Humanity since it reveals the abstract nature of the duty to "never steal" with the help of the Hegelian critique.

²⁷ Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

²⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Who Thinks Abstractly?* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

content by the CI when reaching an ethical judgment regarding a situation is the "empty formalism" critique that Hegel raises against Kant. The CI's inability to give any *content* to morality is further displayed in worldly examples Hegel/Hegelians came up with where the FUL is conditioned to require further *content* to have any normative legitimacy. In these examples, the FUL either delivers a confusing conclusion or an ethically mistaken result due to its insensitivity to the particularity of situations that are present in worldly experience.

Firstly, Hegel critiques Kant's own 'deposit example' to show that the FUL is empty. In this case, the FUL is useless because "it cannot determine whether or not property or a social system without property is a morally good thing."²⁹ In a world where property is necessarily established as an ethical content, the FUL would indeed prohibit theft since when stealing is universalized, property loses its place as a necessary content, causing a contradiction.³⁰ However, the FUL does not say anything about "whether it is right or wrong for people to possess private property" in the first place, hence it is restricted when it comes to making a complex concrete ethical judgment.³¹ Hegel stresses the fact that to demonstrate the inconsistency or immorality of a maxim of this nature, "one would have to admit that a particular content like property has taken on, contingently, a necessary and universal legitimacy such as to make its negation contradictory."³² By disregarding an action's content (what it presupposes to be necessary, contingent, etc.) and only focusing on the maxim's form, the CI delivers abstract and superficial results that neglect the actual ethical truth of a situation. For instance, the CI can lead one to think that it is unethical for a starving kid to steal bread because if theft is universalized this leads

²⁹ Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

³⁰ If everything is stolen then there is no longer any property left to steal since the concept of property is destroyed due to everything being stolen.

³¹ Robert Stern, "On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Ethics," in Oxford University Press eBooks, 2015, 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722298.003.0009>.

³² Jamila M. H. Mascot, "Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46.

to a contradiction. However, this judgment would not consider the possible unethical distribution of property or the ethical validity of property existing in the first place. This is because the CI only takes an agent's maxim's form into account, and their particularity is disregarded, since if their particularity is taken into consideration the CI is unable to attain its goal to be a universal practical philosophy. Hegel thinks that the CI disregards the concrete content that is present in all particular situations, which is also required to make a non-abstract ethical judgment of a situation. There can be no single abstract 'supreme principle of morality' because a moral judgment *demand*s particular content and the method of judgment is formed through its synthesis with the concrete content.

The second problem of the FUL is that it falsely detects contradictions in some moral acts that are widely considered reasonably ethical. Hegel gives the example: "succor the poor", which when universalized leaves nobody poor (i.e., no poor person to succor), thus the maxim "succor the poor" becomes impossible to act on.³³ Therefore the CI would have to conclude that "succor the poor" is an unethical maxim through the use of so-called "reason", even though it does not sufficiently explain why helping the poor is considered unethical, other than it being a "contradictory" maxim.

V. KORSGAARD'S DEFENSE OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AND MY RESPONSE

In her paper "Kant's Formula Of Universal Law", Korsgaard attempts to defend the CI against objections raised by Hegel. She argues that the FUL is not an abstract formula and that if understood correctly, it can provide useful results to concrete Hegelian cases. In this section, I analyze her responses to the Hegelian objections and provide my own objections to her

³³ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

responses.³⁴ As Korsgaard notes, Kant thought that some actions universalized by the FUL become inconceivably contradictory (e.g., the deposit example) and these actions are the ones investigated by Hegel. According to Kant, these actions are simply impossible to universalize through the FUL (i.e., they lead to a *contradiction*) and, thus are unethical regardless of the particular situation. Korsgaard notes that Kant explains these actions as follows:

"Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction, far from it being possible that one could will that it should be such."³⁵

To make her defense of Kant clearer, Korsgaard analyzes the sense in which the word "contradiction" is used in the statement above. She identifies three ways in "which there is a 'contradiction' in willing the universalization of an immoral maxim" when the FUL is used and responds to the Hegelian objection through two of the three interpretations she provides.³⁶ These two interpretations are explained as follows by Korsgaard:

1) The Logical Contradiction Interpretation: On this interpretation, there is something like a logical impossibility in the universalization of the maxim, or in the system of nature in which the maxim is a natural law: if the maxim were universalized, the action or policy that it proposes would be inconceivable.³⁷

³⁴ Although there is a wealth of literature discussing Hegel's criticisms of Kant, this paper narrows its focus to Korsgaard's defense of Kant against Hegelian objections. She is considered to be one of the most influential living philosophers that deals with Kantian ethics and the aim of this paper is to defend Hegel's objection through a unique perspective against her in order to display the contemporary legitimacy of Hegel's objection against Kant.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4:424/36; Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

³⁶ To clarify, Korsgaard basically describes three different interpretations of the word 'contradiction' that can be found in the definition of the FUL. Out of these three interpretations, she only considers the Hegelian objection with regards to two of the three possible interpretations and this paper responds to those considerations.

³⁷ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

2) The Practical Contradiction Interpretation: On this interpretation, the contradiction is that your maxim would be self-defeating if universalized: your action would become ineffectual for the achievement of your purpose if everyone (tried to) use it for that purpose. Since you propose to use that action for that purpose at the same time as you propose to universalize the maxim, you in effect will be thwarting of your own purpose.³⁸

After defining these interpretations of the FUL, Korsgaard considers Hegel's objection to each interpretation separately. For Hegel's deposit critique considered in light of the first interpretation (1), Korsgaard replies:

"On the Logical Contradiction interpretation, the contradiction lies not in envisioning a society in which there are no deposits, but in envisioning a society in which the agent and others with his purpose are making use of the deposit system even though there is no such thing. The contradiction is generated when the agent tries to will his maxim and the universalization of his maxim *at the same time* or tries to will it for a system of which he is to be a part. The nonexistence of the practice that results from universalization is contradicted by the existence of it presupposed in the individual maxim."³⁹

In my view, this reply by Korsgaard does not respond to Hegel's critique adequately and rather supports it. The Hegelian critique already acknowledges that the contradiction solely has to do with the maxim upon which a person acts. It is not contested that there is a contradiction that arises when the maxim is universalized, as this would undermine the trust necessary to maintain

³⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

³⁹ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

the institution of deposit, thereby nullifying the practical basis for the agent's maxim. However, the concept of property/deposit being contradictory/unethical in some way is not something that the FUL takes into account in the deposit example when it concludes stealing is always unethical. The FUL functions without such information as it only considers the properties of the maxim's form rather than its content. This is the limitation the FUL faces when it provides a judgment on worldly cases, which is what Hegel critiques as "abstract thinking" in the first place. The FUL is not a formula that can give a clear judgment on whether it is ethical for people to have the ability to possess private property or not. The CI would have agents presuppose the necessity of a contingent content like property, leading them to reach an abstract ethical conclusion.

For Hegel's deposit critique that would be considered in light of the second interpretation (2), Korsgaard argues that in this case, the contradiction arises when the agent wills the maxim to "use a false promise to get the money" while they also thereby will that practices like deposits exist in order to use them as a means to their end.⁴⁰ However, when the maxim "use a false promise to get the money" is universalized, it leads to practices like deposits no longer existing (i.e., nobody trusts anyone to keep their money for them); therefore willing this maxim causes the agent to thwart their purpose to get money from someone through a false promise. The agent willed a maxim that when universalized cannot be achieved. The "Hegelian objection is that Kant need not be assuming that everyone wants there to be deposits," and in this case, the agent wants the system of deposits to exist since "he proposes to use that system as the means to his end."⁴¹ Here Korsgaard argues that the necessity of the system of deposits is not a prerequisite

⁴⁰ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

⁴¹ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

for the FUL to render a judgment. In this interpretation, the FUL solely focuses on a contradiction that arises when an agent wills something to occur/exist but at the same time wills it through a maxim that hinders the occurrence/existence of that thing when universalized. However, I think the Hegelian objection is misrepresented by Korsgaard in this response. Hegel does not simply argue that the CI presupposes the intention of an agent or that the CI requires the agent to take deposits to be necessarily ethical concepts for it to be able to produce a contradiction. Hegel's true criticism has to do with the fact that the formalism of the CI necessarily relies on contingent content that a particular presupposes to be irrelevant to the ethical judgment. For example, in the deposit example, it is irrelevant to the FUL whether the system of deposits is an ethical concept or not since the ethical nature of a maxim is revealed solely by its form. It only questions whether the purpose is thwarted when the maxim is universalized. However, if an ethical system aims to provide a concrete ethical judgment about the deposit situation, i.e., someone stealing the money deposited to them, it must also take into account whether the deposit system in that particular situation is ethical (e.g., how ethical is a deposit system in a state that experiences great wealth inequality?). The greater consideration given to the actuality of a particular situation in arriving at an ethical judgment, the less abstract thinking is involved in it. The CI fails to free itself from the errors of abstract thinking, as it is structured to dismiss the concrete reality of particular situations in order to solely focus on the formal structure of an abstract maxim.

In response to the "succor the poor" objection Korsgaard has the following two answers ((i) is for (1) and (ii) is for (2)):

- (i) ... the advocate of Logical Contradiction Interpretation can handle the objection. The maxim is to succor those who need it, and this maxim can be

consistently held (and in a degenerate sense acted on) in a world where no one needs help. The policy of succoring those who need it when no one does is not inconceivable. It merely gives one nothing to do.⁴²

(ii) The Practical Contradiction Interpretation answers this objection both readily and, in an obvious way, correctly. One's purpose in succoring the poor is to give them relief. The world of the universalized maxim only contradicts one's will if it thwarts one's purpose. A world without poverty does not contradict this purpose but rather satisfies it in another (better) way, and no contradiction arises.⁴³

I contend that the representation of the FUL in (i) is inaccurate. If everyone in need is helped, then there is no one left to be helped, hence the maxim "succor the poor," when universalized, leads to a situation where it cannot be logically acted upon any longer. The self-defeating contradiction of the maxim is the sense in which it is *inconceivable*. For example, if the maxim "do not pay your debt back" is universalized, then nobody ever lends money in the first place (so no debt to pay back) which causes the maxim to self-defeat. The universe where this maxim is universalized is not "inconceivable," as you can conceive of a universe where nobody pays their debts and no money is lent anymore, however, the FUL would still find this maxim to be contradictory/self-defeating and thus unethical. In a world where no money is lent, "do not pay your debt back" as a maxim also "gives one nothing to do" because the maxim can no longer be acted upon.⁴⁴ Korsgaard assumes "succor the poor" merely "gives one nothing to do," and is not "inconceivable" when universalized, but does not explain why any other

⁴² Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

⁴³ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

⁴⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

contradictory maxim cannot be treated the same way by the FUL (e.g., "do not pay your debt back").⁴⁵ The Logical Contradiction Interpretation mentions that if the action or policy that the FUL tests would be inconceivable when universalized (i.e., it becomes a logical impossibility) then it is a contradictory maxim. In a world where no one pays their debt back (i.e., the maxim is universalized) it becomes logically impossible to act on the maxim "do not pay your debt back" since the concept of debt presupposed by the maxim is destroyed once no one pays their debt, making it impossible to conceive a world where the maxim is universalized. Similarly, the maxim "succor the poor" becomes logically inconceivable when attempted to be universalized as an action since the concept of poor presupposed by the maxim is demolished after the maxim gets universalized (i.e., a world where the maxim is universalized becomes inconceivable). The idea behind the FUL is not that it creates a metaphysically inconceivable world when the unethical maxim is universalized but rather a world where if the unethical maxim is acted upon it logically defeats itself, resulting in being inconceivable as a universalized action (i.e., the poor can be no longer succored, one cannot not pay their debt back since debts do not exist).

Then again, if the way the FUL functions under different interpretations is understood differently by me and Korsgaard, this is a good indication of the not-so-categorical nature of Kantian ethics, because the case I am making indicates that the notion of "conceivability" in the FUL can be understood differently. Korsgaard needs to make it clear what she means by "the policy of succoring those who need it when no one does is not inconceivable," in order to save this maxim from being unethical.

Another problem arises when Korsgaard implies in her argument that "in a world where no one needs help" there is no poor to succor but then again this is an abstract definition of the

⁴⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

word "poor".⁴⁶ Such a definition cannot be universalized, the same way no ethical principle can be universalized without content. Thus, even when Korsgaard attempts to defend the CI, she is required to defend it by providing some particular content (e.g., a particular meaning of a word for her) that cannot be categorically universalized. The word poor is not understood the same way by everyone as it is understood by Korsgaard. Yet, it is already presupposed in the CI that words can universally convey their meaning across multiple cultures, akin to mathematics. However, this presupposition is rather controversial, as demonstrated by Quine's famous *gavagai* argument.⁴⁷ The precise meaning of a certain word cannot be presupposed to be universal, as a word can be inscrutable to different cultures. Even particular people within the same culture could be referring to a word in a way that cannot be universalized (e.g., some words carry different emotions for some people than it does for other people). For example, the Greek word 'Logos' cannot be precisely translated into English, and its specific interpretation depends on multiple factors given in a particular situation.

Additionally, in our concrete reality, meanings of words, facts, and duties are all accompanied by the *biases* of the particular individuals that interact with them (e.g., the connotations and feelings they associate with them); this disqualifies them from conveying their meanings as absolute universals.⁴⁸ Essentially these biases determine the way in which a particular individual is conscious of things and since understanding conscious experience is

⁴⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

⁴⁷ In this argument, Quine questions the process of translating words between languages, highlighting the indeterminacy of translation. Quine imagines the word "gavagai" being used by a native speaker of the Arunta language upon seeing a rabbit. He argues that there are multiple ways to interpret and translate a foreign word like "gavagai" (it can just mean a rabbit or it can mean a rabbit with undetached parts, etc.) because one cannot determine the exact referent or meaning of the word in the absence of a shared language or conceptual framework. This argument challenges the traditional idea of a one-to-one correspondence between words in different languages and emphasizes the inherent ambiguity in cross-linguistic translation (and in some cases even in inter-linguistic expression). Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Mit Press, 1960).

⁴⁸ This may be a necessary problem for any ethical system that gets actualized, yet there is no issue as long as an ethical system is aware of this limitation when producing its ethical conclusions.

crucial in grasping ethical truths, we must incorporate these biases into our ethical considerations rather than disregard their existence in pursuit of abstract understanding.

Alongside linguistic biases, cultural biases are also neglected by the CI, despite their importance in ethical situations. In his article "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy", Serequeberhan mentions that Eurocentrism is a "pervasive bias located in modernity's self-consciousness of itself."⁴⁹ He argues that Eurocentrism involves self-affirming metanarratives in which the European way of being is distinguished as the real as opposed to the non-European, and considers Kant to be one of the most important figures in constructing this pretext of Eurocentrism since Kant states that "the 'others' (non-Europeans) will receive the Law of Reason from Europe."⁵⁰ How can then a defender of the CI and its formulations be assured that the FUL, for example, is not feeding into Eurocentrism? Kant wrote that the "[European] continent...will probably give law, eventually, to all the others."⁵¹ The FUL might as well be that law as it purports to be an objective universalizable law of ethics that emerged out of Europe. The CI abstracts things out from actuality through a Eurocentric perspective as it takes its particular "moral" laws to be universally accepted. It sets its own European bias as the absolute bias. For instance, in Japan, slurping while eating is an action performed to tell the host you are enjoying the food whereas in Western cultures it is generally considered rude to slurp while eating. In this case, one cannot simply assume slurping your food is unethical because its universalization would be frowned upon in a European context.

Other European ethical systems that are alternatives to the CI, such as utilitarianism, also often overlook the potential biases within their own frameworks. They simply inherit the abstract

⁴⁹ Serequeberhan, Tsenay. "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy" in *The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by Pieter Hendrik, Coetzee, 75-93. Psychology Press, 2003.

⁵⁰ Serequeberhan, Tsenay. "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy" in *The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by Pieter Hendrik, Coetzee, 75-93. Psychology Press, 2003.

⁵¹ Serequeberhan, Tsenay. "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy" in *The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by Pieter Hendrik, Coetzee, 75-93. Psychology Press, 2003.

thinking that is present in the CI when they come up with their own abstract formulas of ethics. Take, for instance, Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian philosopher who devised the *felicific calculus*. This method seeks to quantify the maximum pleasure an action can generate through abstract algorithms, guiding agents to determine the ethical nature of their actions depending on these algorithms.⁵² Another prominent utilitarian philosopher, J.S. Mill, presupposed a hierarchy between humans and animals when attempting to calculate the overall pleasure produced by an action. This hierarchy influences human agents' calculations aimed at determining the most ethical course of action.⁵³ If an ethical system, which is supposed to guide us about how we ought to live, is built on top of these biased abstract concepts and presuppositions, then any action we take will simply conform to a static universal formality, missing the hidden aspects of the ethical truth in particular situations. As Hegel writes in *PR*: "Good as a universal is abstract and cannot be accomplished... To be accomplished it must acquire in addition the character of particularity."⁵⁴

Any attempt to disregard the biases of individuals (e.g., their personal connotations, culture, language, etc.) regarding words, facts, and duties, in order to approach an ethical situation from a presupposed objective bias inevitably leads to a limited understanding of the ethical nuances present in the concrete situation.⁵⁵ On a similar note, Hegel's critique of 'abstract thinking' stems from people's tendencies to understand things abstractly by taking their particular biases as the absolute in a given situation rather than prioritizing the contemplation of the biases of particulars involved in a situation. The CI and Korsgaard's defense of it does not seem to

⁵² Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Courier Corporation, 2007).

⁵³ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (CreateSpace, 2010).

⁵⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, T. M. Knox, and Stephen Houlgate, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 130.

⁵⁵ This is not to say attempting to take an objective bias is useless. Rather, it is problematic to absolutize the objective bias towards a situation (the same way it is problematic to absolutize a non-objective particular bias). Yet being aware/using these biases to examine the ethical truth in a given situation is quite helpful.

consider the actuality of things but they rather seem to require the presupposition of an abstract universalized bias towards the world.

My response to (ii) is that it presupposes a purpose for "succoring the poor". This is caused by the abstract thinking that the CI requires to fulfill its purpose in the practical contradiction interpretation (2). It is conceivable that one acts on the maxim "succor the poor" for no reason and this does not necessarily mean that the maxim is unethical. The practical contradiction interpretation requiring maxims to have a purpose, only plays into Hegel's point that the CI is an inadequate abstract formula for concrete worldly cases. And if it is presupposed that every maxim has a purpose to be ethical, consider universalizing the maxim "succor the poor so that there is a fair economic system in the world." In this case, the poor would have enough money to satisfy their needs (or maybe the same money as the "rich" since the rich constantly succors the poor) yet this does not mean that the purpose of the maxim (i.e., a fair economic system) is achieved. I think this universalized maxim could actually thwart its purpose by making the underpaid poor assume they are now finally being fairly paid which could make them more accepting of their unfair exploitation while giving their succorers enough justification to continue exploitation. Consider a scenario where a lazy host manager in an American theater, despite having a less demanding job, earns more than the hosts (i.e., the working class). In the context of the American capitalist economic system, where managers instruct hosts and then relax while the hosts work, even if the hosts earn the same as their managers they are still underpaid. In a world where "succor the poor so that there is a fair economic system in the world" is universalized as a maxim, the managers would have to share their wealth with their host to equalize their pay with all of them. This action could cause hosts to believe that they are now being paid a fair amount or the managers might now feel justified to work less than their

hosts. This could thwart the purpose of the maxim (i.e., to create a fair economic system) since the working class/hosts would be manipulated into thinking they have less justification for strikes and protests regarding fair pay, while the managers could feel more justified to continue exploiting their workers.

It is hard to think the maxim "succor the poor so that there is a fair economic system in the world" is unethical just because "it thwarts [its] purpose" as Korsgaard argues.⁵⁶ Therefore absurd ethical conclusions are still reached, even if Korsgaard's presupposition that every maxim must have a purpose is accepted. Admittedly my contemplation of the maxim "succor the poor so that there is a fair economic system in the world" getting universalized might be relying too much on potential outcomes. Thus I am not denying the possibility that this maxim when universalized might not thwart its purpose, yet I am not convinced that anyone can predict what their maxim will give birth to without relying on potential outcomes. Korsgaard argues that a maxim's ethical nature is revealed only when one can precisely predict whether it will achieve its purpose without contradiction. However, this is an impossible thing to predict (at least for people of our age). If Korsgaard's interpretation of the CI is accurate then the CI relies on the consequence of a universalized maxim rather than its form to reach an ethical judgment. However, such an interpretation cannot be accurate since this would mean that the CI is not a deontological but rather a consequentialist philosophy. And even if one considers the CI to be a consequentialist view of ethics by going against Kant's account, then one still needs to consider how realistic it is for Korsgaard to require an agent to know whether their maxim will necessitate its purpose when it is universalized. Consequently, Korsgaard's defense of the CI falls short of effectively countering Hegel's critique of the CI as an impractical and abstract ethical formula.

⁵⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of universal law," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1-2 (1985): 24-47. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3201869>.

VI. A SUMMARY OF ERRORS COMMITTED BY ABSTRACT THINKING IN THE CI

Ultimately, there are two major issues present in the CI's commitment to abstract thinking with regard to its absolute judgements of ethical situations. These issues underscore the continuing relevance of Hegel's critique, even in light of Korsgaard's modern rebuttal. First, what I will call the representation error occurs because an unbiased, accurate understanding of an ethical situation is impossible without accounting for all the particular information relevant to it—something which the CI cannot practically accomplish by focusing on the abstracted information instead of the concrete content. The CI requires rational agents that have an accurate representation of the world, yet a concrete world cannot be accurately represented by abstract thinking. The agents are inevitably limited by their situatedness (i.e., their bias) when they interact with a representation of the concrete world. Merleau-Ponty's analogy of the neighboring house is helpful to understand this point. Whenever we see or imagine the neighboring house, we can only perceive it from a particular angle. The house is perceived differently from the garden outside, from the inside of the house, and differently from an aircraft. And yet none of these appearances is the house itself. The house is "the geometrical plan that includes these perspectives and all possible perspectives; that is, the non-perspectival term from which all perspectives can be derived; the house itself is the house seen from nowhere."⁵⁷ Analogously, the house seen from nowhere is the ethical situation comprehended perfectly, yet such a view requires that the agent purely understands the concrete without being restricted in a certain formal perspective. This is inherently contradictory since every ethical situation has to appear to a thinking mind through a biased perspective that formally represents the world to them. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "to see is to always see from somewhere," and similarly any ethical

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge eBooks, 2013, 69, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714>.

situation assessed by the CI (or any ethical system) requires an agent who necessarily interacts with their representation of the situation. However, the CI presupposes a house-viewed-from-nowhere-like representation of ethical content, i.e., an absolute and universal view of the ethical content. Yet, when an agent uses the FUL while presupposing their formal representation of the world as the world itself, they do not have an accurate encapsulation of the concrete in the abstract. As Hegelians put it, the ethical content is taken as a necessary and universal form by the CI when instead it is just a particular/contingent representation of the concrete content by an agent.

The CI is a practical impossibility since a formula like the FUL necessitates that the maxim of the agent and the world is formalized according to a necessary universal standard. For instance, when the maxim "never steal a property" is examined, stealing as an act cannot be presupposed to exist as some sort of a universal Platonic form, we rather need to examine each situation acknowledging that our formalization of it is restricted due to the abstract nature of our representation. As discussed in earlier sections, the FUL forces us to formalize situations and assume an abstract universal representation to be the concrete situation itself. In this case, it forces us to necessarily establish property as an ethical content but does not address whether it is morally justified for individuals to possess private property in the first place; this is because if property is presupposed to be a Platonic, i.e., universal and abstract, formal content then it is already necessarily established as an ethical content. Only if the ethical content, i.e., property, is considered a particular/contingent representation by a biased subject then its ethical value comes into question. Hegel displays that Kantians take their particular representation of property as a necessary universal ethical content when it is just a particular/contingent formalization of the concrete content. In the same way that Nietzsche accuses Plato and his followers of "standing

truth on its head and disowning even perspectivism,” Hegelians accuse Kantians of perpetuating a similar issue with regard to the representation error.⁵⁸ The supporters of the CI have to admit that their view of an ethical situation cannot ever be a house-viewed-from-nowhere-like representation of ethical content but rather a particular restricted representation of the ethical situation viewed through their bias.

The second error, the absolutizing error, can occur even if one does not commit the representation error. As established earlier, whenever we are thinking about an ethical situation we are thinking about a representation of the concrete phenomena that our bias provides, i.e., we always see the house from somewhere. Therefore, it is in a way impossible to not commit to abstract thinking whenever we think of an ethical situation, i.e., to see the house from nowhere. If one avoids the representation error and acknowledges that their representation of the world is limited, then they can still commit the error of absolutizing by taking their ethical judgment as the absolute. In this case, the agent is aware that their representation of circumstances of an ethical situation stems from their contingent particular bias and that as a result they are limited when it comes to their comprehension of the ethical case. Yet, they still take their ethical judgment, which is them assessing their limited representation of the world through the CI, as the absolute. While it might be acceptable to rely on our particular and limited bias in everyday tasks, it should not be acceptable when we are philosophically drawing absolute ethical conclusions, such as when we derive abstract duties. As expressed by Hegel, basing knowledge on the finite understanding of limited principles constitutes abandoning the philosophical task of attaining the absolute truth.⁵⁹ Since the representation error is acknowledged as an inherent

⁵⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil: prelude to a philosophy of the future*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

⁵⁹ Jamila M. H. Mascot, "Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 201, (February 2018), 29–46.

aspect of abstract thinking, the ethical truth should always be a progressive investigation, rather than a conclusive absolute fact. In all ethical cases, where a judgment is built on abstract thinking, the ethical truth may be far away from being realized due to an inaccurate representation of the world. Consider the ethical definition, "whenever someone kills somebody else that is murder, and to murder is unethical." Now imagine particular cases of murder that could be considered justified (e.g., murdering a serial killer to save 100 innocent lives, rebelling against a tyrannical or colonial government, etc.). A Kantian might argue that the issue here lies not with the ethical duty "never murder," but rather with the mistaken interpretation of a particular case as murder when it is not (i.e., a representation error). This in itself poses a practical threat to the CI since every situation involves too many particularities in the concrete reality to be subsumed accurately under a certain formal category. By committing abstract thinking in our absolute ethical judgements, we solely focus on inaccurately assigned representations (e.g., "murderer") rather than prioritizing the concrete particular situation (e.g., what is exactly going on?, What are the circumstances?, etc.). Analogously, in mathematics, we may take an abstract finite value to be pi, yet the value of pi in actuality can never be this finite abstract value. The impossibility of capturing this value is not to say there is no value of pi or that one cannot get closer to it by thinking of new abstract values but rather it suggests that one simply fails to capture the value of pi if they attribute it to an abstract value. This is why the ancient Greeks treated polygons as if they were circles to approximate the value of pi, and they got closer and closer to the value of pi as they represented the circle with more-sided polygons. However, such a project was doomed from the start, as the absolute value of pi only lies in a circle and not in a shape that attempts to capture it. Similarly, in ethical cases, the truth cannot be built on abstract conclusions, and the impossibility of capturing the concrete needs to be

respected, no matter how disturbing the situation appears. In mathematical calculations, setting an abstract value for pi may be helpful enough without the need for an absolutely accurate value, however, in ethical situations, even such small presuppositions can lead to wrong ethical judgments with horrific conclusions. If at any point, we set aside the primacy of the concrete case itself, and override its ethical truths with the judgment that an ethical system (or a few ethical systems together) provide(s) then we prevent our ability to get closer to an ethical truth. Thus, the CI by not acknowledging and committing both of these errors of abstract thinking still faces the problems outlined in Hegel's critique, even in light of Korsgaard's modern rebuttal.

The abstract thinking that is present in Kantian ethics, i.e., one of the most influential ethical philosophies of our day, continues to be prevalent even in ethical philosophies that rival it, e.g., utilitarianism, and within our modern ethical discourse. Every ethical judgment on the news or social media is made as if they rely on concrete universal formalities rather than abstract biases. Ultimately, this paper argues that the 'empty formalism' of the CI and other ethical philosophies that commit the same errors of abstract thinking must be acknowledged. The argumentation throughout the paper is handled in quite a formal tone, yet I feel uninterested in concluding this paper with such formality. The true aim of this paper is not to formally establish an abstract truth to the reader but rather to be experienced by them so it can play a role in the concrete dialectic of ethical philosophies. It does not wish to be an abstract collection of formal words on a piece of electronic paper but rather aims to survive in the reader's mind as a piece that helps them investigate the ethical truth with more caution, impervious to eviction by any abstract ethical system.

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