

THE SELF-CONTRADICTION IN PURE RATIONAL ETHICS

Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius PhD*

Abstract

This paper interrogates the philosophical tension between objective morality and the condition of finite human agency. It asks whether an individual can fully ground moral judgment in pure rational principles without generating internal contradiction. The paper examines the aspiration toward universally valid moral laws derived from reason alone by probing the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. While Kantian ethics seeks coherence through the categorical imperative and the demand for universalizability, this paper argues that the lived reality of the moral agent complicates such purity. Human beings are historically situated, emotionally textured and socially embedded; their rational deliberations are never wholly detached from context. The paper demonstrates how the claim to purely objective moral reasoning risks masking subjective presuppositions or generating tensions between universal principles and particular obligations. The argument does not dismiss rational morality; rather, it presents it as a regulative ideal that guides finite agents without erasing their existential limitations. The so-called “self-contradiction” of pure rational ethics, therefore, is not merely logical but existential because it arises from the attempt to inhabit a standpoint that transcends the very conditions that make moral agency possible. In recovering this tension, the paper proposes a more modest and reflexive account of moral objectivity, one that preserves rational rigor while acknowledging human finitude.

Keywords: Objective morality; Finite agency; Rationalist ethics; Kantian moral philosophy; Universalizability; Existential limitation.

Preamble:

The aspiration toward objective morality has long occupied a central place in moral philosophy. At its core lies the conviction that moral principles must be grounded in reason rather than in shifting cultural conventions, personal inclinations, or emotional impulses. The project of rational ethics seeks universality, coherence and non-contradiction. It demands that moral judgments be capable of standing independently of subjective preference and be justifiable to any rational agent. However this aspiration immediately confronts a fundamental difficulty: human beings are finite, historically situated and psychologically complex agents. The tension between the universality of moral law and the particularity of human existence raises an important philosophical question; can finite agents consistently embody objective rational morality without generating internal contradiction? The most systematic defense of objective moral rationalism is found in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that morality must be grounded in pure practical reason and articulated through principles capable of universalization (Kant, 1785: 421). The categorical imperative, particularly in its formulation that one ought to act only on maxims that can be willed as universal law, seeks to eliminate arbitrariness and inconsistency in moral reasoning (424). For Kant, rational consistency is not merely a logical requirement but the very structure of moral obligation. A contradiction in one’s maxim signals moral failure because it reveals the impossibility of coherently willing one’s principle as universally binding (Fasiku, 2022: 91).

However, this rationalist ambition has faced enduring criticism. David Hume famously contends that reason alone cannot motivate moral action, insisting that “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (Hume, 1739: 415). On this view, moral judgments rest on sentiment rather than abstract rational deduction. Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche challenges the supposed objectivity of moral systems, arguing that they often conceal historical contingencies and power dynamics (Nietzsche, 1887: 12). These critiques suggest that the claim to purely objective morality may obscure the situated character of moral agents. This paper enters this debate by examining whether the pursuit of pure rational ethics generates a form of self-contradiction when undertaken by finite beings. It argues that the contradiction is not necessarily logical in the strict formal sense, but existential. The effort to occupy a standpoint of absolute

objectivity may itself conflict with the embodied, relational and historically conditioned nature of moral agency. By exploring this tension, the study seeks to clarify whether objective morality can be sustained as a coherent ideal without denying the finitude that defines human moral life.

The Epistemic Overreach in Pure Rational Morality

The aspiration toward objective morality often carries with it an implicit epistemological claim that the moral agent can, through reason alone, occupy a standpoint detached from personal perspective, cultural contingency and historical limitation. This standpoint appears to promise neutrality, universality and freedom from bias. But the very structure of this aspiration raises a philosophical difficulty. Can finite agents genuinely transcend their situatedness, or does the attempt to do so generate what may be called a “God’s-eye illusion,” i.e., an epistemic overreach embedded within pure rational ethics itself? The most systematic articulation of moral objectivity grounded in reason appears in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant insists that morality must be grounded in principles that are valid for all rational beings as such, independent of empirical inclinations or contingent circumstances (Kant, 1785: 408). The categorical imperative, especially in its universalizability formulation, requires that one act only on maxims that can be willed as universal law without contradiction (421). The moral law, in this account, is not derived from experience but from the structure of rational agency itself. In principle, any rational being capable of practical reason can recognize and endorse its binding force. However, embedded within this rationalist architecture is a subtle epistemic presupposition that the individual agent can abstract from their particular standpoint and reason from a perspective that is not distorted by personal bias, cultural inheritance, or historical location. Kant does not deny that humans are finite beings embedded in empirical conditions. Indeed, he distinguishes sharply between the *noumenal* standpoint of pure practical reason and the *phenomenal* realm of inclination and causality (Kant, 1788: 43). But the application of the categorical imperative in lived moral deliberation inevitably occurs within the phenomenal world. The agent who tests a maxim for universalizability does so from within a particular interpretive horizon.

This tension is an invitation to a thoughtful scrutiny. If moral reasoning requires abstraction from all particularity, the question becomes whether such abstraction is genuinely achievable or merely idealized. The critique here is not that universality is undesirable, but that the claim to occupy a fully neutral standpoint may itself conceal epistemic limitations. The so-called “God’s-eye view” suggests a perspective that sees all relevant factors without distortion and a perspective more divine than human. The epistemological challenge to such neutrality finds significance in the empiricist tradition, most notably in David Hume. Hume argues that moral distinctions are not derived from reason alone but arise from sentiment (Hume, 1739: 457). While Hume does not deny the role of reasoning in moral deliberation, he contends that reason’s function is instrumental rather than foundational. For Hume, the pretense that morality can be constructed from pure reason ignores the affective dimensions that structure human judgment. If this is correct, then the rationalist claim to objectivity risks overlooking the motivational and evaluative background from which reasoning proceeds. The problem deepens when one considers the historical dimension of moral consciousness. Friedrich Nietzsche famously challenges the universality of moral values by tracing their genealogical development (Nietzsche, 1887: 12). What presents itself as timeless moral truth may in fact be the sedimentation of historical power relations and psychological forces. Nietzsche’s critique does not simply reject morality; rather, it destabilizes the assumption that moral concepts are free from historical conditioning. If moral reasoning is conducted through concepts shaped by particular traditions, then the claim to transcend all perspective becomes suspect.

The “God’s-eye illusion” thus names a structural contradiction in the attempt of a finite, situated agent to reason as though they were not situated. This is not merely a psychological error but an epistemological one. The moral agent, in aspiring to objectivity, may fail to recognize the conditions that make moral

reasoning possible in the first place, such as language, social norms, inherited categories and embodied experience. Even sympathetic interpreters of Kant have acknowledged the difficulty of applying pure rational principles in concrete contexts. The judgment required to determine whether a maxim can be universalized presupposes interpretive sensitivity. What counts as the relevant maxim? How broadly or narrowly should it be formulated? The answers are not mechanically derived from reason but require practical discernment. This suggests that moral reasoning cannot escape hermeneutical mediation. Moreover, the demand for complete impartiality may conflict with morally significant forms of partiality. Human beings are embedded in networks of loyalty, care and identity. To abstract entirely from these attachments in the name of neutrality risks erasing dimensions of moral life that are constitutive rather than incidental. The epistemic ambition to eliminate perspective may inadvertently suppress the relational texture of moral agency.

At this juncture, the critique should not be misunderstood as a wholesale rejection of objectivity. The argument is subtler. The issue is whether objectivity must be conceived as a view from nowhere or whether it can be reinterpreted as a disciplined expansion of perspective. The difference is significant. The former implies transcendence of all situatedness; the latter acknowledges situatedness while striving for fairness and consistency. Thomas Nagel famously describes objectivity as the attempt to move from a subjective standpoint toward a more detached one, without ever fully escaping subjectivity (Nagel, 1986: 5). This formulation provides a helpful reframing. Objectivity is not the annihilation of perspective but its critical transformation. If so, the contradiction within pure rational ethics arises only when objectivity is absolutized when the regulative ideal becomes a metaphysical claim. In practical terms, the God's-eye illusion manifests when moral agents assume that their rational conclusions are free from contextual influence simply because they have applied a formal test of consistency. But consistency alone does not guarantee neutrality. A maxim may be internally coherent while still reflecting unexamined assumptions. Without reflexive awareness of one's epistemic limits, the aspiration to universality can harden into dogmatism.

The self-contradiction of pure rational ethics thus lies not in its logical structure but in its epistemic ambition. It demands that finite agents adopt a standpoint that, strictly speaking, exceeds their condition. The moral law may be universal in form, but its apprehension and application are mediated by historically situated consciousness. To deny this mediation is to obscure the very finitude that defines human moral life. The way forward, therefore, may not require abandoning rational morality but tempering its epistemological claims. Moral objectivity can remain a regulative ideal an aspiration toward impartiality, coherence and universality without presupposing the elimination of perspective. In this more modest account, rational ethics acknowledges its own limits. It becomes self-critical rather than self-certifying. The God's-eye illusion represents a subtle but profound tension within pure rational morality. The attempt to ground ethics in universal reason risks epistemic overreach when it assumes that agents can transcend their historical and psychological situatedness. The contradiction is not that universality is impossible, but that its absolute possession is. Finite agents can strive toward objectivity, but they cannot fully inhabit a standpoint that negates their finitude. Recognizing this limitation does not weaken moral seriousness; rather, it deepens it by grounding moral reflection in epistemic humility.

Universal Law vs. Lived Particularity: The Fracture between Principle and Situation

One of the most enduring tensions within rational moral philosophy arises from the encounter between universal law and lived particularity. If morality is to be objective, it must be universalizable; if it is to guide action, it must speak to concrete situations. The difficulty lies in holding these two demands together without allowing one to dissolve the other. Pure rational ethics insists that moral principles must apply equally to all rational beings. However, moral life unfolds not in abstraction, but in relationships, histories, loyalties and embodied contexts. The fracture between principle and situation thus becomes a critical site for examining whether objective morality can avoid internal contradiction.

The Universalist ambition is most clearly articulated by Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that moral obligation derives from principles that can be willed as universal law (Kant, 1785: 421). The categorical imperative seeks to eliminate partiality and arbitrariness by requiring that one test one's maxims against the standard of universal consistency. A maxim that cannot be universalized without contradiction is morally impermissible. In this formulation, morality is not contingent upon circumstance or identity; it is grounded in the structure of rational agency itself. But as pointed out earlier, moral agents do not exist as abstract rational units. They are sons and daughters, parents and friends, citizens and neighbors. They inhabit traditions, languages and communal narratives that shape their moral perception. The demand to universalize a maxim may conflict with particular obligations that seem equally binding. For instance, the impartial requirement to treat all persons equally may sit uneasily alongside special duties to family members or compatriots. Is loyalty a moral virtue, or a violation of universality? Does justice demand strict impartiality, or must it accommodate relational depth? This tension exposes a potential fracture within pure rational ethics. If universal law requires detachment from all particular attachments, then moral life risks becoming alienated from the very contexts that give it meaning. The moral agent may achieve consistency at the cost of relational integrity. Conversely, if one privileges particular attachments, the universality of moral law appears compromised.

The critique of abstract universalism finds expression in several philosophical traditions. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argues that morality cannot be fully understood apart from ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), which is embedded in social institutions and communal practices (Hegel, 1821: 142). For Hegel, the purely formal universalism of Kantian ethics lacks sufficient content to guide action in concrete circumstances. The moral will must be mediated by historically developed forms of life. Without such mediation, universality risks emptiness. Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre contends that moral reasoning is tradition-constituted and narrative-dependent (MacIntyre, 1981: 222). According to MacIntyre, the attempt to construct morality on purely universal rational foundations overlooks the embedded character of moral agency. Individuals reason from within practices and histories that provide the intelligibility of moral concepts. To abstract from these contexts in the name of objectivity may sever morality from its lived grounding.

The fracture between principle and situation becomes especially evident in cases where universal rules seem to generate morally counterintuitive outcomes. Consider the well-known Kantian prohibition against lying, even to prevent harm. Kant maintains that truthfulness is a strict duty because the maxim of lying cannot be universalized without contradiction (Kant, 1797: 426). However, critics argue that rigid adherence to such universality can conflict with compassionate responsiveness to particular circumstances. The tension here is not trivial; it reveals the strain between formal consistency and situational sensitivity. The philosophical challenge, then, is whether universal law can accommodate the richness of lived particularity without collapsing into relativism. If every moral judgment must be filtered through universalizability, does this flatten morally relevant differences? Alternatively, if contextual nuances override universal principles, does morality lose its objectivity? One possible resolution lies in reinterpreting universality not as uniformity, but as fairness. John Rawls offers a model of moral reasoning that seeks impartiality through the device of the original position and the veil of ignorance (Rawls, 1971: 136). While not identical to Kantian universalism, Rawls's framework attempts to secure objectivity without denying social embeddedness. The veil of ignorance does not erase particular identities in reality; rather, it serves as a thought experiment to test the fairness of principles. This suggests that universality may function as a critical perspective on particularity rather than its negation.

Nevertheless, even this approach presupposes the capacity to imaginatively abstract from one's social position. The question remains whether such abstraction can be fully realized by finite agents. Human beings cannot wholly detach themselves from their formative contexts. Their moral intuitions are shaped by upbringing, language and collective memory. Thus, the application of universal law inevitably passes

through interpretive filters. The fracture between principle and situation may therefore be understood as structural rather than accidental. It arises because moral life contains dual demands: coherence and responsiveness. Pure rational ethics emphasizes coherence, consistency across cases and agents. Lived moral experience emphasizes responsiveness and attunement to the uniqueness of persons and circumstances. When coherence suppresses responsiveness, morality becomes rigid; when responsiveness undermines coherence, morality risks fragmentation. This tension need not be fatal to objective morality, but it does complicate its claims. The self-contradiction of pure rational ethics emerges when it assumes that universal law can be applied without remainder to particular life. In reality, moral judgment requires practical wisdom and the capacity to navigate between principle and situation. The universality of moral law provides orientation, but its application demands contextual discernment. In acknowledging this, rational ethics may evolve beyond its most austere formulations. Universality can remain a guiding ideal, ensuring that moral reasoning resists arbitrary favoritism. At the same time, lived particularity must be recognized as morally significant rather than morally irrelevant. The challenge is integration rather than domination.

The fracture between universal law and lived particularity reveals a profound tension within objective rational morality. The aspiration to universal consistency encounters the irreducible complexity of human relationships and contexts. If pure rational ethics neglects this complexity, it risks internal contradiction demanding a detachment that undermines moral life itself. Nevertheless if it incorporates contextual awareness without surrendering universality, it may achieve a more balanced and humane account of moral objectivity. The task, therefore, is not to choose between principle and situation, but to hold them in reflective equilibrium; an equilibrium sustained not by transcendence of finitude, but by thoughtful engagement within it.

The Contradictions in Rational Ethics

One of the most persistent challenges to pure rational ethics concerns not its logical structure, but its motivational force. Even if moral principles can be objectively grounded in reason, can reason alone move the will to act? Or does moral action inevitably depend upon affective dispositions, sentiments and psychological investments that rationalism officially sidelines? The problem of motivation reveals a potential contradiction at the heart of pure rational morality: it claims autonomy from passion, nevertheless may covertly rely upon it. The rationalist tradition, particularly in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, insists that the moral worth of an action lies not in inclination but in duty. For Kant, an action possesses genuine moral value only when it is performed from respect for the moral law, not from sympathy, self-interest, or emotional attachment (Kant, 1785: 397). The moral agent must act from reverence for the law as determined by pure practical reason. Inclinations may coincide with duty, but they cannot ground it. In this framework, morality achieves purity by detaching itself from empirical motivations. Nevertheless, Kant does not deny motivation altogether. He introduces the notion of “respect” (*Achtung*) for the moral law as a distinctive moral feeling generated by reason itself (Kant, 1788: 73). Respect is not an external passion imposed upon reason; it is the affective expression of rational recognition. Still, the introduction of respect raises an important question: if reason must generate a feeling in order to motivate action, does this not suggest that emotion remains indispensable to morality?

The challenge becomes sharper when considered in light of David Hume’s famous claim that “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (Hume, 1739: 415). For Hume, reason alone cannot produce or prevent action; it can only inform us about facts and relations. Motivation arises from desire or sentiment. On this view, a purely rational morality lacks the psychological resources to move agents toward moral conduct. If moral judgment is entirely detached from passion, it risks motivational impotence. The tension here is not merely theoretical. In lived experience, individuals often find that rational recognition of a duty does not automatically translate into action. One may know that honesty is required, but feel tempted to deceive. One may recognize an obligation to assist others, but remain unmoved without empathy. This gap between rational cognition and practical motivation suggests that

moral life is animated by more than formal consistency. The motivational contradiction in rational ethics can be framed as follows: if morality excludes passion to preserve objectivity, it may undermine its own practical efficacy. However, if it reintroduces passion as necessary for action, it appears to compromise its claim to purity. Pure rational ethics thus confronts a dilemma either remain motivationally sterile or acknowledge dependence upon the very elements it sought to transcend.

Friedrich Nietzsche deepens this critique by questioning whether rational morality is ever truly independent of passion. Nietzsche argues that moral systems often mask underlying drives, resentments and power dynamics (Nietzsche, 1887: 13). What presents itself as objective reason may conceal psychological investments. The claim to act from pure duty may itself be motivated by a desire for moral superiority or self-justification. If so, the purity of rational morality becomes suspect not because it fails logically, but because it fails psychologically. Even outside Nietzsche's radical critique, contemporary moral psychology reinforces the complexity of moral motivation. Human decision-making involves a dynamic interplay between cognitive evaluation and emotional response. Rational deliberation shapes moral judgment, but affective engagement often energizes it. The moral agent is not a detached calculating machine; she is an embodied being whose commitments are intertwined with identity and feeling. However, to concede the role of emotion does not necessarily invalidate rational ethics. The crucial distinction lies between grounding and enabling. Rational morality may claim that the justification of moral principles rests upon reason, while acknowledging that their enactment requires affective reinforcement. In this view, emotion does not determine what is right, but it sustains the will to do what reason prescribes. Nonetheless, even this reconciliation invites further reflection. If respect for the moral law must be cultivated, does this not imply that moral education involves shaping emotional dispositions? And if emotions are shaped by culture and upbringing, then the universality of rational morality may depend upon historically contingent conditions. The aspiration to motivational independence from context becomes difficult to maintain.

Another dimension of the problem concerns internal conflict. Human beings often experience tension between duty and inclination. Kant interprets this conflict as evidence of freedom i.e., the capacity to act contrary to desire in obedience to reason (Kant, 1785: 454). But the very experience of conflict reveals that moral agency is not unified. The will is pulled in competing directions. Pure rational ethics demands that reason dominate inclination, but the persistence of struggle suggests that reason does not operate in isolation. The hidden passions of reason may also manifest in the formation of maxims themselves. When agents formulate the principles upon which they act, they do so within frameworks shaped by values, attachments and aspirations. The selection of what counts as morally relevant is rarely neutral. Even the commitment to consistency reflects a valuation i.e., an affective investment in coherence and fairness. Thus, rational morality may presuppose passions at a deeper structural level. Does this amount to self-contradiction? Not necessarily in a strict logical sense. Rather, it reveals a structural dependency. Pure rational ethics seeks to ground morality in reason alone, yet the lived enactment of morality appears inseparable from affective life. The contradiction emerges when rationalism denies this dependency while implicitly relying upon it. A more integrated account of moral agency may therefore be required. Instead of opposing reason and passion, one might conceive them as mutually informing dimensions of the moral self. Reason provides orientation and justification; emotion provides energy and attachment. The aspiration to eliminate passion in the name of objectivity may impoverish moral life rather than purify it. Nonetheless, the hidden passions of reason expose a motivational tension within pure rational ethics. The project of grounding morality in reason alone confronts the psychological reality that action requires more than rational cognition. While rational principles may secure universality and coherence, their practical realization depends upon affective engagement. The self-contradiction of pure rational morality thus lies not in its formal structure but in its implicit denial of the motivational conditions of finite agency. Recognizing this interdependence need not dissolve objectivity; rather, it invites a more honest account of the moral self; one in which rational rigor and human passion coexist without illusion.

Finite Autonomy and the Burden of Consistency

The aspiration to moral objectivity often carries with it a demanding conception of autonomy. To be autonomous, in the rationalist sense, is to legislate the moral law to oneself through reason and to act consistently in accordance with it. Autonomy thus becomes inseparable from coherence. A morally serious agent must avoid contradiction, arbitrariness and self-exemption. But when this demand for consistency is internalized by finite agents beings marked by vulnerability, plurality of roles and existential fragility, it may generate not only moral discipline but also *existential strain*. The pursuit of perfect rational coherence can become a burden that exposes the limits of finite autonomy. In the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, autonomy is the defining feature of moral agency. To act morally is to act according to a law one gives to oneself as a rational being (Kant, 1785: 440). Heteronomy i.e., acting from inclination, social pressure, or external authority, undermines moral freedom. The moral law, as expressed through the categorical imperative, demands internal consistency: one must will only those maxims that can be universalized without contradiction (421). Rational integrity thus becomes the measure of moral worth. This conception of autonomy is profoundly empowering because it locates dignity in the rational capacity of the individual and rejects moral arbitrariness; nonetheless it also sets an exacting standard. The autonomous agent must constantly examine his or her maxims, test them for universality and align his or her conduct with rational principle. Moral life becomes a project of relentless self-scrutiny. For finite beings, whose desires, fears and attachments are diverse and sometimes conflicting, this demand can create sustained inner tension.

Human identity is not monolithic. Individuals occupy multiple roles such as parent, colleague, citizen, friend each carrying distinct expectations. The demand for universal consistency may collide with the contextual flexibility required to navigate these roles. For example, the impartial application of a principle may conflict with the partial responsibilities of care and loyalty. When rational coherence appears to demand emotional detachment, the agent may experience fragmentation between moral ideal and lived self. This strain is not merely psychological but philosophical. Søren Kierkegaard emphasizes the existential dimension of moral decision-making, arguing that ethical life involves inward struggle and subjective appropriation (Kierkegaard, 1843: 213). While Kierkegaard does not reject universality outright, he highlights the anxiety and burden that accompany responsible choice. The individual must commit himself or herself within uncertainty, without access to absolute certainty. From this perspective, the ideal of seamless rational coherence may obscure the lived difficulty of moral existence. The burden of consistency intensifies when autonomy is interpreted as total self-legislation. If the moral agent is entirely responsible for aligning his or her will with rational law, failure becomes deeply personal. Moral inconsistency is not merely error but self-betrayal. The weight of this responsibility can produce guilt, self-doubt, or moral exhaustion. Finite agents may find themselves perpetually falling short of an ideal that tolerates no contradiction.

Hannah Arendt offers a helpful perspective on this tension through her analysis of judgment. Arendt distinguishes between rigid rule-following and reflective judgment, which requires the ability to consider multiple perspectives (Arendt, 1961: 241). Moral life, in her account, is not reducible to mechanical application of universal laws. It involves thinking from the standpoint of others while remaining rooted in one's own experience. This suggests that autonomy may be less about strict consistency and more about responsible responsiveness. The existential strain of rational coherence also arises from the gap between ideal and capacity. Finite agents are limited in knowledge and foresight. They cannot anticipate all consequences or foresee every relevant factor. Yet the demand for universalizability presupposes a level of conceptual clarity that may exceed practical reality. When agents attempt to resolve complex moral dilemmas through purely formal reasoning, they may encounter indeterminacy or conflict between principles. The aspiration to eliminate contradiction may reveal contradictions internal to moral life itself.

Moreover, excessive emphasis on coherence can foster rigidity because an agent determined never to contradict himself or herself may become inflexible, resistant to growth or revision. But moral

development often requires re-evaluating past commitments in light of new insight. What appears as inconsistency may sometimes reflect maturation rather than failure. The demand for unbroken coherence may therefore suppress the dynamic character of moral growth. This does not mean that consistency is dispensable. Without some degree of coherence, moral life collapses into arbitrariness. The issue is proportionality and when consistency becomes absolute; when the avoidance of contradiction overrides compassion, contextual sensitivity, or humility, it risks transforming autonomy into moral formalism. The agent may adhere to a principle while feeling alienated from his or her own lived reality. The strain becomes especially evident in tragic dilemmas, where competing obligations cannot all be satisfied. A parent may face a conflict between professional duty and familial care. A public official may struggle between legal obligation and humanitarian concern. In such cases, rational coherence alone may not dissolve the tension. Whatever choice is made, something of value is sacrificed. The aspiration to total harmony between principle and action confronts the irreducible plurality of moral goods.

The self-contradiction of pure rational ethics, in this context, lies in its expectation that finite autonomy can achieve seamless unity. The moral agent is urged to legislate universal law and embody it without remainder; but his or her condition as a finite, embodied being entails vulnerability, ambiguity and competing commitments. The more she strives for perfect rational alignment, the more she may become aware of her limitations. A more sustainable account of autonomy may therefore acknowledge finitude rather than deny it. Autonomy need not imply flawless consistency; it may instead involve the ongoing effort to integrate reason, emotion and context in good faith. Moral integrity becomes less about eliminating all tension and more about engaging tension responsibly. The burden of consistency reveals an existential dimension within rational ethics. While the demand for coherence secures moral seriousness and guards against arbitrariness, its absolutization can generate strain for finite agents. The aspiration to pure autonomy may exceed human capacity, producing fragmentation rather than unity. Recognizing the limits of finite autonomy does not undermine moral objectivity; rather, it situates it within the lived reality of moral struggle. In doing so, it transforms consistency from an oppressive ideal into a guiding horizon, one that calls the agent forward without denying her humanity.

Reconstructing Moral Universality without Metaphysical Absolutism

If pure rational ethics risks epistemic overreach, motivational abstraction and existential strain, the question becomes whether moral objectivity must be abandoned altogether. Does acknowledging finite agency inevitably collapse into relativism? Or can objectivity be reconstructed in a manner that preserves universality without presupposing a metaphysical “view from nowhere”? This paper proposes a reconstruction of moral objectivity as *regulative rather than absolute* a guiding horizon that directs finite agents toward coherence and fairness without demanding transcendence of their situated condition. The notion of the regulative ideal has its roots in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant himself. In his theoretical philosophy, Kant distinguishes between constitutive principles, which determine objects of knowledge and regulative ideas, which guide inquiry without claiming direct correspondence to empirical reality (Kant, 1781: A644/B672). While Kant’s moral philosophy presents the categorical imperative as binding and universal (Kant, 1785: 421), one may reinterpret its universality not as a metaphysical possession but as a normative aspiration. That is, universalizability functions as a test we continually approximate, rather than a standpoint we fully occupy. Under this reconstruction, objectivity is not the elimination of perspective but the disciplined expansion of it. The moral agent does not step outside history, culture, or embodiment; rather, she critically examines her commitments in light of broader considerations. Universality becomes an activity of self-transcendence within finitude, not an escape from finitude. This preserves the demand for consistency while acknowledging epistemic humility.

John Rawls also offers a helpful analogy through the method of reflective equilibrium. Rather than deriving principles from abstract reason alone, Rawls proposes a process of mutual adjustment between general principles and considered judgments (Rawls, 1971: 48). Objectivity here is procedural rather than

absolute. It arises from the ongoing effort to reconcile particular intuitions with universal commitments under fair conditions. The ideal of impartiality is maintained, but it is achieved through deliberative practice rather than metaphysical detachment. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas reframes moral objectivity in communicative terms. For Habermas, the validity of moral norms depends upon their justifiability within rational discourse under conditions of symmetry and freedom (Habermas, 1990: 66). Objectivity is not secured by solitary abstraction but by intersubjective testing. The universalization principle becomes dialogical: a norm is valid if all affected could accept it in rational discussion. This model preserves universality while grounding it in the practical realities of human interaction. What unites these approaches is the rejection of metaphysical absolutism without surrendering normative ambition. The problem with pure rational ethics is not its commitment to universality, but its implicit claim to have achieved it in a final, uncontested form. When universality is treated as complete and self-sufficient, it risks dogmatism. When it is treated as regulative-always open to revision in light of deeper reflection, it becomes self-corrective.

Regulative objectivity also addresses the motivational and existential tensions identified earlier. By recognizing that moral reasoning unfolds within finite conditions, it integrates rational justification with emotional and relational awareness. The agent is not required to silence her attachments in order to reason morally; rather, she subjects them to critical scrutiny. Loyalty, compassion and identity become morally significant but not immune from evaluation. This reconstruction does not collapse into relativism because it retains the criterion of universalizability. The agent still asks: *Can this principle be justified beyond my particular standpoint?* The difference is that she acknowledges that her answer may be provisional. Moral objectivity becomes iterative rather than absolute. It is sustained through dialogue, self-critique and openness to correction. Moreover, regulative objectivity aligns with the reality of moral growth. Finite agents develop through experience, encounter and reflection. What once appeared coherent may later reveal hidden inconsistency. A rigid model of objectivity treats such revision as failure; a regulative model treats it as progress. Moral integrity thus consists not in static perfection but in faithful responsiveness to deeper insight. The concept of humility becomes central in this framework. Epistemic humility does not negate moral conviction; it tempers it. The agent affirms universal principles while recognizing the limits of her grasp. She seeks coherence without claiming infallibility. In this way, objectivity becomes aspirational rather than triumphalist. The existential advantage of this reconstruction is significant. The burden of achieving flawless consistency is replaced by the responsibility of continual striving. Moral life is understood as a journey toward greater universality, not a possession of it. This reduces the strain associated with the impossible demand for absolute rational purity while preserving the seriousness of moral commitment. At a deeper level, regulative objectivity reconciles the dual aspects of human agency: rational capacity and finite embodiment. It accepts that moral agents are historically located and emotionally textured, yet capable of critical reflection that reaches beyond immediate context. Universality is not denied; it is humanized.

The self-contradiction of pure rational ethics, as previously argued, arises when finite agents are implicitly required to occupy an absolute standpoint. Regulative objectivity dissolves this contradiction by redefining the aspiration. The agent need not become godlike to be moral; she must only be willing to test her commitments against broader standards and revise them when necessary. Reconstructing moral universality as a regulative ideal offers a path beyond the impasse between absolutism and relativism. It preserves the rational demand for coherence and fairness while acknowledging the epistemic and existential limits of finite agency. Moral objectivity remains indispensable, but it is reimagined as a horizon toward which agents strive rather than a vantage point they fully possess. In this reconstruction, rational ethics is not abandoned because it is rendered more humane, more self-aware and ultimately more consistent with the conditions of human moral life.

Conclusion

The investigation into objective morality and finite agency reveals a persistent tension at the heart of rational ethics and the aspiration for universality, coherence and consistency confronts the reality of human finitude, relational complexity and motivational limitation. Across the discussion, it has become evident that pure rational morality, while philosophically elegant, carries inherent strains that manifest in multiple dimensions. From the epistemic overreach of the God's-eye illusion to the fracture between universal law and lived particularity, the motivational dependence on affective life and the existential burden of strict consistency, the ideal of absolute rational morality repeatedly encounters the limits of human agency. Each dimension highlights that the pursuit of moral objectivity is inseparable from the condition of being finite, embodied and historically situated. The critical insight is that the self-contradiction of pure rational ethics is not primarily a logical flaw; rather, it is existential and structural. Finite agents cannot fully detach from perspective, nor can they act without the interplay of emotion, identity and relational context. The aspiration to occupy a standpoint of absolute neutrality or flawless coherence risks alienating the moral agent from his or her lived reality. Yet, as the analysis of regulative objectivity demonstrates, these limitations do not necessitate the abandonment of universality or rational moral standards. By reconceiving moral objectivity as a regulative ideal i.e., an orienting horizon rather than a metaphysical possession rational ethics can remain normative while respecting the practical, emotional and historical constraints of finite agents. This viewpoint achieves several objectives. It preserves the normative force of universality and coherence, ensuring that moral deliberation retains critical rigor. It recognizes the motivational role of sentiment and relational attachment, integrating affective and cognitive dimensions of moral life. It tempers the burden of perfect consistency, framing moral striving as iterative and self-corrective rather than absolutist. In doing so, it reconciles the rationalist demand for objectivity with the existential realities of human agency.

***Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius PhD**

Department of Philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba,
cfasiku@mail.com or gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng
Tel:+2348169448844
ORCID: 0009-0009-3107-7661

References

References

- Arendt, H. (1961). *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press.
- Fasiku, G. C. (2022). "Kant on the Question of Right and Moral Duties and the Challenge of Biocentrism" *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 5(1), pp. 91-101. <https://acjoi.org/index.php/jassd/article/view/2251>
- Habermas, J. 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1821). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Hume, D. (1739). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. London: John Noon.
- Kant, I. (1781). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by P. Guyer & A. W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- _____. (1785). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by H. J. Paton. London: Harper & Row, 1964.
- _____. (1788). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by W. Hastie. London: Macmillan, 1888.
- _____. (1797). *Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by M. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1843). *Either/Or*. Translated by H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Nagel, T. (1986). *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1887). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1967.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.