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Philosophy 97

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December 12th 2012

Practical Identities in The Sources Of Normativity

In *The Sources of Normativity* Christine Korsgaard advances her neo-Kantian response to what she calls the normative question. Her theory centres around the idea that human beings, in virtue of their self-consciousness and free will are required to make conscious choices before acting and thus endorse or reject certain thoughts and beliefs. She believes that obligation is tied closely to the manner in which an individual attributes value to herself, and that morality stems from identifying yourself as a member of humanity. This paper will address the first half of Lecture III, in which Korsgaard sets about establishing whether obligations – of any kind, not just moral – exist at all, and if so where they originate. The work she does here comes in useful as she goes about showing why it is that we have obligations to obey moral rules.

The Normative Question:

The normative question refers to where the justification for moral actions come from. That is, how is it that moral obligations are able to firstly, have obligatory power over us, and secondly, motivate us towards action? The normative question is particularly pertinent when asked by someone who is in doubt about the

jurisdiction that moral truths have over him. As such, any reply to the normative question must meet the following criteria:

1) explain why moral truths are correct.

2) provide a justification or motivation to act morally.

3) inspire confidence to he who doubts that morality is worth upholding.

Self-consciousness and Reflective Endorsement

Korsgaard's position arises out of the observation that human beings are self-conscious. Rather then simply living 'in the moment' by acting upon "impulse" – that is the whims and desire - of the moment, we are able to "back up and bring that impulse into view" and thus are not "dominated" by it (SN 93). This process of stepping back achieves a 'reflective distance' and both allows and compels us to evaluate the impulse before acting on it – for the impulse itself does not constitute a *reason* for either action or belief (SN 93). "Reasons" are particularly important for Korsgaard because it is through reasons that normativity arises. Reasons are tied very closely to desires in that "if I decide that my desire is a reason to act, I must decide that on reflection I endorse that idea." (SN 97)

Korsgaard contends that we have the capacity therefore to either endorse or reject beliefs as they are presented to us, and further that we cannot avoid making such a judgement in cases where the reflective distance is achieved. She states that "the reflective mind *must* endorse the desire before it can act on it." (SN 94, my emphasis). Thus, if I am in conversation and am tempted to divulge a friend's secret, then before acting I have the capacity to question whether or not to I should do so.

This deliberative process occurs even if I obey the desire and share do in fact the secret.

Free Will and Autonomy

For Korsgaard, free will constitutes the ability to make and act on choices in the present. One must be able to deliberate consciously between two or more different options and select the best one to act on (SN94). She sharply distinguishes the ability 'to do otherwise' from the ability to 'have done otherwise' as free will is sometimes defined, since she claims choice in the past tense is meaningless, since "no one can change the past" (SN 96). Korsgaard's definition is also focused on the freedom of the will itself and not merely the agent's capacity to carry out the instructions of the will. Therefore, we must not only have the ability to act on our choices, but we must also be, in a sense, responsible for 'choosing' these choices. For Korsgaard, the only relevant type of freedom is that of an agent who has deliberative power and autonomy at the moment she makes her decision.

Korsgaard then goes about explaining what it means for a will to be free. In order for a will to be free, it must be both 'causally efficacious' (must have influence over our actions), and not be determined by an external cause. She explains:

> "Since reasons are derived from principles, the free will must have a principle. But because the will is free, no law or principle can be imposed on it from outside." (SN 99).

The choices of a 'free' will cannot be caused by deterministic principles that originate outside the will itself for then the will would be only one link in a long

causal chain and would not be free in the sense that it can choose otherwise. Similarly, the will cannot follow non-deterministic causes, for then these causes would simply be random and the will would still lack freedom. However, in order to be causally efficacious, the will must be able to provide reasons for action, and reasons can only be derived from a principle (SN 98). The only option, as Korsgaard articulates it, is that the will must obey a principle that originates in the will itself. Therefore, in order to be free, "the free will must be entirely self-determining" (SN 97). Given this account, the free will is also "autonomous" in that it has its "own law or principle" (SN 98).

A contention with the argument at this point is Korsgaard's requirement that the will must act according to its own principle. She has established that the will cannot be externally caused, but why must the internal causes of the will obey a 'law or principle'. Why is it that the will cannot behave according to discontinuous, or untraceable set of causes at least some of the time? She must be able to sufficiently address this contention because it forms the keystone of the next step in her argument. The 'categorical imperative' is understood to be the idea that one must "act only on maxims you can will to be law" (SN 99). Korsgaard connects the free will to the categorical imperative by arguing that both require us to act in a way that has the form of a law, and thus the categorical imperative *is* the law of the free will (SN 98). At this stage, the categorical imperative functions only as shorthand. However, she goes on to argue that "It is only if the law ranges over every rational being that the resulting law will be the moral law" (SN 99). This step is achieved by

coming to understand oneself as a citizen among many, which gives us that our personal laws must be universalisable in order to be moral.

Having established that the free will must act according to a law that lives "over and above all of your desires" (SN 100), Korsgaard is forced to explain the nature of this law, and from where it originates. If the law itself is either arbitrary or too rigid, then we may question whether the agent has any control, freedom or responsibility for her actions. Korsgaard's solution is that "the law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of *yourself*." (SN 100). In this way, she is able to retain the autonomy of the individual all the way through to the choices of the will – since all choices originate solely in the moral agent herself.

Practical Identities and Obligation

The principle for action required previously stems from the innovation in Korsgaard's philosophy – the idea of 'Practical Identities'. She defines a practical identity as

> "A description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking." (SN 101).

Practical identities define a relationship that an individual has with herself. A multiplicity of practical identities exist in each individual. One may for example be simultaneously all of: a human being, a man, a Buddhist, a carpenter, a husband and a father. These identities are contingent in that they vary from person to person and

can be shed. The only identity which is not contingent is the 'human identity' which every person must have in virtue of being human, and which dictates that the person must have contingent identities.

Korsgaard's practical identities are also the root of motivation and obligation in her philosophy. She contends that "No 'ought' is needed because the normativity is built right into the [identity]." (SN 101). To reject the normative pull of a particular identity would be simply to refuse the identity for oneself. It seems incoherent to define oneself as, for example, a doctor while simultaneously holding that such a definition has no normative pull over your own actions. Under her model, when we are presented with an 'impulse' to act – such as a desire or inclination – we undergo a process of reflective deliberation. This process consists in evaluating the action against the practical identities we identify with. If an action is in accordance with these identities, then the action is motivated – there is a reason for it. If an action requires the abandonment or dissociation from one of our strong identities, then it is an obligation. An 'obligation' is understood in the sense that the punishment for transgression are so severe that they compel the agent to act according to the obligation. As in the case of judicial laws, one may disobey but only at a significant price. It is unclear whether the distinction between a reason to act and an obligation to act is one of degree or kind. Korsgaard relegates obligations down to simply very compelling reasons. For example, a vegetarian's 'obligation' to not eat meat originates in the fact that doing so would require her to abandon the said identity – which is understood to be too severe a consequence. Korsgaard explains that "Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations

spring from what your identity forbids." (SN 101) – and we are thus able to get from impulses to reasons and obligations via practical identities.

It is worthwhile to consider the domain of practical identities – and the choices we have when inside this domain. As mentioned before, given that practical identities are the root of personal autonomy, it seems that a lack of freedom with respect to choosing practical identities will ripple through the rungs of Korsgaard's argument and lead to actions that consequently lack freedom. Korsgaard will respond that practical identities are simply *who you are* and that to ask for choice in this area requires a lens that simply doesn't exist – we may ask *who* does the choosing? It makes sense that one can evaluate her actions through the lens of her identity, but evaluating this identity itself presents a more significant challenge. However, if practical identities are arbitrarily selected, then it becomes unreasonable that they have such jurisdiction over us.

While many contingent identities are easily shed, there some identities which are very difficult to change. In order to remove my practical identity as a student and relieve myself of the associated obligations, I would need to significantly alter not only my mindset, but also my lifestyle. In my role as a student, I am obligated to complete certain assignments, to take certain classes and many other things. Of course, this is a choice I made voluntarily, but even so, at the present moment I am compelled to the obligations of this identity and do not have the choice to opt out.

We can go further, surely identities such as "father", "son" or "member of society" are not within the agents own capacity for choice. Korsgaard may contend that these identities are contingent and removable, but that to abandon them would

lead to severe repercussions which most people would not wish to endure – and that this is precisely why they such strong identities. A better line of argument may be to argue that one can easily shed any contingent identity, because doing so requires only a personal, private denial. In fact, the very act of deciding that a practical identity is not desirable is enough to shed the identity because the identity only references the relationship one has to oneself. This means, that it is possible to live and function within a society, while also not viewing oneself as a 'member of society' per se. This may turn the person into a recluse, or simply mean that one does not hold oneself to the same obligations that she would as a 'member of society'. She may of course still perform the same actions as someone who possesses the identity, but will likely do so for different reasons. She will refrain from breaking the law not because being a 'member of society' demands it, but rather because she fears the consequences of such action, or identifies with the identity of 'not a lawbreaker'.

One response to the choice dilemma is that it only makes sense to evaluate personal identities by using reflective endorsement, that is by using other practical identities. While we may not have direct control over the origins of our practical identities – they may seem to 'spring up' on us – we do have the capacity to endorse or reject identities such that we cannot hold any identities which we have deliberately rejected. This implicates that it is possible to possess an identity without being explicitly conscious of it. I may subconsciously value my ability to manipulate other people into doing what I want, and thus may feel pleased, motivated, perhaps even obligated when I partake in such actions, but only upon

reflection realise that what I was doing was wrong and the relevant identity should be abandoned. Either this is a case of a practical identity under which the agent is unclear about whether not they value themselves (there is ambiguity over whether 'manipulator' is a practical identity), or more likely, the status of the identity changes over time or through reflection.

The above contention raises a corollary. We, almost instinctively attach labels of 'good' and 'bad', or 'more desirable' and 'less desirable' to practical identities. However, Korsgaard's reflective endorsement test tests only for unity, not for correctness. That is to say, if someone has a whole series of negative personal identities, then the reflective endorsement process will only enable them further this negative streak. Given that as human beings, we attempt to seek, or at least aspire to those identities which we deem to be most desirable to us, and that the desirability of identities can only be judged by those identities we already possess, how can we be sure that we are 'improving' morally. Korsgaard's theory, at least in from this limited vantage point invokes the issue of moral progress and whether it is possible.

A final contention with Korsgaard's introduction of practical identities is that this causes the purpose to be more removed from the action that it should be. If a father rescues his daughter from a burning building, his reason for doing so is not that he is father and that father's ought to rescue their daughters from burning buildings. Rather, his reason is simply that his daughter was in need – that was why he did what he did. If the man must refer to the practical identity in order to find a reason to act we seem to have diminished the nobility of the action and he seems no

longer to be acting for the correct reasons. Korsgaard's philosophy seems strangely self centred in that reasons can only come from within oneself. Her position dictates, that reasons of the nature: "she needed my help", "because he had no one else", "they wanted me to", must be translated into self centred reasons before they can have motivational content. However in such cases the order of the relationship seems reversed. It is not the case that I help my mother because I am her son, I help her because she is my mother. What are the consequences of this? Korsgaard might say that only good things can come from this. If I didn't identify as the son of this woman then I wouldn't in fact help her (even though she is my mother) – one can think of cases of children being abandoned, unloved etc.

Conclusion

In this essay I have focused on looking for and highlighting contentions with Korsgaard's notion of practical identity. Largely, I have ignored the step that takes her from identity to morality, which is arguably more complex and contentious. Overall, Korsgaard's account provides a compelling account of how obligation exists, and is particularly powerful when one argues that practical identities are given strength by the way the are interdependent upon each other, and that a cohesive network.

Cited Works:

Korsgaard. C. Sources of Normativity. Cambridge University Press. Print. 1996