

Summary of Chapter 3 'The Authority of Reflection' in 'The Sources of Normativity' by Christine M. Korsgaard

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The author opens the chapter by outlining the three ways in which the *normative question* developed in modern moral philosophy. Voluntarists are those who follow rules and laws simply because there are authorities or organisations which tell them to do so. This begs the question as to why we should follow these authorities and their rules in the first place. Realists do so because they are justified by objective values and obligations. However, why should we believe in these values in the first place without any justification? Thirdly, the reflective endorsement theorists say that our moral obligations are based on our own feelings and sentiments, and we do not justify them because they correspond to the objective truth but because they serve our self-interest and nourish our societal outlook as they help strength our social relationships. The author says that it is up to us, the agents who perform the actions, to try and understand the reason behind our obligations. Our actions need to pass the test, not of the objective truth, but of *reflective endorsement*.

The author's argument, inspired by Kant, is two-fold in nature. Firstly, the author argues that the fact that we can make our own rational choices is our source of moral obligation, and secondly, that we are morally obligated to not just people we know and have relations with, but to the entirety of humanity. However, she does clarify that she does not believe that every action is morally obligated.

Just because the human mind is self-conscious i.e we have the capability to think about our own thoughts, feelings, and desires, does not mean that we know what we're thinking or feeling in a definitive manner. It is just that unlike other animals, we can reflect on our thoughts and feelings and assess them. This is why human beings have to face the problem of normativity; for instance, when we desire something, we do not just go for it and instead, we take a step back to think about whether there is a valid reason behind it. The author says that since this problem arises from reflection, so must the solution. Our impulsive thoughts and feelings may not always seem like the right thing to do once we scrutinise and reflect on it. This is why we need good reasoning to back up our feelings and desires. If on reflecting, we reach a verdict of good or bad, then that would indicate successful reflection. However, we may not always be able to reach such a clear conclusion, and it may feel that this process of reflection will remain unresolved forever.

According to Kant, since we can reflect on our thoughts, we essentially act under the idea of freedom; even if we act on an externally influenced desire, we should then *make it our maxim* and then we would still be acting freely. One could object that if our actions can be predicted, then we are no longer free. However, the author explains that these predictions do not really affect our actions because if we were about to do something, irrespective of whether someone predicted so or not, we would still be assessing the situation ourselves and then act accordingly. She argues that if I know that my behaviour is predictable, that does not mean

that I will just sit idly waiting for that predictable action to happen. Say, I have the option to either remain sitting or work and I am predicted to just remain sitting. If I end up working, then clearly the prediction was incorrect but if I remain sitting, it is not because I was predicted to remain sitting but simple because I chose to do so after contemplating on the two options I had. She goes on to provide an example how instead of affecting our freedom, knowing these predictions can actually help us take better decisions. For instance, I have the chance to either work or play. If I play and I was predicted to play, then there is no issue as I did what I thought was the right thing to do and it aligned with the prediction. If I choose to work though I was predicted to play, I become aware of the fact that the other option could be very tempting, but I should be weary of that and exercise self-control. She also goes on to talk about how the Scientific World View is great at explaining and predicting things accurately, but it is no substitute for human experience. Things like reason and freedom may not be needed for scientific explanations but that does not mean that reasons are not real or that our sense of freedom cannot be explained scientifically. We need reason since we have the ability to reflect on our options and choose, and freedom does not refer to the ability to change the past, but it is our sense of having a choice and the ability to make decisions.

The author brings up the next problem using the example of desire. If we decide to act on our desire, this means that we reflected on our desire and then choose to embrace it. This then calls for the question of how we took the decision. Kant addressed this issue by defining free will as *a rational causality which is effective without being determined by any alien cause*. However, free will must be totally self-determining, but since it is causality, there must be a law that it needs to follow. To satisfy both the conditions simultaneously, the law then must be its own law. But then, how can we form rules of our own? This is where Kant introduces his concept of the categorical imperative. It is represented by the universal law of nature, according to which, we should act only in accordance with that maxim through which we can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law. The author then proceeds to distinguish the categorical imperative from what she calls the moral law. In Kant's system, "the moral law tells us to act only on maxims that all rational beings could agree to act on together in a workable cooperative system", which is the Kingdom of Ends. For instance, say I believe that I should take care of my family. In case of the categorical imperative, I will have to ask myself if I am okay with everyone else in the world taking care of their families as well. Meanwhile, in case of the moral law, I would have to ask myself if taking care of our parents is something that all members in a rational society would agree to follow together in a cooperative society. The author concludes this argument by saying that just because we follow the categorical imperative doesn't necessarily imply that we are following the moral law. According to her, to be bound by the moral law, the agent needs to become a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends i.e we must see ourselves as a part of the aforementioned cooperative society.

Unlike what many think, Kant does not think that self-consciousness refers to an encounter with oneself; he says that it comes from our ability to reflect which thus makes us have a conception of ourselves. When we have choices in our hand, it may seem that we just let our strongest desire win. However, it is not just our desires but also our self-conception that leads our choices and actions. Our actions are guided by several principles based on our practical identity. Our practical identity is not something singular in nature and comprises multiple conceptions – For instance, I am a human being, a man, a student, a friend to a certain group

of people, etc. These are all conceptions of my identity, and they give rise to different obligations and principles which I follow. As the author points out, this is why when we violate our obligations, it makes us feel like we lost our integrity, and we often end up saying things like “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did something like that.”

There are two complications when it comes to obligations – we can sometimes shed some parts of our identity without significantly deviating from our core identity, and also, sometimes we can deviate from our identity temporarily. Kant says that when we violate these laws, it must be an exception since otherwise, the universal law would imply that we endorse universal violation. A simple solution to this problem is to just commit to our own integrity, without exception. However, even those with the most excellent characters sometimes falter because at times, we voluntarily make exceptions as we know that we can get away with it. To try and tackle this, the author mentions second order integrity – to commit to ourselves that we will not let these exceptions happen too often. But the same issue could happen to this as well in which case. We do not always do what we think we would do or have done previously, but we do at least feel obligated to act based on what we thought. In case we do not do that, we feel guilty and we regret our actions, almost like that is the punishment. Essentially, this validates an idea mentioned at the start – voluntarism. We do not feel obligated to do something merely because it is a good idea, but also because we command ourselves to do it.

According to Kant, whether a maxim should be a law or not can be told by assessing not the matter but the form, where matter refers to the material composing it while form refers to their functional arrangement. For example, say, we have three cases:

1. I will have this piece of cake as I want it for myself.
2. I refuse to return your piece of cake as I want it for myself.
3. I refuse to return your piece of cake as you are a diabetic patient, and this is not something permissible in your diet.

Here, maxims 1 and 3 are good while maxim 2 is not. Note that it is not the action that is the decisive factor here as maxims 2 and 3 have the same action. However, it is the form of the maxim i.e the way in which its parts are inter-combined which distinguishes the goodness of maxims 2 and 3.

The author then distinguishes between concept and conception. A concept is more of a general term which points out the problem while the conception addresses the concept and proposes a solution. For instance, the author mentions John Rawls’ theory of justice; the concept of justice refers to a problem while the conception of justice is a principle proposed as a solution. According to his theory, we move from concept to conception by taking on the perspective of the pure liberal citizen; in the author’s words, the conception of practical identity embodies the issue and helps in solving it.

She also mentions how all of us have multiple roles and identities. I am the child of my parents, the student of a particular institution, the citizen of a nation, etc. Since these are contingent in nature, we may shed some of them for various reasons. However, what can never change is the fact that we will always have some form of practical identity. It is a fundamental need that is tied to mankind and without it, there would not even be any reason to live. She also says that we value not only ourselves but also other human beings in a similar way, which is due to our sense of moral identity.

The author contends that valuing anything or believing in any kind of practical reasoning implies an acknowledgment of one's moral identity and the importance of valuing humanity as an end in itself. She says that any person capable of reflection can recognise their moral obligations. However, this does not mean that all obligations are moral or that moral obligations supersedes any other obligation. She also mentions that conflicting obligations can both be unconditional. She explains with an example that on one hand, we can have an assassin, whose very identity opposes the inherent worth of humanity, while on the other hand, there are contextual conflicts. For example, say there is a person who is a father and an engineer at a global conglomerate. On his daughter's birthday, he has a business trip which is of the utmost importance. Here, the conflict is contextual; his practical identity clashes with his moral obligation as a father. Many differentiate personal relationships from moral ones with the essential reason being that moral ones are driven purely by reason and a sense of duty while the factors of favouritism and impartiality creep in when it comes to personal relationships since they are motivated by affection. The author disagrees with this view. Influenced by Kant, she defines personal relationships as commitments between individuals to consider each other's thoughts, feelings and desires. They mould one's practical identity and involve a unity of will. The virtues needed for both practical relationships and moral obligations are same – kindness, respect, etc. They are structurally same as well and personal relationships just involve a more complete sense of reciprocity.

In conclusion, in this chapter, the author explored the relationship between human beings' ability to reflect, their practical identity and their moral obligations. She talked about our ability to reflect and how that allows us to be self-conscious and make our own decisions, following which she also showed how our choices are connected to our roles and identities. She explains how having a behaviour that is predictable does not really affect our actions but can instead help our self-control. She talked about moral obligations and how they arise from practical identity, following which she talked about moral identity. She also touched upon the connection between our personal relationships and our moral obligations.