Jeremy Holloway

PHIL-3040-001

12/12/2018

Final Paper – Question 3

Korsgaard is right in saying we constitute ourselves by our actions rather than our actions being constituted by us. I will offer three arguments to prove my case, and three counter points to those examples followed by replies. These arguments will encapsulate an idea that I felt was especially powerful while the counter points are problematic aspects that I spent some time trying to understand.

An Actions relative goodness is determined by the autonomy and efficacy of the being committing to the action, so it must follow that the being’s will is constituted by the action. Actions can be classified as good and their goodness have a measure upon the actor performing them but requires autonomy and goodness in order to be considered good action. Korsgaard says that good actions come from autonomy and good action, which can be further broken down to says autonomy follows from the categorical imperative and efficacy from the hypothetical. The heart of this argument says that having the free will to follow the categorical imperative is paramount to constituting yourself through actions. If the categorical imperative were some how forced upon you then it would be a response rather than choice. Therefore, the hypothetical also plays a role, since there could be situations where the thing that we ought to do isn’t possible. In class we often spoke of those weirdos who enjoy putting their hands in people’s mouth (dentists) and concluded that person ought to see a dentist for tooth pain but there could also be good reasons to delay or not do so.

The counter argument to this is a determinists argument that our actions constitute us because everything happens because someone willed it so. If you could somehow view a person’s entire decision history, you could make a judgement about what kind of person they were. Did they give money to the poor? Did they remain faithful to their wife/husband? People act for reasons and the vast amount of daily interactions among humans is to serve the end of some purpose they seek. There wouldn’t be a point in accomplishing anything if it weren’t for the sake of some end, so a person who fails in a task must not have really wanted to do it. Imagine a child who needs to clean their room, while they might act as if they are motivated to do so but won’t accomplish that task if they really don’t want to. I can personally attest that children will seldom accomplish things merely because you told them to do so. In this same way we can conclude that people would only really accomplish things that they were properly motivated to do and therefore it must be their actions are constituted by them.

The problem with a determinist view of the world is it leaves out the ought situations we encounter more often in our daily lives than don’t. This idea is very easy to conceptualize on a small scale because people often fail at things that they wanted to do for reasons that aren’t invalid. I ought to try harder at writing my philosophy papers, but my data structures and algorithms class might keep me up until two or three in the morning. This means that the quality of the paper that I will write is less than what I could have written if I had worked less on my other class. This choice doesn’t reflect that I don’t care about philosophy because if I didn’t care about philosophy then I would drop my minor and not care about taking the classes. The choice to become engrossed into a deeply analytical and difficult problem is something I enjoy doing and reflects that I prefer that type of work. This is what determinists miss because of their black and white views of the world as a series of consequences resulting from the wills of others. Those gray areas will always tell you far more about a person than the black and white decisions, which is the biggest hole left by determinists view (the ought). The determinists view can tell you a great deal about the causal relationships in the world, but very little about the true intentions of humans. I don’t have any love for academics, but here I am writing papers and programming all night, so a determinist might conclude that I want to do those things. My work here at Clemson is merely the means to achieving some end and most of the time I work hard because I ought to.

The will to make something possible and the consummating the appropriate conditions for those actions to be complete is just as important as whether the actions is completed or not. When you constitute something, you are also constituting yourself to that things telos and becoming the cause of that things end. Every time we choose to be the cause of some end then we are making some judgement based on the normative force of society and where we want to see ourselves in that force. I really enjoy helping people who struggle in computer programming languages because I struggled so hard to learn. I am committed to a being the cause of someone else advancing their computer skills and performing better because I wish someone would’ve helped me. I will that end, and it is representative of who I am as a person because it stems from my rationality as a human being. I created a personal maxim of helping grow the skills of others and making computer programming a less daunting task to take on. This maxim is easily universal because everyone would and could benefit from having a basic understanding of computer languages. This follows from a basic categorical imperative that you should help someone when you are in a position to do so. I applied this imperative in a way that is representative of me and the type person I am or want to be.

Kant would argue that I don’t do well on my philosophy papers because I did not will the means to do so, therefore I never really wanted to do well in the first place. I didn’t will that telos in my pursuit of philosophical knowledge and fell into instrumental irrationality. Kant sees this instrumental principle of people as the same as the hypothetical imperative because people should always do the thing they should do. The principle of prudence or self-interest should motivate me to do well on philosophy papers so that alone should be the thing I should do. Simply, I should make my happiness or my desire my maxim and by not properly applying myself to writing papers I failed to apply my maxim. In this way we become instruments to achieving our own happiness and would dive into instrumental irrationality by failing to meet some end. In that way, I never truly desired to do well on my papers in the first place because I did not will those means, therefore I never really wanted to do well on them in the first place. The sum of my actions is always causal because people only do the things in which they want to do, and it would be impossible for me to fail at something in which I did not want to do.

Instrumental irrationality misses what the hypothetical imperative is all about, what we ought to do. It should tell us what we ought to do in a situation and not be the cause of our actions in a situation or else we would be able to constitute ourselves. If everyone acted within the normative force of the hypothetical imperative it wouldn’t allow for free will. As humans we must determine our own causality by willing our personal maxims as universal law, which is why the hypothetical imperative is so key. Kant’s idea relies on the idea of particularistic willing which Korsgaard says its impossible because any universal law by nature would already be very specific. The other large hole in Kant’s argument is it lacks substantiated reasoning in the way that everything is weighed equally, and the larger perspective is not considered in the way it ought to be. This substantiated reasoning is what helps us avoid dogmatic adherence to the hypothetical imperative and allows us to unique in the way we will our means. This unique way of reacting to the hypothetical imperative is how we constitute ourselves through our actions instead of being constituted by our actions. In that sense, all personal relationships would serve no purpose in a deterministic society or view. What would be the point to interact with other people if it weren’t for the sake of some end, or instrumentally in some purpose? This is a rather large hole to fill in the general make up of society because we are intrinsically social creates and seek these friendships for no other reason than to have friends.

The lack of heteronomous forces means that all our actions would have to be a manifestation of our personal views since none of them would be grounded in any type of outside or abnormal cause. Korsgaard says that hypothetic imperatives will be a synthetic occurrence rather than an analytical result because we are guided and bound by the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative gives us the complete picture of our actions rather than the immediate causal reasoning in which the hypothetical imperative lies. This autonomy to act within our own efficacy to bring about whatever means we desire inside of the categorical imperative is key for maintaining agency over one’s self. Otherwise we are slaves of the imperative, which could cause us to lose the shape or mold that makes it what it is. Humans are designed to have agency over their decisions which allows them to define themselves as humans, rather than something else.

Kant argues that it is our actions that define the thing that it is instead of the ability to make those decisions as the thing that it is. Great works of art speak to people because they can identify with the humanity they see in the works before them. This is a sentiment in which I can personally relate to with my son, since he is of an age where he imitates the things he sees. He hurt himself doing something one day and ran to me crying so like any normal parent I cradled him in my arms and kissed the spot where he was injured. This resulted in every time he gets hurt, which is way too often, he runs to me to get kisses. I can see the telos of that action through him through repeated instances and because I willed that action, I will love the results of that action. Aristotle points out that everyone loves to see their actions because we can see ourselves in the results like a painter in his painting or my son running to me for kisses.

This type of deterministic thinking relegates us only to circumstance because you could look at previous decisions as merely the results of conditions to react in that way. Did I comfort my son in that way because my parents comforted me in the same way when I was a child? If this were the case could I not look at my entire existence as a series of conditioned reactions? This type of determinism about decisions causes us to lose the shape of what it is and become more like computers than people. A computer will do exactly what you tell it to do and will act out of previously positive results but does not have autonomy or efficacy. A human must have both autonomy and efficacy to be an agent and agency is truly the thing that makes it what it is for humans. There do exists situations in which we will act out of instinct or default to previously known methods to resolve a problem. That doesn’t mean we won’t deliberate or weigh options in maybe a very brief or longer period. This deliberation is where we constitute ourselves because we weigh our options in respect to our interpretation of the hypothetical imperative while maintaining adherence to the categorical imperative.