

Contingency in Korsgaard's Metaethics: Obligating the Moral and Radical Skeptic

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Introduction

In this paper I offer an account of Christine Korsgaard's metaethical project as offered in her book, *The Sources of Normativity*. In brief, Korsgaard attempts to demonstrate that people who value anything incur moral obligations. Korsgaard's system thus purports to answer the moral skeptic, who believes she can value without incurring moral obligations, but not the radical skeptic, who values nothing at all. I agree that Korsgaard cannot answer the radical skeptic and argue that Korsgaard's system can answer some—but not all—moral skeptics, for there are people who can value but not incur moral obligations in the manner Korsgaard describes.

I will first provide a sketch of Korsgaard's position to ground my discussion. According to Korsgaard, normative values are not mind-independent facts woven into the fabric of reality. Values are instead human creations that exist only within human viewpoints (or perhaps the viewpoints of other creatures with similar capacities of rational deliberation), which is why Korsgaard is sometimes categorized as a metaethical *constructivist* (Korsgaard 161). Despite their contingent status, values and morals approach objectivity by giving

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answers to practical problems in the genre of “how ought I to live?” and “what is the right action in this case?” (Korsgaard 161). Such answers are solutions to normative questions, and yet are not correct in virtue of necessary, intrinsic features of reality (Bagnoli “2.2”). They instead owe their validity to the method used to arrive at them (Korsgaard 36). This method is the process of reasoning through practical normative questions (Bagnoli, “2.2”). Korsgaard holds that this reasoning process itself contains nearly objective steps, in virtue of which the normative conclusions it provides are valid (Bagnoli “2.2”). The essential claim is that the method of practical reasoning yields the following conclusion: if an agent values anything, he must have moral obligations and values (Korsgaard 92).

The Moral Skeptic and the Process of Reflective Deliberation

Korsgaard’s moral skeptic denies just this conclusion: he believes he can value certain things without incurring moral obligations (Korsgaard 163). To refute the moral skeptic, then, Korsgaard must establish that the act of valuing generates moral obligations. Her defense of this position lies in an account of reflective, practical reasoning.¹

Korsgaard begins with a problem that motivates her account of practical reasoning.² Noting the self-conscious nature of the human mind, Korsgaard highlights the capacity of self-reflection. Humans can question whether their impulses and desires are proper reasons for action. This ability to question ourselves triggers a problem: to act on impulses and desires, we must reflectively endorse them as legitimate reasons. If I am tired and desire to take a nap, I must decide that my desire to nap is a good reason to nap before climbing into bed. Such endorsement is a first-person enterprise: each person assesses, endorses, and rejects desires from *within* her own perspective

¹Two lectures by Carlos Núñez shaped my understanding of Korsgaard’s account, especially its ascending, dialectic nature. These are “Philosophy 90N: Lecture 12” and “Philosophy 90N: Lecture 13,” respectively given at Stanford University on October 29, 2015 and November 3, 2015.

²For the problem and its explanation, see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 92–93.

(Korsgaard 96). However, the problem remains of how and why we decide which specific desires to endorse. Korsgaard holds that we derive reasons for specific actions from more general principles, and that since humans have free will, they must construct and impose these principles on themselves (98). Action guiding principles are thus laws that free agents choose to follow (98). I might decide that my desire to nap is a good reason to get in bed because I've chosen to follow the maxim <I will sleep when tired, barring any pressing needs to stay awake>. Humans need laws of this kind, for again, their reflective natures demand reasons for action, which as free agents can only come from themselves (103-4).

The dialectic continues when we ask which action guiding laws to freely impose on ourselves. Korsgaard maintains that the "reflective structure of human consciousness requires" *identification* with our laws, and "that is the source of normativity" (104). Free will does not mean we can randomly impose and identify with laws, though, for we need to justify the laws to ourselves (and random choice would not pass the reflective test). *De facto*, the process of identifying with laws depends on self conception: if a law is consistent with my identity, I can impose it on myself (107, 110). For example, if I am a pacifist, I will follow the law <I will not fight in wars> and thus endorse my desire to not fight in World War III. When I endorse a practical identity (e.g., a pacifist, a friend, a student, etc.), I thus endorse it as a source of reasons (Bagnoli, "2.2").

Korsgaard points out that many of our practical identities are contingent (they could have been different) and are subject to revision and renunciation (120). If the source of our endorsements is identification with contingent identities, however, the process of reflective deliberation will not yield an objective grounding of value and morality. For example, if A reflectively endorses her identity as a soldier and commits to World War III and B reflectively endorses her identity as a pacifist and commits to nonviolence, we will be unable to decide whose decision is correct if the story ends with identity endorsement. However, Korsgaard claims to have pinpointed one identity that almost all people must share: the identity of a reflective being who requires reasons for action (120-21). For, since practical identities provide reasons for action, if a person is not committed to any practical identity, he lacks reasons to act in one way over any other (121).

That is, if a person is not governed by a conception of his identity, he will lack reasons to act and even to live (123).

Most people find such a lack of reason for action and life unacceptable, for their reflective natures—which are intrinsic features of humanity—demand reason and justification. In a crucial argumentative step, Korsgaard deduces that in finding this lack of reason unacceptable we endorse our humanity itself as a practical normative identity (121). If we did not take our reflective humanity as normative, we would not demand reasons for actions, and so we would not find the lack of reason unacceptable. To take our humanity as normative in this way is to value our humanity itself. Moreover, “valuing humanity in your own person rationally requires valuing it in the persons of others,” and moral obligations arise when you value others’ humanity (121). Korsgaard thus concludes that demanding reasons for action entails moral values: to demand reasons for action is to affirm your reflective nature, which is to affirm your humanity, which requires you to value others’ humanity, which entails morality (121).

We are now equipped to understand Korsgaard’s response to the moral skeptic. Recall that the moral skeptic thinks he values and has reasons for acting, but does not believe he has moral obligations or values. Korsgaard denies this possibility via the above argument (123). Before assessing Korsgaard’s response to the moral skeptic, I will consider her response to the radical skeptic, as it further clarifies her position.

The Radical Skeptic

The radical skeptic is someone who denies the existence of value itself. The radical skeptic embraces complete normative skepticism, so he must also deny that there is a reason for any action. Rather than acting for values or reasons, he follows his prevailing desires on a moment-to-moment basis, unable to even act on hypothetical imperatives. One must have an end in order to act on a hypothetical imperative, but ends are things people have reasons to pursue, and since the radical skeptic does not have reasons for action, he cannot have ends. Furthermore, if his “ends” are simply objects of momentary desires, there can be no practically incorrect

action, since every action he takes will be in pursuit of a desire and thus an “end.” If there is no incorrect action, though, there is no normativity, so the radical skeptic cannot follow normative hypothetical imperatives (Korsgaard 162–64).

Korsgaard links radical skepticism to suicide. Remember that in Korsgaard’s view, valuing is an integral fact of life for reflective beings like humans: we confer value on certain things (our loved ones, happiness, success, etc.) and believe that our actions are backed by reasons. To reject value, therefore, is to reject life (161). Of course, radical skeptics do not have to kill themselves for internal rational consistency, as they have no reasons or values with which to be consistent. It is rather that continuing to live requires rational action, so lacking rational action points one towards suicide. If people kill themselves due to sincere radical skepticism, they have not violated any of their own values or reasons (for these do not exist), so they cannot be said to have done wrong. Unfortunately, radical skepticism is possible, and Korsgaard admits she is not equipped to answer the radical skeptic, judging that an answer—which would involve convincing the skeptic that life and humanity are valuable—would require more than philosophical argument. Korsgaard’s system therefore does not prove that we must or should value anything. It simply says that most people do value, from which moral obligation follows.

In assessing Korsgaard’s response to the radical skeptic, the first item I note is that much philosophical skepticism is insincere. Consider archetypal skeptical scenarios in epistemology: how do we know that our entire life experience is not fabricated by an evil demon? How do we know that we are not dreaming when we think we are awake? How do we know that we are not brains floating in vats, controlled by neuroscientists to simulate real life experiences? Proponents of such skeptical scenarios (I should hope) do not truly believe in evil demons, dream lives, and brains in vats. They advance such skeptical arguments to test theories of knowledge: can the theory in question explain why the skeptical scenario is false or not a concern? If not, the theory requires improvement.

This may at first appear to be a false analogy: epistemological skepticism is unlike moral skepticism, and certainly unlike the type of radical skepticism Korsgaard describes. I agree that epistemological

skepticism is unlike Korsgaard's radical skepticism, but I do think that the type of insincere skepticism I described will eliminate some people from the list of potential radical skeptics. But what about those who are skeptical on a deeper level—those who claim to be radical skeptics, and not just for the purpose of testing moral theories? I think we can eliminate many of these people from the list of radical skeptics as well. My suspicion is that many of these people really do value something. If we were to assess their honest reactions to footage of the Holocaust, for example, or to tragic events happening to their families, friends, or even acquaintances, we would discover values, and not simply the momentary desire states Korsgaard attributes to the radical skeptic. In providing the above example I do not mean to be gauche or abrasive, but to show that the vast majority of people really do have values, even if extreme circumstances are necessary to reveal them.

Even after eliminating these would-be radical skeptics, however, I concede that a small fraction of humanity might remain that values nothing whatsoever. What I have attempted to show is that the final list of radical skeptics contains very few names. Regarding this list, I agree with Korsgaard that philosophy alone is insufficient to overcome their skepticism. A somewhat tenuous analogy might compare the situation to trying to convince a determined Biblical literalist that the earth is older than four thousand and some odd years. A person in that situation could have the best possible philosophical arguments and still fail to convince the literalist. Of course, the flaw in the analogy is that whereas the literalist and his interlocutor disagree over an objective matter of fact, the radical skeptic and her interlocutor do not—they disagree whether life is worth living and whether anything is worthy of value. What the analogy does illustrate is the intractable difficulty of convincing a resolute skeptic that his position is mistaken.

Assessing Korsgaard's Response to Moral and Radical Skeptics

Korsgaard's concession to the radical skeptic ushers in a related worry about her answer to the moral skeptic. The worry runs as follows: at most, Korsgaard shows that if you value anything or demand reasons for action, you are committed to valuing your own

humanity, from which valuing others' humanity and thus moral obligation follows. In logical form, then, Korsgaard's conclusion is a conditional of the form $\langle(A \vee B) \rightarrow C\rangle$ where A is valuing anything, B is acting for reasons, and C is having moral values and obligations. However, as Korsgaard admits in her discussion of the radical skeptic, there is no proof that we *ought* to value anything or demand reasons. There is no proof for A or B; they are contingent. Therefore, Korsgaard's entire moral system—and thus her response to the moral skeptic—is groundless, for it rests on contingent features that we are not obligated to have.

I do not think this criticism weighs too heavily in Korsgaard's disfavor. I agree that her moral system is in one sense groundless, since there is no objective necessity for A or B. However, as I argued in my treatment of the radical skeptic, I think that *de facto* almost everyone does fulfill A and B, so if Korsgaard's conditional is valid, it supplies the sought-after consequent (moral obligation) for the vast majority. Moreover, operating under the worldview presented to us by twenty-first century scientific progress, I think appealing to a nearly universal feature of humanity that is relatively uncontroversial (the facts of valuing and acting for reasons) is a palatable foundation for amoral system that binds almost everyone. Korsgaard sacrifices absolute moral objectivity (the radical skeptics are left out) but avoids appealing to more tenuous foundations like J. L. Mackie's "queer" entities (intrinsic values in the fabric of reality) or G. E. Moore's spooky non-natural properties.

However, Simon Blackburn advances a similar worry in his essay "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness" that highlights the issue presented by the radical skeptic. The worry is that moral value and obligation must be of the same objective status as "the rigid commands of logic and mathematics," and not, as Korsgaard has it, contingent on practical human standpoints (Blackburn 26). Blackburn explains that some people accordingly split ethical theorists between those who think humans somehow detect mind-independent values and those who think that humans create values (27). Falling into the latter camp, Korsgaard is subject to the criticism that morality depends on contingent human characteristics, and one need not "go far out into logical space to find scenarios in which anything goes, and this upsets people" (27). (Blackburn thinks that the motivation

behind this split between ethical theorists is deeply misguided, but it is not my aim here to assess Blackburn's quasi-realist project [27, 33]. I will simply consider the objection he raises.)

This worry about the contingent status of Korsgaard's ethical system applies especially to the radical skeptic. Korsgaard says of the radical skeptic who kills himself that "it is hard to say of one who commits such suicide that he has done wrong, for he has violated no value in which he believes" (162–63). Further, Korsgaard denies radical skeptics can even follow hypothetical imperatives, for "there is no normativity if you cannot be wrong," which the radical skeptic cannot be, as she simply follows her momentary desires (164). It seems, then, that the radical skeptic is exempt from morality under Korsgaard's system. However, moral exemption appears problematic, for if the radical skeptic has a momentary desire to physically assault someone and acts on that desire, the assault is still (at least *prima facie*) immoral. Here, the intuition discussed by Blackburn arises: unjustified physical assault is immoral, regardless of the perpetrator's status as a radical skeptic or not. If Korsgaard's system does not allow us to say that the radical skeptic behaves unethically in this situation and similar scenarios, I take it as a point against the system.

A final worry about Korsgaard's system takes the form of a Euthyphro dilemma, which proposes that either the reflective human standpoint has moral obligations or it does not (Bagnoli "7.3"). If it does not, we have no reason to assume that the moral principles it arrives at will properly ground ethics (Bagnoli "7.3"). If it does, we are committed to moral realism and should abandon the constructivist project (Bagnoli "7.3"). A parallel formulation of the dilemma proposes that Korsgaard's reflective, practical reasoning process either makes tacit moral assumptions, or it does not. If it does not, again, why would it ground ethics? If it does, it is circular—a system that purports to ground ethics cannot make substantive ethical assumptions. Korsgaard's response to both versions of the dilemma is to claim that the reflective standpoint is not subject to mind-independent values but that reflective, practical reasoning makes no moral assumptions. The process of nonetheless outputs an almost objective groundwork for ethics, for it contains non-arbitrary structural elements and internal rules that appeal to common aspects of humanity (Bagnoli "7.3").

To assess Korsgaard's response, we must scrutinize the conclusion of the reflective reasoning process in which she claims to derive morality. Up to this point in the dialectic, we are supposed to have realized that our practical identities give us reasons for action, and we now wonder: is there any identity that is not contingent? Korsgaard reasons that if we lack commitment to any practical identity, we lack reason to act in one way over the other (120–21). We thus commit to various practical identities to give us reasons to act. The cause of this commitment is our felt imperative to have reasons to act, which we feel insofar as we treat our humanity "as a practical, normative, form of identity." In valuing ourselves as human beings we must value the humanity of others: a coherent Caligula, who has a robust set of reasons but cares not for others, is impossible.

I'd like to put pressure on Korsgaard's step where she claims that people only demand reasons for their actions if they treat their humanity as normative. Consider an egocentric hedonist who cares only about his own pleasure. Such a hedonist is not like the radical skeptic, for he does not simply follow his momentary desires. Instead, he carefully plans his life so as to maximize his own pleasure. He is capable of following hypothetical imperatives, for he can be wrong about his actions: he may be mistaken as to which path will maximize his pleasure. It is unclear that such a person must treat his humanity as normative or value his humanity. He may demand reasons for his actions only insofar as he cares about successfully maximizing his own pleasure—not because his human nature demands a justification for this desire—and therefore not care at all about his status as a human being. I think this is why critics see the step in question as a tacit realist commitment to the value of humanity and thus accuse Korsgaard of circularity (Bagnoli "7.3").

My objection does not discount Korsgaard's system. It is still possible that some people do demand reasons and endorse their reflective natures as Korsgaard details. For these people, Korsgaard's link to morality stands. However, if my objection is valid, there may be people like the hedonist who demand reasons and value certain things without endorsing their humanity. As they do not endorse their humanity, they are not rationally compelled to endorse that of others, so the reflective chain to moral obligation is broken. Therefore, Korsgaard cannot answer all moral skeptics: she can only answer those who, when honest, admit that they take their human identity as normative.

Works Cited

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