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## **Korsgaard on Self-Constitution**

### **Abstract**

Christine Korsgaard claims that Kantian moral law means the law of self-constitution and that unless we fully understand what self-constitution means in Kant, we cannot comprehend Kantian morality. Korsgaard's idea of self-constitution is based on the idea that the unity of an action and the unity of an agent are not detachable. In this paper, I will examine Korsgaard's Kantian notion of the self, and, correspondingly, her idea of a good action. However, in doing so, I will claim that her account of the self begins from an assumption, that is the mind is transparent, in other words, we are completely aware of our desires, motives and inclinations.

### **Keywords**

Self-Constitution, Kantianism, Agent, Action.

## Introduction

Can we still maintain the moral egalitarianism that Kant was committed to and which he associates with the idea of self-governance?<sup>1</sup> Some contemporary thinkers argue that we can. For instance, Christine Korsgaard claims that Kantian morality can still provide a true basis for morality as long as we fully understand the idea that moral law is the law of self-constitution. This idea seems to be rather obscure; perhaps that is why Korsgaard devotes several books and articles to how the concept of morality cannot be separable from the concept of the self, in other words, this equation is based on the idea that the unity of an action and the unity of an agent are not detachable. In this paper rather than confront Kant directly, I will discuss the work of a contemporary Kantian philosopher, Christine Korsgaard. In fact, Korsgaard draws our attention not only on Kant but also on Aristotle; while she agrees with Alasdair MacIntyre who claims that we need to go back to the Aristotelian understanding of action, i.e. adopt a teleological view of human nature, for according to him, the concept of a whole human life cannot be divorced from a broader tradition of practices, she does not see this as a reason to reject Kantian morality, as MacIntyre did.

## Korsgaard on Self-constitution

In *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*, Korsgaard attempts to answer the following questions: what is a self? What makes a behaviour an action performed by an agent rather than a mere movement? Which actions are morally wrong or right?

Korsgaard appeals to Aristotle and Kant in order to explain her position about the difference between a mere act or movement and action. A good action for Aristotle is the one that was conducted at the right time, in the right way, to the right object, and with the right aim. That is to say, it is one that embodies the right principle. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims that humans are the origin of intentional and deliberate action, humans are the only animals capable of doing this. The origin of action is choice, which involves not only intellect and thought, but also a certain moral state; because good conduct involves thought and character. Whenever someone produces something, he/she does so for the sake of something; the product is not an end in itself, only a relative end. But an action is an end in itself and the human being is the origin of this action.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the important point in Aristotle's approach is that the aim is already included in the action, and that 'it is the action as a whole, *including the aim*, that the agent chooses' (Korsgaard 2009: 10). This picture is not very different from

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<sup>1</sup> John Skorupski, 'Morality as Self-Governance: Has it a Future?', *Utilitas*, Vol. 16, No: 2, 2004, pp. 133-145. Here I mean self-governance in the Kantian sense, that is to say, the capacity to give a law to oneself. However, this definition of self-governance is not exhaustive, and indeed it may not have to involve the idea of law at all. Variations on the theme of self-governance can be found in the work of numerous thinkers from St. Paul to Foucault.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 2004), BookVI: 1139<sup>a</sup>31-b<sup>5</sup>.

Kant's, claims Korsgaard, for an action in Kant is described by a maxim which is also to do with the 'to-do-this-act-for-the-sake-of-this-end' structure.

Korsgaard concludes that 'an *action*, then, involves both an *act* and an *end*, an act done for the sake of an end' (Korsgaard 2009: 11). Now, this distinction between the act and action is crucial since while the act is performed for the sake of purpose it serves, the action is performed for its own sake. When we talk about a reason for what someone does, we should be aware of which reason we are talking about: the reason for the act or for the action?

In both Aristotle and Kant the discussion of the concept of action is inseparable from that of morality. In Kant our purposes cannot be normative and a law to us. Normativity arises from autonomy. On this view, the reason for an action is not something outside of the action. Rather, Korsgaard says, 'an action is essentially intelligible object that *embodies* a reason, the way a sentence is an essentially object that embodies a thought' (Korsgaard 2009: 14). This raises the question of what a good action is.

Here once again Korsgaard adopts an Aristotelian approach: every Substance is defined by its Form. Goodness does not rest in the parts but in the way the parts are combined. But she formulates this idea in the Kantian language of maxims:

If the action and the purpose are related to one another *so that* the maxim can be willed as a universal law, then the maxim is good.

The maxim describes the action; the action is good if its maxim is fit to be a law in virtue of its form. That means that being fit to be a law is an *internal* property of the maxim (Korsgaard 2009: 16).

At this point we should see how this is related to the idea of agency and practical identity in Korsgaard. She says: 'To regard some movement of my mind or my body as *my action*, I must see it as an expression of my self as a whole, rather than as a product of some force that is at work *on me* or *in me*' (Korsgaard 2009: 18).

In this understanding, a movement must result from my integrated self in order to be regarded as an action. But then there seems to be a paradox: Is an action the effect or expression of a prior unity in the agent, in other words, is there an 'I' prior to my choices? This is where personal identity comes into the picture. Because, she says, 'your identity is in a quite literal way *constituted* by your choices and actions' (Korsgaard 2009: 19). In other words, in choosing one's actions, one creates himself or herself. This is what Korsgaard calls the paradox of self-constitution. However paradoxical it sounds the idea is this: action is self-constitution. Thus, the self is not a pre-existing entity, like a Cartesian ego. In the action the self is constituted, but also it is the constitutor. And it is the principles of practical reason that serve to unify us as agents, and because of this they are normative (Korsgaard 2009: 27).

According to Aristotle, what makes an object the kind of object that it is is what it does, in other words, its function, or characteristics. In this view, to be unified is not other than to be teleologically organized. Korsgaard adopts Aristotle's picture of the nature of living things, claiming that a living thing is engaged in an endless activity of

self-constitution. In other words, to be a person or a rational agent is ‘just to be engaged in the activity of constantly making yourself into a person - just as what it is to be a giraffe is to be engaged in the activity constantly making yourself into a giraffe’ (Korsgaard 2009: 42).

One of the ways in which Korsgaard tries to defend this view of morality is through a dialogue with and critique of Hume. Hume’s theory of morality, in contrast to those of both Kant and Aristotle, is a motivational theory: people have various wants and desires. In connection with these desires we also establish judgments by means of actions we perform. The combination of desires and cognitions constitutes a motive for the agent to act (Karlssohn 2005: 236). In that sense, an action is a movement caused by a judgment or an idea that regularly has an effect on the will and it ‘inherits its capacity to be morally right or wrong from the moral quality of its ‘motive’’ (Korsgaard 2009: 63-64). So for instance, in Hume, says Korsgaard, crying for despicable reasons is not only morally bad but it is also wrong in the same sense that injuring someone is wrong.<sup>3</sup> In this account moral rightness or wrongness does not have any necessary connection to action. For Korsgaard this account of action cannot be correct since ‘emotional responses may be subject to evaluation in terms of moral standards, but they cannot, in the same sense as actions, be right or wrong’ (Korsgaard 2009: 101).

More basic difference is that in Hume, the moral character of actions depends upon a relationship between the actor, the object of the actions, and a putative spectator. For instance if someone donates some money to a charity, such an action may be motivated by virtuous character traits, and in such an action the agent will have an immediate effect on the receiver and the receiver may experience an agreeable feeling. Finally, the third figure, the spectator, may also sympathetically experience the agreeable feelings that the receiver experiences. Now, these feelings of pleasure *constitute* the spectator’s moral approval of the original act. In other words, in Hume I turn to myself via looking at the others. Others are constitutive for myself. But this is, Korsgaard claims, where she disagrees with Hume. For her, the approval or the disapproval must come from my own self. Whereas for Hume there is no right or wrong action without the spectator, for her, an action is wrong or bad if it does not constitute you as an agent, as the agent who you are (Korsgaard 2009: 101-102).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, from a Kantian point of view, in Hume’s account there is no such thing as willing, merely desiring, whose result may or may not be consistent with morality. For Kant, willing and morality imply one another:

...the hypothetical imperative is a constitutive principle of willing. What makes willing different from merely desiring or wishing or thinking-it-would-be-nice-if is that the person who wills an end determines himself to bring the end about, that is, to cause it. And to

<sup>3</sup> See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1985), Book 3, sect.1.

<sup>4</sup> Here though Korsgaard claims that in Hume there is no right or wrong action without the spectator, in *Treatise* Hume by the example of willful murder argues that the disapproval comes from a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in the person. See Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1985), Book 3, sect.1.

determine yourself to be the cause of an end is to determine yourself to set off a chain of causes that will lead to the achievement of the end. Thus the person who wills an end constitutes himself as the cause of that end (Korsgaard 2009: 68).

However, this raises the question of how the hypothetical imperative unifies and constitutes the will. Korsgaard claims that, if I was always tempted by my timidity and idleness rather than trying to accomplish something that I set for myself as an aim, then I never really will an end. That means my will is never active, and, in fact, as an agent I do not even exist. She adds 'conformity to the hypothetical imperative is thus constitutive of having a will. It is, in fact, an essential part of what gives you a will' (Korsgaard 2009: 70). Recalling the difference between an action (an-act-for-the-sake-of-an-end) and a mere act, she claims that 'there is a sense in which *there is no hypothetical imperative*' and what she means by this is whenever we make a choice we are also governed by the categorical imperative, not only by the hypothetical imperative. In other words, hypothetical imperative is not a separate principle, rather 'it captures an *aspect* of the categorical imperative: the fact that the laws of our will must be *practical laws*' (Korsgaard 2009: 70).

There is another way of saying acting is determining yourself to be a cause: 'Deciding is *committing* yourself to doing the thing' (Korsgaard 2009: 77). She regards unification of the will as a commitment which constitutes the agent as the cause of some end. And this for Korsgaard is what Kant means in the *Groundwork* III, when he says 'a free will and a will under moral laws are the one and the same' (Korsgaard 2009: 79). What about if I change my mind about something? She claims that only if I have good reasons to do so I may change my mind about something. I do not realize a promise with no good reason then I violate my commitment (Korsgaard 2009: 78).

As we have seen, according to Korsgaard action constitutes oneself. But the question arises: unless she is already autonomous, how can the agent perform an action? She is quite aware of the problem and this is exactly what she is trying to say: for her such a question is based on a false picture of the way we are related to our actions, for it is based on the idea that actions are caused by the agents. In fact, we can say that when an agent acts, her movements are caused by her, but we can say that only after we have identified it as an action. In other words, Korsgaard's project attempts to show that the nature of the action and the unity of the self are one and the same thing. In other words, 'action is simply interaction with the self' (Korsgaard 2009: 204).

However, this interaction is based on an idea that human mind is self-conscious, that is to say, we are conscious of our desires, inclinations and our own mental activities and the notion of reason is bound up with reflection. And it is self-consciousness which is the source of reason because, she claims that 'to be an agent is...to be a self-conscious causality' (Korsgaard 2009: 84), in other words, when one thinks herself/himself as an agent, one knows that she/he is the cause of the action and the effects are also her/his own. Thus, when we are conscious about the workings of an incentive within us, then the way we experience it is no longer a force upon us, rather something that we should deal with. It places us in a decision-making process. In doing this, we are active, not reactive (Korsgaard 2009: 119-120).

Self-consciousness also produces the parts of the soul:

It requires us to substitute principles of reason for our instincts, and it transforms our incentives into inclinations. At the same time it makes it necessary for us to deliberate about what we are going to do. Since actions must be assignable to the person as a whole, the work of practical deliberation, the work that leads to action, is also a kind of unification (Korsgaard 2009: 133).

In *The Sources of Normativity* Korsgaard had already discussed the relationship between the reflective mind and reason: ‘The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a *reason*. Otherwise, at least as long as it reflects, it cannot commit itself or go forward’ (Korsgaard 1996: 92-93). And one would not violate the obligations associated with one’s identity, since this would mean to lose your integrity and identity and to no longer be what you are. As we have seen, this idea of a unified identity and integrity is based on an assumption that the mind is transparent to us.

It should be noted that for Kant it is also his constitution with whom the person identifies, not his reason directly. It is the categorical imperative that brings about the constitutional unity that makes the action possible to the soul. This leads to the question of what counts as a *bas* action and Korsgaard strongly implies that a bad action as an action that is performed in the lack of constitutional unity.

Now, as we have seen, Korsgaard, while adopting an Aristotelian approach according to which every Substance is defined by its Form, says that ‘an action is essentially intelligible object that *embodies* a reason, the way a sentence is an essentially object that embodies a thought’ (Korsgaard 2009: 14). In ‘Personal Identity and Unity of the Agency’ Korsgaard attempts to put emphasis on the agent as the ultimate source of her action and in doing this her critique is directed towards Derek Parfit<sup>5</sup> who sees the agent merely as a form of experience. From a moral point of view, she says: ‘it is important not to reduce agency to a mere form of experience. It is important because our conception of what a person is depends in a deep way on our conception of ourselves as agents’ (Korsgaard 1989: 103). And an individual is an agent only if he acts in conformity with reason. An action which most fully unifies the agent and which is in conformity with reason is a good action. What makes an action bad, on the other hand, is that it is caused not from the person but from something external, something that threatens his or her unity. Or in Kantian terms since a free will is not determined by any external cause, that is to say, by any law outside of itself (*Groundwork*, 4:446-448), a bad action is an action that lacks a free will, and that is determined by some alien causes.<sup>6</sup>

However, McDonald sees this position of Korsgaard problematic since it implies that all agents are rational by definition and that since it is constitutive of agency that actions be rational and good, it does not seem that moral wrong is possible:

<sup>5</sup> See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre would completely disagree with this since a good action is an action which fits some way in the traditions of a community.

If an individual is irrational, on Korsgaard's account, that individual is not an agent at all: there is a failure to act in a way that constitutes oneself as an agent. Given that rationality is constitutive of agency, those individuals who are not guided by the categorical imperative must thereby fail to constitute themselves as agents. If this is the case, how could an individual ever be responsible for failure to act according to the categorical imperative? (McDonald 2010: 236).

Moreover, the fact that she starts her account from reason seems that Korsgaard falls into intellectualism. Her expressivist notion of the self – the idea that the unity of the action and the unity of an agent are inseparable – is what many philosophers would be sympathetic to; however, they would also disagree with her on the idea that human mind is self-conscious, that is to say, we are conscious of our desires, inclinations and our own mental activities and the notion of reason is bound up with reflection. For instance, one attempt to develop an understanding of an expressivist notion of the self that departs from Kant can be derived from Nietzsche. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche famously claims that 'the doer is a mere fiction' and 'the deed is everything' (Nietzsche 2002: 28). However, despite his famous statement Nietzsche does not simply deny that there is a subject of a deed, rather he is claiming that the subject is not separate from the activity itself, in other words, it is in the deed. Put like this his expressivist notion of the self does not seem to be very different from that of Korsgaard's; however Nietzsche also claims that we are not that rational; we are not conscious of our desires, inclinations and our own mental activities: our motives are opaque. In other words, what expresses itself in our deeds is our selfhood as a whole, with its inclinations, incentives, desire and even instincts.

While in Korsgaard's Kantianism we have control over our actions because reason has the capacity to stand back from the biddings of inclination and self-consciousness transforms our incentives into inclinations (Korsgaard 2009: 133), Nietzsche claims that when we act we cannot rely on consciousness to discover our motives and inclinations; because once we attempt to do that we are already involved in processes of selection and interpretation. Being in the 'processes of selection' may sound obscure here, however the idea of selectivity is related to Nietzsche's drive psychology. Though a deeper analysis of his drive psychology extends the scope of this paper, we can say that if Kant, and also Korsgaard, leaves no room for inclinations, drives etc. in the realm of morality, Nietzsche claims that drives, being multiple and deeply interconnected, interpret the world by generating selective views of the world. As opposed to the traditional models of agency, where a genuine agency is linked to the capacity for reflection, and where reason has the capacity to stand back from the biddings of inclination, Nietzsche claims that our 'conscious' choices are secretly guided and channelled by a variety of unknown factors (Nietzsche 1966: 11). Thus any attempt to reflect on why we do what we do is in vain. However, this does not mean that one should not try to understand oneself, on the contrary, Nietzsche claims that one should regard oneself as a site of experimental knowledge, without forgetting that any 'truth' or 'discovery' about one's own self is an interpretation (Nietzsche, 1974: 115).

## Conclusion

Korsgaard claims that Kantian moral law means the law of self-constitution, which is based on the idea that the unity of an action and the unity of an agent are not detachable. Thus, she gives us an expressivist notion of the self, according to which an individual is an agent only if he/she acts in conformity with reason and an action which is in conformity with reason is a good action. Though her Kantian account of the self, and correspondingly the nature of an action seem to be consistent, it starts from an assumption, that is our mind is transparent, in other words, we are completely conscious of our desires and inclinations etc. This assumption, and its resulting account of a good action further leads to a problematic situation: individuals who are not guided by reason cannot constitute themselves as agents, and correspondingly, cannot perform good actions. One attempt to develop an understanding of an expressivist notion of the self can be derived from Nietzsche. However, as opposed to Korsgaard, Nietzsche claims that human beings are not that rational and that the action itself cannot be separated from our desires, inclinations and even instincts. However, he also says that whenever we act we create our own selves and our own events. Thus, even though we can never be sure about the inclinations and motivations behind our actions, we should see ourselves as a work of art: 'we can become what we are' only through a creative interpretation.



## Korsgaard'ın Benlik-İnşası Anlayışı

### Öz

Christine Korsgaard'a göre Kantçı ahlak anlayışı hala bize ahlak konusunda doğru bir kaynak sunabilir ancak bunun olabilmesi için Kant'ın ahlaki yasa anlayışını, benliğin-inşası yasası olarak anlamamız gerekmektedir. Benliğin-inşası anlayışında Korsgaard'ın sadece Kant'a değil, Aristoteles'e de başvurduğunu görürüz: Aristoteles'e göre bir şeyin 'ne'liği, o şeyin fonksiyonu, karakteristiğiyle belirlenir. Bu anlayışa göre, birliği olan bir şey olmak, teleolojik olarak örgütlenmek demektir. Korsgaard Aristoteles'in *telos* anlayışını benimseyerek, canlı varlıkların mütemediyen bir kendini-inşa etme aktivitesinde olduklarını belirtir.

Korsgaard'ın bu yaklaşımı eylemin birliği ile failin birliğinin birbirinden ayrılmaz olduğu anlayışında kaynağını bulmaktadır. Bu anlayışa göre Korsgaard, zihnin ya da bedeninin herhangi bir hareketinin bir eylem olarak adlandırılması için, o hareketin benliğin (*Self*) bir ifadesi (*expression*) olarak görülmesi gerektiğini belirtir. Bu dışavurumcu (*expressionist*) benlik anlayışına göre kimlik (*personal identity*) kişinin seçimleri ve eylemleriyle mütemediyen kurulur. Başka bir deyişle, eylemlerini seçerken insan her daim kendini yaratıyor olmandır. Eylemde benlik inşa edilen, aynı zamanda da inşa edendir. Korsgaard'ın projesi eylemin doğasıyla, benliğin birliğinin aynı şey olduğunu göstermektedir, ya da Korsgaard'ın deyişle 'eylem benlikle bir etkileşimde bulunma' halidir (Korsgaard 2009: 204). Ancak bu etkileşim bir varsayımdaya dayanmaktadır: insan zihni apaçık; kendi arzularımızın, eğilimlerimizin ve zihinsel aktivitemizimizin farkındayızdır ve bir birey ancak akla (*reason*) uygun olarak eylediğinde bir fail (eyleyen, *agent*) haline gelir. Failin (eyleyen) birliğini sağlayan ve akılla uyum içinde olan eylem de iyi bir eylemdir. Bir eylemi 'kötü' eylem olarak nitelendiren şey ise, o eylemin kişinin kendisinden değil, dışsal bir sebepten kaynaklanmış olmasıdır. Ya da Kantçı bir dille şöyle diyebiliriz: özgür irade dışsal bir nedenden, başka bir deyişle, kendi dışında bir yasadan, kaynaklanmadığı için kötü bir eylem özgür iradenin yokluğunda icra edilen, dışsal sebeplerle belirlenen eylemdir. Ancak burada şöyle bir problematikte karşılaşmaktayız: tanımı gereği bütün failer (eyleyen) rasyoneldir; ancak bir eylemin rasyonel ve iyi olması failliğin kurucu öğesiye o zaman ahlaki anlamda 'kötü' mümkün değildir.

Korsgaard gibi dışavurumcu benlik anlayışını savunan bir başka filozof da Nietzsche'dir. Ancak Korsgaard'ın aksine Nietzsche akılda temellendirilen bir ahlakın bizi yanılacağına iddia eder çünkü Nietzsche'ye göre insanlar o kadar da rasyonel varlıklar değildir; dahası kişinin eylemleri onun arzularından, eğilimlerinden, dürtülerinden bağımsız düşünülemez.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Benlik-İnşası, Kant, Fail, İyi Eylem.

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