

# **Korsgaard's Constructivism**

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## **Introduction**

In “Sources of Normativity,” Christine Korsgaard argues for Kantian Constructivism by explaining that the human consciousness causes us to act for moral reasons that are inherently normative. Korsgaard explains that because humans are self-reflective, they must have reasons for their selected actions, and that there must be some normativity for their reasons to act. Korsgaard argues that although humans do have awareness of their minds, they do not have full access to their consciousness. They are aware of their own consciousness to the point that they are able to reflect on the reasons they have to act certain ways, and are motivated by the best reason to act, according to their own identity. A person's self-reflective identity is authoritative and must hold inherent value as part of being a human. To act in a way that is supported by the best reasons in accordance with a person's practical identity would be to choose the normative action. Further, if the reason for action cannot be willed into a law, then it should be rejected.

I argue here that Korsgaard's theory of moral normativity is correct, both in the way that moral reasons are discovered through self-reflection on one's identity, and as a result its universal application. There are arguments that may be brought against this theory. For example, the fact that moral reasons are not universally accepted is potentially an issue for the objectivity of moral truth. But I believe Korsgaard's essay addresses these problems adequately, as I will show in this paper.

## **Summary**

In her essay, Korsgaard begins by explaining that human beings have only partial access to their own consciousness. This is important because it explains why people must practice self-reflection of their own minds to make decisions. By reflecting on reasons to act, people will choose the moral reason that coincides most with their basic identity. She further explains that the human consciousness will force us to act for certain reasons, and will punish us if we do not act accordingly with things like guilt, regret, etc. This is because humans have an identity that is settled upon which provides a basis for reasons for action. This basis for reasons for action is what makes moral reasons authoritative. Korsgaard also describes Kant's explanation of the free will. The free will is supposed to be rational and any decisions made that are based on a person's desires must be something that is already part of their basic identity. This reflection of one's own consciousness is the source of how a person makes their moral decisions. Therefore, any decisions that a person makes has to already be endorsed by their self-reflection of identity.

To defend the universal aspect of self-reflective normativity, Korsgaard explains that because people adhere to and value their own identity, they must also value other people's identities. This is because people must recognize their similarities between one another. If one person has an identity that holds authoritative value, then all other people must, too. Korsgaard gives an example of someone else being harmed. We recognize that something should not be

done to another person because we know that it is not something that we would want done to ourselves. People recognize that their own identity is not the only one that holds value. And that other people's identities must be treated with as much importance. Because of this, people are rationally committed to taking other people's reasons into their own accounts. According to Korsgaard, people will also have universally applied truths for the same reasons. Rational beings would have to be committed to the same truths that are derived from personal self-reflection. This is because if a person values their own reasons based on self-reflection and also recognizes the value of other people's reasons, rational people would come to the same conclusions and their decisions would be normative. An example given in Korsgaard's essay is supposed to show this. In the example, a student and teacher are discussing when they can schedule a meeting. They both reflect on their own reasons for when they believe the meeting should be and express those reasons to each other. They both recognize each other's reasons and come to a conclusion on when they ought to meet based on the most rational and reasonable decision for both of them. This is how it is believed to work through self reflecting on one's own reasons and also taking into account another person's reasons. Both are valued and the decision that they would come to does not interfere with or go against either one's own basic identity.

Finally, Korsgaard explains that moral reasons must be categorical under this reflective endorsement theory. She states that if an action should be taken because it has a good moral reason, then it should be authoritative and therefore willed into a law.

## **Critique**

A fairly obvious objection against this theory would be against the idea that all reasons for actions must be categorical and universally agreed upon. Korsgaard is arguing that all actions are results of reasons discovered through self-reflection, and that all humans have the same capability to self-reflect. Because of this mutual ability, the reasons must be willed into laws and therefore categorical. Other than assuming that everyone could possibly come to the same conclusions because of their similar abilities to reflect on their own practical identities, one could argue that there is not a strong enough reason given in this theory to say that everyone would arrive at the same moral reasons for actions. There would have to be some sort of mutual agreement in the theory to make it plausible. An opposing stance that one might take for the way people might come to an agreement on certain moral beliefs is that it is simply accepted as a way of social order and a result of compromise. This relativist view would also mean that different groups might have different moral reasons and that those reasons would change over time, and that there is no real reason that the moral reasons wouldn't be subjective to the group that agrees to them.

I am arguing that Korsgaard does give a strong enough defense for the idea that moral reasons for actions are categorical and a result of self-reflection. In Korsgaard's argument, the very rationality of reasons is dependent of them being normative. Even though self-reflection is a private activity, it is mutually understood by others and the reasons that people discover must be subject to mistake. The biggest issue that would likely occur with the stance against categorical truths is that with a relativist approach, it is more difficult to recognize a moral reason as being incorrect. If the only criteria for a good moral reason is that it is mutually agreed upon by the group, then it is not subject to criticism and there would be no reason to make any corrections to

beliefs, other than further compromise. This would mean that something that seems inherently wrong might still be viewed as morally right if it benefits the group at that specific time. In Korsgaard's theory, moral truths cannot be independent of what is rational and they must be willed into laws. Because of this, the truths are authoritative and would not compromise or contradict the things that someone finds valuable based on their self-reflection.

In regards to rational people coming to the same moral reasons as a result of the self reflective nature of consciousness, I believe that Korsgaard's reasons can explain how that could be true. People have limited access to their own minds, and that is why self-reflection is the only way to discover what the best decisions are based on one's identity. So the fact that people do not have access to other people's minds doesn't mean that they can't have similarly limited access by ways of communication and mutual understanding with others. As Korsgaard explains (and under Kant's view), a rational decision made by a person cannot be in opposition of reasons they already have from their own identities. But they also value other people's reasons based on their self-reflected identities. So taking into account other people's reasons and valuing the identities of others would be part of a rational person's basic identity and reason for decision making. Not only do people inherently take the reasons of others into account, but they are morally obligated to do so. If one person has a basic identity that is valuable and authoritative, then they must recognize that other people have the same type of identity that is authoritative as well. So without compromising one's own beliefs derived from their self-reflection of their mind, and also taking into account other people's reasons and beliefs derived from their own personal self-reflection, I believe that rational people would have to come to the same conclusions about moral truths. In a case that they do not come to the same moral truths, I think that it would be due to one or both parties either contradicting their own beliefs based on their identities, or not taking into account the value of the other person's identities as equal to their own. And this would not be rational under the view.

## **Conclusion**

In "The Sources of Normativity" by Christine Korsgaard, the theory of Kantian Constructivism is being defended by explaining how moral truths are authoritative and derived from self-reflection. Self-reflection of the mind is the only way to discover one's reasons for actions because of the limited access one has to their own mind. Through self-reflection, one finds the best reason for actions based on their own basic identities. These actions must be authoritative and have the capability of being willed into laws. Korsgaard also defends the idea that moral truths are categorical. This is done by explaining how people are not only morally obligated to take into account their own reasons obtained by self-reflection, but also take into account the reasons other people have. This is because people recognize the value of their own identities and reasons for actions based on them, and because humans all have these basic identities, they must be equally valued.

I have argued that Korsgaard's theory and explanation given is strong enough to defend the Kantian view that moral truths are categorical and universally authoritative. I've also argued that under this view, moral truths are to be universally agreed upon by the rational person as a result of the self-reflective state of our consciousness. The reason I have argued in defense of this view is that it explains how moral truths give reasons for actions and as a result are willed into

laws. This theory does not have the same problems that other views, such as the moral relativist's, have in regards to the explanations for moral reasons and the way that those reasons are obtained, and therefore is the stronger of the views.