

Autonomy and Moral Obligation

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The primary purpose of a moral theory is to regulate one's actions so as not to impinge upon the well-being of others. The primary question a moral theory must deal with is: how should one act? But an even more fundamental question threatens the very basis of any moral theory: why should one follow it? This is the normative question, and it seems as though, regardless of which moral theory one is considering, that it is a question one could rightly ask. And this question requires an answer, for what is at stake is everything that we hold to be just and good.

According to Christine Korsgaard (16f), there are three conditions that any answer to the normative question must fulfill:

- 1) It must address the person asking it in the first person.
- 2) It must be transparent.
- 3) It must appeal to one's identity.

The first condition seems fairly straightforward. If someone asks, "Why should I do that", we should be able to look him/her in the eye and give a *direct* answer (provided that we ourselves know the answer). The second condition, while somewhat less self-evident, is no less necessary. An answer to the normative question should be one that is easily understood. In other words, an answer to the normative question that is not understood by the person asking it really isn't an answer from the *perspective* of the person asking it. So, an answer that is not transparent really wouldn't meet the first condition in a satisfactory way. The third condition is even less obvious than the second, but I think that it too is important, for any answer to the normative question that

does not appeal to oneself will always remain open to further questioning. That is, so long as the source of normativity is separate from oneself, there will always be a gap between moral obligation and the will.

Korsgaard's answer to the normative question, which she also claims to be a general solution to *all* normative questions, centers on the notions of autonomy, identity, and reflection. An agent capable of reflecting on his/her actions will require some reason for them. But an agent capable of reflecting on his/her *self* will also have a sense of identity. By enforcing this identity as a reason for acting, the agent is expressing his/her autonomy. This is, according to Korsgaard, like a law to the agent, although I'm not sure how. Let us just grant this last point, and ask a simple question: does this answer stand up to the criteria she set forth?

While Korsgaard's answer to the normative question manages to meet her first condition, it fails to adequately meet the other two. For one thing, it isn't at all clear how *my* identity obligates me to act in certain ways toward *other* living things. Her account of obligation is very queer in a far-out Kantian sort of way, and is most likely beyond the threshold of the average person's level of comprehension. Thus, her answer is far from transparent. As for the appeal to one's identity, it isn't entirely clear how one is supposed to acquire this identity in the first place. As far as I can tell, there are only two possibilities: either one chooses one's own identity, or one's identity is chosen for them. But if one is free to choose one's own identity, then why should we choose one identity over another? Why not, for example, choose the identity of a mass murderer or a rapist? On the other hand, if one's identity is chosen for them, why should one accept it? If my society tells me to "be a man", and that "real men don't cry", why should I bow to their concept of what a man is, much less what *I am*? In either case, we can raise the normative question anew, and Korsgaard's answer fails on her own criteria.

I think it would be worthwhile at this point to step back from Korsgaard's answer to the normative question, and consider what type of person would even ask it. I can only think of two types of people who would ask it in a serious way: philosophers and sociopaths. In the first case, philosophers ask such questions because that is their job, and we should forgive them for it. The second case presents a problem, however, for the sociopath is *incapable* of being obligated in this way. Indeed, if Korsgaard's answer to the normative question were able to morally obligate sociopaths, it would revolutionize the fields of psychology and criminal justice; but alas, this is not so.

Perhaps we could gain some insight into the problem by considering the case of the sociopath. Not all sociopaths are criminals; some are able to follow the rules of their society well enough to get along without incident, while others are habitual criminals. In the case of the rule following sociopath, they evidently have some cognitive mechanism that enables them to follow the rules. But given what's been said, I think it would be foolish to propose that they have formulated a "law-abiding sociopath" identity for themselves. Rather, this capacity must be something basic to the human psyche, and perhaps reinforced, or brought to full light, through parental instruction. They follow the rules because they are cognitively "programmed" to do so, either innately, or through parental instruction.

Sociopaths aside, I think that if you asked most people on the street why they behave morally, they would make reference to the fact that other people are like themselves, and so are worthy of their consideration. This is a position that is somewhat elevated from mere rule-following. In fact, this is why *I* behave morally. I see other people as intrinsically valuable and worthy of my consideration. In fact, *I cannot help but see people in this way*. There is even a name for this ability: it is called empathy. This, for me, is where I get off the normative bus; this

is where I stop asking the normative question. It does not even occur to me to continue asking the normative question in any *serious* capacity. This is where I must insist that, either you are an empathetic person, or at the very least a rule-follower, or you need to be locked away where you can't hurt anyone. If we are to continue asking the normative question, it must be out of pure morbid curiosity; we want to know just how uncaring the universe really is. Here the philosopher suffers from his/her capacity for abstract thought. This is what scares some philosophers into formulating convoluted theories of morality.

So, given what's been said, might there not be a simple way to answer the normative question? I think so. In fact, it's a one-liner. If someone asks why s/he should be morally obligated to others, or why s/he should follow the rules, we should reply: "You can't help but be obligated/follow the rules, *because that's just the way you are.*" While this answer may not be profound, and may not have the righteous-sounding appeal of being a "Citizen of the Kingdom of Ends" (Korsgaard, 100), it *is* an answer, and it meets Korsgaard's three criteria. It answers the person asking the normative question in the first-person, it is so utterly transparent that anyone intelligent enough to ask the question will understand the answer, and it appeals to one's sense of identity, since you are an intrinsically moral (but fallible) autonomous agent.

References

Korsgaard, Christine M.; *The Sources of Normativity*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK; 2004.