

Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*

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Why be moral? Why be rational? What is it to be an agent, a self? Christine Korsgaard presents answers to these questions, answers that inextricably link the reply to one question to the replies to the others. In her view, rationality is the activity that constitutes agency. Insofar as an agent lives a rational life, she is guided by a central moral principle, the categorical imperative. The exploration of this view of the relation between morality, rationality, and agency is a central focus of the essays collected in this book.

This volume collects ten essays. Nine of the essays were published between 1996 and 2008. One essay, "Aristotle on Function and Virtue," is published here for the first time, as an accompaniment to another essay on Aristotle. Korsgaard has written a helpful introduction to the book that summarizes both the collected essays as well as the current state of her philosophical project. As readers of Korsgaard's work might expect, in these essays she presents her own views on contemporary issues in ethics through readings of the great philosophers: Aristotle, Plato, Hume, and Kant.

While this is a wide-ranging collection, containing essays on issues as diverse as egoism, Hume's account of love, and Kant's view of revolution, the central issue pursued throughout many of these essays is Korsgaard's account of agency. This account is a fusion of ideas from Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. From Plato's account in the *Republic*, Korsgaard draws on the idea of the constitution of the self as a central concern of morality, and she makes a questionable attribution of a similar concern with the constitution of the self to Kant. (It is hard to see how this account of the constitution of the self accords with Kant's claims regarding the impossibility of knowledge of the noumenal self.) On the account of the self offered by Plato and Korsgaard's Kant, rational activity is the source of the unity of the self or agent. Rational activity is acting for a purpose, a notion Korsgaard presents through a synthesis of elements of Aristotle and Kant. Thus rationality and morality are necessary for agency, and not subject to any reasonable doubt.

The problem with the resulting account is that it makes all agents *rational* agents by definition. According to Korsgaard, an individual is an agent if, and only if, she acts in conformity with reason. There are reasons to be concerned with such an account. First, it rests on a somewhat dubious linguistic claim. It is far from clear that this technical philosophical term 'agent' contains rationality as a component of its meaning. There does not seem to be anything contradictory in the notion of an irrational agent. Second, it might be Korsgaard's intention to define agents as rational by stipulation. However, it is hard to see how an account that makes all agency rational by fiat could play such an important role in a justificatory moral theory. Third, if only rational agents are agents, then it seems there is no possibility of irrationality. 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? How could an individual ever be responsible for wrongdoing? The account of agency based in rationality suggests that there could be no agents responsible for irrational choices, insofar as any irrational individual would not be, on Korsgaard's account, an agent.

Korsgaard addresses this concern in the essay "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," noting that the Platonic/Kantian view on offer would imply, *prima facie*, that "nothing exactly counts as a bad action" (110). Given that it is constitutive of agency that actions be rational and good, it does not seem that irrationality or moral wrong is possible. In response to this, Korsgaard seems to weaken her own account of what constitutes agency: it is not rationality that is constitutive of agency, but an *attempt* at rationality. She claims that "even the most venal and shoddy person must try to perform a good action, for the simple reason that there is no other way to try to perform an action" (113). In virtue of the fact that an irrational agent has made a failed attempt at rational agency, she is an agent because she has at least tried to be rational. This claim about what irrational or morally flawed persons attempt to do seems deeply implausible. It makes much more sense to say that venal and shoddy persons are persons who are trying to do venal and shoddy things. What reason do we have to believe that a corrupt businessman is making any sort of attempt to act in a way that is guided by the categorical imperative?

To fully make sense of immorality and irrationality, a distinction needs to be made between metaphysical issues of the nature of agency and the self, on the one hand, and moral issues of rationality and morality, on the other. Korsgaard's account precludes any such distinction, and hence makes it difficult to see how irrationality or immorality could be possible, casting doubt on her account of the constitution of agency.

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