

Christine M. Korsgaard

The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology.

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Korsgaard's work in ethical theory is well known. She has published a previous collection of articles *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and her Tanner lectures *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). *The Constitution of Agency* is another collection of articles on practical reason and moral psychology. As with her previous work, Korsgaard makes her arguments largely through the interpretation of Kant, and she also draws heavily on Aristotle, with further discussion of Plato and Hume. The book is dedicated to Bernard Williams 'for questions' and to John Rawls 'for answers', and the spirit of Rawls is apparent throughout, especially in the constructivist approach to ethics that Korsgaard promotes. Most of the papers are from the late 1990s, but one is from 1986 and two are new in print. The book has a useful introduction surveying the views and arguments in the rest of the book. The quality of the work is uniformly excellent, and the writing is generally clear, although some of the papers are especially challenging in their length and detail, leaving one wishing for a concise main statement of the argument.

On Korsgaard's view, agents constitute themselves through their rational choices; and in the Kantian tradition, rationality includes ethical principles. In different papers she explains how self-constitution is possible through analogy with the self-constitution of a city, her Kantian conception of rationality, and her understanding of human agency. She emphasizes the similarities between the moral theories of Aristotle and Kant, and the role that emotions can play in moral action, and she argues that Kant does not reject the importance of emotions, as many interpreters have claimed. She has a long discussion of Hume's moral theory and the collection concludes with a discussion of how her form of constructivism relates to moral realism.

The basic idea that we constitute ourselves through rational action helps to explain what is special about human life and how we differ from other animals. One immediate concern about Korsgaard's view is whether it is possible to defend a clear conception of rational action with respect to morality. She believes in the categorical imperative, and spends some time explaining the nature of action and the relation between an action and the maxim under which it is performed. In other work she has discussed the universalizability of maxims, and none of the essays here do much to address some central worries we may have about morality as rationality. Rather, they address Korsgaard's worries, or the ones she imagines that others may have. She is very clear about the importance of being able to separate activity from passivity, and the crucial role of an agent laying down the law for themselves as the essence of autonomous action. Yet despite her admiration of Aristotle, her approach is extremely different from

his. While Aristotle gives many examples to explain what he is saying, and roots his ethics firmly in his conception of human psychology, it is hard to tell how Korsgaard's work relates to the inner goings on of real people. It is unclear to what extent she thinks that people are in fact capable of being autonomous, and whether they do live by maxims in a Kantian sense. While Aristotle divides people up into different kinds of moral ability, and explains how his view relates to each kind, Korsgaard does not.

Maybe it would be enough if she had described an ideal of moral action at least in principle achievable by good people. But Korsgaard gives readers little to go on even in the ideal case: we do not get a clear idea of what the ideal life would be. It is in her discussion of Aristotle's ethics that we approximate most closely her view of a moral life. Her discussion of the function argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is especially illuminating. She argues that rational considerations are able causally to affect our appetites, bringing about a harmony of reason and passion. In other papers comparing Kant and Aristotle, she shows how their views are compatible even with respect to the role of emotions in moral action. The Aristotelian moral views she argues for are appealing. Her discussion of what it is to act for a reason is especially illuminating. When we act well, we act on principle, but this need not be a deliberate uttering of the principle as one is acting, and it does not need to be a highly cognitive separate activity. Of a person doing good, Korsgaard explains that 'to say that he acts on principle is just to record the fact that he is active and not merely receptive with respect to the good-making properties of the action' (228). The judgment is embodied in the self-conscious action itself. This helps to show that a Kantian view need not be rationalistic in psychologically implausible ways, and yet the Kantian emphasis on judgment can be retained.

Still, inevitably readers will return to the heart of Korsgaard's view, that we can constitute ourselves. She discusses Plato's analogy in the *Republic* between the different kinds of rule of a city and the different kinds of government between parts of the mind: democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy and so on. Her argument is that both Plato and Kant have a model of self-constitution, and that one's constitution gives one the volitional unity to be the author of one's actions. Further, according to Korsgaard, having the most unified constitution makes one most truly the author of one's actions. Choosing an action is itself an act of self-constitution on this view. However, Korsgaard does not manage to give a clear picture of how this self-constitution lasts over time or how an action has causal effects on a person's constitution. So the notion of self-constitution here seems to be very thin; it still does work, but not the work that we would expect from a rich notion of self-creation that comes from, e.g., existentialism, or that we find in the work of Charles Taylor.

Korsgaard's collection of papers will be essential to scholars of Kant, Aristotle and Hume, and it will be influential in contemporary moral theory, though it presents interpretive challenges—especially challenges in being integrated into the rest of the literature in moral theory.

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