

The Normative Question

I. Introduction: The Problem of Normativity

- Korsgaard's central concern: *How do we justify moral obligations?*
 - The challenge: If moral obligations exist, where does their authority come from?
 - Korsgaard critiques *moral realism*, which asserts that moral truths exist independently of human cognition.
 - **Key Question:** *Can realism provide a satisfactory answer to the normative question?*
 - **Context:** This issue relates to broader themes in metaethics, particularly debates between moral realism, constructivism, and expressivism.
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II. The Realist Position and Its Justification

1. Traditional Defenses of Moral Realism

- **Samuel Clarke:** Moral obligation derives from the intrinsic reasonableness of certain actions.
- **Richard Price:** Some actions are intrinsically right, and we recognize their moral necessity.
- **G.E. Moore:** The property of goodness is a *non-natural*, indefinable quality.
- **Supplementary Note:** These views align with rationalist traditions in ethics, contrasting with empiricist or constructivist accounts.

2. The Epistemic Challenge for Realism

- **Humean skepticism:** Realists assume moral truths exist but cannot explain how we access them.
 - **Mackie's Argument from Queerness:** If moral truths were objective, they would be unlike anything else in the natural world.
 - **Korsgaard's critique:** *Realists rely on confidence rather than genuine discovery.*
 - **Broader Implication:** If moral truths exist, there must be a reliable mechanism for perceiving them, akin to perception in empirical knowledge.
 - **Expansion:** Intuitionism, as defended by Prichard and Moore, claims moral truths are *self-evident*, but Korsgaard argues that this fails to explain why moral obligations should be compelling for all rational agents.
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III. The Infinite Regress Problem

- **Realist Strategy:** Halt the question "Why must I do what is right?" by appealing to *intrinsic normativity*.
- **Korsgaard's Comparison to the Cosmological Argument:**

- Just as theologians claim a necessarily existent being (God) stops the regress of causes,
 - Realists declare that some moral truths are *intrinsically normative*.
 - **Philosophical Concern:** This approach asserts normativity rather than *explaining* it.
 - **Expansion:** Korsgaard notes that this move resembles traditional foundationalist strategies in epistemology, which attempt to justify beliefs by positing self-evident truths rather than through a coherent system of justification.
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IV. Procedural vs. Substantive Realism

1. Procedural Moral Realism

- The claim: There are *correct* methods for resolving moral questions.
- **Example:** *John Rawls' constructivism*—moral conclusions derive from rational deliberation.
- Unlike substantive realism, procedural realism does not assume moral facts exist *independently* of reasoning processes.
- **Broader Context:** This position connects to Kantian ethics, where reason itself generates moral obligations.
- **Expansion:** Procedural realism allows moral norms to be justified based on shared rational principles rather than appealing to external moral truths.

2. Substantive Moral Realism

- The claim: Moral truths exist independently of human procedures.
 - Realists assume moral inquiry is about *discovering* moral facts rather than *constructing* them.
 - **Korsgaard's critique:** *Why should we believe in moral facts when we do not need them to explain moral discourse?*
 - **Key Dilemma:** If realism cannot answer *why* moral obligations bind us, it remains metaphysically suspect.
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V. Naturalistic Attempts to Save Realism

- **Thomas Nagel, Peter Railton, and David Brink:** Argue that moral realism does not require mysterious metaphysical entities.
- **Naturalist Strategy:**
 - Moral properties are natural properties (e.g., pain is bad because of its intrinsic aversiveness).
 - Moral realism need not invoke *queer* entities but can rest on empirical facts about human nature.
- **Korsgaard's Counterpoint:** *This does not resolve the normative question—it merely shifts it to empirical facts.*
- **Larger Issue:** Even if we acknowledge that pain is undesirable, that does not justify why

we are *morally* obligated to avoid causing it.

- **Expansion:** Evolutionary ethics attempts to explain moral behavior as a product of natural selection, but Korsgaard argues that descriptive accounts of morality do not provide normative justification.
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VI. The Source of Normativity

1. The Need for a Different Approach

- Realism frames ethics as an *epistemological subject* (about discovering moral facts).
- Korsgaard argues ethics should be seen as a *practical subject* (about solving moral problems).
- **Relevance:** This shift moves moral philosophy away from metaphysical speculation and toward *practical justification*.

2. Alternative Foundations for Morality

- The challenge: If we abandon realism, can we still justify moral obligations?
- **Kantian approach:** *Moral obligations derive from the nature of rational agency itself.*
- **Humean approach:** *Moral norms emerge from human sentiments and social practices.*
- **Significance:** If morality stems from reason or human nature, it remains robust without positing objective moral truths.
- **Expansion:** Korsgaard emphasizes that moral obligations must be justified in a way that speaks to the *practical identities* of rational agents, meaning obligations are tied to our self-conception and commitments.

3. Constructivism as a Way Forward

- Korsgaard hints at her own constructivist position: Morality is not about *finding* moral truths but *creating* normative principles through reasoned reflection.
 - **Key Shift:** Constructivism prioritizes *justification* over *discovery*—the authority of morality comes from rational endorsement, not external truth.
 - **Expansion:** By framing moral authority as stemming from rational agency, Korsgaard moves away from traditional metaethical debates and toward a Kantian-inspired account of moral autonomy.
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VII. Conclusion: Why Realism Fails to Answer the Normative Question

- **Realism's Core Weakness:** It assumes obligations exist but cannot explain *why* they bind us.
- **Dependence on Confidence:** Instead of offering justification, realists rely on intuition and assertion.
- **Korsgaard's Alternative:** The *true task* of moral philosophy is not to discover moral facts but to justify the *authority* of moral claims.

- **Next Step:** Moving beyond realism to examine how morality can be grounded in human nature and practical reasoning.
 - **Expansion:** Korsgaard's constructivism offers a framework where normativity is neither an external imposition nor a subjective preference, but an inescapable feature of rational deliberation.
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Key Takeaways:

- **Korsgaard's Main Critique:** Realism *fails to answer* the normative question—it assumes rather than explains moral obligation.
- **The Constructivist Alternative:** Morality is not about *discovering* external truths but about *rationaly constructing* justified principles.
- **Wider Philosophical Context:** This debate ties into larger discussions on Kantian ethics, Humean sentimentalism, and contemporary metaethical constructivism.

Final Thought: The normative question is best answered by understanding morality as a *function of rational agency* rather than as a set of external truths.

Author	Explanation of Normativity	Korsgaard's Criticism
Samuel Clarke	Normativity arises from the rational nature of actions being obligatory in themselves.	Critiques the realism that obligates by itself without further justification, noting its circular or regressive justifications.
Thomas Hobbes	Obligation stems from the sovereign's power and the social contract.	Points out the issue of deriving normativity merely from power or social constructs, which leads to problematic conclusions if power is resisted or the contract is not enforced.
Samuel Pufendorf	Defines legitimate authority based on power and just cause, arguing obligation arises from gratitude, benevolence, or contractual submission.	Challenges the view that pre-existing moral norms are necessary to confer legitimacy, questioning the source of initial normative force.
G. E. Moore	Advocates for moral intuitionism, where normative truths are self-evident and known via intuition.	Criticizes intuitionism for failing to provide a substantive method for understanding moral truths beyond asserting their self-evidence.
Thomas Nagel	Suggests that normativity can be understood through a careful examination of our reasons for action, which are grounded in rational evaluations of human interests.	Questions Nagel's reliance on rationality alone to account for normativity, pointing out the need for a broader explanation that encompasses emotional and psychological aspects of moral action.