

The Normative Question

The Problem

Korsgaard begins by citing a passage from Plato's *Republic*:

Do not merely show us by argument that justice is superior to injustice, but make clear to us what each in and of itself does to its possessor, whereby the one is evil and the other good.

Korsgaard takes this passage to be expressing the normative question.

She notes that the normative question has been a central concern of modern moral philosophy since the time of Hobbes and Pufendorf.

Korsgaard argues that it is not enough to show that morality is an invention of politicians or a product of evolution.

Even if this were true, it would not answer the question of what makes morality normative for us.

Korsgaard begins this excerpt by articulating the project of moral philosophy. Korsgaard argues that what she calls the **normative question** is central to the study of moral philosophy. She argues that the normative question is the question of what makes morality normative for us. This chapter is a survey of existing answers to that question.

Korsgaard distinguishes the normative question from the evolutionary question of where and how moral concepts came to exist.

She argues that the answer to the normative question must meet three conditions:

- It must successfully address the question of what obligates us to do what morality demands.
- It must be transparent, in the sense that it must still be efficacious even when the agent knows exactly what morality is and why they are susceptible to its influences.
- It must appeal to our sense of who we are.

Korsgaard then identifies four answers to the normative question that have been given by modern moral philosophers:

1. **Voluntarism**, which says that morality is normative for us because it comes from the will of a legitimate authority.
2. **Realism**, which says that morality is normative for us because it is true.
3. **Reflective Endorsement**, which says that morality is normative for us because we endorse it as good for us.
4. **The Appeal to Autonomy**, which says that morality is normative for us because it comes from our own will.

Korsgaard will argue that it is the Appeal to Autonomy that provides the correct answer to the normative question.

The Normative Question

Korsgaard argues that the normative question is the question of what justifies the claims that morality makes on us. She distinguishes the normative question from the question of what moral concepts mean, what they apply to, and where they come from.

She argues that the normative question is distinct from these other questions because it is a question about the authority of morality.

In other words, it is a question about why we should care about morality.

The Threat of Moral Skepticism

- Korsgaard argues that the real threat of moral skepticism lies in the possibility that there is no satisfactory answer to the normative question.

The real threat of moral skepticism, therefore, is the possibility that there is no good reason to be moral.

The Evolutionary Theory

Korsgaard considers the example of the evolutionary theory of morality, which says that morality is a product of evolution. She argues that even if the evolutionary theory is true, it does not answer the normative question.

Hence, according to Korsgaard, even if morality is a product of evolution, this does not tell us why we should care about morality.

The First-Person Perspective

Korsgaard argues that the normative question is a first-person question; it is a question that each of us must answer for ourselves. She argues that this is why the answer to the normative question must appeal to our sense of who we are.

Her main point is that by her lights, the answer to the normative question must show us *why* it is important to be moral, given our own values and commitments.

The Modern Scientific World View

Korsgaard argues that the *Modern Scientific World View* has made it more difficult to answer the normative question. This is because the such a worldview has deprived us of the idea that the

world has a purpose. In the past, it was thought that morality was normative for us because it was part of the purpose of the world. But now that we no longer believe that the world has a purpose, we must find a new answer to the normative question. In opposition to such a view, she describes the views of Thomas Hobbes and Samuel von Pufendorf.

Voluntarism

Korsgaard discusses the first of the four answers to the normative question that have been given by Hobbes and Pufendorf known as voluntarism. Voluntarism is the view that morality is normative for us because it comes from the will of a legitimate authority. In other words, it is due to the voluntary action of a legitimate authority that morality becomes normative for us.

Pufendorf and Hobbes

Korsgaard discusses the views of Pufendorf and Hobbes, who were both voluntarists.

- Pufendorf and Hobbes claimed that the content of morality is given by natural reason.

They argued that what morality demands of us is what it is reasonable for us to do.

- However, they also claimed that morality is not normative for us *until* it is made into law by a legitimate authority.

Sanctions

Pufendorf and Hobbes also claimed that no one could be a legislator without the power to impose sanctions to enforce their law. They argued that sanctions are necessary to give moral commands the special force of requirement. Sanctions are thus necessary to make moral demands into demands that we are obligated to obey.

The Motive of Duty

- Pufendorf and Hobbes viewed a morally good action as an action which proceeds from the motive of duty.

They argued that we should do the right thing because it is the right thing, and for no other reason.

- They argued that if we are motivated to do the right thing by something other than the motive of duty, then our action is not truly morally good.

Conclusion

- According to Pufendorf and Hobbes:
 - **Moral Content is Given by Natural Reason:** The content of morality is determined by what is naturally reasonable for us to do, particularly in the context of social life.

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- **Social Utility:** The rules of morality are those that make social life possible, which is essential for human beings.
 - **Motivation by Reasonableness:** In many cases, the inherent reasonableness of moral rules can be sufficiently motivating.
 - **Legislator for Obligation:** A legislator (God or a sovereign) is necessary to transform moral considerations into obligations, making morality truly normative.
 - **Authority and Sanctions:** The legislator's authority requires the power to impose sanctions, which are necessary to establish the force of law and obligation.
 - **Intrinsic Motivation:** Morally good actions are those done from the motive of duty, simply because they are the right thing and the law.