

The Reflective Endorsement Test

Korsgaard examines the question of **how we can arrive at a workable and defensible account of moral normativity?** She begins by looking at the idea of reflective endorsement.

Williams vs. Hume: The Nature of Moral Sentiments

Williams and Hume have differing views on the nature of moral sentiments.

- **Hume** believes that moral sentiments are **natural** and grounded in human nature.
- **Williams** believes that moral sentiments are **cultivated** by life in a particular social world.

For both, the question of **normativity** is whether these moral sentiments are reinforced or undermined by reflection.

Key Themes and Arguments (pgs 71 - 79)

1. Thick and Thin Ethical Concepts (pp. 71–73)

- Williams distinguishes between *thin* concepts (e.g., "good," "right") and *thick* concepts (e.g., "cowardly," "brutal").
- Thick concepts involve both factual and evaluative components—they describe the world and prescribe action simultaneously.
- Korsgaard suggests that recognizing this connection strengthens the case for ethical objectivity.

2. The Convergence Argument (pp. 73–75)

- Korsgaard explores how different moral traditions (e.g., a Monk's belief that lying is sinful vs. a Knight's belief that it is dishonorable) might converge on a deeper normative truth.
- Williams argues that ethical values are cultural constructions rather than objective moral facts.
- However, Korsgaard points out that reflection can reveal which values promote human flourishing.

3. Williams's Alternative: Ethics as Social Habitation (pp. 75–77)

- Williams sees ethical values as part of a social framework rather than as tracking independent moral truths.
- He suggests that we can assess the value of a moral system by considering whether it promotes human well-being.
- However, Korsgaard challenges whether this is sufficient for genuine normativity—mere social functionality does not necessarily generate obligation.

4. The Reflexivity of Moral Judgments (pp. 77–79)

- Korsgaard connects Williams's view to Aristotle's claim that ethical dispositions must be

- good for the agent.
- For Aristotle, a virtuous life is *intrinsically* good for the person who lives it, avoiding a split between self-interest and morality.
- Korsgaard suggests that this approach can ground normativity, but only if agents can rationally *endorse* their moral dispositions.

Mill: Moral Realism and the Proof of Utility

Mill, unlike Hume and Williams, is a **moral realist**. He offers a proof of the principle of utility, suggesting that **desirable** things are good, and pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things that are desirable.

Mill's Sanctions and the Puzzle of Obligation (pgs 79 - 84)

Mill separates the proof of utility from its sanctions, leading to a puzzle about obligation. He argues that moral motivation comes from training and education, not just moral knowledge. This raises the question: **Where does moral obligation come from?**

- **Mill's "Proof" of Utilitarianism:**
 - Mill argues that the desirable is the good, meaning that moral reasons ultimately stem from our desires.
 - However, Korsgaard notes that Mill separates moral proof from *moral motivation*—the mere fact that utility is desirable does not ensure that people feel obligated to promote it.
- **Sanctions and Moral Motivation:**
 - Mill distinguishes between external sanctions (social pressure, divine punishment) and internal sanctions (feelings of guilt or conscience).
 - Korsgaard critiques this as circular: if moral motivation depends on training, what justifies that training as moral rather than arbitrary?

Mill's Reflective Endorsement

Mill's answer lies in **reflective endorsement**. He argues that morality is normative when reflecting on our moral concepts leads us to be glad that moral motives have been instilled in us.

The Role of Reflection

Reflection plays a crucial role in determining the normativity of our moral sentiments and motives.

- For Hume, reflection reveals the **congruence** of morality with self-interest, establishing normativity.
- For Mill, reflection shows that utilitarian motives, instilled through training, **harmonize** with our social and sympathetic nature, making them normative.

- **The Role of Reflection:**

- Mill argues that moral dispositions should be sustained because they harmonize with human sociability.
- Korsgaard questions whether mere harmony is sufficient—should we not also ask *whether we ought to endorse these dispositions?*

The Problem with Mill's Argument

Korsgaard points out a problem with Mill's argument: it seems to **miss its target audience**. The argument about the sanction only proves that utilitarianism would be normative for those raised as utilitarians. It doesn't address those who are not already utilitarians, failing to persuade them to become one.

Reflection and the Destruction of Knowledge

Reflection can also destroy knowledge, as illustrated by Bentham's rejection of Hume's theory of virtues after reflecting on it.

The Case of the Humean Lawyer

Korsgaard presents the case of a lawyer who, despite being a Humean, is tempted to act unjustly for the greater good. The lawyer's reflection on the **general rules** that influence moral sentiments leads her to question the rationality of her disapproval in this particular case.

The Difficulty with Reflective Endorsement

The difficulty with reflective endorsement is that it can lead to a **slippery slope**. Once we start questioning the normativity of our sentiments, where do we stop?

The Kantian Solution (pgs 85 - 89)

Korsgaard suggests that the Kantian approach provides a solution. According to Kant, we should subject each impulse to action to the test of reflection, determining whether its maxim can be willed as a law. This continuous process of reflective endorsement is, in essence, morality itself.

Conclusion

Korsgaard's analysis of reflective endorsement reveals the challenges and complexities involved in establishing moral normativity. She concludes that the Kantian approach, with its emphasis on **continuous reflection** and the **categorical imperative**, offers a promising path towards a robust account of morality.

Philosopher	Their View	Korsgaard's Criticism
Williams	Values are a social construct and should be evaluated based on their contribution to human flourishing.	Williams's view can lead to a relativist approach where any value system can be justified if it promotes flourishing, even if it conflicts with other moral considerations.
Mill	Moral motivation is instilled through training and education, and utilitarianism is normative because it harmonizes with our social and sympathetic nature.	Mill's argument misses its target audience by focusing on how utilitarianism is normative for those already raised with it, failing to persuade others to become utilitarians.