

---

# Handout: Christine Korsgaard - The Authority of Reflection

---

## The Problem: The Need for Normativity

- Korsgaard begins by identifying a fundamental problem in moral philosophy: **the source of normativity**.
- Traditional explanations struggle with an infinite regress:
  - **Voluntarism**: We follow moral laws because they are commanded by an authority, but why should we obey that authority?
  - **Realism**: Moral laws exist as objective facts, but why should we accept them?
  - **Reflective Endorsement**: Morality arises from our nature as reflective beings, but reflection itself demands justification.
- The key issue: **Why should we act morally?** Mere inclination is not enough, since we can always question whether we should follow our impulses.
- This brings us to **the problem of reflective distance**: unlike non-human animals, we can step back from our desires and question them. This creates a demand for justification that must be met.

## The Solution: Autonomy as the Source of Normativity

- Korsgaard builds on Kant's idea of **autonomy**: we are bound by laws we give to ourselves.
- Reflection demands that we act for reasons. But if we must justify our reasons, what justifies justification itself?
- Kant's answer: the categorical imperative—**act only on maxims that you could will as universal laws**.
- Korsgaard refines this:
  - A law cannot be imposed externally (or it would not be autonomy).
  - A law cannot be arbitrary (or it would lack normativity).
  - Therefore, **we must be the source of our own laws, and these laws must be universalizable**.

## The Role of Practical Identity

- **Practical identity**: how we conceive ourselves influences our reasons for action.
- Examples:
  - A student acts **as a student** by taking required courses.
  - A citizen obeys the law **as a citizen**.

- A moral agent acts in accordance with universalizable principles **as a rational being**.
- Practical identity provides **the structure that makes obligation intelligible**: we act not just on isolated reasons, but as part of an ongoing commitment to being a certain kind of person.
- However, practical identity is **not fixed**—it must be justified through reflection, leading to Korsgaard's claim that **we are self-constituting through our choices**.

## Freedom and the Authority of Reflection

- **Freedom in reflection**: To act autonomously is to act under the idea of freedom, meaning **we must see ourselves as capable of choosing**.
- Korsgaard defends free will against determinism:
  - Knowing what we will do in advance does not remove our responsibility.
  - The **deliberative standpoint** remains necessary—**even if our actions are causally determined, we still experience them as choices**.
- The key claim: **The structure of reflection itself necessitates that we act as if we are free**.

## Realism Revisited: Procedural vs. Substantive Realism

- Korsgaard argues for a **procedural** rather than substantive realism.
- **Substantive realism** claims that values exist independently.
- **Procedural realism** argues that values emerge from the reflective process itself.
- A maxim is **good if its structure allows it to be willed universally**—this is **the test of normativity**.

## Conclusion: Why We Must Be Moral

- **Normativity comes from our reflective nature**: because we must reflect, we must endorse reasons for action.
- The **authority of moral obligation** derives from our own autonomy.
- To reject moral obligations is to reject oneself **as a rational agent**—this is the ultimate self-undermining position.