

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

Prof. Funkhouser

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Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason"

- Kantian approaches to ethics root ethics in rationality: ethical action is a species of rational action. But, there are skeptical worries about such approaches:

By *skepticism about practical reason*, I mean doubts about the extent to which human action is or could possibly be directed by reason. (311)

Korsgaard considers two such skeptical worries. First, there is *content skepticism* — i.e., how can formal principles alone yield substantive conclusions? Second, there is *motivational skepticism* — i.e., how can reason provide motives for action? Motivational skepticism is the primary topic of her paper. Korsgaard will argue that the latter skeptical worries depend on the former.

I.

- The Humean View: Reason can only help us find good means to our ends. Reason cannot provide us with ends. Korsgaard rehearses two of Hume's main arguments for motivational skepticism, on p. 313. Korsgaard rightly points out that Hume's first argument depends on his very limited account of rationality, according to which reason alone has very little content (e.g., the only knowledge of relations of ideas is logical or mathematical). So, this argument assumes content skepticism.

II.

- Korsgaard then defines *internalism* and *externalism* about motivation.

An *internalist* theory is a theory according to which the knowledge (or the truth of the acceptance) of a moral judgment implies the existence of a motive (not necessarily overriding) for acting on that judgment . . . On an *externalist* theory, by contrast, such a conjunction of moral comprehension and total unmotivatedness is perfectly possible: knowledge is one thing and motivation another. (315)

In short, internalists and externalists differ over whether there is a *necessary* connection between moral knowledge and motivation.

◦ On p. 317 she discusses Nagel and Williams' arguments for the conclusion that reasons must be motives.

So long as there is doubt about whether a given consideration is able to motivate a rational person, there is doubt about whether that consideration has the force of a practical *reason* . . . Practical-reason claims, if they are really to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating rational persons. I will call this the *internalism requirement*. (317)

III.

• Korsgaard reminds us of the varieties of practical irrationality that Hume admits. She also claims that Hume should allow for the following kind of practical irrationality: a person recognizes something as a means to a desired end, but that person is not at all motivated to pursue that means.

So a person may be irrational, not merely by failing to observe rational connections — say, failing to see that the sufficient means are at hand — but also by being “willfully” blind to them, or even by being indifferent to them when they are pointed out. (320)

IV.

• Korsgaard charges that many think that the internalism requirement is more demanding than it in fact is.

All it requires is that rational considerations succeed in motivating us insofar as we are rational. (321)

Just because one can fail to be motivated by the greater good or by prudence, it does not follow that it is not *rational* to do so (or that these ends do not have special rational authority). (322)

V.

• If true irrationality is possible, then argument alone cannot reliably produce rational behavior.

◦ Note her characterizations of the *prudent person* and the *determined/resolute person*, on pp. 324–325.

VI.

• One might argue that practical reasoning must begin with motives one already has. Korsgaard attributes this position to Williams. For Williams:

Internal reasons are reasons reached by deliberation from the subjective motivational set: they can motivate us because of their connection to that set. (326)

But, remember, Williams is quite liberal regarding what can be included in the subjective motivational set.

Korsgaard responds to Williams by nothing that, as with Hume, his motivational skepticism depends on content skepticism.

As long as it is left open what kinds of rational operations yield conclusions about what to do and what to pursue, it must be left open whether we are capable of being motivated by them. (328)

VII.

- Korsgaard accepts the internalism requirement, but she does not think that it rules out any ethical theories.

VIII.

- Conclusion:

To the extent that skepticism about pure practical reason is based on the strange idea that an acknowledged reason can never fail to motivate, there is no reason to accept it. It is based on some sort of a misunderstanding, and I have suggested a misunderstanding of the internalism requirement as a possible account. (331)