

Normative Realism and The Normative Question

Sze Hoi CHAN

Department of Philosophy, The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

The substantive normative realists argue all normative facts, including morally normative facts, are “objective” in the sense that they are independent of agents’ attitudes of endorsement and intention towards the actions or state-of-affairs such facts are about (or: the actions in questions). What Korsgaard calls *the normative question* is a challenge to the substantive normative realists. Central to the normative question is humans’ ability to reflect on their moral beliefs. Korsgaard thinks this ability to reflect is ultimately inconsistent with substantive normative realism.

Korsgaard thinks our moral reflection can go on and on. Consider the claim that we are motivated to preserve the human species because we are psychologically structured so. Korsgaard thinks we can reflect upon this claim and ask, for instance, why “must” we care about this psychological disposition of ours? This is one instance of the normative question. In this essay, what I call the *psychology response* to the normative question suggests even though we can reflect upon the disposition *to care about the preservation of the human species*, we just cannot reflect upon a disposition even more fundamental, which is the disposition *to endorse and intend whatever actions we believe are morally right*. The difference is that the disposition about the preservation of the human species is about the *content* of our moral beliefs while the latter disposition is more fundamental and is not concerned with the content of our moral beliefs. The psychology response does not make a claim about what moral beliefs we are disposed to have, it only makes the claim that we have the disposition to endorse and intend *whatever* actions we believe are morally right.

Contrary to Korsgaard’s claim, my thesis is that the substantive normative realists can answer the normative question adequately. Normative non-naturalists, a kind of substantive normative realists, can answer the normative question using the psychology response. I argue reflection cannot go beyond some fundamental dispositions of human beings, given we are biological animals.

Literature Review

- Normative realism: the view that normative claims are cognitivist (i.e., are true or false) and normative predicates express normative properties. Among normative realists, there are the *substantive* normative realists who think normative claims purport to describe objective features of the world.
- Moral constructivism: Korsgaard argues agents’ attitudes towards X explain X being *morally* right or wrong. Moral facts are explained by a specific kind of attitude of agents – *reflective endorsement*. Korsgaard thinks an action is morally right to an agent if the agent reflectively endorses the action, i.e., the agent endorses the action and the action *passes* the agent’s reflection.
- The normative question: Central to the normative question is, as mentioned, human beings’ ability to be reflective. According to Korsgaard, when someone claims an action X is morally right (or morally ought to be done), one can ask the normative question: why *must* I do X? By asking this question, the agent is reflecting upon the moral claim and requesting further justification.

Conclusion

Korsgaard’s radical idea about autonomy in practical decision making is that we must review everything that contributes to our practical decision making and endorse each one on our own. Such contributions consist in the culture of morality we are making a decision based on, our psychological inclinations, etc. But why do we have to assume when we make a decision about what to do, we must be consciously reviewing *each* contribution and endorse them? I argue it is more plausible that humans just have certain fundamental dispositions that we cannot get away with – after all, we are biological animals. Such dispositions are something humans must live with without conscious evaluation. I argue the disposition to endorse and intend whatever actions we believe are morally right is one such fundamental disposition of humans, as biological animals. Such fundamental dispositions are indeed one of the many *causes* of our moral practice that are inseparable from human lives.

References

- Dasgupta, S. (2017). XV—Normative Non-Naturalism and the Problem of Authority. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 117(3), 297-319.
- Dreier, J. (2015). Can reasons fundamentalism answer the normative question? In G. Björnsson (Ed.), *Motivational Internalism* (pp. 167-181). Oxford University Press.
- Hopster, J. (2017). Two Accounts of Moral Objectivity: from Attitude-Independence to Standpoint-Invariance. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 20(4), 763-780. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-017-9796-z>
- Korsgaard, C. M. (1996). *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (2003). *Normativity, Necessity, and the Synthetic a priori: A Response to Derek Parfit*. <https://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~korsgaard/Korsgaard.on.Parfit.pdf>
- Parfit, D. (2011). *On What Matters: Volume One*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199572809.001.0001>
- Scanlon, T. M. (2014). *Being Realistic About Reasons*. Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgement

I thank my supervisor, Max Deutsch, my mentor, Christopher Cowie and my friend Felix Yeung for being the audience of my ideas and providing invaluable input.