

Action and Morality: A Reflection on Thomas Nagel's and Christine Korsgaard's Moral Thinking

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In recent decades, there is an interesting group of authors in American metaethics attempting to ground morality in practical reason construed in a broadly Kantian way. Its main representatives are Thomas Nagel, Stephen Darwall and Christine Korsgaard (Darwall et al. 1992). In what follows I shall focus on the positions of Nagel and Korsgaard. Each of them is Kantian in two respects. First, in their approaches to the rationality of action, both of them refer to the internal structure of the act itself and not to its external results. Second, contrary to Hume's position, they assume that practical reason can be normative and that practical reason is not determined by an agent's desire.

In his classic derivation of the categorical imperative from the nature of action of a rational subject, Kant assumed that a subject always acts according to 'a maxim' and that the universality of 'a maxim' is both necessary and sufficient to confer morality on the act. In the perspective of the contemporary philosophy of mind an action is done *for a reason*. Nagel and Korsgaard are interested in the normative kind of reasons i.e., in reasons that can justify and regulate human actions. But each of them assumes that the condition of universality is not enough to establish morality and that it must be complemented by some other conditions.

1. Toward an Objectivity of Moral Theory

In Nagel's approach any reason for action must be universal by virtue of his definition requiring that a reason must be valid for any rational agent. More precisely, Nagel assumes that a reason is 'a predicate' R that 'applies to some act, event, or circumstance' A. "(...) We can say that every reason is a predicate R such that for all persons p and events A, if R is true of A, then p has prima facie reason to promote A" (Nagel 1970, 47). While 'some act, event or circumstance' are apparently natural objects, it is not wholly clear whether the 'predicate' R should be regarded as referring to a natural quality or not. Neither is Nagel absolutely clear on the nature of reasons: are they constructed by agents or are they discovered by them in the external world. Instead, he introduces and elaborates in detail a distinction among reasons for action based on the formulation on the 'predicate'. It is the distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' reasons for actions that constitutes the complementary condition for grounding morality in practical reason in *The Possibility of Altruism*. A reason is 'subjective' if its formulation contains an irreducible 'free agent-variable' (referring to the person who acts); otherwise the reason is 'objective'. 'Objective' reasons require all of us to promote the same things. Using both his earlier analysis of the prudential reasons and the philosophy of later Wittgenstein, Nagel argues that we cannot accept purely subjective reasons for actions unless we are 'practical solipsists'. As a consequence, as soon as we accept 'a conception of oneself as simply a person among others', we will recognize and act exclusively on 'objective' grounds or the grounds that can be reformulated into their objective forms. The moral implications of the formal system of reasons ('the possibility of altruism') is established by the fact that, as rational agents, we have the same reasons to act for the interest of our own as for any other person's. What is

more, given the internalist construal of the reason for action, we should have the same motivation to do. In the 1980's Nagel dropped the demand that all valid reasons for actions must be 'objective' (Nagel 1986). The true element of it, according to his reinterpretation, consisted in the fact that it reflected the tendency to objectivity, which is characteristic of the moral point of view. The capacity of adopting an objective, increasingly external point of view is specific and central to the human mind. This tendency justifies the demands of the impersonal and formal part of morality and the reasons for action stemming from it. In Nagel's new terminology, there are two kinds of such reasons: 'agent neutral' and 'agent relative'. The latter contains not only the reasons coming from deontological moral theories but also some purely 'subjective' reasons coming from an individual's projects and engagements. 'Subjective' reasons for action are valid as long as they do not conflict with the reasons coming from the demands of morality; in such a case they are overridden by moral reasons. Despite this new distinction and an apparently better and more complete description of human action, some substantial doubts as to the nature of reasons still remain. Are there any reasons in the external world, which are independent of human activity or are they constructed by humans? If the former were true, then Nagel's position would be a moral realism of a non-naturalistic character, a kind of metaethical neo-intuitionism. Nagel himself, on the one hand, explicitly argues for 'moral realism' and against moral antirealism. On the other hand, he says that what he means by 'moral realism' is the fact that the truth about reasons for action is independent of our interests and attitudes and there is no independent reality for a moral theory as is the case for a physical theory. What are then the bearers of the truth about the reasons? Should we understand Nagel's position as a kind of idealism? Clearly, further investigation into the nature of reasons for actions is both necessary and promising.

2. In Search of 'the Sources of Normativity'

Christine Korsgaard has no doubts that Nagel's position represents moral realism and she is sure that moral realism in general is not true. Her description of human action is both unsophisticated and bold. First of all, she has formulated a powerful response to the Humean challenge to the idea of practical rationality: practical reason must be normative even if it is purely instrumental (Korsgaard 1997). This is perhaps the best argument against the Humean position in the 20th century. Korsgaard's aim is not to derive morality as a formal consequence of practical rationality. Rather, her ultimate aim is to discover the 'source of normativity'. What she means by this is an answer to the question: "what justifies the claims that morality makes on us" from the first person perspective (Korsgaard 1996, 10). It is within this, internal perspective of an agent that his or her reasons for action manifest themselves along with the freedom of will. Due to the reflective structure of our consciousness we can either follow our desires and natural impulses or not. Korsgaard's approach is, paradoxically, both strongly Kantian and non-Kantian. It is Kantian because she assumes that all valid reasons for action must fall under some general laws of action. There are no particular, unique reasons that could play a role only once in

an extreme or exceptional situation. Again, it is Kantian because she assumes that an agent has the authority to give these laws of action to himself or herself and this is what she means by normativity. It is an inescapable feature of our action: as humans we have to give imperatives to ourselves. 'The sources of normativity' must be placed inside us as long as we are rational and integral subjects. Yet, Korsgaard's position is at the same time non-Kantian because she claims that the law does not have to be the moral law and they do not have to extend over all rational agents. The thesis she defends instead reads that all the laws of the action of a person must be grounded in what she calls his or her 'practical identity'. It is central to our nature that we have to determine and construct our 'practical identity'. Korsgaard is absolutely clear on the fact that there are no reasons for action in external reality. All the reasons for action are constructed by agents and they are grounded in the laws of their actions and ultimately in their 'practical identities'. Determining what we cannot do without losing our identity, these laws constitute our obligations as well.

Should we conceive our personal identity and the relation between our self and our actions as Korsgaard does? Or can we discover a simple and constant self in the logical analysis of our action, the self that in fact constitutes our identity at a deeper level (Searle 2001, 87)? Do agents have enough authority and power to fulfill all the tasks that Korsgaard attributes to them? She is apparently sure that they have and that there is no better explanation of the nature of normativity.

Korsgaard's entire argument can be divided into two parts: the first goes from normative reasons to practical identity and the second from practical identity to morality. The difficulties and gaps of the first part have been extensively discussed by R. Cohon (Cohon 2000). Even if we assume that all reasons must fall under some general laws it is not clear why these laws should be grounded in our 'practical identity'. There apparently are reasons to teach our children some things even if a mother does not recognize them as a part of her 'practical identity'. The second part is not wholly convincing either. In this part, an agent reflects on his/her 'practical identities' and finds that many of them can be dropped and changed. We can change our jobs, enter some new organizations or make new friends. But if we reflect thoroughly enough, we will arrive at our deepest 'practical identity' that cannot be dropped or changed. It is identity that ascribes the same 'unconditional' value of 'humanity' both to ourselves and all other human beings. This fundamental kind of identity extends over all human beings and the law it constitutes is moral law.

Leaving aside the lacunae of each part of Korsgaard's argument, there is one more general problem that extends over both parts. It is true that if one confers conditional values on the things he or she chooses, one has to ascribe an unconditional value to oneself at the same time. But ascribing the same fundamental value of 'humanity' to any person in the world is apparently a normative claim. Korsgaard offers some new content to the idea of humanity that we must value: we are beings who have to make laws of action for ourselves determining in this way our relative and contingent identities (Korsgaard 1996, 119-122). Both the idea and the value of humanity construed in this way are neither relative nor contingent. In the first part of Korsgaard's argument normativity as such is explained in terms of 'practical identity'. In the second part, however, the most important kind of 'practical identity' is explained in a way that explicitly refers to normativity. In the first part normativity in a broad sense is construed as the central future of our agency and moral normativity is regarded as its particular kind. In the second part, moral normativity, defined by reference to the value of

'humanity', is shown to be the most important and regarded as the source of other more contingent normativities implied by our contingent and relative forms of 'practical identity'. On Korsgaard's theory, in the case of a conflict, moral reasons, always override the reasons coming from other, 'contingent' kinds of 'practical identity'. Leaving the differences in terminology aside, the position at which Korsgaard's argument ends up is clearly very close to the genuine position of Kant, from which it explicitly departs at its beginning.

Drawing from the philosophy of later Wittgenstein, Korsgaard argues that there cannot be private reasons and all reasons for actions are public because the 'linguistic consciousness' is public in the sense that the language in which they are formulated must be public. First, she argues that ascribing the unconditional value of 'humanity' to oneself does mean ascribing the same value to any other person. Second, she argues that we can share all the particular reasons for action that other people have. The reasons of other people have the status that our own natural impulses have: we can construct from them our own reasons for actions. Korsgaard undermines Nagel's distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' reasons: there is no need to resort to the 'objective' reasons in order to establish morality since morality is grounded in the objective value of 'humanity'. Even if we accept her position, there is still a problem that needs an answer. We can share all the reasons and values of a person on the basis of the value of his/her 'humanity' but we clearly cannot get involved and act on all of them. Where is the line between the reasons and values in which we must get involved and those in which we do not have to, though, of course, we can? Nagel has an answer to this question: we must always recognize and act on objective reasons in the first place.

Are there any reasons for action in external reality, which are independent of our activity? Of course this question must be left open here. But there is one point at which Korsgaard's thinking apparently goes too far. She claims that even if moral realism were true, that would be not enough to explain the 'sources of normativity' since an agent can always question and reject the demands of any external normative entity. True, an agent can do this but would this decision be rational? If there are independent reasons in the world, and morality gives overriding reasons for action to us, and internalism is true, then this clearly would suffice to explain the 'sources of normativity'. If moral realism would be the case, then Korsgaard's thinking would be an important insight into the normative aspects of our action showing suggestively how an agent is able to follow his normative principles despite all the difficulties facing him in the real world. The autonomy of an agent can also manifest itself in this way in the long run.

References

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