



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Book review of Self-Constitution, Christine Korsgaard

Doomen, J.

Citation

Doomen, J. (2010). Book review of Self-Constitution, Christine Korsgaard. *Dialogue*, 49(2), 317-322. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17870>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17870>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity, and Integrity

C. M. KORSGAARD

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, xiv + 230 pp., \$95.00 cloth, \$31.50 paper

doi:10.1017/S0012217310000338

Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity, and Integrity is Korsgaard's attempt to characterize and clarify what is decisive for man's actions. As a Kantian (p. 123) she emphasizes the

role of reason, not eschewing the confrontation with Plato and Aristotle, thus providing a familiar background against which to espouse a moral theory.

One of Korsgaard's crucial claims is that action is self-constitution (pp. 24, 25). Furthermore, one is stated to be responsible for what one does "because we have a form of identity that is *constituted* by our chosen actions" (p. 130). A number of important topics are touched upon. The issue of how one's identity (what constitutes a "self") should be understood obviously presents itself. The phrase "chosen actions" leads to the question of to what extent actions can be chosen. Finally, "responsibility" has a moral connotation. These three matters are all discussed to various extents.

To start with the "self": Korsgaard indicates one's identity to be constituted by one's choices and actions (p. 19). She is aware of the apparent problem that ensues from this position, which she presents in the guise of "the paradox of self-constitution," namely that it is difficult to grasp how one may thus constitute one's own identity if one does not yet exist as a (fully fledged) agent (p. 20).

The way she attempts to tackle this issue is crucial for the assessment of the book's merits. The following is illustrative:

What makes an action *mine*, in the special way that an action is *mine*, rather than something that just *happens* in me? That it issues from my constitution, rather than from some force at work within me; that it is expressive of a law I give to myself, rather than a law imposed upon me from without. (p. 160)

A place seems thus to be demarcated where one's identity is allegedly located, although Korsgaard maintains not to cling to the agent as separately existing, the agent being rather "something over and above her parts in the way that the constitution of a city is something over and above the citizens and officials who live there" (p. 135).

After all, the contrast is drawn between one's *own* constitution and some force that is not crucial in the coming about of an action. This is not very clarifying, since all that is said here is that an action is mine if it is mine (and if it is not heteronomous instead of autonomous, to anticipate matters somewhat). This difficulty can be evaded not by identifying with the constitution, but rather by taking it as something that belongs to oneself, just as, to use a somewhat trite simile, one (presumably) doesn't identify with one's material possessions. Such an approach would, however, only add to the vagueness of the "self."

Furthermore, the location of identity is not easily found and it seems to be (further) eroded by the following: "what counts as me, my incentives, my reasons, my identity, depends on, rather than precedes, the kinds of choices that I make" (p. 199). If one's identity depends on one's choices, there is no criterion for these choices to be made that would qualify as one's own. In fact, the very phrase "the kinds of choices that I make" is in that sense delusive, since no "I" exists at this stage to make any choice. One might even argue that no "choice" is made at all, a point that will be addressed below. Whether one actually chooses or not is not necessarily decisive, since, according to the author, an animal makes no choices but nonetheless "makes himself the kind of agent that does what he does by doing what he does" (p. 108). Still, if this line of thought is followed, the notion of "agent" is eroded as well, especially if an action's decisive element is that it be performed on purpose (p. 96).

Trying to resolve this by – artificially – introducing a secondary notion of “autonomy,” meaning that the agent is (merely) governed by his “own” causality (p. 108), isn’t satisfactory, as this would (again) erode a notion, in this case that of “autonomy,” which would become meaningless. (Incidentally, it may be argued to be meaningless in any case, but I will leave that for now, as this problem is not limited to the book under review.) At any rate, the promise to make it clear how self-constitution should be considered to be action itself (p. 44) is not fulfilled.

Additional difficulties emerge as the basis for man to choose is inquired, which is, in this book, inextricably connected with self-constitution (at least for rational beings). When Korsgaard states that to will an end is to make oneself the cause of the end (p. 69) and that “to act is to constitute yourself as the cause of an end (p. 72) or, alternatively, “acting is determining yourself to be a cause” (p. 77), it is incumbent upon her to indicate on what basis one would do this. “Autonomy,” which has been briefly discussed above, is an important notion in this respect. An agent is considered to be autonomous “when her movements are in some clear sense self-determined or her own” (p. 83). Agents are considered to be the causes of effects through their wills (p. 87), but the step from this to the claim that they operate autonomously is too great to take without an additional account. Someone may, e.g., be said to will a certain purchase and effectuate this by closing a deal, but that doesn’t mean that he thereby acts autonomously; his actions may be explained by an appeal to factors that determine his will.

Korsgaard’s remark that one has “no choice but to choose” (p. 87) appears to be correct if this is taken in the general sense that one must act one way or another. (To continue the simple example just presented, one must choose to make the purchase or not [e.g., because one wants to reserve one’s money for something else]). That doesn’t entail a more fundamental sense of “choice,” according to which one determines the *ground(s)* on the basis of which one acts, or, in other words, it doesn’t entail a position in which one decides *how* one will choose (i.e., a position similar [at least in this regard] to the Kantian noumenal one).

In a previous work to which the author frequently refers, the position is taken that since nothing determines how one should act, there is a free will [Korsgaard 1996, p. 98]. This is presented negatively, in that no ground is pointed out for the act. However, it is not enough to state that no (external) factor is decisive. In fact, if *nothing* determines how one should act, no ground whatsoever is appointed, not even one that would allegedly suffice to demonstrate a “free will.” If nothing determines the act, there is no act.

Perhaps the difficulty results from the fact that one can choose without determining the grounds of the choice, so that the act – no *action* remains in this case, according to the author (pp. 11, 12) – would come about relatively mechanically. In that sense, one may argue that an animal or a child, beings that are (presumably) unable to determine these grounds (Korsgaard admittedly deals with animals and has a more nuanced view in this respect [notably pp. 98, 99, 115], but fails to corroborate her claims empirically or by means of a compelling argument), chooses if it/she/he has more than one option and acts in such a way that one of the options is pursued. Korsgaard’s notion of “choice” differs from this, as is clear from the following: “an animal does not choose the principles of his own causality – he does not choose the content of his instincts. We human beings on the other hand do choose the principles of our own causality – we choose our own maxims, the content of our principles” (p. 108). This kind of “choice” obviously is further-reaching than the variant discussed above.

Unfortunately, Korsgaard doesn't clarify how this choice is possible. It is useful to contrast her account with Kant's, by whose practical philosophy this model is clearly inspired but who takes a different approach with regard to this matter. It is striking that Korsgaard only refers to the immortality of the soul and God's existence as matters of faith (p. 88) which are, indeed, postulates of practical reason according to Kant in that they can't be proven on the basis of (theoretical) reason but are required if one is to act morally. Significantly, however, Kant states that freedom, too, is such a postulate [Kant 1908, p. 132], it being impossible to know how freedom is possible [Kant 1908, p. 133]. Kant's solution to the problem that it is difficult, if possible at all, to comprehend how freedom should be possible is obviously unsatisfactory, but at least he takes the issue seriously. Korsgaard acknowledges the problem (p. 85). What is meritorious in her attempt to resolve it is that no similar refuge is sought in a supposed intelligible world. Still, it does appear that the reason why recourse to such a far-reaching way out is not required is that the difficulties are underrated.

By maintaining that "Our practical identities are, for the most part, contingent" (p. 23), the grounds for the coming about of actions are not located at any (alleged) noumenal level, thus commendably evading Kant's predicament that the "noumenal self" is an abstract and even empty notion. This does, however, come at the expense of burdening oneself with having to prove how this leaves open the possibility of autonomy.

In saying "Making the contingent necessary is one of the tasks of human life and the ability to do it is arguably a mark of a good human being" (p. 23), it appears that Kant's dictum to act in such a way that a maxim can be a principle of a general law [Kant 1908, p. 30] is confused with his stance that the noumenal self is the moral agent. Moreover, the fact that one is conscious of the process that leads to an action does not imply, as Korsgaard argues (p. 127), that one is free. After all, apart from this consciousness it should, in order for the presence of freedom to be argued compellingly, be made clear *how* one determines oneself. Whether this is possible at all is a point of discussion, but Korsgaard does not, in any case, demonstrate this. These difficulties culminate near the end of the book, when it is stated: "Without respect for the humanity in your own person, it is impossible to will the laws of your own causality, to make something of yourself, to be a person; and unless you make something of yourself, unless you constitute yourself as a person, it will be impossible for you to act at all" (p. 204). The notion of "respect" will be forgone here, as the moral conceptions will be briefly addressed below. As to the rest of this quote: it is unclear, at least to me, how one can be said to will the laws of one's own causality. With regard to the given that one must constitute oneself: the paradox of self-constitution has not been resolved at this stage.

It may be more convincing to maintain that a human being develops on the basis of diverse factors, which can be of an innate or environmental nature (one's upbringing being a natural candidate), until he is able to reflect and make choices (in the sense discussed above, rather than in the author's sense). In that case, man would be constituted, to use the vernacular, by said factors, rather than that he would, in some mysterious way, constitute himself. This would mean, according to Korsgaard, that what man does can no longer be dubbed actions (p. 91), but this is merely a matter of definition; and besides, one could still call them acts, if one would be so inclined to maintain the author's idiom (cf. the discussion of the nature of an action, above).

One may additionally adduce that there is no freedom but that human adults basically act in the same ways animals and children (presumably) do; the process would then merely

be more complex in the case of adults than in the other cases. This account, or a similar one, is then to be adhered to as long as the existence of freedom has not been shown.

Another issue that needs attention is the moral framework in which the theory is presented. A number of moral notions are used, notably “good,” “morally right/wrong,” “plight,” and “responsibility.” The author partially (implicitly) relies on a common-sense approach and partially argues that the human condition as she takes this serves as a basis here (which does not, as was argued above, suffice). To provide an example: it is stated, in the chapter dealing with autonomy, that humans “must be committed to morality – for that, of course, isn’t optional” (p. 88). One wonders what prompts the phrase “of course” here.

Perhaps the same line of thought is decisive as in the discussion of the human plight in the first chapter. There, Korsgaard says:

We must act, and we need reasons in order to act. And unless there are *some* principles with which we identify we will have no reasons to act. Every human being must make himself into someone in particular, in order to have reasons to act and to live. Carving out a personal identity for which we are responsible is one of the inescapable tasks of human life. (pp. 23, 24)

The first sentence of the quote is straightforward and seems to be correct: one has a reason to act. Still, “reason” is not to be taken here as any motivation whatsoever, but has a moral meaning (p. 13). This makes the rest of the passage understandable, but that doesn’t mean that what is expressed here is correct as a whole. For the “plight” to carve out an identity and to take responsibility shows the paradox of self-constitution in its full force. And, apart from that, no moral task needs to be posited in order to describe the fact that one must act: it is simply useful to act consistently (and, as was mentioned above, “must” can also be regarded in the sense that one inevitably acts one way or another). “Must” needs, in this case, to be distinguished from “should” in a moral sense. This may explain (a great number of) the phenomena the author points out, and in that case she should (although not in a moral sense) make it clear why an (additional) moral account is necessary, which she fails to do.

Finally, a general note on the terminology is warranted. Korsgaard rightly says that a philosophical problem can’t be solved by giving it a name (p. 99). She appears nonetheless to fall prey to her own criticism in several instances. This is clear, e.g., in her attempt to explain animal behaviour by introducing a minor sense of autonomy (p. 108) – the appeal to autonomy in general is problematic as well, as was indicated above. An appeal to an alleged (Aristotelian) form to explain the coming about of an action (pp. 107, 109) does not provide clarity. The same applies to the alleged “self-constitution,” which is, admittedly, expounded in detail but without convincingly explaining how this might actually take place, at times hiding behind metaphysical constructions.

In conclusion, the author’s ambitions are not fulfilled since she does not succeed in compellingly presenting the amalgam of moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology the construction of which is, throughout the book, carefully attempted. This is not necessarily to be attributed to the author, though. Such a project may simply be doomed to fail because of a number of assumptions and notions inherently intertwined with it that make it inconsistent and incoherent.

References

Kant, Immanuel

- 1908 *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Kant's Gesammelte Schriften.* (1788).
Erste Abtheilung: Werke. Band 5 (Kant's collected writings. First
division: works. Volume 5). Berlin: Georg Reimer.

Korsgaard, Christine M.

- 1996 *The Sources of Normativity.* Cambridge/Melbourne: Cambridge
University Press.