

Korsgaard on Motivational Skepticism

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In her article "Skepticism about Practical Reason," Christine Korsgaard argues for the thesis that considerations regarding the motivational efficacy of practical reason do not constitute an independent ground for skepticism "about the extent to which human action is or could possibly be directed by reason."¹ In her view, skepticism about the scope of reason as a motive, which she calls motivational skepticism, is always based on a prior skepticism about whether certain supposed rational principles have any content bearing on human action and deliberation, which she calls content skepticism. We will consider Korsgaard's argument for this thesis, which relies upon an ambiguity between a psychological and a trivial understanding of her internalism requirement. If we do not equivocate between these two understandings, then her argument no longer appears to be sound. We will also consider why the distinction between these two understandings is important for Humean theories of practical reason and consider another way of understanding Korsgaard's thesis.

1.

Before presenting her central argument for the thesis that motivational skepticism is always based on content skepticism, Korsgaard examines David Hume's motivational skepticism. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will."² Hume begins by noting that reason plays a role in judging the relations of ideas, such as in abstract mathematical or demonstrative reasoning, and in judging the relations of objects given to us by experience, such as in reasoning concerning causal relations, including instrumental reasoning. Reasoning concerning the relations of ideas does not direct our actions at all while reasoning concerning causal relations can be said to direct our actions only insofar as there exists some relevant prior passion. Should we lack a passion for some end, the discovery of the means to that end will not move the will to act. Therefore, reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will.³

Korsgaard notes that Hume's argument relies upon "what is by this point in the *Treatise* a settled list of the types of rational judgement."⁴ Hume already has some views about the content of rational principles; reason plays a mathematical and demonstrative role and is able to determine cause and effect. Hume notes that these kinds of reasoning cannot direct or oppose the passions. This is then taken to be a basis for denying that practical reason can exist. As Korsgaard puts it:

Hume's arguments against a more extensive practical employment of reason depend upon Hume's own view about what reason is—that is, about what sorts of operation and judgement are “rational.” His motivational skepticism (skepticism about the scope of reason as a motive) is entirely dependent upon his content skepticism (skepticism about what reason has to say about choice and action).⁵

If Hume had admitted the possibility of rational operations other than the rational operations on his settled list, his analysis of the motivational efficacy of reason would have come out another way. Hume is skeptical about the motivational efficacy of reason only because he assumes a less extensive view of reason. Therefore, his motivational skepticism cannot, as some philosophers have supposed, be used to support the less extensive view of reason. Korsgaard argues that we should not think of Hume's argument as “placing independent constraints, based solely on motivational considerations, on what might count as a principle of practical reason.”⁶

Korsgaard is right that Hume starts with a somewhat settled list of the kinds of rational operations, but this does not make his argument question-begging or prevent him from establishing independent constraints on what counts as a rational process based on motivational considerations. Hume examines a number of activities that are considered, without controversy, to be rational processes, such as mathematical reasoning, logical deduction, and instrumental reasoning. He then notes the connection all these processes bear to motivation. If, in our conceptual analysis of reason, we were to extend the class of rational processes to include other supposed rational processes, such as those processes expressed in a Kantian account of practical reasoning, then we should expect that these processes bear some relevant similarities to our uncontroversial cases. If they do not, then we should hesitate before extending our concept of reason to include them. Thus, Hume's argument can be understood as a conceptual analysis beginning from uncontroversial cases of rational processes.

Indeed, Korsgaard herself suggests that a similar analysis be conducted in order to present an argument to determine which processes have rational authority: “This argument will usually consist in an attempt to arrive at a general notion of reason by discovering features or characteristics that theoretical and practical reason share.”⁷ Hume discovers a common feature of uncontroversial cases of reasoning in their relation to motivation, and uses this feature to ground a skepticism about practical reason. This is not to deny that these uncontroversial cases bear some relevant similarities to other more controversial cases of reasoning, but to note one important difference with which to ground a skepticism about practical reason.

Someone might defend Korsgaard at this point by noting that she suggests that we look for the shared characteristics of theoretical and practical reason while Hume's argument simply starts from a settled list of uncontroversial cases, which does not include practical reason. However, the question of where we

start our analysis of the concept of reason is not very important. A Humean could start by looking at both theoretical and practical reason and then narrow down the field of candidates by considering the relation between reason and motivation. Furthermore, the cases that Hume considers are uncontroversial, since they would not be denied by Kantians. Kantians argue for an expansion of the concept of reason. They do not want to exclude either ordinary theoretical reasoning or instrumental reasoning from the concept of reason.

2.

Although Korsgaard argues against Hume's motivational skepticism, the remainder of her paper is concerned to establish a thesis about motivational skepticism in general, specifically, that motivational skepticism must always be based on content skepticism. Korsgaard accepts the idea that practical reason claims must have some relation to motivation. She specifies this idea in her internalism requirement, according to which "practical-reason claims, if they are really to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating rational persons."⁸ She later clarifies the requirement with the following remarks:

My speculation is that skepticism about practical reason is sometimes based on a false impression of what the internalism requirement requires. It does not require that rational requirements always succeed in motivating us. All it requires is that rational requirements succeed in motivating us insofar as we are rational. One can admit the possibility of true irrationality and still believe that all practical reasoning is instrumental.⁹

By "true irrationality," Korsgaard means a "failure to respond appropriately to an available reason."¹⁰ In the last sentence of the passage above, Korsgaard notes that if we say, for example, that practical rationality is limited to instrumental rationality, then the fact that someone fails to be appropriately motivated to respond to an available instrumental reason does not show a defect in the conception of instrumental rationality, but only shows a defect in the agent, who is exhibiting true irrationality. Korsgaard expresses this point later in the paper by saying that the fact that "the law might not govern conduct, even when someone understood it, is no reason for skepticism: the necessity is in the law, and not in us."¹¹

Korsgaard argues that our understanding of the internalism requirement needs to take into account true irrationality because there are a number of causes which prevent individuals from responding appropriately to available reasons:

But the internalism requirement does not imply that nothing can interfere with this motivational transmission [a transmission of what she calls "motive force" from our ends to the conclusion that we have reason to perform some action which is a means to those ends]. And generally, this is something there seems to be no reason to believe: there seem to be

plenty of things that could interfere with the motivational influence of a given rational consideration. Rage, passion, depression, distraction, grief, physical or mental illness: all these things could cause us to act irrationally, that is, to fail to be motivationally responsive to the rational considerations available to us.¹²

Therefore, the internalism requirement should not be understood to require that reasons always motivate us, but to require that reasons motivate us insofar as we are rational.

There is an ambiguity in the internalism requirement presented by Korsgaard, specifically concerning the clause “insofar as we are rational.” It is unclear whether or not this clause expresses a notion of rationality with some independent content. On one hand, we could think of this clause as expressing an independent notion of a rational person: rational persons are persons not affected by rage, passion, depression, distraction, grief, physical or mental illness, or any other psychological factors that would normally cause someone not to respond to available reasons. On this view, we could examine psychologically sound individuals and see whether or not supposed practical reason claims succeed in motivating them, thereby seeing whether or not the practical reason claims satisfy the internalism requirement. On the other hand, we could understand the rationality clause as expressing a definitional truth about the relation between rationality and motivation. On this view, should an individual fail to respond appropriately to some available practical reason claim, then the individual is shown to be exhibiting irrationality, thereby failing to satisfy the rationality clause. On this view, the agent is deemed irrational, regardless of whether or not he is affected by rage, passion, depression, distraction, grief, physical or mental illness, or any other psychological factors that would normally cause someone not to respond to available reasons. The agent’s failure to respond appropriately to the available reason, in itself, makes the agent exhibit irrationality. We may call the first understanding of the clause the psychological interpretation and the second, the trivial interpretation.

3.

The ambiguity we have considered plays an important role in Korsgaard’s argument for the thesis that motivational skepticism is always based on content skepticism. With her central argument, Korsgaard aims to show that our motivational analysis of a person’s actions depends on what we think comprise the principles of rationality. She asks us to begin by assuming that we already accept that rationality is limited to instrumental rationality, which is the requirement that we ought to take the means to our ends. This notion of rationality, however, does not include a rational requirement of prudence. Let us suppose that we are considering an individual who takes the means to some imprudent end. According to our merely instrumental notion of rationality, the imprudent individual would not be acting irrationally. Indeed, we would be

committed to a revealed preference analysis. The individual's actions show that he did not care about the prudent end. Since our notion of rationality cannot condemn the individual as irrational for his imprudence, we say that he acted rationally since he took the means to the end he cared about, as evidenced by the fact that he chose it.

But, says Korsgaard, we need not accept this motivational analysis of the case once we admit the possibility of true irrationality:

But once we admit that one might from some other cause fail to be responsive to a rational consideration, there is no special reason to accept this analysis of the case. I do not mean that there is a reason to reject it either, of course; my point is that whether you accept it depends on whether you already accept the limitation to means/ends rationality.... if you do not [accept the limitation to means-end rationality], and you think it is reasonable to choose the greater good (because prudence has rational authority), you will say that this is a case of true irrationality. The point is that the motivational analysis of the case depends upon your views of the content of rational principles of action, not the reverse.¹³

Thus, she concludes that our motivational analysis of a person's actions depends on what we think comprise the principles of rationality.

There are two central claims in this argument which are relevant to the distinction between the psychological and trivial interpretations of irrationality. First, there is the claim of some other cause, that "once we admit that one might from some other cause fail to be responsive to a rational consideration, there is no special reason to accept this analysis of the case."¹⁴ Second, there is the claim of rational authority, that "if ... you think it is reasonable to choose the greater good (because prudence has rational authority), you will say that this is a case of true irrationality."¹⁵

The basic point of the claim of some other cause is that once we admit that rage, passion, grief, depression, and so forth, might cause someone to fail to respond appropriately to reason, there is no reason to accept or reject the initial analysis, which held that the imprudent man did not act irrationally. We might be tempted to accept the initial analysis, according to which practical rationality is simply means-ends rationality, because individuals are most often motivated to take the means to their ends, while they are less often motivated to do what is prudent. Indeed, the initial analysis was such that the individual always acted rationally. But once we admit that that rage, passion, grief, and depression can interfere with our rationality, including even our motivations to take the means to our ends, then there is no reason to accept an analysis according to which it comes out that the people are most often motivated to do what is rational. In order for the claim to be persuasive, Korsgaard must here be using the psychological interpretation of irrationality. Irrationality happens when some psychological cause interferes with an agent.

According to the claim of rational authority, if we think that prudence has rational authority, then we will consider any violation of the requirements of prudence to be a case of irrationality. This claim does not make use of the psychological interpretation of irrationality. It is not that irrationality is understood in terms of some psychological deficiency that causes us to fail to do what we have reason to do. Irrationality happens simply when rational requirements are violated. Any violation of the requirement of prudence shows an individual to be exhibiting irrationality. Here we have the trivial interpretation of irrationality.

It might be thought that Korsgaard aims to refute a kind of skepticism that relies upon the thought that it is impossible to violate the requirements of instrumental rationality. This kind of skepticism seems to be refuted by noting that irrationality involves the interference of some cause or other. Depression, distraction, and grief can cause us to fail to take the means to our ends and any form of skepticism that refuses to recognize this would be misguided. However, this is not Korsgaard's argument. If it were, she could simply claim that the initial analysis is a bad analysis. But she goes out of her way to say that she is not claiming that there is reason to reject the initial analysis. Her point is that the motivational analysis of the case depends upon our views of the content of rational principles of action.

According to the argument, the claim of some other cause is supposed to persuade us to accept the rational authority claim. Once we admit that certain psychological causes can interfere with our motivation to do what we have reason to do, then if we accept prudence as a rational requirement, any violation of the requirement will constitute true irrationality. However, it should now be clear that the argument does not go through. A defender of a less substantive account of rationality has an easy reply to make. She can say that insofar as agents are rational in that they are not affected by rage, passion, grief and depression or any other psychological factors that would normally cause someone not to respond to available reasons, they may not be motivated to follow the supposed rational requirement of prudence. The specification of such psychological causes has a content independent from the supposed rational requirements. The violation of these requirements by an agent does not imply that the agent's motivation is affected by the aforementioned psychological conditions. Taking "insofar as we are rational" to mean "insofar as we are not affected by these psychological causes," the supposed rational requirement of prudence will fail to satisfy the internalism requirement.

Our understanding of psychological deficiencies is not determined entirely by a specification of rational requirements. Our understanding of psychological deficiencies, such as rage, passion, depression, and grief are not defined without any consideration whatsoever about what the requirements of rationality are. For example, our understanding of rage as a psychological deficiency depends to some extent on the fact that rage causes us to do things we

have no reason to do. However, while there is no doubt that our understandings of the psychological causes that interfere with rationality are informed by our views about what a person has reason to do, it does not follow that these psychological causes do not have a content independent from the specification of rational requirements.

Korsgaard notes that once we admit that true irrationality is possible, the internalism requirement should not be understood to always require that individuals be able to be argued into rational conduct. If the role of reason were, as Hume thought, limited to the determination of means to ends, then we could point out to people the false beliefs they have about their means, and thereby argue them into rational conduct. In this case, as Korsgaard puts it, “the motivational path, so to speak, from means to ends is open.”¹⁶ However, with true irrationality, we are dealing with irrationality in this motivational path:

A person in whom this path is, from some cause, blocked or nonfunctioning may not respond to argument, even if this person understands the argument in a theoretical way. Aristotle thinks of the incontinent person as being in a condition of this sort: this happens to people in fits of passion or rage, and the condition is actually physiological.... But if there is a gap between understanding a reason and being motivated by it, then internalism does not imply that people can always be argued into reasonable conduct.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that in Aristotle’s discussion of incontinence, to which Korsgaard refers, he asks the very question which drives the distinction between the psychological and trivial interpretations of true irrationality. He says:

The starting-point of our investigation is the question whether the continent man and the incontinent are differentiated by their objects or their attitude, i.e. whether the incontinent man is incontinent simply by being concerned with such and such objects, or instead, by his attitude, or instead, by both of these things.¹⁸

Aristotle does not go on to answer this question, at least directly. However, it seems reasonable to suspect that the truth lies in the last option mentioned by Aristotle. It seems reasonable to claim that a person is irrational only if there is some interfering psychological cause, but also claim that what counts as a interfering psychological cause is determined, in part, by considerations of what a person has reason to do. However, the important point to note in our discussion of Korsgaard’s argument is that if we reject the first option presented by Aristotle, according to which irrationality is defined only by our views about what an agent has reason to do, then it does seem right to maintain that psychologically rational people could always be argued into reasonable conduct.

4.

Some philosophers might wonder why it is important to draw a distinction between the psychological and trivial interpretations of irrationality and place a

great deal of emphasis on whether irrationality is attributed to some psychological cause or not. The reason is that contemporary Humeans often call attention to the connection between reasons and explanations. For example, Bernard Williams writes:

If there are reasons for actions, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action (it does not follow that they must figure in all correct explanations of their action).¹⁹

Williams goes on to note that “nothing can explain an agent’s (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act.”²⁰ Williams uses these premises in an argument which concludes that reasons must bear some rational relation to an agent’s subjective motivations.

For most intentional actions that do not involve the influence of some psychological deficiency, we can present a reason-based explanation for the individual's actions. For such actions, an agent’s reasons can figure into a correct explanation of his actions. However, in many cases where a psychological deficiency causes an individual to act in some way, we do not cite a reason-based explanation. Instead, we point to the psychological cause of his action and use this cause to explain his behavior instead. If we accept the psychological interpretation of irrationality, then irrationality has some explanatory force. However, if we accept the trivial interpretation of irrationality, then irrationality does not have explanatory force. Irrationality is simply any violation of what we say are the requirements of rationality. No psychological explanation of an agent’s supposedly irrational action is presented. This naturally raises a question about whether we could instead present a reason-based explanation of the agent’s action, assuming that we do not want to leave his action unexplained. If we could come up with some reason-based explanation, then a Humean might, given the connection between reasons and explanation, claim that the supposed requirements of rationality are not correct. The psychological interpretation of irrationality allows for an explanatory tidiness that the trivial interpretation does not allow for. This could provide some justification for the Humean line of defense outlined in the previous section.

This version of Humean skepticism relies to a great extent on norms concerning the explanation of behavior. When we encounter an individual who fails to connect cause and effect or fails to take the means to an end, we normally assume that there must be some psychological cause interfering with his behavior. This is not the kind of behavior for which we would normally present reason-based explanations. However, when we encounter an individual who, for example, refuses to test the universality of the maxims on which he acts, we do not normally assume that his refusal must have its origin in some psychological deficiency. Nor do we take such a refusal to constitute a psychological deficiency. We do not recognize a psychological ailment having to do with an unwillingness to universalize maxims. If a Humean draws some

connection between reason and explanations, then our understanding of rational requirements is going to be influenced by our norms of explanation, particularly norms governing psychological explanations of irrationality.

The psychological interpretation of irrationality might also appeal to Humeans if they are conducting a common feature conceptual analysis of reason as discussed in the first section of this paper. If they were looking for the features common to rational processes, they might also conduct an investigation of the features common to irrational thought and behavior. Rage, passion, depression, grief and distraction are psychological deficiencies that interfere with a broad range of rational processes. These psychological deficiencies constitute a core common notion of irrationality. If we were to consider a supposed rational process as a candidate for inclusion in the concept of reason, and if a failure to follow the process does not usually involve some psychological deficiency, then we have shown that, in a certain sense, this failure does not link up with our core common notion of irrationality.

Certain assumptions about the relationship between reasons and explanation would give Humeans an interest in the distinction between the psychological and trivial interpretations of irrationality. However, whether Humean assumptions are justified is another question not addressed here. In any case, Korsgaard has not shown why a Humean needs to accept the trivial interpretation of irrationality. A Humean could limit the understanding of irrationality to the psychological interpretation and still use the internalism requirement to ground a skepticism about practical reason.

5.

Korsgaard argues that if we think prudence has rational authority, then we would condemn an imprudent agent as irrational. More generally, she thinks that our motivational analysis of such cases depends upon our views about the content of rational principles. While Korsgaard's argument for such a claim is problematic, perhaps there is another way in which she could present and defend her claim that motivational skepticism depends on content skepticism. Instead of focusing on how a philosopher's views about the content of rational principles might figure directly into the motivational analysis of an agent's actions, she could focus on an agent's beliefs about the content of rational principles. She could argue that an agent's being unmotivated by a principle of rationality is due to either the interference of some psychological cause or his lack of belief in the principle of rationality. All psychologically rational people who believed in the principle of rationality would be motivated accordingly. This is the case whether the principle of rationality is instrumental rationality, a requirement of prudence, or some moral requirement. For example, according to this view, an imprudent man is either psychologically irrational or does not believe he is rationally required to be prudent. Likewise, a person who does not

test the universality of his maxims is either psychologically irrational or does not believe he is rationally required to universalize his maxims.

With this line of reply, we are able to preserve Korsgaard's thought that motivational skepticism depends upon content skepticism in the sense that facts about our motivations place no independent constraints on what counts as a rational requirement. An imprudent man is either psychologically irrational, which obviously does nothing to question the authority of prudence as a rational requirement, or does not believe he is rationally required to be prudent, which could only question the authority of prudence if his beliefs were true or at least reasonable. But whether the belief is true or at least reasonable depends upon our views about the content of the principles of rationality.

On this view, both minimal and more ambitious conceptions of rationality motivate psychologically rational agents provided that the agents believe in these conceptions of rationality. This view is able to satisfy a Humean's concern with the connection between reasons and explanations since any adequate explanation of an agent's behavior will refer to the agent's beliefs about what he is rationally required to do.

While this view provides the most plausible way of understanding Korsgaard's view that motivational skepticism depends upon content skepticism, a Humean skeptic would challenge this view on two grounds. A Humean skeptic would think that the fact that a large number of agents do not believe in the more ambitious conceptions of rationality is a reason for skepticism about these conceptions of rationality. That agents are not moved to accept such conceptions of rationality shows that the conceptions of rationality differ from the less controversial rational processes that we normally include within our concept of reason. This difference justifies a skepticism towards these more ambitious conceptions of rationality. As well, a Humean skeptic might deny that an agent's being unmotivated by a conception of rationality is due to either the interference of some psychological cause or his lack of belief in the conception of rationality. It does not seem to be true, for example, that a person who refuses to test the universality of his maxims is either psychologically irrational or does not believe he is rationally required to universalize his maxims. We could imagine a psychologically rational individual who believes that he is rationally required to universalize maxims, but finds his attention directed elsewhere. Perhaps he finds himself using considerations of overall utility to guide his deliberation. Perhaps he finds himself ignoring maxim universalization in his ordinary relationships and interactions with friends, family, and colleagues. Perhaps in setting his ends he is inclined to make special exceptions for himself and thereby ignore maxim universalization altogether. There is no reason to deal with such a case by claiming that the agent does not really believe he is rationally required to universalize maxims since this would make the connection between belief and motivation so tight that it would rule out the possibility of an agent acting against his own beliefs.

There is a trivial sense in which we might call such individuals irrational in that they are acting against their own beliefs. However, there is no reason to suppose that their actions would best be explained by some form of psychological irrationality, such as depression, distraction or something similar. Individuals may find themselves failing to be motivated by their beliefs in conceptions of rationality without such failures being due to the interference of psychological irrationality. Perhaps an individual who finds his attention directed away from maxim universalization is simply coming to revise his beliefs about what is rationally required. Perhaps he is starting to see that maxim universalization is not functioning well in his practical deliberations. A Humean skeptic may well note that it is difficult to say something similar about individuals who find their attention directed away from instrumental rationality. For a Humean skeptic, this difference will ground a motivational skepticism toward more ambitious conceptions of practical rationality. While this line of thought does provide a more plausible way to understand Korsgaard's view that motivational skepticism depends upon content skepticism, it keeps us from acknowledging that psychological irrationality is distinct from the trivial sense of irrationality involved in acting against our own beliefs. In this sense, the failure is similar to the failure of Korsgaard's own argument which equivocates between a psychological and a trivial understanding of irrationality.²¹

Notes

1. Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (1986) p. 5.
2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P.H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 413.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 414.
4. Korsgaard, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
17. *Ibid.*

18. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), VII, 3, p. 1811.
19. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 102.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
21. I would like to thank Joseph Raz and Akeel Bilgrami for helpful comments and discussion on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Value Inquiry* and its Editor-in-Chief, Thomas Magnell, for providing insightful and constructive comments.