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 Christine M. Korsgaard
 Excerpt
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PROLOGUE

Excellence and obligation
a very concise history of western metaphysics
387 BC to 1887 AD
Christine Korsgaard

One should guard against thinking lightly of [the bad conscience] merely on account of its initial painfulness and ugliness. For fundamentally it is the same active force that is at work on a grander scale in those artists of violence and organizers who build states . . . only here the material upon which the form-giving and ravishing nature of this force vents itself is man himself, his whole ancient animal self . . . This secret self-ravishment, this artists' cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and of burning in a will . . . as the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena, also brought to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation.

Nietzsche¹

It is the most striking fact about human life that we have values. We think of ways that things could be better, more perfect, and so of course different, than they are; and of ways that we ourselves could be better, more perfect, and so of course different, than we are. Why should this be so? Where do we get these ideas that outstrip the world we experience and seem to call it into question, to render judgment on it, to say that it does not measure up, that it is not what it ought to be? Clearly we do not get them from experience, at least not by any simple route. And it is puzzling too that these ideas of a world different from our own call out to us, telling us that things should be like them rather than the way they are, and that we should make them so.

Plato became Plato when Socrates made him see the problem.

¹ *The Genealogy of Morals*, II.17, p. 86.

In the *Phaedo* he asks: why do we say that the two sticks are ‘not exactly equal?’² Instead of seeing two sticks, lying side by side, that’s that, we see them as if they were *attempting* something, endeavouring to be something that they are not. We see them as if they had in mind a pattern that they were trying to emulate, a pattern of equality that was calling out to them and saying ‘be like me!’ And if we see them this way then the pattern must be in our own minds too. You cannot look at two sticks and say: ‘Oh look at the two sticks, trying and failing to be equal!’ unless your own mind contains an idea of the equal, which is to say, the perfectly equal. Plato called such a thing a form, because it serves as a kind of pattern, and said we must have known them in another world.

The fact of value is a mystery, and philosophers have been trying to solve it ever since. But it is essential to see that during the transition from the ancient to the modern world a *revolution* has taken place – in the full sense of that resonant word. The world has been turned upside down and inside out, and the problem of value has become the reverse of what it was before. And here is why:

Plato and Aristotle came to believe that value was more real than experienced fact, indeed that the real world is, in a way, value itself. They came to see the world we experience as being, in its very essence, a world of things that are trying to be much better than they are, and that really are much better than they seem. It would be hard to convey this in a few lines to someone unfamiliar with their metaphysical systems. Plato believed that the essence of a thing is the form in which it participates. A thing’s true nature and its perfect nature are one and the same. Form, which is value, is more real than the things which appear to us to participate in but fall short of it. Aristotle believed that the *actuality* of a thing is its form, which makes it possible for the thing to do what it does and therefore to be what it is. The reality of a thing is its activity. Form is more real than the matter, since matter is just the potential for form, the possibility of acting in a certain way.³ And yet form is also perfection. For Plato and Aristotle, being guided by value is a matter of being guided by the way things ultimately *are*.

² *Phaedo* 74–76, pp. 56–58.

³ Here I have in mind *Metaphysics* VIII (I)–IX (Θ) especially.

In ethics, this way of viewing the world leads to what we might call the idea of excellence. Being guided by the way things really are is, in this case, being guided by the way *you* really are. The form of a thing is its perfection, but it is also what enables the thing to be what it is. So the endeavour to realize perfection is just the endeavour to be what you are – to be *good at being what you are*. And so the ancients thought of human virtue as a kind of excelling, of excellence.

Now the revolution I'm talking about happened gradually, but the seeds of it were already present in what Plato and Aristotle thought. For after all, even in this world of value, this world in which the real was the good, something has to have been amiss. For things at least look *to us* as if they are pretty imperfect. If all things are striving for perfection, why do they fail? What holds them back? What could? Plato, I believe, thought that the problem was in *us*, that sense experience itself was a kind of illusion, or perhaps that the badness of the world was an illusion produced by the perspective of sense. And because the problem was in us, he put forth, in the *Phaedrus*, a doctrine of the Fall.⁴ But like his Christian followers, he had to leave it as a mystery; he could give no real explanation of why we fell. Aristotle didn't give an explanation either, but he gave the problem a name: *hyle*, matter. The form of thing is its perfection, but if a thing doesn't reach its perfect form then ultimately it is because there is some reluctance, some recalcitrance, some resistance in its matter: the matter refuses, so to speak, to take the form.

I'm not sure about Plato. But at least in ethics, Aristotle doesn't seem to have made much of the problem. A well-brought up person would not need to have excellence forced upon him – he would move naturally towards the achievement of his perfect form. Indeed what I've just said is a tautology, a sort of definition of 'well-brought up'. In Greek thought, becoming excellent is as natural as growing up. We need to learn virtue; but it is as we learn language, because we are human and that is our nature. But what about those who are not well-brought up, or perhaps have the sort of native material defects that at their worst make a person a natural slave?

⁴ *Phaedrus* 246–249, pp. 493–496.

Aristotle isn't much interested in them in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but they do come up, in the very last section of the book. And Aristotle suggests that in this case there is a remedy: it is law.

As its detractors love to point out, the idea of obligation is naturally associated with the idea of law. And obligation differs from excellence in an important way. When we seek excellence, the force that value exerts upon us is attractive; when we are obligated, it is compulsive. For obligation is the imposition of value on a reluctant, recalcitrant, resistant matter. Obligation is the compulsive power of form. Excellence is natural; but obligation – as Nietzsche says in the passage I have quoted – is the work of art.

This is why in the Christian era, obligation began to play a greater role in moral thought than it had done before. For then we turned our attention to the problem of fallen humanity, and we saw that the fallen human being is a reluctant, recalcitrant, resistant matter. For the Christian thinkers, we, humanity, are what is wrong with the world. We are the reason why the world, being good, is yet not good; we are the resistant matter; in a sense we are matter itself. (Think of Christian horror of the body, of our material nature.) In Augustine's hands the Form of the Good is transformed into a person, a lawgiver, God, whose business is to impose excellence on a reluctant, recalcitrant, resistant humanity. Why we were this way of course remained a mystery, the mystery of the Fall. But the upshot was that we became obligated.

The enemies of obligation think that now that God is dead, or anyway not the source of ethics, we can dispense with obligation, or put it back into its proper place, the sphere of justice and contract, where ethics naturally shares a border with the law. For the rest, we can go back to an ethics of excellence alone. But the death of God did not put us back into Plato and Aristotle's world. For in the meantime the revolution has completed itself. We no longer think that we are what's wrong with the world. We are no longer at all puzzled about why the world, being good, is yet not good. Because for us, the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*. This is what I mean when I say that there has been a revolution, and that the world has been turned inside out. The real is no longer the good. For us, reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form.

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If the real and the good are no longer one, value must find its way into the world somehow. Form must be imposed on the world of matter. This is the work of art, the work of obligation, and it brings us back to Kant. And this is what we should expect. For it was Kant who completed the revolution, when he said that reason – which is form – isn't in the world, but is something that we impose upon it. The ethics of autonomy is the only one consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world, and the ethics of autonomy is an ethics of obligation.

And Nietzsche was right when he warned the enemies of obligation not to think of it lightly because it was born in pain and ugliness. Obligation is what makes us human. Or anyway, so I will argue.

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LECTURE I

The normative question

Christine Korsgaard

Do not merely show us by argument that justice is superior to injustice, but make clear to us what each in and of itself does to its possessor, whereby the one is evil and the other good.

Plato¹

INTRODUCTION

I.I.I.

In 1625, in his book *On the Law of War and Peace*, Hugo Grotius asserted that human beings would have obligations ‘even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him’.² But two of his followers, Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf, thought that Grotius was wrong.³ However socially useful moral conduct might be, they argued, it is not really *obligatory* unless some sovereign authority, backed by the power of sanctions, lays it down as the law. Others in turn disagreed with them, and so the argument began.

Ever since then, modern moral philosophers have been engaged in a debate about the ‘foundations’ of morality. We need to be shown, it is often urged, that morality is ‘real’ or ‘objective’. The

¹ Plato, *Republic* II, 367b, p. 613.

² Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace*. Schneewind I, p. 92. I owe a great debt to Jerome Schneewind for drawing my attention to this stretch of the historical debate, and especially for encouraging me to read Pufendorf.

³ See Hobbes, especially *Leviathan* (1651), and Pufendorf, *On the Law of Nature and Of Nations* (1672) and *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (1673). More detailed references will be given in the discussion that follows.

early rationalists, Samuel Clarke and Richard Price, thought that they knew exactly what they meant by this.⁴ Hobbes had said that there is no right or wrong in the state of nature, and to them, this meant that rightness is mere invention or convention, not something real.⁵ Hobbes meant that individuals are not obligated to obey the laws of social cooperation in the absence of a sovereign who can impose them on everyone.⁶ But the rationalists took him to mean what Bernard Mandeville had later ironically asserted: that virtue is just an invention of politicians, used to keep their human cattle in line.⁷

But what exactly is the problem with that? Showing that something is an invention is not a way of showing that it is not real. Moral standards exist, one might reply, in the only way standards of conduct *can* exist: people believe in such standards and therefore regulate their conduct in accordance with them. Nor are these facts difficult to explain. We all know in a general way how and why we were taught to follow moral rules, and that it would be impossible for us to get on together if we didn't do something along these lines. We are social animals, so probably the whole thing has a biological basis. So what's missing here, that makes us seek a philosophical 'foundation'?

The answer lies in the fact that ethical standards are *normative*. They do not merely *describe* a way in which we in fact regulate our conduct. They make *claims* on us; they command, oblige, recommend, or guide. Or at least, when we invoke them, we make claims on one another.⁸ When I say that an action is right I am saying that you ought to *do* it; when I say that something is good I am recom-

⁴ See Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation. The Boyle Lectures 1705*; and Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1758). More detailed references will be given in the discussion that follows.

⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1.13, p. 90. ⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1.15, p. 110.

⁷ See Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*, especially the section 'An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue', pp. 41–57. Mandeville himself denied that he meant either that virtue is unreal or that it is not worth having. See for instance 'A Vindication of the Book', pp. 384ff.; and also *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honor*, in Schneewind II, pp. 396–398.

⁸ For this thought see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, especially part 1, division 1, book 1, 'The Analytic of the Beautiful'. Kant argues that when we judge something beautiful we not only take pleasure in it, but demand that everyone do so.

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mending it as worthy of your choice. The same is true of the other concepts for which we seek philosophical foundations. Concepts like knowledge, beauty, and meaning, as well as virtue and justice, all have a normative dimension, for they tell us what to think, what to like, what to say, what to do, and what to be. And it is the force of these normative claims – the right of these concepts to give laws to us – that we want to understand.

And in ethics, the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is *hard*: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence or integrity don't inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives, or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question – *why?* – will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral? This is not, as H. A. Prichard supposed, a misguided request for a demonstration that morality is in our interest (although that may be one answer to the question).⁹ It is a call for philosophy, the examination of life. Even those who are convinced that 'it is right' must be in itself a sufficient reason for action may request an account of rightness which this conviction will survive. The trouble with a view like Mandeville's is not that it is not a reasonable explanation of how moral practices came about, but rather that our commitment to these practices would not survive our belief that it was true.¹⁰ Why give up your heart's desire, just because some politician wants to keep you in line? When we seek a philosophical foundation for morality we are not looking merely for an explanation of moral practices. We are asking what *justifies*

⁹ Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' and 'Duty and Interest'. Prichard's argument is discussed in detail below.

¹⁰ Actually, as Hume and Hutcheson both argued, there are also problems about the explanatory adequacy of Mandeville's view. Neither Hume nor Hutcheson names Mandeville, but that he is their target is clear. Mandeville had suggested that politicians create the desire to be virtuous by praising virtue, and so by appealing to our pride. Hume and Hutcheson's answer is that if there were not a basis in human nature for the pleasure we take in being praised for our character and actions, the ideal of virtue could neither be made intelligible to nor motivate us. Politicians might turn the ideal of virtue to their own use but could not conceivably have invented it from whole cloth and foisted it upon animals whose only conception of the good is getting what they want. For Hume's discussion see the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 214. For Hutcheson's see the *Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, in Raphael 1, p. 291.

the claims that morality makes on us. This is what I am calling ‘the normative question’.

THE PROBLEM

1.2.1

Most moral philosophers have aspired to give an account of morality which will answer the normative question. But the issue of *how* normativity can be established has seldom been directly or separately addressed, as a topic in its own right. My purpose in these lectures will be to do just that; to explore the various ways in which modern moral philosophers have tried to establish the normativity of ethics.

Before I begin discussing particular theories, however, I want to define the normative question a little more clearly, and to show how it differs from certain other questions with which it is readily confused. I will therefore begin with a schematic account of the tasks of moral philosophy, in order to show where in its enterprise the normative question arises. Since many moral philosophers have not addressed the question directly, it is not always clear what their answers are. When we want to know what, according to some philosopher, makes morality normative, this will show us where to look.

It is obvious that human beings apply ethical concepts – the concepts of goodness, duty, obligation, virtue, and justice – to certain states of affairs, actions, properties of actions, and personal characteristics. The philosopher is, in the first instance, concerned with three important features of these concepts. First, what exactly do they mean, or what do they contain: that is, how are they to be analyzed or defined? What is meant by saying something is good, or right, or a duty? Second, of course, to what do they apply? Which things are good, and which actions are right or obligatory? And third, the philosopher wants to know where ethical concepts come from. How did we come into possession of them, and how does it come about that we use them? Did we get them from reason, experience, God, or a prior existence in Plato’s world of Forms? What features of our minds, or actions, or the world insti-

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gated us to develop these concepts and apply them to actions and characters? Let me call those three questions – what moral concepts mean or contain, what they apply to, and where they come from – a theory of moral concepts. In the first instance, then, the philosopher wants to produce a theory of moral concepts.

Now moral concepts play a practical role in human life, and they have a quite particular kind of importance. And this shows up in the fact that on the occasions when we use them we are influenced in certain practical and psychological ways, both actively and reactively. Let me review some familiar facts: when you think an action is right, you think you ought to do it – and this consideration at least frequently provides you with a motive for doing it.¹¹ Sometimes this can be a very strong motive. Many people throughout the course of history have been prepared to die for the sake of doing what they thought was right, or of avoiding what they thought would be terribly wrong. Similarly, when you think that a characteristic is a virtue you might aspire to have it, or be ashamed if you don't. Again this can be very strong: people's lives and happiness can be blighted by the suspicion that they are worthless or unlovely specimens of humanity. If you think that a characteristic is a vice, you might seriously dislike someone for having it: if it is bad enough, you may exclude that person from your society. Indeed your whole sense that another is for you a *person*, someone with whom you can interact in characteristically human ways, seems to depend on her having a certain complement of the moral virtues – at least enough honesty and integrity so that you are neither a tool in her hands nor she in yours. And finally, there are the phenomena of reward and punishment. Many people believe that good people or people who do good things deserve to have good things happen to them and that bad people or people who do bad things deserve to have bad things happen to them. Some people have even thought that this is so important that God must have organized the world so that people will get what they deserve. When we use moral concepts, then, we

¹¹ By saying this I do not mean to imply that 'internalism' – the view that moral judgments necessarily motivate – is necessarily true. Even 'externalists' usually think that rightness is a motivating consideration sometimes, although it might only be through the mediation of other motives. The relation between the views advanced in these lectures and the internalism/externalism dispute is discussed in lecture 2, 2.4.2.