

PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

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Christine M. Korsgaard (Harvard)

We are publishing this week with great pleasure Prof Christine M. Korsgaard's answers to our mini-interview questions. She is presently the Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor at Harvard University. Prof Korsgaard is well known for her work on Kant, agency and action, normativity, animal ethics and other issues in meta-ethics and ethics. Her last published book is *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, and her new work *Fellow creatures: Our obligations to the other animals* is coming out this summer. Enjoy!

1. How did you first become interested in Philosophy of Action?

I became interested in the philosophy of action when I was working on the question of what

makes the instrumental principle or hypothetical imperative normative. Why is it a requirement of reason that we should take the means to our ends? Of course, I also wondered whether whatever story we tell about that could be extended to the moral principle or categorical imperative. I found myself claiming that the instrumental principle is a constitutive standard of action, a standard based on the very nature of action (or agency). Then I realized that if I were going to make claims like that, I had better know what action or agency is.

2. What are you working on at the moment?

At the moment I am working on the good, specifically on the question why there is such a thing as the good, and whether we can give an explanation of that which is naturalistic. I distinguish between what I call the “functional” sense of good and the “final” sense of good. In the functional sense, something is good when it has the properties that enable it to perform its function, and to perform its function well. In the final sense, something is good when it is suitable as an end of action or is the condition that results from the successful pursuit of such ends. My question is about the final sense of good. I believe that there is such a thing as final good because there are creatures in the world for whom things can be good or bad—namely, sentient animals. In other words, the final good derives from the good-for relation. Part of the reason animals have a good in the final sense is that they are agents, who pursue the things that are functionally good for them as the ends of action. So, in that sense I think the evolution of conscious agency helps to explain why there is such a thing as final good.

3. What is your 5-15 sentence account of what an action is?

Kant defines action as the capacity to be by means of one's representations the cause of the object of those representations. (That's in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, at 6:211. He says he's defining “the faculty of desire” but he means the capacity to act.) Fans of the belief/desire model will think of “representation” as being something like belief, and will then worry that the “desire” part has been left out. I'm taking it that whether you find something desirable or aversive is part of the way you “represent” it. That way the definition covers both the actions of

human beings, who are conscious of our practical attitudes and their influence on our choices, and the actions of the other animals, who may not be.

But I think there are actually two conceptions of action, a more naturalistic one and a normative one. In the naturalistic sense, an action is an intentional and purposive, or goal-directed, movement guided by the agent's representations. I intend that as a capacious description, one that covers even the instinctive actions of simple animals. In the case of human beings (with the "higher" animals things get tricky here), we also work with a normative conception of action, according to which an action is an intentional and goal-directed movement that issues from, and is expressive of, the self. We are working with the normative conception when we hold people responsible for their actions, and more broadly when we take the things people do as appropriate grounds for attitudes such as liking and disliking, love and hate, approval and disapproval, and in general for evaluative attitudes whose objects are the agents themselves—that is, whose objects are the agents' selves. I take one of the central questions of the philosophy of action to be how these two conceptions are linked. Many philosophers assume that the link is that, in the case of actions that make these evaluative attitudes appropriate, the representation that guides the action is expressive of the agent's self or character. I think that instead it is because of the way in which it is through action that, as I argue in *Self-Constitution*, we constitute the self.

4. In your view, what were the three most important recent developments in philosophy of action?

I think of philosophy of action as having emerged as a field with the work of Davidson and Anscombe. In the tradition, many of the questions we would now identify as questions in the philosophy of action were dealt with under the heading of questions about free will. This very shift is itself helpful, because it is easy for people to be skeptical about free will, or at least to think that they are, but it's much harder for people to be skeptical about whether people (and the other animals) actually do things, and whether doing and undergoing are really different things.

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However, for a long time after the work of Anscombe and Davidson, moral philosophy and the philosophy of action remained separate. I believe that this was partly because everyone assumed that moral standards are what I call external standards, imposed on action from outside, rather than constitutive standards that arise from the nature of action. I think moral philosophers are paying much more attention to questions about the nature of action now, and that's to the good. Moral philosophy is full of moments of unclarity or confusion that result from a failure to pin down the assumptions about action that are at work in it. Just to take an easy example, many moral philosophers think you can do "the right thing for the wrong reason" without asking themselves whether your reason for acting is part of the "right thing" itself, or something that stands outside of it.

Finally, I think it is important to understanding human action to ask how it is both different from and continuous with the actions (or the activities, or the voluntary movements—there is some controversy about what exactly to say here) of the other animals. I think more people who try to think about action are doing that now.

5. What direction would you like to see the field go in?

People who come to questions about action from the philosophy of mind tend to contrast action with perception. It's as if the contrast were: perception is the way the world comes into the mind, and action is the way the mind goes out into the world. People who come to the philosophy of action from ethics, on the other hand, tend to contrast action or volition with belief. There are two kinds of reasons, theoretical reasons for belief and practical reasons for action: how are they similar and how are they different? These contrasts are similar but they are certainly not the same, nor of course, is there any reason for thinking one of them is "the right contrast." But someone needs to think about how these still somewhat divided discussions fit together.

More generally, I think it is a problem with philosophy at present that people think of themselves as working in fields, and often limit their reading to what counts as being “in their field.” It’s understandable, of course, with the overwhelming volume of journal literature that is being produced. One has to limit one’s reading somehow, and the peer review process, unfortunately, tends to guard the established boundaries between fields. These developments tend to prevent people from developing or even working towards big philosophical systems, like those of Plato or Aristotle or Kant or Hegel, in which the connections between various parts of philosophy get explicitly explored and worked out. Because philosophy of action is so obviously connected to metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, and ethics, philosophers of action are in an excellent position to make war on this sort of philosophical parochialism. I hope they will.

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Many thanks to Prof Korsgaard for her answers!

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