

Dissertation Abstract for *Meaning, Reasons, and Endorsement*
Heather Salazar

In my dissertation I examine Christine Korsgaard's neo-Kantian constructivist theory of moral obligation, which if successful would provide an attractive alternative to the traditional theories of the origin and nature of ethics. Ethical theories traditionally ground moral obligation in one of two sources: (1) our subjective desires, or (2) real, objective moral facts. Korsgaard's 'constructivism' attempts to bridge the gap between subjectivist and realist approaches by proposing that although reasons have their source in people's rational endorsement of 'private' desires, all reasons and obligations are nonetheless 'public'. This means that all reasons generate normative demands on everyone. The public nature of reasons then gives her a way of arguing for specifically moral reasons. She thus avoids the metaphysical and epistemic pitfalls of realism without lapsing into subjectivism. Since her arguments and theory are generally acknowledged as difficult to understand, I consider and evaluate a number of possible interpretations in my analysis. In Part 1 of my dissertation I examine the arguments that Korsgaard has offered in defense of her theory. In Part 2 I assess the view itself, independently of the arguments offered in its defense. Although I am very sympathetic to her approach, I think that the arguments she provides for her account are invalid and that the two possible versions of the view that I identify are either inconsistent or implausible. By investigating the arguments and theoretical possibilities for a Korsgaard-inspired constructivist view, I hope to eliminate some theoretical options and illuminate criteria for a consistent and plausible alternative to the traditional theories of ethics.

Korsgaard claims that previous constructivist accounts fail because they assume that people can create shared, public reasons by 'exchanging' subjective, private reasons. She argues in contrast that in order for a constructivist theory of morality to be successful, it must maintain that reasons are public. Korsgaard then uses a version of Wittgenstein's private language argument to show that private reasons, like private languages, are impossible. Reasons are like language in that there are normative demands implicit in simply understanding them. Since reasons are essentially communicable, understanding someone's reason generates a complimentary reason in the people who understand it. In Part 1 I argue that this line of argument is invalid for three reasons: (1) it relies on a dubious analogy to Wittgenstein's private language argument; (2) it assumes that people are obligated to hear others' reasons and then uses this to ground the publicity of morality, which begs the question; and (3) it establishes only that reasons are understandable when communicated, not that understanding alone creates universal or public reasons.

Although I think that the arguments for Korsgaard's theory fail, her theory deserves consideration in itself as a possible alternative account. In Part 2 I explore two general ways of seeing her view. These are based on interpretations of what I take to be the two primary theses of her account: the Constructivism Thesis (regarding the source of reasons) and the Publicity Thesis (regarding the nature of reasons). I argue that on one construal of her theory, inconsistencies within the theory itself force us to dismiss either the Constructivism Thesis or the Publicity Thesis. However, the alternative construal of her theory entails a radical form of ethical relativism that is ungrounded in and unlimited by rationality. This result is particularly meaningful since it eliminates Korsgaard's account as a 'third way' theory and instead makes it a version of subjectivism, which is an undesirable result even from Korsgaard's perspective. Since these two ways of construing her theory encompass all of the alternatives, and both are unsatisfactory, I argue that Korsgaard's account ought to be rejected. My arguments indicate that the Publicity Thesis and the Constructivism Thesis cannot be successfully combined and that a more consistent and plausible theory must either involve some real (non-constructed) reasons, resulting in a limited form of constructivism, or permit non-public reasons, reducing the amount and kind of reasons which create normative demands on all.