

# The *Groundwork*, the Second Critique, Pure Practical Reason and Motivation

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will critically examine Christine Korsgaard's claim that Kant argues that we can be motivated by the pure practical reason in the *Groundwork*, while he does not in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. I will also argue that pace Korsgaard, Kant still holds that pure reason can be a motive in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the first part of my paper, I will introduce Korsgaard's expositions of the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the second, I will examine the passages which Korsgaard takes as her textual evidence, and show problems in her reading. This finally leads to the discussion of other passages that seem to be inconsistent with her interpretation, which shows that Kant still argues that pure reason can be a motive in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

## 1. Korsgaard's Reading

In her paper "Skepticism of Practical Reason," Korsgaard suggests an important difference between the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*:<sup>1</sup>

In the Third Section of the *Foundations*, Kant does try to argue that we can be motivated by the categorical imperative, appealing to the pure spontaneity of reason as evidence for our intelligible nature and so for an autonomous will (Beck 70/1; Acad. 452). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, however, Kant turns his strategy around. He argues that we know that we are capable of being motivated by the categorical imperative and therefore that we know (in a practical sense) that we have an autonomous will. Again, explorations into practical reason reveal our nature. It is important, however, that although in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant does not try to argue that pure reason can be a motive, he has detailed things to say about how it can be a motive – about how it functions as an incentive in combating other incentives. (Korsgaard 1986, p. 24)

According to Korsgaard, in the *Groundwork*, Kant tries to provide an explanation why we can be motivated by the categorical imperative and by pure practical reason. The reason why pure reason can motivate us is that pure reason is spontaneous. Since our pure reason is spontaneous and not determined by something else, we can conceive us as autonomous members of the intelligible world. On the other hand, Korsgaard claims that in the *Critique of*

*Practical Reason*, Kant does not try to explain why we can be motivated by the categorical imperative, though we somehow already know that we can actually be motivated by that. For Kant, the freedom is already given, and we are able to be motivated by the categorical imperative, but we cannot show the mechanism that explains why we are free and we are motivated by that.

## 2. Korsgaard's Textual Evidence

To support her reading, Korsgaard first refers to a page in the *Groundwork*. I will quote the key paragraph from that page:

Now, a human being really finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself insofar as he is affected by objects, and that is reason. This, as pure self-activity, is raised even above the understanding by this: that though the latter is also self-activity and does not, like sense, contain merely representations that arise when we are affected by things (and are thus passive), yet it can produce from its activity no other concepts than those which serve as merely to bring sensible representations under rules and thereby to unite them in one consciousness, without which use of sensibility it would think nothing at all; but reason, on the contrary, shows in what we call "ideas" a spontaneity so pure that it thereby goes far beyond anything that sensibility can even afford it, and proves its highest occupation in distinguishing the world of sense and the world of understanding from each other and thereby marking out limits for the understanding itself. (Gregor 99 = Ak 4: 452)

Kant seems to show the general spontaneity and self-activity of reason by summarizing his discussions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Unlike sense, reason is not passive. Unlike understanding, it is not constrained within the limit of sensibility. Reason can go beyond the realm of sensibility, and make us conceive of "ideas" of the immortal soul, the whole world and God.<sup>ii</sup> Thus we can give a provisional argument for the spontaneity:

- (1) Reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility. (Premise)
- (2) If reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility, then it is not constrained with the limit, and in that sense it is spontaneous. (Premise)
- (3) Thus, reason is spontaneous. (from (1) and (2))

Now we have to show why this is relevant to the fact that we can be motivated by the categorical imperative. After this paragraph, Kant tries to show that since reason is spontaneous, the holder of reason or rational being belongs to a world, which is essentially different from the natural world where everything is determined by the laws of nature:

Because of this a rational being must regard himself as intelligence (hence not from the side of his lower

powers) as belonging not to the world of sense but to the world of understanding; hence he has two standpoints from which he can regard himself and cognize laws for the use of his powers and consequently for all his actions; first, insofar as he belongs to the world of sense, under laws of nature (heteronomy); second, as belonging to the intelligible world, under laws which, being independent of nature, are not empirical but grounded merely in reason. (Gregor 99 = Ak 4: 452)

The concept of “rational being” is so important for Kant. Only rational beings can be members of the intelligible world (Ak 4: 452), and think of the causality of their wills. Since only rational beings have consciousness, they can reflect themselves and conceive them as subjects of their decisions. Also, “the human being can never think of the causality of his own will otherwise than under the idea of freedom” (Ak 4: 452). The idea of freedom is necessary for us to conceive ourselves as causes of decision making.<sup>iii</sup> In addition, “freedom and the will’s own lawgiving” are reciprocal concepts (Ak 4: 450).<sup>iv</sup> We cannot conceive of the idea of freedom totally without any cognition of laws given by our reasons.<sup>v</sup> All of these discussions are related to the practical use of reason, not the speculative. But at least, even in the analysis of the speculative use of reason (i.e. in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), we know that reason is spontaneous, which is analogical to the self-activity of pure reason in the practical realm. Thus we may be able to have a full version of the argument:

- (1’) Reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility. (Premise)
- (2’) If reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility, then it is not constrained with the limit, and in that sense it is spontaneous. (Premise)
- (3’) Thus, reason is spontaneous. (from (1’) and (2’))
- (4’) If reason is spontaneous, the holder of reason can regard himself as an intelligence or a member of the intelligible world. (Premise)
- (5’) The holder of reason is an intelligence. (from (3’) and (4’))
- (6’) If one is an intelligence, then he is not under the laws of nature, but under those of morality. (Premise)
- (7’) The holder of reason or rational being is under the laws of morality, and therefore he can be motivated by them. (from (5’) and (6’))

Thus we have an argument for explaining why we can be motivated by the moral laws given through pure reason. Of course, there are many presuppositions. But at least it has a form of argument.

Now we turn to the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the textual evidence in it to support Korsgaard’s reading. Korsgaard states that in *Critique of Practical Reason* “Kant project is “not ... to show a priori why the moral law supplies an incentive but rather what it effects (or better, must effect) in the mind, in so far as it is an incentive (Beck 17; Acad. 72)” (Korsgaard 1986, p. 24). On the basis of this passage, Korsgaard claims that Kant does not argue that pure reason can be a motive for us. To see whether her reading is correct, we have to examine

the whole paragraph which contains this passage:

For the sake of the law and in order to give it influence on the will one must not, then, look for some other incentive by which that of the moral law itself might be dispensed with, because this would produce sheer hypocrisy without substance, and it is even hazardous to let any other incentive (such as that of advantage) so much as cooperate alongside the moral law; so nothing further remains than to determine carefully in what way the moral law becomes the incentive and, inasmuch as it is, what happens to the human faculty of desire as an effect of that determining ground upon it. For, how a law can be of itself and immediately a determining ground of the will (though this is what is essential in all morality) is for human reason an insoluble problem and identical with that of how a free will is possible. What we shall have to show a priori is, therefore, not the ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive but rather what it effects (or, to put it better, must effect) in the mind insofar as it is an incentive. (Gregor 198-9 = Ak 5: 72)

As Korsgaard suggests, Kant limits the scope of his inquiry. But he is not saying that he cannot, and therefore is not going to, show that pure practical reason can motivate us. Rather, he is claiming that he is not going to show how pure practical reason supplies a motive for us without any empirical basis. Though the freedom is already given to us, we cannot show the mechanism that fully explains why we are free and we are motivated by pure practical reason. It is a kind of hidden structure of rational being, and beyond our cognition. We can just know the existence of pure practical reason through its function: It tells us how the categorical imperative is, and how it shows some maxims can be moral laws, but others are not. But we cannot know a priori the “ground” or mechanism which shows why human being has pure practical reason. Thus, we can agree with Korsgaard to some extent: Kant clearly tries to limit his scope of inquiry. However, when Korsgaard states that Kant “does not try to argue that pure reason can be a motive,” I think, she should have distinguished these following views:

(A) Kant does not try to argue that pure reason can be a motive in such a way that he can prove the reality and necessity of the moral law and the categorical imperative by showing the ground or mechanism that fully explains how a moral law can be a determining ground of our will.

(B) Kant does not try to argue that pure reason can be a motive in such a way that he can give an explanation of how pure reason is spontaneous and autonomous, and by doing so, an explanation why pure reason can provide us with the moral laws and the concept of freedom.

According to (A), Kant gives up showing the hidden structure of rational being which completely explains why we are free and have the moral law. Some properties of noumenal self, for example, might completely explain why rational beings have freedom. But our cognition of noumenal self is so limited. At most, we can say that noumenal self has a will, and there is a kind of causality between this will and his action. According to (B), on the other hand,

Kant gives up something easier. Kant even does not try to show how pure reason is spontaneous in that it can go beyond the realm of possible experience, and explain the relationship between the spontaneity of pure reason and the possibility that we can be motivated by pure reason. To be sure, given the passage above, we may be able to read the *Critique of Practical Reason* by following (A). Still, since (A) and (B) are not identical, (B) might be false in the context of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

### 3. Other Passages in the *Critique of Practical Reason*

Now we are in a position to examine whether we can hold (B) or not when we read the second critique. To deny (B), we have to find some passages in which Kant tries to give a kind of argument which is similar to that in the *Groundwork*. In the section of “On the warrant of pure reason in its practical use to an extension which is not possible to it in its speculative use,” Kant suggests the possibility of applying the category of causality beyond the limit of sensibility or possible experience:

But how is it with the application of this category of causality (and so too of all the others, for without them no cognition can be had of what exists) to things that are not objects of possible experience but lie beyond its boundaries? (Gregor 183 = Ak 5: 54)

After proposing this question, Kant more explicitly states that we can actually apply the category of causality to our own wills, which are not located in space and time like phenomenal objects:

...[W]hile the objective reality of the concept (of causality) nevertheless remains and can be used even of noumena, although this concept cannot be theoretically determined in the least and thereby produce a cognition.... In order now to discover this condition of the application of the concept in question to noumena, we need only recall why we are not satisfied with its application to objects of experience but would like to use it of things in themselves as well. For then it soon becomes apparent that it is not a theoretical but a practical purpose that makes this a necessity for us. (Gregor 183-4 = Ak 5: 54)

In this passage, first, Kant admits the concept of causality has the objective reality even in the noumenal realm. But he does not try to show a complete explanation why it is objectively real. He just takes note of the fact that its objective reality is already given since we are actually free. Also, Kant suggests that at least the causality of noumenal realm is possible in that we do not conceive a contradiction there, though we do not fully determine this noumenal object a priori and thus perfectly comprehend it. In addition, Kant emphasizes that we have an urgent necessity of the application of the concept of causality to noumena for a practical use. For these reasons, Kant concludes that we are allowed to use the concept of causality beyond the phenomenal realm:

...[I]t is enough for me to thereby only designate it as such a being and hence only to connect the concept of causality with that of freedom (and with what is inseparable from it, the moral law as its determining ground); and I am certainly authorized to do so by virtue of the pure, not empirical origin of the concept of cause, inasmuch as I consider myself authorized to make no other use of it than with regard to the moral law which determines its reality, that is, only a practical use. (Gregor 185 = Ak 5: 56)

We can note at least three important points: (I) Reason can go beyond the limit of possible experience by trying to apply the category of causality to the outside of the realm of possible experience. (II) It is possible to apply the category of causality to noumena. (III) The moral law gives the reality of practical use of the concept of causality together with that of freedom. Now we are able to compare the discussion in the *Critique of Practical Reason* to the argument we found in the *Groundwork*, which has the following form:

- (1'') Reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility. (Premise)
- (2'') If reason can go beyond the limit of sensibility, then it is not constrained with the limit, and in that sense it is spontaneous. (Premise)
- (3'') Thus, reason is spontaneous. (from (1'') and (2''))
- (4'') If reason is spontaneous, the holder of reason can regard himself as an intelligence or a member of the intelligible world. (Premise)
- (5'') The holder of reason is an intelligence. (from (3'') and (4''))
- (6'') If one is an intelligence, then he is not under the laws of nature, but under those of morality. (Premise)
- (7'') The holder of reason or rational being is under the laws of morality, and therefore he can be motivated by them. (from (5'') and (6''))

Though Kant does not use the term “spontaneity,” it is obvious that Kant emphasizes that pure reason can go beyond the realm of sensibility. That is what Kant meant when he said that reason is spontaneous (i.e. (3'')). Also, in the same section, Kant explicitly states that he has presented the subject of the will or the human being as “it belongs to an intelligible world, as belonging to a world of pure understanding” (Gregor 180 = Ak 5: 50). The reason why the human being is supposed to belong to the intelligible world is that that world, as the “archetypal world” can be cognized only through reason (Gregor 175 = Ak 5: 43), and hence, only rational beings can join it as members (i.e. (5'')). Now what belongs to this intelligible world must be different from phenomenal objects in the sensible world. “The determination of the causality of beings in the sensible world can as such never be unconditioned” (Gregor 178 = Ak 5:48), while that of beings in the intelligible world (i.e. the causality of our will) is unconditioned (i.e. (6'')). Also, the moral law “determines [the concept of causality’s] reality” (Gregor 185 Ak 5: 56), and “[t]he objective reality of a pure will or, what is the same thing, of a pure practical reason is given a priori in the moral law” (Gregor 184 = Ak 5: 55). That shows the subject of the will as a member of the intelligible world

is under the moral law, and as far as it is free it is motivated by the law (i.e. (7'')).

Thus, the discussion found in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is pretty much close to the argument in the *Groundwork*, I think. Thus, we have a good reason to suppose that (B) is false in relation to the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In fact, in this work, Kant substantially has an argument to explain why pure reason can motivate us on the basis of the spontaneity of reason.

## Concluding Remark

If Korsgaard were to say that Kant does not try to argue that pure reason can give us a motive in the context of (A), then her reading would be much more persuasive. But in fact, Korsgaard is suggesting not (A) but (B) in her reading of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we cannot agree with her view. One question remains: Is (A) true in the *Groundwork* as well as in the *Critique of Practical Reason*? I would say yes. We can find some passages to hold (A) for the *Groundwork*. Kant, for example, states that “[i]t seems, then, that in the idea of freedom we have actually only presupposed the moral law, namely the principle of the autonomy of the will itself, and could not prove by itself its reality and objective necessity” (Gregor 97 = Ak 4: 449). Kant relinquishes providing a complete explanation or demonstration of why the moral law given through pure reason is necessarily real and objective. Again, the complete picture of the structure of rational being is hidden to us, thus “we cannot yet see how this is possible, and hence on what grounds the moral law is binding” (Gregor 97 = Ak 4: 450). So, we can conclude that (A) is true both for the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It seems that the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* are closer than Korsgaard realizes.

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## Abbreviations

**A / B:** Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. References in standard form to the first two editions.

**Ak:** *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*. 27 vols. Ed. by the Koeniglichen Preussischen (later Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Reimer (later de Gruyter), 1900-

**Gregor:** *Practical Philosophy* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant) Trans. and ed. by Mary J. Gregor New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul Guyer suggests something similar:

The *Critique of Practical Reason* may infer the fact of our freedom from our prior acknowledgement of our obligation under the moral law, whereas the *Groundwork* may infer our obligation under the moral law from the fact of our freedom, which is in turn inferred from the basic structure of human cognition, but the epistemological status of both arguments is intended to be precisely the same: each argument assumes that what characterizes as the sufficient

ground for knowledge of our freedom is just as available to every human being, just as much a part of our self-understanding as is the basis for the belief in determinism. (Guyer 2000, pp. 230-1)

In this paper, I cannot fully address whether this suggestion is right. But at least, I can say that Guyer's statement is much weaker than Korsgaard's. He does not say that the *Critique of Practical Reason* has no argument to explain how we acknowledge the moral laws and are motivated by them.

<sup>ii</sup> "A concept made up of notions, which goes beyond the possibility of experience, is an idea or a concept of reason." (A 320 / B 377)

<sup>iii</sup> Kant once saw freedom "as the condition of rational actions" (Ak 17: 704).

<sup>iv</sup> "[F]or, freedom and the will's own lawgiving are both autonomy and hence reciprocal concepts, and for this very reason one cannot be used to explain the other or to furnish a ground for it. . . ." (Gregor 97 = Ak 4: 450)

<sup>v</sup> Also, we cannot conceive of the moral law and duty without understanding the concept of freedom, since Kant emphasizes that "duty commands nothing but what we can do" (Ak 6: 47). On the basis of this, Guyer states that "if we cannot do an action, then the principle of morality cannot command it, so the principle of morality must reflect what we can do" (Guyer 2000, p. 228).