Abstract: This essay examines two interpretations of Kant’s argument for the formula of humanity. Christine M. Korsgaard defends a constructivist reading of Kant’s argument, maintaining that humans must view themselves as having absolute value because their power for rational choice confers value on their ends. Allen Wood, however, defends a realist interpretation of Kant’s argument, maintaining that humans actually are absolutely valuable and that their choices do not confer value but rather reflect their understanding of how the objects of their choices fulfill their needs and wants and contribute to their flourishing. Though Korsgaard’s reading is more consistent with Kant’s prioritizing of the right over the good, this essay raises a metaethical question regarding her constructivist position, namely, “What is meant by her claim that rational choice ‘confers’ value on objects?” In developing this question, it presents a realist account of goodness that is taken from Peter Geach’s “Good and Evil.”

Keywords: categorical imperative, Korsgaard, Wood, constructivism, realism, Geach.

One of the more prominent and (to my mind) more interesting debates in contemporary Kant scholarship concerns the proper interpretation of Kant’s argument for the second formulation of the categorical imperative, the formula of humanity. Basically, the debate is between Christine Korsgaard’s constructivist interpretation and Allen Wood’s realist interpretation of Kant’s formula of humanity. Their disagreement is important for Kant scholars in particular and moral philosophers in general because the point of contention between the two thinkers concerns a fundamental metaethical issue regarding the nature of value.

For those unfamiliar with the debate, allow me briefly and all too quickly to summarize the positions of Korsgaard and Wood. Kant makes his argument for the second formulation of the categorical imperative in the second book of the *Groundwork* (Kant 1996b, 4:427–29). The formula of humanity is meant to give the moral law some content by way of identifying an objective, universal end that all rational agents must have by virtue of their rationality. Such a rational and objective end would be
quite different from the empirical, subjective ends that we each adopt on the basis of our sensible needs, desires, and feelings. Kant claims that such sensible ends are of only conditional value or worth. We need, he thinks, to establish some unconditional value that is the ground of these conditional values, since “without [such an unconditional value] nothing of absolute worth would be found anywhere” (1996b, 4:428). Rational nature fills this requirement for Kant. In a controversial passage, he makes the following case for his claim: “The ground of the principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. The human being necessarily represents his own existence in this way; so far it is thus a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that holds for me; thus [rational nature] is at the same time an objective principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will” (1996b, 4:428–29).

The controversy over the foregoing passage concerns (1) how one explains what Kant means by the “absolute worth” of rational nature and the relationship between this absolute worth and the conditional worth of our subjective ends and (2) how one interprets Kant’s claim that each human being “necessarily represents his own existence” as an end in itself. Korsgaard argues for a constructivist reading of the argument. On her view, we take our subjective ends to be good simply because they are the objects of rational choice (Korsgaard 1996a, 122, 239–41). One might be tempted to think that some end is good because of some property or set of properties that it possesses, but this, according to Korsgaard (and Kant) would be mistaken. On Korsgaard’s view, those ends we take to be good are good not because there is some property, “goodness,” that is “out there,” in the objects we desire and choose. On the contrary, our ends are good because our choices confer value upon them. On Korsgaard’s constructivist reading of Kant, only rational nature, seen as creating and conferring value on conditional goods, can serve as that which has absolute value, the unconditional condition. As Korsgaard puts it, “We view ourselves as having value-conferring status in virtue of our rational nature. We act as if our own choice were the sufficient condition of its object: this object is built into . . . rational action” (1996a, 123). It is important to see that Korsgaard is not asserting that rational nature really has this absolute value. Rather, her point is that each rational agent must think of herself or himself as having such value in virtue of her or his rational capacity to set ends. Rational nature functions as the objective ground of our duties because each person’s conferring of value (i.e., each person’s taking some object to be good by making it the object of rational choice) must be harmonious with the conferring of value of other human beings, since “the good is a consistent, harmonious object shared by all rational beings” (Korsgaard 1996a, 123). In order to establish such harmony, rational nature must act as a limiting condition for our choices, thereby generating our moral obligations.
Allen Wood, despite agreeing with Korsgaard’s interpretation at times (see, e.g., Wood 1999, 124–32), has in his recent *Kantian Ethics* (2008) taken a very different approach to interpreting Kant’s argument. To put the matter plainly, Wood takes Kant to be a moral realist. As he puts it, “Kant never presents the dignity of rational nature as an end in itself, or the categorical nature of moral obligation, or the objective validity of the moral law, as ways in which rational nature or the law can be considered or thought about. They simply are statements of how these things are” (Wood 2008, 112; see also 295–96 n. 11). As a Kantian, Wood thinks that the unconditioned condition of our subjective ends is the unconditional value of rational nature (so, at least in this respect he and Korsgaard are on the same page), but this unconditional value, according to Wood, is objective and real. On his account of Kant’s argument, we take rational nature to have unconditional value *because* rational nature really has such value. This, Wood claims, is quite different from Korsgaard’s view, which holds that rational nature has unconditional value because we take it to have such value. Moreover, according to Wood, our choices do not confer value on our ends, as Korsgaard would have us believe. Rather, our reasons for choosing ends point to what makes those ends good. According to Wood, our ends usually have value because “they fulfill the needs, or enrich the lives, or contribute to the flourishing and the happiness of rational beings” (2008, 92).

It is difficult to make a conclusive case for either reading of Kant, since there is ample textual evidence to support both readings, and both have their advantages and disadvantages. That being said, I think Korsgaard’s interpretation can make better sense of one famous passage from the second *Critique* in which Kant argues for the priority of the moral law over the concept of the good (Kant 1996a, 5:57–66). As Kant succinctly puts his point, “The concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law (for which, as it would seem, this concept would have to be made the basis) but only (as was done here) after it and by means of it” (1996a, 5:63). This is what John Silber famously called Kant’s Copernican Revolution in ethics (Silber 1959). I think Wood’s realist reading of the formula of humanity has a hard time making sense of this central feature of Kant’s moral philosophy, since Wood seems to make the good (both the absolute good of rational nature and the conditional goods that are conducive to its flourishing) the ground of the moral law.

The foregoing consideration gets right to the heart of my concern regarding Korsgaard’s reading of Kant’s formula of humanity and her development of Kant’s moral philosophy in her own recent work, particularly *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (2009) and *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (2008). To put the matter as plainly as possible, I am not quite sure what Korsgaard means when she avers that rational choice...
confers value on ends and is the sufficient condition of things being valuable. She has made it clear that she does not intend her position to be construed as “a piece of abstruse metaphysics” (Korsgaard 1998, 62), but she has not, so far as I understand her work, explained what exactly transpires when one confers value on the objects of one’s choice.

Questions concerning the way in which rational choice confers value notwithstanding, in her work Korsgaard has very clearly rejected wholesale any sort of “substantive” moral realism of the kind espoused by thinkers such as G. E. Moore (Korsgaard 1996b, 28–48). In this regard, as some philosophers have noted, her constructivist account of value has quite a bit in common with existentialist ethics, and Korsgaard has welcomed such a comparison (Korsgaard 2003, 786–87). This is not surprising, since on Korsgaard’s account our choices do not merely confer value, they also create our self-identities; here one can easily see the affinity between her moral philosophy and the ethics of such thinkers as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre (see, e.g., de Beauvoir 1989 and Sartre 1975). De Beauvoir and Sartre also rejected realist accounts of value in favor of one’s self-creation and transcendence through genuine acts of free choice.

While Korsgaard has embraced those aspects of her constructivist account of value that are existentialist, she also has argued forcefully for a close affinity between the ethics of Kant and the ethics of Aristotle, and has increasingly relied on Aristotle in developing and defending her own moral philosophy. I find this part of her work to be the most interesting, as it offers a promising alternative to a strictly Kantian ethics. At the same time, however, it is her comparison of Kant and Aristotle that poses a problem for Korsgaard’s moral philosophy. Though I find her arguments against substantive moral realism of the Moore variety to be persuasive, his is not the only kind of moral realism that offers a challenge to Kantian constructivism. In fact, I do not think Wood’s realist reading of Kant qualifies as a substantive realism of the Moorean variety. Rather, Wood’s moral realism seems to have more in common with the kind defended by Peter Geach in his classic essay “Good and Evil” (1956). Geach, to my mind, offers an interesting counter to Korsgaard for at least two reasons. First, he (like Korsgaard) rejects substantive moral realism of the variety Moore defends (Geach 1956, 35–36). Second, he (like Korsgaard) takes his account of goodness to be largely consistent with the ethics of Aristotle. Nonetheless, I believe Geach provides us with an account of the nature of value very different from the one Korsgaard offers, and I do not think the two accounts can be easily reconciled.

The basis of Geach’s argument concerns a distinction he makes between two different kinds of logical predication. Despite the technical language used by Geach, the distinction to which he draws our attention is one that is familiar to many of us. According to him, we can distinguish
between logically predicative adjectives and logically attributive adjectives. An adjective is logically predicative when the adjective (A) and the noun it modifies (B) can be split into two logical predications, namely, "this is A" and "this is a B" (Geach 1956, 33). Geach’s example of a logically predicative adjectival phrase is "a red book," which can be split into "this is red" and "this is a book." An adjective is logically attributive, however, if it cannot be split in the way I have just described. Geach’s example of a logically attributive adjectival phrase is "a big flea," which cannot be split into "this is big" and "this is a flea." Were such a splitting possible, argues Geach, "a simple argument would show that a big flea is a big animal," which clearly is not true (1956, 33).

According to Geach, "good" (like "bad") is always logically attributive. There are two important implications of Geach’s position. First, one cannot fully make sense of the adjectival phrase "a good X" unless one knows what X is. Second (and this is what I think is potentially problematic for Korsgaard’s position), "good" is a descriptive term. Put differently, to call some object "good" entails pointing out some natural/descriptive properties that make it good. So, for example, a good scotch is one that is peaty, has a smooth finish, leaves one with a nice buzz, and so on. In other words, on Geach’s account of things, what makes an object (such as scotch) good is not merely that it is an object of choice. Rather, it is an object of my choice because I take it to be good, which means that I take it to have certain natural properties (even if some of these properties are relational). I imagine Korsgaard would respond to what I have just said by pointing out that scotch would not be good were there no human drinkers of scotch who find it pleasant. In this she would be correct, and Geach would agree with her, but the point of difference between the two philosophers comes down to Korsgaard’s use of “because” in accounting for why a conditional good such as scotch is good. On her view, scotch is good because it is an object of rational choice. On Geach’s view, it is good because of the natural properties it has.

One of the main reasons Korsgaard rejects substantive moral realism is because she argues that it cannot adequately answer the normative question. The normative question, according to Korsgaard, asks, "What justifies the claims morality makes on us?" (Korsgaard 1996b, 9–10). Korsgaard’s constructivist moral philosophy argues that this question can only be answered adequately by a Kantian appeal to autonomy that locates the source of value in rational nature. Geach thinks the normative question is legitimate, but he believes that the only way to answer the question is to point to something the questioner wants (1956, 39). And what the questioner wants is going to be essentially connected to what she or he is (namely, a human animal) and what her or his function is as a human animal. At this point, one can easily see the Aristotelian character of Geach’s account of goodness. What I want to draw attention to, in contradistinction to Korsgaard’s Kantian construc-
tivism, is that Geach’s answer to the normative question concerns an appeal to how things are. In other words, Geach endorses a moral realism, but one that avoids the criticisms Korsgaard makes of Moore. It is telling that Geach deliberately ignores what he calls “the supposed distinction between the Right and the Good” (1956, 41). He claims to follow Aquinas in holding that it is sufficient to talk of good and bad actions, and I presume he would say he is following Aristotle as well. And this brings me back to my main concern regarding Korsgaard’s account of value, namely, what exactly is meant by her claim that rational choice confers value on ends. Perhaps Korsgaard sees no real tension between her account of value and the account offered by Geach. If so, I am curious to learn how she accommodates his account of value in her moral philosophy, since she is clear about her rejection of (substantive) realism. Given her Aristotelian leanings, I suspect that Korsgaard does not see Geach’s position as opposed to her own, but if that is the case then I wonder to what extent such an admission pushes her closer to the kind of realist interpretation of value that Wood defends. And the closer one gets to such a realist account of value, the closer I suspect one gets to dissolving the distinction between the right and the good, opting instead solely for the latter in trying to answer the normative question. Fundamentally, I think Geach’s moral realism reveals a constructive dilemma for Korsgaard. If her constructivist account of value is correct, then she is right to endorse a Kantian answer to the normative question, one that prioritizes the moral law over the good. If, however, Geach’s (and perhaps Wood’s) realist account of value is correct, then she has to endorse an Aristotelian answer to the normative question, one that prioritizes the good over the moral law. My reading of Korsgaard sees her as leaning strongly toward the second horn of the dilemma. If I am right, then there is an important sense in which her moral philosophy is not Kantian, but this might very well be a good development.

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1 While I was originally preparing this piece for the 2009 NNEPA symposium, I discovered that Korsgaard would reference Geach in her planned keynote address, “The Origin of the Good and Our Animal Nature.” She seems to think there is some affinity between Geach’s view and her own, though I am not sure that the agreement concerns the points I identify.
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References


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