

## **Kant's Regress Argument**

Sanja Ivic, Belgrade University, [aurora1@yubc.net](mailto:aurora1@yubc.net)

### **Abstract**

Kant's regress argument presented in his *Groundwork* presupposes specification of the categorical imperative<sup>1</sup>, and the accounts of duty and moral worth. Kant argues that regress argument leads to an objective and necessary end, which is the ground of the categorical imperative. Consequently, it must be seen as something that has value for all rational beings. Korsgaard<sup>2</sup> argues that the only candidate for such an object with absolute value is "the human being and in general every rational being" as an "end in itself".<sup>3</sup> This paper will argue that Korsgaard's argument rests on a fallacy. Korsgaard misconstrues Kant's regress argument.<sup>4</sup> Kant argues that unconditioned condition for categorical imperative is autonomy of the will ( i.e. freedom ),<sup>5</sup> not humanity.

Key words: categorical imperative, humanity, autonomy of the will, objective end, regress argument.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this inquiry is to show that Kant's regress argument was not well understood neither by its critics nor by its proponents. All critiques of the regress argument must refer to Kant's original argument presented in his work ( not on interpretations of his theory ).

In his *Groundwork*, Kant argues that rational choice is the supreme principle of morality. This argument is entitled as the "regress argument", because it regresses on the conditions for a choice to be good<sup>6</sup>. It is identified by Christine Korsgaard.<sup>7</sup> In this paper Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant's regress argument and Gaut's critique of Korsgaard's reconstruction of Kant's argument will be presented. These two interpretations of Kant's regress argument will be compared to Kant's original idea presented in his *Groundwork*.

### **Korsgaard's and Gaut's Interpretation of Kant's Regress Argument**

In his paper "The Structure of Practical Reason", Berys Gaut represents his critique of Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant's regress argument. He argues that two of Kant's central arguments ( the good will and the regress argument ) for constructivism fail, and that the constructivist account Kant gives is "fundamentally flawed". However, Gaut does not succeed to undermine Kant's regress argument, because he only considers Korsgaard's interpretation of the regress argument. He does not analyze Kant's original text sufficiently and does not undermine Korsgaard's thesis that regress argument is founded on humanity. By pointing to problems that occur in the regress argument identified by Korsgaard, Gaut is closer to Kant's original idea of the regress argument. However, both Korsgaard and Gaut do not identify autonomy of the will ( i.e. freedom ) as unconditioned condition for the categorical imperative, which is argued by Kant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kant idea is that categorical imperative, as a supreme law of morality, must be valid to all rational beings with absolute necessity.

<sup>2</sup> Korsgaard, "Kant's Formula of Humanity"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.111

<sup>4</sup> This was also argued by Gaut. However, he did not succeed to resolve the gaps in the regress argument he pointed to.

<sup>5</sup> This was also argued by Guyer in his *Kant on Morality, Freedom and Happiness*.

<sup>6</sup> i.e. unconditioned condition for the categorical imperative.

<sup>7</sup> Korsgaard, "Kant's Formula of Humanity", p.114

In his regress argument Kant argues that if there is a categorical imperative<sup>8</sup>, then there must be some necessary end or ends<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, Kant's regress argument starts with an inquiry for the source of categorical imperative. Kant argues that if all values were conditioned ( i.e. contingent ), there would be no practical laws, since such laws hold for all rational beings no matter their contingent desires. Subsequently, the existence of categorical imperative requires the existence of necessary end.

According to Korsgaard, Kant argues that unconditioned condition for the categorical imperative is humanity. However, humanity cannot be perceived as an objective end<sup>10</sup>, because that means that all rational beings would have the same rational choices<sup>11</sup>, which is flawed. Gaut argues that Korsgaard didn't mention Kant's footnote<sup>12</sup> attached to the claim that "every other rational being thinks of itself as an end."<sup>13</sup> Kant introduces the discussion of rational being as an end in itself by saying that it is still a question whether it is a universal law for all rational beings and that "one must, however much he resists it, take a step into metaphysics"<sup>14</sup> in order to answer it.

### **Kant's Original Idea**

Humanity ( i.e. rational choice ) is not the final step of the regress argument, because we can think of the example of a rational choice that is not autonomous. For example, a man who obeys the law, only because he is afraid of the punishment, acts rationally, but his choice is not autonomous. Kant makes a distinction between "morality" and "legality".<sup>15</sup> The moral worth of an action is based on inner maxim and the reason why an agent performed it, not on its effects. If an agent performs an action which externally looks like obeying the moral law, and his inner maxim is based on hypothetical imperatives, in that case the will is heteronomous, and the action is not moral. It is just legal.<sup>16</sup> Hence, morality presupposes autonomy of the will for Kant.

Korsgaard omits to identify the final step of Kant's regress argument: the unconditioned condition for the regress argument is not humanity ( i. e. rational choice ), but autonomy of the will ( i.e. freedom). This is clear from Kant's definition of this concept. Kant defines the autonomy of the will as "the property of it by which it is a law to itself independently on any property of the objects of volition".<sup>17</sup> This is contrasted with heteronomy, according to which "the will does not give itself a law, but the object does so in virtue of its relation to the will."<sup>18</sup> In the last step of the regress argument, Kant finally reduces the conception of morality to the idea of freedom.<sup>19</sup> According to Kant, it is the idea of freedom which makes categorical imperatives

---

<sup>8</sup> "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law." (G, 18)

<sup>9</sup> "But suppose there were something the existence of which itself had absolute worth, something which, as an end in itself, could be a ground for definite laws. In it, and only in it could be the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i. e. of practical law." ( Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 55 )

<sup>10</sup> This means that every rational being should have it, insofar he is rational.

<sup>11</sup> Insofar they are rational.

<sup>12</sup> In his *Groundwork* Kant states: "Man necessarily conceives his own existence as being so: so far then this is a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being regards its existence similarly just on the same rational principle that holds for me: so that it is at the same time an objective principle, from which as a supreme practical law all laws of the will must be capable of being deduced." ( p. 173 ) On this claim Kant attached note in which he explained that this proposition was not proved yet. He stated that this was only a postulate that he would try to prove in the last section of his *Groundwork*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.173

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.53

possible. Autonomy of the will ( i. e. freedom ) makes every rational being a member of the intelligible world.

Kant argues that if rational beings are ends in themselves, they are not such because they have reason, but because they have freedom. Kant emphasizes that only freedom makes rational beings an ends in themselves. It enables them to act according to their own will. The argument for the autonomy of the will is based on the idea that rational being submits to the valid categorical imperative, because it has legislated it itself. If the reason for submission to categorical imperative is based on some interest or inclination, then imperative is hypothetical.<sup>20</sup>

Kant's concept of the autonomy of the will ( i.e. freedom ) is crucial for comprehending his conception of the speculative reason. Kant derives all other concepts of speculative reason from this concept of the autonomy of the will ( i.e. freedom ) and he argues that we know a priori the possibility of freedom.

---

<sup>15</sup> This is very important distinction on which his ethics is founded, and from which is derived the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperative.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*

<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, p.71

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.71

<sup>19</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, p.81

<sup>20</sup> Guyer in his book *Kant on Moral Freedom, Law and Happiness*, argues that it can be inferred that there is a flaw in the Kant's argument: an autonomous will is not logically, nor analytically compelled to act only on moral laws. He argues that there is no logical contradiction in freely choosing to give into inclinations. According to Guyer, Kant's idea is that the connection between the autonomy of the will and the categorical imperative is not "logical"– it is "substantive". This means that autonomous will is logically free to destroy its own freedom, but, on the other hand autonomous will does not will to do so, it needs to Abide by the moral law (Guyer,2000,p.56)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gaut, Berys (1997) "The Structure of Practical Reason" in *Ethics and Practical Reason* ( co-edited with Garet Cullity ), Oxford University Press

Guyer, Paul (2000) *Kant on Morality, Freedom and Happiness*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Johansson, Robert (2004) "Kant's Moral Philosophy" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2004, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2004/entries/kant-moral/>

Hill, Thomas (1992) *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*, Cornell

Kant, Immanuel (1969) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, London, Longmans

Kant, Immanuel (1991) *Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Korsgard, Christine (1996) "Kant's Formula of Humanity" in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press

*Freedom and Reason in Kant*, <http://www.essayssample.com/essay/001118.html>