Finding Obligations Within Second-Personal Engagement: A Critique of Christine Korsgaard's Normative Theory

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This thesis titled
Finding Obligations Within Second-Personal Engagement: A Critique of Christine Korsgaard's Normative Theory

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ABSTRACT

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In response to Stephan Darwall’s The Second-Person Standpoint, Christine Korsgaard agrees that the autonomy of others must be presupposed in order to hold them accountable to our second-personal demands, but unlike Darwall, she finds that we discover our autonomy prior to second-personal engagements. Korsgaard maintains that one knows that one is autonomous by obligating oneself through a “second voice within.”* Hence, she concludes that we do not have to engage with others second-personally in order to know that we are autonomous and can obligate ourselves. In this thesis, I introduce Tyler Burge’s Reason and the First Person to show that knowing that others are capable of holding themselves accountable to our second-personal demands is not dependent on first knowing that we can hold ourselves accountable—we can have knowledge of both concurrently. I conclude with the stronger claim that given the unnecessary epistemic priority of self-obligation, coupled with her own theory of rational agency, Korsgaard must accept that we cannot know that we have obligations to ourselves without engaging second-personally with others.


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INTRODUCTION

In *The Second Person Standpoint*, Stephen Darwall introduces the idea that moral obligation is discovered within the social practice of giving and receiving *second-personal* demands.¹ A second-personal demand occurs “when you address a claim or a demand to someone, expecting him to respond to that claim as one that gives him a reason for action.”² In response to Darwall, Christine Korsgaard makes use of her theory of normativity, which tells us why moral obligation arises within *first-personal* deliberation. On her account, first-personal deliberation is self-conscious thereby involving a “second-personal voice within.”³ The second voice within allows us to make second-personal demands on *ourselves*.

By holding ourselves accountable through first-personal deliberation, Korsgaard finds, as opposed to Darwall, that not only can we know that we are capable of obligating ourselves prior to making and responding to demands on others, but also that this knowledge must be epistemically prior to those transactions. So, while Korsgaard agrees with Darwall, that one’s obligations to others are established in authentic second-personal encounters, she believes those obligations cannot be realized without prior knowledge of one’s autonomy, which is the capacity to obligate oneself. From Kant, Korsgaard considers autonomy as the “source of obligation, and in particular of our ability to

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³ Ibid., 11.
obligate ourselves.” She asks, “How do we go about ‘presupposing’ the autonomy of others in second-personal address, if we have no independent access to this feature of human agency?” She asserts that without a prior notion of autonomy, we cannot expect others to do something we ask if they are incapable of keeping themselves to the task. This is why Korsgaard insists that moral obligation is discovered prior to making and responding to second-personal demands on others, since these demands assume one has the capacity to self-obligate—that one is autonomous.

Korsgaard’s theory proceeds in showing us that knowing that you are autonomous is dependent on knowing that you are a rational agent. For Korsgaard, being a rational agent means being a source of reasons—reasons that are public in the sense that they would apply to not only yourself in a relevant future case, but also to anyone who is rational. Since, all reasons for Korsgaard are public in this way, they are also all second-personal. As a rational agent, I obligate myself through the reasons I give myself; therefore, knowing that I am a rational agent is integral in knowing that I am autonomous and capable of obligating myself.

For you to obligate me, I must know that you are also a rational agent. Korsgaard holds that “we may be obligated by others … in much the same way that we may be obligated by ourselves”—that is through reasons—arguing that, “[i]t is impossible to hear the words of a language you know as mere noise. In hearing your words as words, I

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5 *Autonomy*, 23.
7 *Autonomy*, 10.
acknowledge that you are someone." When someone issues a second-personal demand, we recognize this demand as a reason for us to act established by another rational agent. Before we know that someone else is a rational agent, Korsgaard insists, we must have self-knowledge, which is the knowledge that we are rational agents.

The question is whether Korsgaard is right to claim that self-knowledge grants us epistemic access to know that there are other rational agents who can be held accountable. One may think that self-knowledge is prior, since one has direct knowledge of oneself intellectually; whereas, knowledge of others is indirect since it is inferred from perceiving other’s behavior. However, our dependence on sense perception to engage with others does not mean that the knowledge that others are rational agents is not intellectually grounded. If the case can be made that I can have apriori and immediate knowledge that you are a rational agent, then I can show why Korsgaard is wrong in claiming that knowing that I am autonomous is epistemically prior to knowing that I can obligate you by way of a second-personal demand.

In *Reason and the First Person* Tyler Burge provides just such an argument. He posits that, “both self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds can be epistemically immediate and epistemically grounded in intellectual, non-empirical entitlements.” His argument reveals why knowing that we are rational, autonomous agents is not necessarily epistemically prior to knowing others in the same way, as Korsgaard would have it. He argues that one knows that one is a rational agent through the sheer fact that one

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8 Sources, 134, 143.
10 Ibid.
understands the concept of reason and understands the content of one’s own thoughts.\textsuperscript{11} In knowing the content of one’s own thoughts, one has, he argues, a “non-empirical, apriori epistemic entitlement to knowledge” that there is another rational agent by way of a contrast between understood instantiations of rational content that are one’s own with content that is not.\textsuperscript{12} This would mean that if I understand a second-personal demand as obligating to me as a reason, and if I know that I did not make this demand on myself, then I know that someone else, another rational agent, did. If knowledge of other minds is based on this contrast and not on an inference or empirical evidence, then this knowledge is apriori and available to us with the same immediacy as self-knowledge.

If it is the case that knowing that one is a rational agent has no epistemic priority in relation to knowing that others are rational agents, then the knowledge that one is autonomous need not be epistemically prior to acknowledging that one can be held accountable to others by their second-personal demands. If Korsgaard is right in maintaining that reasons are obligating to us qua reasons, and if our ability to oblige ourselves is through the demands of a second voice within, then the second voice within must be the voice of reason. If there is no necessary epistemic priority in understanding the voice of reason whether it springs from our own rationality or from that of others, then it is not the case, as Korsgaard argues, that one must know that one is autonomous prior to knowing that one is obligated by others. That is the weak claim I will defend in order to support the stronger claim that Korsgaard must accept that obligations to oneself

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{12} See note 9 above.
as well as to others are introduced simultaneously within the social practice of second-personal address.

I argue for this conclusion to show that, although our autonomy is discovered through first-personal deliberation, the knowledge that we are autonomous is neither necessarily epistemically prior to nor independent of the knowledge that we can obligate and be obligated by others through second-personal demands. Thinking that one apprehends moral obligation by knowing that one is autonomous, while not knowing at the same time that one has obligations to others, indicates a failure to recognize both the depth of such obligation and rational content as such.

I proceed as follows. In section one, I briefly summarize Korsgaard’s moral theory, taken primarily from her books, the *Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Construction*. In doing so, I make clear how Korsgaard relates autonomy, rational agency, and obligation. Since Korsgaard refers to a second voice within to argue that first-personal deliberation grounds normativity, I fit this notion into her theory as a whole to show why this voice must be the voice of reason.

In section two, I introduce Burge’s argument in which he defends how one can have knowledge that there are other rational agents without depending on, or making an inference from, knowledge of one’s own rational agency.¹³ This argument is critical in showing that the epistemic access to oneself as a source of rationality is not necessarily prior to that of others as rational agents.

In section three, I employ Burge’s arguments to challenge Korsgaard’s position on moral obligation to self and others. By attenuating Korsgaard’s objection to Darwall’s

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¹³ Ibid., 243-270.
theory, I show that obligations to oneself and others mutually arise and why Korsgaard
must accept that moral obligation cannot be known without second-personally engaging
with others.
SECTION I

Korsgaard’s moral theory tells us that rational agency is the means through which we discover both our autonomy and the fact that it is rational agency itself that obligates us. In this section, I will discuss rational agency as Korsgaard presents it and why on her view it leads to our ability to obligate ourselves, or in other words, to our autonomy.

For Korsgaard, “autonomy is commanding yourself to do what you think it would be a good idea to do, but that in turn depends on who you think you are.”\(^{14}\) We see ourselves as persons who do not always act autonomously—at times falling short of rational action. For this reason, Kant says, “A will whose maxims necessarily accord with the laws of autonomy is a holy, or absolutely good, will. The dependence of a will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (that is, moral necessitation) is obligation. Obligation can have no reference to a holy being.”\(^{15}\) So the fact that we feel the bind of obligation is because there is nothing necessary about the way we act. We are free to determine our actions and sometimes we choose things that are, we could say, less than holy. Obligation arises not because we see ourselves as necessarily autonomous, but because our conception of ourselves is as rational agents with the capacity for self-governance and self-constitution.

On Korsgaard’s account, having a conception of ourselves as rational agents starts with the fact that we are self-conscious. Self-consciousness, as Korsgaard construes it, is a capacity to be conscious of oneself as both a thinking and acting being.\(^{16}\) Understood

\(^{14}\) Sources, 107.


\(^{16}\) Sources, 92-93.
in this way, self-consciousness introduces reflective space between thought and behavior, which allows one to take a step back and decide which potential actions and beliefs among others are worth choosing. For example, when you are sitting for a period of time you may suddenly realize that you have been tapping your foot. Having the ability to reflect on your behavior and your desires, you can decide to stop tapping your foot, recognizing that you do not wish to distract others sitting near you. Since you are self-conscious, you are conscious of the mental activity that shapes who you are by determining which actions to engage in.\(^\text{17}\)

When determining which actions are worth pursuing, we ask ourselves if there are reasons for choosing one action over another. Korsgaard asserts that self-consciousness brings reason into being since consciousness of myself as someone who must act and someone who has the freedom to choose which actions to pursue, enables me to ask myself normative questions.\(^\text{18}\) Normative questions ask us whether we have reasons to choose one action over another and expose what truly obligates us. Korsgaard refers to the ability to ask oneself normative questions as “first-personal deliberation.”\(^\text{19}\) Someone who acts based on reasons arrived at through such deliberation is for oneself a source of reasons, and is therefore, according to Korsgaard, a rational agent. A rational agent is one who can answer to oneself whether actions are worth pursuing.

\(^\text{17}\) Since Korsgaard holds the view that we constitute ourselves by our actions, it is important to clarify how the term is being used. Our mere physical movements are not what we are referring to now as the actions that go into making us who we are. The actions that we are concerned with are those that are the result of choice. If our arm moves and causes change in the world because of a choice we have made, then that is an action, good or bad, for which we are now a responsible agent. Because we are self-conscious, we recognize that we have choice about who we become. Within this context, beliefs are taken to be actions as well.

\(^\text{18}\) \textit{Self-Constiution}, 116; See note 7 above.

\(^\text{19}\) See note 7 above.
Given that rational agency is the means through which we determine our actions, Korsgaard perceives rational agents as self-conscious causalities. From our self-conscious perspective, we see ourselves as free to determine how it is we go about making change in the world. Since we view the world around us as categorized into terms of cause and effect, if we take ourselves to be the cause of our actions and the change they effect in the world, then we must act in ways that are law-governed.

According to Korsgaard, we must act in accordance with law because, as Hume states, “we could never recognize cases of causality in the absence of regularity.” This means that without regularity we could not identify necessary relationships apart from temporal ones. If it was not the case, for example that things fell to the ground when dropped but rather flew in different directions when released, the gravitational relationship between objects might not have been discovered. People may have thought these events just happened one after the other without any connection. The regularity, or consistency with which objects fell to the ground signaled a causal interaction. When causal events happen with necessity, our attempt to explain them is in terms of laws. Hence, Newton’s Universal Law of Gravitation explains the phenomenon of my book falling to the floor when pushed off the desk, and it tells us why this sequence will always be the case.

For us to identify our agency as the necessary cause behind our actions as apart from our merely having a tendency towards particular actions, we must act, according to Korsgaard, with regularity by acting on principles of reason that take universal form.

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20 Self-constitution, 84.
21 Sources, 226-227.
Like other forces in nature, if we are governed by universal laws, regardless of where we are in the universe, on every occasion relevantly similar to the present one, it could be predicted that we would act in the same way. But what makes us rational agents is that in order to see ourselves as a causality, we choose which laws to impose on ourselves. As long as we are self-conscious—conscious of ourselves as rational agents—the law that governs us is Kant’s categorical imperative, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” When one follows the categorical imperative, she constitutes herself by acting on some principle or other that she freely chooses and imposes on herself. Legislating for oneself in this way is what makes her autonomous. Hence, for Korsgaard, knowing that you are autonomous as well as knowing how to go about commanding yourself, are both dependent on knowing that you are a rational agent.

Korsgaard’s description of autonomy raises a concern about the underlying notion of self-obligation. If, for Korsgaard, autonomy is the ability to obligate oneself by laws one freely chooses and imposes on oneself, then why should we follow our own laws if we could simply change them? Kant realized the apparent contradiction in saying that an autonomous self both legislates and is ruled by a law it chooses for itself. Someone cannot hold these opposing positions simultaneously—either you are actively constraining or actively being constrained. The only response that quells these

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22 Sources, 227.
23 Kant, Ak. 4:421, Paton, 88.
concerns and leaves autonomy intact, is to make a distinction within the self between that which commands and that which obeys. Korsgaard sees that Kant makes such a distinction “between noumena and phenomena—the active and passive aspects of the self.”

Following Kant’s lead, Korsgaard takes a similar approach to the problem of autonomy.

Employing Plato’s Republic, Korsgaard puts forth what she calls a “constitutional model” of the self. The constitutional model describes the soul as comprised of many parts (perhaps “voices” would better keep with Korsgaard’s metaphor). That we have different parts to ourselves is apparent when we are torn about what to do. In Plato’s Republic, Plato tells the story of Leontius who struggles with his desire to look at the dead bodies of criminals lying on the ground outside the wall of the city. Leontius tries to shield his eyes from the sight as part of him is repulsed to view the spectacle. Ultimately, he casts his gaze upon the corpses while cursing himself for doing so. Plato uses this story to illustrate the soul as having parts that can come into conflict.

What is the relationship among the parts of the soul? Plato describes the soul as having three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. The reasonable part of us seeks to act rationally; the spirited part derives from an inner sense of worth and defends what the self determines itself to do against fear, desire or pain; and the part of appetite gives rise to desires. The divisions of the soul are parallel to those of a city-state with three classes:

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26 Self-constitution, 146.
27 Ibid., 134.
29 Self-Constitution, 137-140; see Plato, 129.
30 Self-Constitution, 141.
the rulers who make the laws; the auxiliaries who defend the law; and the working class who provide for the basic needs of the city.\textsuperscript{31} For Plato, a city is just when it maintains a distinction among its classes by each class fulfilling its duty without interfering with the other classes’ functions.\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, a person has justice within himself, according to Plato, when he recognizes the same distinctions among the parts of his soul.\textsuperscript{33} As a city acts as one unified entity when each of its classes performs its duty, so too a person acts as one unified self when each part of the soul performs its own function. Because we are made up of more than one part and each part has a distinct function, Korsgaard answers how we avoid contradiction in the idea of obligating ourselves—one part of our self rules another.\textsuperscript{34}

Korsgaard sees that we become a unified self when the parts of our soul do their duty when we deliberate over what to do. Our appetite presents us with incentives, which our rationality reflects on to determine which are worth acting on, while our spirit enforces the decision we make.\textsuperscript{35} Korsgaard emphasizes that it is the following of this protocol that makes our actions just, not the particular outcomes that result from it. The same goes for a city; the ruling of the court is just regardless of whether the verdict is guilty or not guilty, so long as the proper juridical procedures are in place and followed.\textsuperscript{36} That which informs a city as to the proper jurisdiction of its classes and unites its citizens is its constitution. No one part of a city is the city itself, but all the parts as a whole make

\textsuperscript{31} Self-Constitution, 136.  
\textsuperscript{32} Plato, 120.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 141.  
\textsuperscript{34} Self-Constitution, 119.  
\textsuperscript{35} See note 30 above.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 151.
the city, which is represented in its constitution. As long as the constitution is upheld, the state will be unified and just. Korsgaard contends that like an idealized state, we too must identify with our constitution to see the parts of our soul acting as one unified agent.

The constitutional model of self that Korsgaard proposes makes sense of how you can have parts to yourself, allowing for self-obligation without contradiction, while at the same time acting as one unified self under a constitution, which fits with being a rational agent. The city-state ideal also translates well into our self-conscious experience, since who it is we take ourselves to be is not identified with any one part of ourselves. Such is the case with Leontius, who is neither wholly desiring to view the corpses nor completely disgusted to do so. Our self-conscious vantage point oversees the relation among the parts of ourselves. It is by identifying this perspective with a constitution that our divided soul can follow through with action.\(^{37}\)

Given our human condition, what must our constitution look like? The mandates of a constitution depend on what it is uniting; therefore, our constitution must answer to a soul that is both self-conscious and divided into parts. Since I am compelled to action and because I am self-conscious, I take myself to be someone who must act based on reasons. To act on a reason, I cannot be divided within myself. Therefore, Korsgaard states, in order to unite the parts of our soul in acting together as one rational agent, our constitution must say, “let reason rule.”\(^{38}\)

If we identify ourselves with our constitution, then that means we do not identify with reason itself. Doing so would be equivalent to a city that identified only with its

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 145.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 158.
The ruling class is the part of the city employed to legislate, and likewise, reason is the part of us in charge of guiding our choices. Reason alone has the authority backed by our constitution to obligate us and tell us what to do. Because Korsgaard claims “that I am answerable to myself … is made clear to me by the voice of the second person within,” this second voice must be our voice of reason. First-personal deliberation on her account must simply be the voice of reason addressing the other parts of the self. Because you can both address and obligate yourself by your voice of reason, Korsgaard maintains that you can discover moral obligation by means of first-personal deliberation alone.

The capacity for understanding a voice of reason, whether it is your own or the voice of another person, goes along with being a rational agent. All rational agents are also sensitive to the normativity of reasons and subsequently understand their source as a voice of reason. This is because, on Korsgaard’s account, our reasons must take universal or law-like form, meaning they apply to all relevant situations presently and in the future. Korsgaard argues that if reasons are such that they appeal to us now as well as to who we are in the future, they must be public and appeal to anyone who is rational. If all reasons are public, Korsgaard sees that they are then also all second-personal, since a voice of reason can address anyone who is rational and understands what is being said.

It is clear on Korsgaard’s account that our voice of reason obligates us. It is only by our obeying what reason tells us that we can act as a rational agent. That fact is recognized by our constitution. Yet, Korsgaard considers that for us to be obligated at all, we must value ourselves as rational agents. For Korsgaard, our rationality is our

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39 Ibid., 154.
humanity. If we stop acting rationally, then we stop acting based on reasons, and if we do not have reasons to do anything then we have no means to articulate the value of pursuing anything—even our own lives. Since we constitute ourselves through our rational activity, Korsgaard sees its loss as no better than suicide since “the only thing that could be as bad or worse than death is something that for us amounts to death—not being ourselves anymore.” All values are grounded in the value of our humanity, so at the deepest level we are obligated to reject anything that threatens the value we have in ourselves as rational agents. We do not get to obligation without knowing and valuing that we are rational agents.

To summarize, the second voice within on Korsgaard’s account must be the voice of reason. A rational agent listens to the voice of reason, so when it is said that an autonomous person self-obligates, what is meant is that this person is being obligated by his voice of reason. Using a constitutional model of agency, Korsgaard shows how this voice of reason speaks from the part of us that is rational. Composed of more than just one part, we have more than just one voice. When parts of us come into conflict, a cacophony of voices arises. If we are to become unified agents who can hold ourselves accountable to our actions, we can only have one voice. Therefore, Korsgaard has shown why we must identify with our constitution, which tells us to heed the voice of reason. When we listen to our voice of reason, it in turn speaks for us as rational agents.

Because the voice of reason is a second voice within, Korsgaard claims that one does not have to engage in second-personal address with others to discover moral

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40 Sources, 18.
41 Ibid., 102.
42 Self- Constitution, 140.
obligation and to know that one is autonomous. One need simply deliberate first-personally to know that one is capable of holding oneself accountable to a law that one freely chooses and imposes on oneself. Since I can know through first-personal deliberation that I am autonomous and because I must take myself and others to be autonomous before I can issue or be held accountable to second-personal demands, Korsgaard concludes that knowing that I am autonomous is epistemically prior to my making and responding to second-personal demands on others.\(^{43}\)

As this section served to bring out from Korsgaard’s theory, knowing that I am autonomous is dependent on knowing that I am a rational agent. Since knowing that I am a rational agent is necessary to engage second-personally with others, in the next section, I will examine why I am justified in knowing that I am a rational agent.

\(^{43}\) Burge, 23.
SECTION II

In Section I, I showed how on Korsgaard’s theory, one need not engage in second-personal demands with others to realize that one is autonomous. Rather, one knows one is autonomous by knowing that one is a rational agent. In this section, I will examine Tyler Burge’s argument for how we are justified in knowing ourselves as rational agents. In *Reason and the First Person*, Burge argues that understanding the concept of reason grounds the knowledge that we are rational agents, and that others are as well. If Burge is successful in his arguments, what is ultimately shown is the knowledge that we are autonomous rational agents is not necessarily epistemically prior to knowing that there are other rational agents. If neither notion is epistemically prior to the other, then I can argue (as I do in Section III) that one knows that others can obligate one at the same time one recognizes one’s own autonomy.

Building the argument for why there must be rational agents, and how I can know that I am one of them, Burge first examines the concept of reason:

> Fully understanding the concept of reason involves not merely mastering an evaluative system for appraising attitudes or relations between thoughts, and not merely realizing abstractly that in any reasoning such evaluations must be (somehow) associated with a motivating impulse to implement them. It requires reasoning and understanding what it is to be so moved. There are thus applicational, or implementational, and motivational elements in understanding reason.\(^{44}\)

Holding the same view, Korsgaard says that, “reason in all its departments is legislative.”\(^{45}\) For reason to be legislative, its evaluations must apply to someone. Burge considers it to be “conceptually deficient” to not associate rational activity with a rational

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\(^{44}\) Burge, 250.

\(^{45}\) *Autonomy*, 14.
Although the concept of reason requires that there be rational agents, knowing ourselves as agents to whom rational evaluations apply requires further evidence.

Fully understanding the concept of reason is recognizing that reasons are “reasons-to,” which means some reasons must be applied immediately and necessarily without further justification. One must be able to tell the difference between reasons that have this immediacy for implementation from those that do not. The distinction between these reasons lies in their application. This is because reasoning itself demands that one acknowledge reasons as reasons and use them to “correct, suspend,” and “change attitudes conceived as such,” in the immediate going-on of thought, but not all reasons make immediate demands like this. By being a source of reasons for oneself, one has the immediacy to application without further inference that one does not necessarily have when the source of reasons is other than oneself. When the source of reasons is other than myself, I recognize that I might not have all the relevant information necessary to apply an evaluation immediately in the same way that you might if you were the source of reasons. This also applies to myself, in that—reasons I might have had at one time may not be relevant to me now given a change in what I know. Because some reasons require immediate application in actual deliberation, Burge insists one must recognize oneself as both the source of those reasons and the person to whom they apply. Even

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46 Burge, 266.
47 See note 44 above.
48 Ibid., 252.
49 Ibid., 247.
though he does not say so explicitly, it is clear that Burge shares Korsgaard’s view that being a source of reasons for oneself is to be a rational agent.⁵⁰

While pointing to yourself third-personally as the rational agent who is doing the reasoning fulfills the need for a subject of rational thought, it does not allow for the immediate application of certain evaluations that comes with knowing first-personally that you are the rational agent.⁵¹ The identification of oneself as the rational agent in the present, active moment of reflection is essential for the application of reasons with immediacy. As Burge argues, this is only possible by way of the first-person concept.⁵²

To know what it is to be rational, we must have a first-person conception of ourselves—what Burge calls the ‘I concept.’ Burge explains that, “…[F]ully understanding the concept of reason, and engaging in reasoning in the most reflective and articulated way, require[s] having the I concept and being able to apply it for this purpose.”⁵³ This means we conceptualize ourselves as rational agents engaged in reasoning and to whom the evaluations apply. Burge explains that identifying oneself as a rational agent means, “one must be susceptible to the force and implement normative evaluations in guiding thought and other acts that fall under those evaluations; and … one must regard reasons as effective in one’s judgments, inferences, and other activity.”⁵⁴ On Korsgaard’s account, in the same way, it is our identification with the concept of a rational agent that turns it into a normative conception.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., 251.
⁵¹ Ibid., 254.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Ibid, 258.
⁵⁴ See note 50 above.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 255. A distinction between concept and conception is worth briefly addressing Korsgaard takes a concept as presenting a problem, and a conception as offering the solution. So for example, we all share a
Although the concept of a rational agent does not derive from your intellect—it comes from your experiences a posteriori—the epistemic justification behind knowing that you are a rational agent does not depend on the empirical world. Burge explains that if we grant one sufficient experience in order to have something to deliberate about, then one is epistemically entitled to judge that he or she is the rational agent to whom the outcomes of this deliberation apply.\textsuperscript{56} This is due to the fact that one is aware of whether or not one is thinking and one seems to understand what it is one is thinking about. Burge finds that in order to for me to claim that I am thinking, I do not have to first link together that there is thinking with the thought that it is \textit{I} who is thinking. There is an immediacy of application in regards to the first-person concept that occurs with thought. Since the application of the first-person concept is “immediate and non-inferential,” there is no misidentification possible; “mastering the first-person concept is sufficient to guarantee that applications will be successful. This suggests that the epistemic warrant associated with applications of the I concept comes with mastery of the concept—and it is non-empirical.”\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, the justification one has in saying to oneself, ‘I am a rational agent,’ is apriori, since its “force derives from intellection….”\textsuperscript{58}

To summarize, Burge argues that the apriori justification behind knowing that we are rational agents starts with the fact that understanding the concept of reason is to

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 246  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 245.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 264.
understand that reason is legislative and applies to a rational agent. Since the evaluations of the reasoning process must at times be applied with immediacy and no further inference, one must take oneself first-personally to be the rational agent to whom those evaluations apply. Since there is no step between understanding the first-person concept and applying it to oneself, Burge concludes that knowing that one is a rational agent is apriori epistemically justified.

Burge moves from the justification grounding the knowledge that I am a rational agent, or what he also refers to as self-knowledge, to presenting the case for my apriori epistemic entitlement in knowing that there are other minds. Although the arguments are related, the latter is knowledge is not inferred from the former. Burge sees that the justification for knowing that there are other minds, or rather, that there are other rational agents, hangs with the argument for self-knowledge since,

Knowledge of other minds is distinguished from self-knowledge not by being necessarily inferential or by being necessarily grounded in perception, but by being in some known contrast with acknowledgement of an understood instantiation of content as one’s own.

His argument points to a capacity we have to differentiate between making and receiving assertions. As rational agents, we know when we make rational assertions. So, when we seemingly understand rational assertions of which we know we are not the author, we are entitled to believe that the rational content is coming from another rational source. Knowing that one is the source of rational content is knowing that one is not the source, and to know that one is not the source (as when one receives content), is to know that someone else—an other rational agent—is.

59 See note 9 above.
60 Ibid., 267. Emphasis mine.
Knowledge that there are other rational agents fits into the reflective space of determining when the rational application of content applies to oneself in the present moment by knowing whether one has made the assertion or not. One is not rationally obligated to apply with immediacy reasons that arise from rational content that is not one’s own in the same way that one must if the source of rational content is oneself. Yet, when we are presented with second-personal reasons from another rational source, we take ourselves as understanding what is said. Since reasons are such that they are understood by anyone who is rational, we have an “apriori prima-facie entitlement to presume genuine understanding of an instantiation of content.” Of course, this entitlement is defeasible since it may well turn out that we are always standing outside a Chinese Room. For example, what I take to be another rational agent speaking to me could in fact turn out to be a very convincing robot. Regardless of the fact that we rely on our senses to actually perceive what someone else is saying, sense perception plays no more a part in the justification of our understanding of what is being said than memory does, “…[as] an element in the justification of deductive reasoning.”

Burge’s argument not only shows that knowing that there are other minds is not dependent on empirical evidence, it also explains how this knowledge does not rest for its justification on inference from knowledge of our own mind. Other minds are known

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61 See note 46 above. Burge explains that we demonstrate our understanding of rational content by recognizing the “attitudinal mode” and “instantiations, or token occurrences,” of that content Burge, 265.
62 Ibid., 270.
63 Ibid., 265.
“through understanding an assertion in the third-person attributive way.” Burge explains,

If one has the requisite conceptual equipment to make explicit third-person attributions of propositional content, one can know immediately in understanding an utterance its being a sign of another person, just as in using the first-person concept in *cogito*-like thoughts, one knows non-inferentially a thought as one’s own.

The capacity for discerning the source of understood instantiations of rational content is built on there being sources of rationality other than oneself. One knows immediately that there is another rational mind in the same way that one knows oneself; therefore, one is conceptually misfiring if he has knowledge that he is a rational agent but does not, at the same time, have knowledge that there are other rational agents when they make demands on him.

Burge provides the justification behind not only the knowledge that we are rational agents, but that others are as well. When second-personal demands are made of me, I can know, as Burge’s theory tells us, that the other person is a rational agent with the *same immediacy* with which I know that I am a rational agent. To know that someone is a rational agent is to know that this person is autonomous, in which case, I know, as she addresses me, that her demand is a second-personal reason. By showing how the justification for our apriori epistemic entitlement in knowing that others are rational agents is based on a contrast versus an inference, Burge sheds light on why Korsgaard’s claim, that knowing one is autonomous must be epistemically prior to knowing that one

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64 Ibid., 269.
65 Ibid.
can make and respond to second-personal demands on others, does not hold, as I shall argue in Section III.
SECTION III

In Section I, I showed how Christine Korsgaard considers us, as rational agents, to be autonomous in the sense of determining ourselves by choosing the principles by which we make ourselves the cause of our actions. I also showed why we use our reasoning capacity to decide which principles to act on. This notion is at the heart of Korsgaard’s theory of self-constitution. Using Plato’s model of a city-state, she explains that how well we govern ourselves is dependent on how well we engage with reason. That is, the extent to which we are autonomous depends on how well we connect our principles with our actions by listening to the second-voice within as our voice of reason. Acting as rational agents, we let the voice of reason speak for us. Because this sense of autonomy is dependent on rational agency, I wanted to see whether the justification for knowing that we are rational agents would reveal why such knowledge is not dependent on second-personal demands with others, as Korsgaard claims.

Tyler Burge’s argument for how we can be justified in knowing that we are rational agents shows how we can know that others are rational agents as well. He argues that we can know that someone else is a rational agent by understanding what he is saying as rational content, and knowing that it is not us who has said it. What was important to bring out from that discussion was that we can have knowledge that someone else is a rational agent, neither by inferring from knowing ourselves as rational agents, nor from observing the behavior of that person empirically, but rather knowing by way of contrast with self-knowledge. This contrast is significant in showing that the capacity we have for determining whether we are the author of instantiated rational
content can tell us with immediacy whether we can know that there is another a rational agent.

That I have the same immediacy in knowing that someone else is a rational agent as I have in knowing that I am a rational agent, tells me that there is no inferential step to take between knowing that I am obligated by the demands I make on myself and knowing that the demands another agent makes on me through second-personal reasons are obligating to me as well. Let me carefully unpack this claim. Although I do not have to apply his reasons with the same immediacy with which I apply my own (I might in the end reject his reasons), this fact of application does not take away from my feeling the force of their normativity. That I understand his reasons as reasons puts me under obligation, which is the nature of public reasons as Korsgaard defines them.\(^{66}\) On Korsgaard’s account, what obligates me is my voice of reason, and what obligates me to you is your voice of reason, and what Burge’s argument supports is that I do not have to translate your words into my own rational language, since I understand with immediacy what it is you are saying. Of course, to be obligated by your reasons I must obligate myself by them, as noted by Kant, “I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation.”\(^{67}\) What is crucial to highlight here is that self-obligation can occur at the same time that another person obligates me, and does not have to be epistemically prior.

What I am revealing here is not whether obligation to self and other occur simultaneously, but rather whether knowledge of moral obligations to self and other are

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\(^{66}\) See *Self-Constitution*, 191.

\(^{67}\) See note 25 above.
discovered at the same time, as opposed to Korsgaard’s view that the former knowledge is necessarily epistemically prior in relation to the latter knowledge, in order to grasp the latter knowledge. Korsgaard claims that the knowledge that one has moral obligations to oneself is epistemically prior to knowing that one can obligate and be obligated by others. She claims that without having the prior knowledge that she can obligate herself (which she takes to be knowledge that she is autonomous), she could not engage in holding or being held accountable to others, since she would not know what those actions entail.

For this reason, Korsgaard believes that moral obligation is discovered by means of first-personal deliberation and not within the practice of persons making second-personal demands on each other. In this section, I will show why I take Korsgaard to be mistaken on this matter of epistemic priority, and why I think her theory would instead support the view that moral obligations are discovered within second-personal interactions with other rational agents.

As Korsgaard rightly points out, to make demands of someone second-personally, I must know that she is capable of holding herself accountable to do what I ask of her. I must know what it is for someone to be autonomous. Our concept of a rational agent holds that the individual is autonomous, so when we assume that someone is a rational agent, we also take her to be autonomous from this concept we have of agency. Therefore, in order to know that another person is capable of doing what it is I demand of her, I must know that she is a rational agent. Our knowledge that someone is a rational agent is defeasible, as Burge notes, because we could be wrong in our assumption about someone. For example, it may be that what we thought was a rational person speaking to
us was in reality a robot, or a well-trained parrot. But this defeasibility does not detract from the point that we are obligated by the voice of reason that we take to be coming from another rational agent, and if we take that person to be a rational agent, then we also take him to be autonomous. If I believe that he is autonomous, then I can obligate him second-personally, because I can take him as being able to hold himself to doing what I ask by the reasons I give him. Korsgaard believes that we do have obligations to others, and not just obligations to ourselves in reference to others. This would be possible on her account, only if such skepticism about the reality behind what we take to be sources of reasons is not her concern.

Korsgaard is concerned with the context in which we discover moral obligation. She believes that obligations could not have been realized within the framework of second-personal demands, since we would not be able to begin making demands on each other without first knowing obligation to ourselves. Yet, if I can understand what someone is saying to me and I know that this person is another rational agent with *immediacy* in the instant she addresses me with a second-personal demand, then it is not necessary that I first know what obligations are to myself to recognize the obligations, as such, I now have to this person. Since knowing that she is a rational agent and can obligate me is not inferred from the knowledge that I am a rational agent and can obligate myself, there is no reason why the latter knowledge must have epistemic priority in order to grasp the former knowledge. Korsgaard observes that, “I can obligate myself because I am conscious of myself. So if you are going to obligate me, I must be conscious of

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68 See note 8 above.
Therefore, knowing that someone else is a rational agent is sufficient for knowing that he is autonomous and that I can hold him accountable.

This defense of the weak claim—knowing that you are autonomous is not, as Korsgaard argues, necessarily epistemically prior in order to for you to know that you are obligated by the second-personal demands of others—by itself does not support my stronger claim. In order for me to conclude that, by her own account, Korsgaard must accept second-personal interactions as the arena within which one simultaneously discovers moral obligations to oneself and others, I must respond to a further concern. Korsgaard asks,

If we are autonomous, then the person who fails to take up the second person standpoint fails to know something intimate and important about his own agency. But unless he has a reason to take up the second-personal standpoint and its presuppositions, it is possible that he will never know. And that conclusion can be generalized: if it were not for the fact that it is so psychologically difficult to avoid holding one another accountable, it seems as if we might never have discovered that we are autonomous. But then how could we ever have been autonomous?

If it is claimed that moral obligation is discovered within the practice of second-personally obligating each other, and yet we are not committed to engaging with others in this way, what is at stake is our full recognition of our own rational agency and autonomy. This is a problem. But it is not solved as Korsgaard proposes, by showing how the second-personal standpoint is an unavoidable position, since we always stand in such relation to ourselves. Standing only in relation to ourselves does not get us very far as agents. By itself, such an internal relation does not normatively orient us in the world.

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69 Ibid., 136.
70 *Autonomy*, 22-23.
in which we act as agents. In their work, ‘Yo!’ and ‘Lo!’, Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla explain that,

The ability to locate ourselves first-personally in normative—or for that matter material—space is not sufficient to render our knowledge of such space practically deployable. … In the case of my practical placing in a world of things, then, I need both first personal knowledge of where I am on the map and also practical knowledge of how to find something else from here. I must understand not only that “I am here,” but also that that is the lake, she is over here, this is how long a foot is. I must grasp how other things are located and locatable relative to me. Indeed, I need a great deal of such relational and demonstrative knowledge in order to give any usable bite to my theoretical and indexical knowledge.71

What this paragraph illustrates is that as we are positioning ourselves second-personally towards ourselves, we must at the time be positioning ourselves in relation to something else in the world “out there” in order to understand the status of our own position. Although this is a pragmatic account of the relationship we must hold with the world and others in order to know that we are rational agents, it introduces the significant role that sociality plays in rational agency. An appeal to our sociality can go so far as to justify how it is that our second-personal engagement with others is unavoidable, and hence that at no time are we deprived of knowing that we are autonomous, rational agents and that others are as well, in which case then, we know that we are obligated to one another. Rather than arguing that the second-person perspective one takes towards oneself is unavoidable, as Korsgaard does (which by itself, leaves us, on the account of Kukla and Lance, without much room to navigate as rational agents), we must instead

71 Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance, ‘Yo!’ and ‘Lo!’: The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 158.
consider that our second-personal encounter with another person is one that inducts us into rational agency itself.  

We would have never become rational agents, able to take a second-personal stance towards ourselves in order to deliberate, if we had not already engaged with others in order to develop the capacities necessary for us to be rational agents by any understanding of the term. Specifically, I am referring here to our self-conscious capacity. In order to address ourselves second-personally and listen to our voice of reason, we must be self-conscious, which is why this fact about ourselves is the starting point for Korsgaard’s theory.

Because Korsgaard argues that self-conscious thought leads us to the source of normativity, she concludes that self-conscious reasoning, or first-personal deliberation, establishes the basis for moral theorizing. But if we take a step back and ask ourselves what provides the foundation for self-consciousness, we will see that we get back to social interactions with others. For example, George Mead, social psychologist and philosopher, was the first to present a theory of self-consciousness as a second-personal relationship with the self. On Mead’s account, self-consciousness arises within a social and logically prior linguistic framework, and is based on the rise of meaning through mutual recognition of the significance of objects—the self being one of those objects. Mead, like Korsgaard, also considers language to be an integral part of our experience of mind since “the mechanism of thought is but an inner conversation.”  

For Mead, necessarily prior to language, social engagement allows one to “have something to

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72 Darwall thinks that the second-person standpoint can be rejected (Darwall, 140).
communicate before communicating.” If theories such as Mead’s about the relationship between self-consciousness and sociality are correct, then one need not worry whether it could have been the case that one is a rational agent without knowing that one is autonomous for lack of having engaged second-personally with others. The fact of our sociality is sufficient for assuaging Korsgaard’s concern, as she herself defends, “if our social nature is deep … then justifications of morality can and should appeal to it.”

Putting that concern aside, I can now show why second-personal interactions with others support the structure of humanity that Korsgaard utilizes in her theory. I do not see Korsgaard objecting to such a view, when she says that, “Human beings are social animals in a deep way. It is not just that we go in for friendship or prefer to live in swarms or packs. The space of linguistic consciousness—the space in which meanings and reasons exist—is a space that we occupy together.” Recall from Section I that on Korsgaard’s account, the source of normativity is the value we have in our humanity. In other words, the view of humanity that we value is the one that is obligating to us. Korsgaard maintains, “What you want is not merely to be me-in-particular nor of course is it just to be a generic human being—what you want is to be a someone, a particular instance of humanity.” Given this account, one could argue that what we value is not a conception of ourselves as the only locus of rationality, nor, at the opposite end, is it a conception of ourselves as nothing but reason itself. We are obligated by a conception of

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75 See note 69 above.
76 Ibid., 145.
77 *Self-constitution*, 212.
humanity that lies in-between these two extremes, which is of ourselves as one source of rationality among others.

Although Korsgaard would agree with much that is said here given that she advocates for public reasons, she denies that one must engage in second-personal interactions with others to know that one is accountable to oneself—that one is an autonomous agent. This is because one can deliberate first-personally to arrive at that knowledge. Further, she claims that knowing that one can hold oneself accountable must be epistemically prior to knowing that one can obligate and be obligated by others. As I have shown by employing Burge’s arguments, this latter claim is untenable, since the knowledge that I am autonomous and that you are as well can be taken up together with the same immediacy and apriori epistemic entitlements. I do not need to know that I am a rational agent prior to knowing that you are a rational agent in order for us to engage and obligate each other second-personally.

I have also shown that even though Korsgaard might argue that it remains metaphysically possible to have self-knowledge without knowledge that there are other minds, since these notions do not necessarily go hand in hand, such self-knowledge, as noted by Lance and Kukla, does not orient oneself, allowing one to act as a rational agent in any serviceable way. So, although Korsgaard can hold the position that the knowledge that one is a rational agent, and all that goes with that, is not metaphysically dependent on the knowledge that there are other rational agents, she cannot hold the position that useable self-knowledge is independent of knowing that there are other people who can
obligate us. This is because of the fact that our rational agency is dependent on sociality and second-personal interactions.

Also, given Korsgaard’s account of our fundamental social nature, one can press for greater clarification on how she defines humanity. If, at bottom, what grounds self-obligation is the value we have in a picture of humanity, and that picture entails others, then one cannot understand moral obligation without knowing that one has obligations to others.

Regardless of the fact that our rational agency and humanity are *built upon* second-personal encounters with others in a fundamental way, Korsgaard still holds that these social encounters do not play an epistemic or justificatory role in regards to moral obligations, particularly the obligations that one has to oneself in being an autonomous agent. From her position one could point to the fact that our rational agency is also dependent on, for example, shelter, food, and sleep, and yet these necessary conditions do not factor into the justification for morality. In relation to these other necessary conditions, the difference with second-personal interactions as one of the building blocks of one’s rational agency, as Korsgaard brought out for us, is that one cannot engage in second-personal interactions without already knowing *or discovering* that one is a rational agent and having the knowledge that oneself and others are autonomous. Yet, this does not indicate, as Korsgaard argues, that the knowledge that one is a rational and autonomous agent is epistemically prior to knowing that one is making and responding to second-personal demands with others. This cannot be the case if the second-personal encounter is serving as a means to one’s agency. Rather, the necessity of self-knowledge
is showing how second-personal engagement with others is playing both a causal and justificatory role in how we come to know that we are rational agents, and *at the same time* know that others are rational agents as well, and that we can hold one another accountable. Therefore, given her theory of normativity as a whole, Korsgaard must accept that the knowledge that we are self-obligated and the knowledge that others obligate us, are neither dependent on each other nor independent of each other—I cannot know that I have obligations to myself without knowing that I have obligations to you—since these notions arise together within second-personal engagement.
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