

Self-Constitution: Action, Identity and Integrity

Lecture One

The Metaphysical Foundations of Normativity

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1.1.1 Human beings are *condemned* to choice and action. Maybe you think you can avoid it, by resolutely standing still, refusing to act, refusing to move. But it's no use, for that will be something you have chosen to do, and then you will have acted after all. Choosing not to act makes not acting a kind of action, makes it something that you do.

This is not to say that you cannot fail to act. Of course you can. You can fall asleep at the wheel, you can faint dead away, you can be paralyzed with terror, you can be helpless with pain, or grief can turn you to stone. And then you will fail to act. But you can't *undertake* to be in those conditions – if you did, you'd be faking, and what's more, you'd be acting, in a wonderfully double sense of that word. So as long as you're in charge, so long as nothing happens to derail you, you must act. You have no choice but to choose, and to act on your choice.

So action is necessary. What kind of necessity is it? Philosophers like to distinguish between *logical* and *causal* necessity. But the necessity of action isn't either of those. There's no logical contradiction in the idea of a person not acting, at least on any particular occasion. You could not fail to act, in all the ways I've just described, if there were. And although particular actions, or anyway particular movements, may have causes, the general necessity of action is not an event that is caused. I'm not talking about something that works *on* you,

whether you know it or not, like a cause: I am talking about a necessity you are *faced* with. Now sometimes we also talk about *rational* necessity, the necessity of following the principles of reason. If you believe the premises, then you *must* draw the conclusion. If you will the end, then you *must* will the means. That's rational necessity, and it's a necessity you are faced with, so that comes closer. But the necessity of action isn't quite like that either, for in those cases we have an if-clause, and the necessity of action is, by contrast, as Kant would say, unconditional. The necessity of choosing and acting is not causal, logical, or rational necessity. It is our *plight*: the simple inexorable fact of the human condition.

1.1.2 But once inside that fact, once we face the necessity of acting, we are confronted with a different kind of necessity. We live under the pressure of a vast assortment of laws, duties, obligations, expectations, demands, and rules, all telling us what to do. Some of these demands are no doubt illicit or imaginary - just social pressure, as we say (as if we knew what that was). But there are many laws and demands that we feel we are really bound to obey. And yet in many cases we would be hard pressed to identify the source of what I call the *normativity* of a law or a demand - the grounds of its authority and the psychological mechanisms of its enforcement, the way that it binds you. In philosophy we raise questions about the normativity of highbrow laws like those of moral obligation or theoretical and practical reason. But it is worth remembering that in everyday life the same sort of questions can be raised about the normativity of the laws and demands of professional obligation, filial obedience, sexual fidelity, personal loyalty, and everyday etiquette. And we can raise the same sorts of questions about why we must meet these demands. And just as we may find ourselves

rebellling against, say, the sacrifice of our happiness to the demands of justice, so also, in a smaller, more everyday way, we may find ourselves *bucking* against doing our chores or returning unwanted phone calls or politely thanking a despised host for a dull party.

The surprising thing is not that we resist such demands, but that our resistance so often fails. Sometimes to our own pleasant surprise, sometimes merely with bewilderment or bemusement, we find ourselves doing what we think we ought to do, in the teeth of our own reluctance, and even though nothing obvious forces us to do it. We toil out to vote in unpleasant weather, telephone relatives to whom we would prefer not to speak, attend suffocatingly boring meetings at work, and do all sorts of irksome things at the behest of our families and friends. Part of the lawless charm of a character like W. C. Fields springs from the fact that most of us are almost incapable of ignoring the requests of children - and yet we chafe under the enthrallment. It is a fact worthy of philosophical attention that the wanton disregard of life's little rules makes the people who would never break them laugh. To be sure, there is no question that in what Joseph Butler called "a cool hour," most of us would unhesitatingly choose to be the kinds of people who generally do what they ought. As Aristotle observes:

... no one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or practical wisdom, who is afraid of every insect which flutters past him, and will commit any crime, however great, in order to gratify his lust for meat or drink, who will sacrifice his dearest friend for the sake of [a little money], and is as feeble and false in mind as a child or a madman.

But there is also no question that in those warmer hours when we actually choose the particular actions demanded of us, we often manifestly do not *want* to do them. And yet we do them, all the same: the normativity of obligation is, among other things, a psychological force. Let me give this phenomenon a name, borrowed from Kant. Since normativity is a form of necessity, Kant calls its operation within us - its manifestation as a psychological force -- *necessitation*.

1.1.3 In recent years, it has become rather unfashionable to focus on the phenomenon of necessitation. It seems to evoke the lugubrious image of the good human being as a miserable sinner in state of eternal reform, who must constantly repress his unruly desires in order to conform to the demands of duty. Necessitation is thus conceived as *repression*. In opposition to this, some recent virtue theorists have offered us the (to my mind) equally rebarbative picture of the virtuous human being as a sort of Good Dog, whose desires and inclinations have been so perfectly trained that he always does what he ought to spontaneously and with tail-wagging cheerfulness and enthusiasm. The opposition between these two pictures is shallow, for they share the basic intuition that the experience of necessitation is a sign that there is something wrong with the person who undergoes it. The disagreement is only about how inevitable the evil is. It may be natural to think of necessitation as a sign that something is wrong, since necessitation can be painful, and it is natural to interpret pain as a sign that something is wrong. But necessitation is so characteristic, so utterly commonplace a feature of human experience, that we should not be in a hurry to jump to that conclusion. In the *Republic*, Socrates says that the phrases we use to describe necessitation, phrases like ‘self-

control' or 'self-mastery' or 'self-command,' seem absurd on their surface, since the stronger self who imposes the necessity is the same person as the weaker self on whom it is imposed. But Socrates also suggests that these phrases are like "tracks or clues" that virtue has left in the language (430d). Necessitation, he thinks, reveals something important about human nature, about the constitution of the human soul. What it reveals – that the source of normativity lies in the human project of self-constitution --- is my subject in these lectures.

1.1.4 More specifically, in these lectures I will be dealing with three topics that I take to be intimately related. The topics are the nature of action, the constitution of personal identity, and the normativity of the principles of practical reason. For the sake of orientation I am going to begin today by laying out the basic elements of the conception that I believe relates these topics. Necessarily, what I say at this early stage will seem mysterious and cryptic, or at the very least dogmatic. So I ask you to keep in mind that this is a summary of a view to be defended in detail in the rest of the lectures and that nothing that follows is meant to be uncontroversial or obvious.

1.2.1 Let me begin with the nature of action. If we want to learn what it is that makes certain actions necessary, we must start by asking what actions are. John Stuart Mill thought he knew the answer to both of these questions. In the opening remarks of *Utilitarianism*, he says:

All action is for the some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.

According to Mill, action is essentially production, and accordingly its function is to bring something about. Whether an action is good depends on whether *what* it brings about is good, or as good as it can be.

The influence of this conception of action on contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy has been profound. Nowadays even moral philosophers who are not utilitarians appear to be comfortable only if they can explain moral value in terms of the production of various goods and harms. Deontological considerations are sometimes characterized as “side-constraints,” as if they were essentially restrictions on ways to realize ends. As such, they have been found mysterious by many philosophers. If the whole point of action is to produce the good, how then can it be good to restrict that production? A standard move in utilitarian arguments, a move that Bentham made right from the start, is to insist that productive success – effectiveness for good - is an obvious, unquestionable standard for actions. The burden of proof, he argues, is on his opponents to show that there is any other standard which actions have to meet. While many moral philosophers have been prepared to try to pick up that burden, by showing that there are deontological constraints on the use of our productive capacity, hardly anyone has thought to challenge this assessment of where the burden of proof really lies.

1.2.2 But it has not always seemed obvious to philosophers that action is production. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, when trying to work out what art or craft is, Aristotle says:

Among the things that can be otherwise are included both things made and things done; [now] making and acting are different.... so that the reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make..... Making and acting being different, art must be a matter of making, not of acting (NE VI.4 1140a1-15).

According to Aristotle, action and production are two different things. And in the following section Aristotle remarks on one of the most important differences between the two, namely, that – I’m quoting now:

while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end (NE VI. 5 1140b5-10).

Actions, or at least good actions are chosen for their own sakes, not for something they produce.

1.2.3 Actually, this is one of three different things Aristotle tells us about why good actions are done by virtuous agents. First of all, in at least some cases an act is done for some specific purpose or end. For instance, Aristotle tells us that the courageous person who dies in battle lays down his life for the sake of his country or for his friends (NE IX.8 1169a17-30). In the same way, it seems natural to say that the liberal person who makes a donation wants to help somebody out; the magnificent person who puts on a play wants to give the city a treat, and

magnanimous man wants to reap honors, the ready-witted man wants to amuse his audience, and so on. At the same time, as I've just mentioned, Aristotle says that virtuous actions are done for their own sakes. And finally, Aristotle also tells us that virtuous actions are done for the sake of the noble. (e.g. NE III.7 1115b12; III.8 1116b3; III.9 1117b9, 1117b17; III.11 1119b15; IV.1 1120a23; IV.2 1122b6).

On an oversimplified conception of moral psychology these will look like three inconsistent accounts of the purpose or aim of virtuous action. But a little reflection will show why there is no inconsistency here, and at the same time, will throw light on Aristotle's conception of action. What corresponds in Aristotle's theory to the description of an action is what he calls a *logos* – as I will render it, a principle. A good action is one that embodies the *orthos logos* or right principle – it is done at the right time, in the right way, to the right object, and – importantly for my purposes – with the right aim. To cite one of many such passages, Aristotle says:

...any one can get angry – that is easy --- or give or spend money; but to do this at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.

(NE II.9 1109a25-30)

The key to understanding Aristotle's view is that the *aim* is included in the description of the action, and that it is the action as a whole, *including the aim*, that the agent chooses. Let us say that our agent is a citizen-soldier, who chooses to sacrifice his life for the sake of a victory for his polis or city. The Greeks seem to think that that is usually a good *aim*. Let's assume that our soldier also sacrifices himself at the right time – not before it is necessary, perhaps, or

when something especially good, say cutting off the enemy's access to reinforcements, may be achieved by it. And he does it in the right way, efficiently and unflinchingly, perhaps even with style, and so on. Then he has done something courageous, a good action. Why has he done it? His *purpose* is to secure a victory for his city. But the object of his choice is the whole action – sacrificing his life in a certain way at a certain time in order to secure a victory for the city. He chooses this whole package, that is, to-do-this-act-for-the-sake-of-this-end -- he chooses *that*, the whole package, as a thing worth doing for its own sake, and without any further end. “Noble” describes the kind of value that the whole package has, the value that he sees in it when he chooses it.

1.2.4 Now this means that Aristotle's view of the nature of action is precisely the same as Kant's. Kant thinks that an action is described by a maxim, and a maxim is also normally of the “to-do-this-act-for-the-sake-of-this-end” structure. Kant is not always careful in the way he formulates the maxims of actions, and that fact can obscure the present point, but on the best reading of the categorical imperative test, the maxim of an action which is tested by it includes both the act done and the end for the sake of which that act is done. It *has* to include it, because the question raised by the categorical imperative test is whether there could be a universal policy of pursuing *this sort of end* by *these sorts of means*. For instance in Kant's own *Groundwork* examples the maxims of action tested are something like “I will commit suicide in order to avoid a painful existence” and “I will make a false promise in order to get some ready cash.” What the rejection of these maxims identifies as wrong is the whole package – committing suicide in order to avoid a painful existence, and making a false promise in order

to get some ready cash. The question of the rightness or wrongness of, say, committing suicide in order to save someone else's life, is left open, as a separate case to be tested separately. Indeed, Kant makes this clear himself, for in the *Metaphysics of Morals* he raises it as an interesting question whether a man bit by a rabid dog who commits suicide in order to avoid harming others when he inevitably goes mad does wrong or not. Committing suicide in order to save someone's life is a different action from committing suicide in order to avoid the personal troubles that you foresee ahead.

And "moral worth" or being done "from duty" functions in Kant's theory in the same way that nobility does in Aristotle's. It is not an alternative purpose we have in our actions, but a characterization of a specific kind of value that a certain act performed for the sake of a certain end may have. When an agent finds that she must will a certain maxim as a universal law, she supposes that the action it describes has this kind of value. Many of the standard criticisms of the idea of acting from duty are based on confusion about this point. The idea that acting from duty is something cold, impersonal, or even egoistic is based on the thought that the agent's purpose is "in order to do my duty" *rather than* "in order to help my friend" or "in order to save my country" or whatever it might be. But that is just wrong. Sacrificing your life in order to save your country might be your duty in a certain case, but the duty will be to do that act *for that purpose*, and whole action will be chosen as one's duty.

1.2.5 Let me introduce some terminology in order to express these ideas more clearly. Let's say that the basic form of a Kantian maxim is "I will do act-A in order to promote end-E." Call that entire formulation the description of an action. An action, then, involves both an

act and an end, an act done for the sake of an end. In the examples we've looked at, making a false promise, committing suicide, are what I am calling "acts"; making a false promise to get some ready cash, committing suicide to avoid misery are what I am calling "actions." Now a slight complication arises from the fact that *acts* in my sense are also sometimes done for their own sakes, for no *further* end, from some non-instrumental motive like anger or sympathy or the sheer pleasure of the thing. In this case, doing the *act* is itself the end. To describe the whole *action*, in this kind of case, we have to put that fact into the maxim, and say that we are doing it for its own sake, for its inherent desirability, or however it might be. So for instance, if you choose to dance for the sheer joy of dancing, then *dancing* is the *act*, and *dancing for the sheer joy of dancing* is the *action*. We might contrast it to the different action of someone who dances in order to make money, or to dodge the bullets being shot at his feet. As I said before, it is the action that is strictly speaking the object of choice, which is why Aristotle says that our characters are revealed above all by our choices (NE III.2 1111b5-10). And according to both Aristotle and Kant, it is the *action* which properly speaking is morally good or bad, noble or base.

1.2.6 The view that actions, acts-for-the-sake-of-ends, are both the objects of choice and the bearers of moral value sets Aristotle and Kant apart from many contemporary moral philosophers, less because of disagreement than because of unclarity about the issue. Contemporary philosophers tend to think of the reason for an action as something outside or apart from the action itself, something that perhaps serves as its cause. This in turn leads to misinterpretation of our practices of asking and answering questions about people's reasons.

We ask for *the reason* for an action, and as often as not, we give the answer by citing the agent's *purpose*. The purpose is separate from and behind the act, so if you think of a reason as separate from and behind an action, you will be led to confuse the act with the action. "Why did Arthur go to New York City?" we may ask. For Arthur lives in Vermont, several hundred miles away. "To visit his aunt who lives there" is the reply. Arthur's purpose is offered in answer to the question about his reason. This makes it appear as if his purpose is the reason for this choice, and what he chose was the act. But this appearance is misleading.

To explicate this point I will first take a detour. One way to accommodate talk of reasons to the distinction between acts and actions would be to distinguish the reasons for acts from the reasons for actions. We could say that act is performed for the sake of the purpose it serves, while the whole action is performed for its own sake – say because of its nobility or lawfulness or rightness. Then we might think that confusion arises from thinking there is always "a reason" for what someone does, when in fact the phrase "the reason for what he does" is ambiguous between the reason for the act and the reason for the action. This proposal, although tempting, is not satisfactory. One problem springs from the fact that reasons are supposed to be normative. If a reason for an act is its purpose, and reasons are supposed to be normative, then it follows that the purpose itself is normative for the agent. This is certainly not what either Aristotle or Kant thinks. What is normative for the agent is for Aristotle the nobility, or for Kant the lawfulness or requiredness, of the action. The purpose, in most cases, is not a law to us, for in most cases the purpose may be abandoned if we find that there is no decent and reasonable and worthwhile way to pursue it. It is a different question whether there are *some* purposes it is wrong to give up; my point is that our

purposes are not *in general* laws to us. In Kant's theory, normativity arises from autonomy – we give laws to ourselves. But we do not first choose a purpose, enact it into law, and then scramble around for some way to fulfill it, now being under a requirement to do so. If it worked that way, we would be in violation of a self-legislated requirement every time we were unable to find a decent and reasonable way to achieve one of our purposes. What we will as laws are maxims, whole actions, and we normally adopt a purpose as a *part* of an action. Another problem with the proposal is that suggests that in asking for “the reason” for what someone does, ordinary language is misleading, because there are always, so to speak, two reasons, one for the act and one for the action.

But that in turn suggests a different way of looking at the situation, which does not require us to say that the idea of a reason is ambiguous, but only that we tend to misinterpret what we are doing when we give a reason. If Aristotle and Kant are right about actions being done for their own sakes, then it may appear that every action is done for the same reason, because it is seen as a thing worth doing for its own sake. This obviously isn't what we are asking for when we ask for the reason why someone did something, because the answer is always the same: it seemed worthwhile to him. What may be worth asking for is an *explication* of the action, a complete description of it, that will show us *why* it seemed worth doing to him. Now normally we already know what the act was, so the missing piece of the description of the action is the purpose or end. “Going to New York City to visit one's aunt” is intelligible as a worthwhile thing to do, so once we have that missing piece in place, we understand what Arthur did. That the purpose by itself couldn't really be the source of the reason shows up clearly in this fact: if the purpose supplied is one that fails to make the whole action seem

worthwhile, even though the purpose is indeed successfully served by the act, we will not accept the answer. So if I tell you that Arthur went to New York City to buy a box of paperclips, you will not accept the answer, even though one can certainly buy a box of paperclips in New York City. You will say “that can’t be the reason,” not because the purpose isn’t served by the action, but because going from several hundred miles from Vermont to New York City to buy a box of paperclips is so obviously not worthwhile. Thus when we ask for the reason we are not just asking what purpose was served by the act – we are asking for a purpose that makes sense of the whole action. And as Aristotle saw, there will be cases where supplying the purpose will not be sufficient to make the action intelligible even where it is, so to speak, weighty enough to support the act. “Why did Arthur go to Paris?” we ask. “He has always wanted to see it” is the reply. “No, but why just now?” urges the questioner, for Arthur has taken off quite suddenly in the middle of the semester. And as Aristotle says, in order to be worthwhile the action must also be done at the right time and in the right way. So the practice of answering the motivational question “why” by citing the agent’s purpose does not really suggest that that actions have purposes outside themselves and are not performed for their own sakes. It is just that the purpose is often, though not always, the missing piece of the agent’s maxim, the piece we need to have in place before we can see why the agent thought of this action as a thing worth doing. On this view, importantly, the reason for an action is not something outside of or behind or separate from the action at all, for explicating the action, and explicating the reason, are the same thing. Rather, an action is an essentially intelligible object that *embodies* a reason, the way a sentence is an essentially intelligible object that embodies a thought.

1.3.1 Now with that conception of action before us, I am ready to try to state my view. I believe that it is essential to the concept of action that an action is performed by an agent, rather in the same way that it is essential to a thought that it be thought by a thinker. One must be able to attach the “I do” to the action in the way one must be able to attach the “I think” to a thought. As the invocation of Kant here suggests, this is not yet to say whether the agent or the thinker needs to be a separately existing entity – as I will explain shortly, I don’t think that. But an action requires an agent, someone to whom we attribute the movement in question as its author. And I also believe it is essential to the concept of agency that an agent be unified. That is to say: to regard some movement of my mind or my body as *my action*, I must see it as an expression of my self as a whole, rather than as a product of some force that is at work *on* me or *in* me. Movements that result from forces working *on* me or *in* me constitute things that happen to me. To call a movement a twitch, or a slip, is at once to deny that it is an action and to assign it to some part of you that is less than the whole: the twitch to your eyebrow, or the slip, more problematically, to your tongue. For a movement to be my action, for it to be expressive of *myself* in the way that an action must be, it must result from my entire nature working as an integrated whole.

1.3.2 Now this is where things get complicated. You might suppose that this requires that an action be the effect or result or expression of a *prior* unity in the agent, an integrity already achieved. You first achieve the sort of psychic unity or integrity that makes you the master of your own movements, that is, that makes some of your movements attributable to you as

yours, and then the choices that lead to your actions express the unified selfhood you have already achieved. But I will argue that this cannot be how it works. This is where the problem of personal identity comes into the picture. I am going to argue that in the relevant sense there is no *you* prior to your choices and actions, because your identity is in a quite literal way *constituted* by your choices and actions.

1.3.3 The identity of a person, of an agent, is not the same as the identity of the human animal on which the person normally supervenes. Human beings differ from the other animals in an important way. Because we are self-conscious, and choose our actions deliberately, we are each faced with the task of constructing a peculiar, individual kind of identity – personal or practical identity – that the other animals lack. It is this sort of identity that makes sense of our practice of holding people responsible, and of the kinds of personal relationships that depend on that practice. You will already see that I think those who claim that judgments of responsibility don't really make sense unless people create themselves are absolutely right – only unlike most people who believe this, I don't think it's a *problem*. It is as the possessor of personal or practical identity that you are the author of your actions, and responsible for them. And yet at the same time it is in choosing your actions that you create that identity. What this means is that you constitute yourself *as* the author of your actions in the very act of choosing them. I am fully aware that this sounds paradoxical. How can you constitute yourself, create yourself, unless you are already there? Call this the paradox of self-constitution. It is a problem to which I will return at the end of this lecture.

1.3.4 First I must introduce the other part of my thesis. I said that you constitute yourself as the author of your action in the very act of choosing it. I am proposing that this, not production, is what action is. Action is self-constitution. And accordingly I am going to argue that what makes actions good or bad is how well they constitute you. People are more or less successful at constituting their identities, and a good action is one that does this well. It is one that achieves, as well as springing from, the integrity of the person who performs it. But since action requires agency, it follows that an action that is less successful at constituting its agent is to that extent less of an action. So on this conception, “action” is an idea that admits of degrees. An action chosen in a way that more successfully unifies and integrates its agent is more authentically, more fully, an action, than one that does not. And this in turn is where the principles of practical reason, the hypothetical and categorical imperatives, come in to the story. For I will argue that the principles of practical reason are principles of the unification of agency. And I will argue that that explains their normativity. The principles of practical reason bind us because we must constitute ourselves as unified agents.

I know that at this point this is all very abstract, since I haven’t yet said how an action can unify or constitute its agent. That has to wait for later lectures. But here’s the conclusion I am looking for. The necessity of conforming to the principles of practical reason comes down to the necessity of being a unified agent. And if it is correct that agency requires unity, the necessity of being a unified agent comes down to the necessity of being an agent. And if it is correct that action requires an agent, the necessity of being an agent comes down to the necessity of acting. And the necessity of acting, as we have seen, is our plight. The principles of practical reason are normative for us, then, simply because we must act.

1.3.5 It will be evident that in what I have said so far that I am talking about *human* action – that is to say, self-conscious action. In fact some of the things I have said suggest that only human beings are agents, and if you aren't puzzled by that, you should be, because it isn't true. The nature of action more generally, and the differences between the actions of human and non-human animals, will be one of my subjects in these lectures [in particular in lectures three and four]. But one of those differences is immediately relevant here to the thoughts with which I began. Because human beings are self-conscious, we are conscious of threats to our psychic unity or integrity. Sometimes these threats spring from our own desires and impulses. The element of truth in the image of the miserable sinner who must repress his unruly desires in order to be good rests in the fact that we deliberate in the face of threats to our integrity, and as against them. What is false about the picture is the idea that we must repress these threats *in order to be good*. Rather, we must repress them in order to be one, to be unified, to be whole. We must repress them in order to maintain our personal or practical identity. And the person who succeeds in that is good – not because he is striving to be good, but because he is striving to be unified, to be whole. On the picture I will be developing, being a person, having a personal identity, is a form of *work*. And the experience of necessitation, with its elements of effort and even of pain, is the experience of a form of work. A good person, it follows, is one who is good at this work. A good person is someone who is good at being a person.

1.4.1 The principles of practical reason serve to unify and constitute us as agents, and that is why they are normative. Behind this thesis lies a more general account of normativity that I believe to be common to the philosophies of three thinkers who are going to be the heroes of these lectures: Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. According to this account, normative principles are in general principles of the unification of manifolds, multiplicities, or, in Aristotle's wonderful phrase, *mere heaps*, into objects of particular kinds.

The view finds its clearest expression in the central books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, so that is the place to start. According to Aristotle, what makes an object the kind of object that it is - what gives it its identity - is what it does, its *ergon*: its purpose, function, or characteristic activity. This is clearest in the case of artifacts, which are obviously functionally defined. An artifact has both a form and a matter. The matter is the material, the stuff or the parts, from which the artifact is made. The form of the artifact is its functional arrangement or teleological organization. That is, it is the arrangement of the matter or of the parts which enables the object to serve its function, to do whatever it does that makes it the kind of thing that it is. Say for instance that the function of a house is to serve as a habitable shelter, and that its parts are walls, roof, chimney, insulation, and so on. Then the form of the house is that arrangement of those parts that enables it to serve as a habitable shelter - or rather, to be more precise - it is the *way* the arrangement of those parts enables it to serve as a habitable shelter. The walls are joined at the corners, the insulation goes into the walls, the roof is placed on the top, and so on, so that the weather is kept out, and a comfortable environment is created within. That is the form of the house.

On this view, to be an object, to be unified, and to be teleologically organized, are one and the same thing. Teleological organization is what unifies what would otherwise be a *mere heap* of matter into a particular object of a particular kind. Teleological organization is the also the object of knowledge. To know an object, that is, to *understand* it, is to see not only what it does and what it is made of, but *how* the arrangement of the parts enables it to do whatever it does. After all, anybody knows that a house is a shelter, and anybody knows that its parts are walls and roofs and chimneys and things, and even roughly where they go. What distinguishes the architect is his knowledge of *how* the arrangement of those parts enables the house to serve the purpose of sheltering. And this means that according to Aristotle the form of a thing governs both theory and practice. To understand houses is to have their form in your mind, and to build one is to be guided by that form.

At the same time, it is the teleological organization or form of the object that supports normative judgments about it. A house with cracks in the walls is less good at keeping the weather out, less good at sheltering, and therefore it is a less good house. The ancient metaphysical thesis of the identification of the real with the good follows immediately from this conception, for this kind of badness eventually shades off into *literal* disintegration. A house with enough cracks in the walls will crumble, and cease to be a house altogether: it will disintegrate back into a mere heap of boards and plaster and bricks.

It is essential here to observe the distinction between being a good or bad *house* in the strict sense and being a house that happens to be a good or bad *thing* for some external reason. The large mansion which blocks the whole neighborhood's view of the lake may be a *bad thing* for the neighborhood, but it is not therefore a *bad house*. The normative standards to

which a thing's teleological organization give rise are what I will call "constitutive standards," standards that apply to a thing simply in virtue of its being the kind of thing that it is. So I am going to be arguing that the principles of practical reason are constitutive standards of actions, and therefore, of us.

The idea of a constitutive standard is an important one, for constitutive standards meet skeptical challenges to their authority with ease. Why shouldn't you build a house that blocks the whole neighborhood's view of the lake? Perhaps because it will displease the neighbors. Now *there* is a consideration that you may set aside, if you are selfish or tough enough to brave the neighbors' displeasure. But because it does not make sense to ask why a house should serve as a shelter, it also does not make sense to ask why the corners should be sealed and the roof should be waterproof and tight. I mean, of course you can ask these questions in a technical voice, you can ask how sealed corners and waterproofed roofs serve the function of sheltering. But once you've answered the technical questions, there is no further room for doubting that the constitutive standard has normative force. For if you fall too far short of the constitutive standard, what you produce will simply not be a house. In effect this means that even the most venal and shoddy builder must try to build a good house, for the simple reason that there is no other way to try to build a house. Building a good house and building a house are not different activities: for both are activities guided by the teleological norms implicit in the idea of a house. Obviously, it doesn't follow that every house is a good house, although there is a puzzle about why not. It does, however, follow that building bad houses is not a different activity from building good ones. *It is the same activity badly done.*

1.4.2 Go back to the puzzle. Why isn't every house a good house? In the case at hand, we have an object, a house, characterized by certain constitutive standards. It is in terms of those standards that we understand the activity of producing a house. The producer of the house looks to the normative standards that are constitutive of houses, in Aristotle's terms to its form, and tries to realize that form in appropriate matter - building materials. That is what the activity of building essentially is. The description of the form of a house could be read as a sort of recipe for building a house - join the walls at the corners, put the insulation in the walls, put the roof on top.... So trying to produce a house is not different from trying to produce a good house. One is trying to build a good house if one is building a house at all. But then how is the shoddy builder even possible?

The problem is a general one, not limited to productive activities. Here are a couple more examples. In the *Groundwork*, Kant argues that hypothetical imperatives, the principles of instrumental reason, are analytic, because "whoever wills an end wills the means" is analytic. This seems to suggest that if you don't will the means then it logically follows that you don't really will the end. But if that were true in the plainest sense, no one would ever be guilty of violating a hypothetical imperative. For if someone didn't will the means it would follow logically that he hadn't willed the end, and in that case, of course, he wouldn't have violated the hypothetical imperative, which only tells him what to do if he *does* will the end. This, however, leaves us unable to give sense to the claim that instrumental principles are imperatives - for how can they be imperatives, if they are impossible to violate? Later I will argue that the hypothetical imperative is constitutive of action, but it cannot follow that it is not normative for it as well. Here's another example that you might find more readily

convincing. The presence of both a noun and a verb in an English sentence is *constitutive* of its being a sentence, that is, of its expressing a complete thought. Yet those of us whose work includes grading papers have all encountered the verbless string of words that wants to be a sentence and fails, and yet is not mere gibberish. There is such a thing as writing English badly, and it is not quite the same as not writing it at all, although it tends that way.

So we are looking at a quite general problem about finding the conceptual space between performing an activity perfectly and not performing it at all, space into which we can fit the person who does it badly. Among the ancient Greek philosophers it seems to have one of the puzzles about art or craft. At least it comes up in the first book of the *Republic* with respect to the art of ruling. Thrasymachus says that justice is the advantage of the stronger, for the rules of justice are imposed on the weak by the strong, and the strong rule for their own advantage. Socrates pretends to be puzzled by the question where justice lies when the strong make a law that is not *in fact* to their advantage (339c ff.). Thrasymachus replies that the problem is the result of a loose way of talking. In the *precise* sense, he says, no craftsman, expert, or ruler, is a craftsman, expert, or ruler, at the very moment when he makes an error (340d-341a). In other words, Thrasymachus concludes you are not practicing an art at all if you practice it badly. Socrates proceeds to make mincemeat of Thrasymachus with this “precise sense” by showing that a ruler, in the precise sense, rules for the benefit of whatever he rules, and not for his own benefit.

In fact the “precise sense” or perfect version of an activity stands in a complex relation to the activity, because it is at once normative and constitutive. Although it is not true that you are not performing an activity at all unless you do it precisely, it is true that you have to

be *guided by* the precise version of the activity in order to be performing the activity at all. And at the same time the precise sense sets normative standards for the activity. It is tempting to say that the actual activity must participate in the perfect or precise one, and then it will appear that for activities Plato's theory of forms does very well.

The shoddy builder doesn't follow a different set of standards or norms. He may be doing one of two things. He may be following the norms, but carelessly, inattentively, choosing second-rate materials in a random way, sealing the corners imperfectly, adding insufficient insulation, and so on. But he may also, if he is dishonest, be doing this sort of thing quite consciously, say in order to save money. In that case, surely we can't say he is trying to build a good house? No, but now I think we should say that he is not trying to build a house at all, but rather a sort of plausible imitation of a house, one he can pass off as the real thing. What guides him is not the aim of producing a house, but the aim of producing something that will fetch the price of a house, sufficiently like a real house that he can't be sued afterwards. Socrates, in the passages from *Republic I* that I have already mentioned, makes rather a fuss about this point, insisting that a craftsman in the precise sense is not a money-maker, but simply a practitioner of his craft.

So on this conception, every object and activity is defined by certain standards that are both constitutive of it and normative for it. These standards are ones the object or activity must at least try to meet, insofar as it is to be that object or activity at all. An object that fails to meet these standards is bad in a particular way. It will be useful to give this kind of badness, badness as judged by a constitutive standard, a special name, and in English we have a word that serves the purpose well: *defect*. So in the somewhat special sense that I will be

using the term, a house that is so constructed as to be ill adapted for sheltering is *defective*; while a house that blocks the neighborhood's view, though it may for that reason be a bad thing, is not *a defective house*. Since the function of action is self-constitution, I am eventually going to argue, in lecture five, that bad actions, *defective* actions are ones that fail to constitute their agents.

1.4.3 Now let's return to the paradox of self-constitution and its solution.

Aristotle extended his account of artifactual identity to living things with the aid of the view that a living thing is a thing with a special kind of form. A living thing is a thing so designed as to maintain and reproduce *itself*: that is, to maintain and reproduce its own form. It has what we might call a self-maintaining form. So it is its own end; its *ergon* or function is just to be - and to continue being - what it is. And its organs, instincts, and natural activities are all arranged to that end. The function of a giraffe, for instance, is to be a giraffe, and to continue being a giraffe, and to produce other giraffes. We might therefore say that a giraffe is simply an entity organized to keep a particular instance, a spacio-temporally continuous stream, of giraffeness going - primarily through nutrition - and also to generate other instances of giraffeness, through reproduction. A healthy giraffe is one that is well-organized for keeping its giraffeness going, while an unhealthy giraffe suffers from conditions that tend to its disintegration. So health is not, strictly speaking, a *goal* for giraffes, but rather is our name for the inner condition which enables the giraffe to successfully perform its function - which is to go on being a giraffe. This parallels the way in which, as I said earlier, goodness is not a goal for people, but rather is our name for the inner condition which enables a person to

successfully perform her function – which is to maintain her integrity as a unified person, to be who she is. This is why Plato and Aristotle compared health to virtue.

It is important to notice the complex role that teleological organization plays with respect to the giraffe's activities and actions. The giraffe's actions are both dictated by, and preservative of, its giraffeness. A good giraffe action, such as nibbling the tender green leaves at the tops of trees, keeps the giraffe going, for it provides the specific nutrients needed to constantly restore and refurbish its giraffeness through the nutritive processes. Yet the giraffe's action is one to which it is prompted by instincts resulting *from* its giraffe nature. This is related to an important set of differences between living things and artifacts, which is that living things are made of parts that strictly speaking cannot exist independently of the living things themselves. You can't build a giraffe out of tender green leaves, but a giraffe's nutritive processes turn tender green leaves into the kinds of matter out of which a giraffe *is* built - giraffe tissues and giraffe organs and so on. Furthermore, the living tissues that make up organisms are comparatively fragile, and in need of constant renewal. It follows from all this that if a giraffe ceases its activities - if it stops nibbling the tender green leaves, or stops digesting them when it does - it will fall apart. So, strictly speaking, being a giraffe is not a state, but rather an activity. Being a giraffe is *doing* something: a giraffe is, quite essentially, an entity that is always *making* itself into a giraffe. In fact, the *entity* that I just mentioned is derivative, arrived at only by an artificial freezing of the observer's mental frame, for nothing that stops working at being a giraffe, that stops making itself into a giraffe, will remain a giraffe for long. So to be a giraffe is simply to engage in the activity of constantly making yourself into a giraffe: this is what a giraffe's life consists in. And for the same reasons that we

considered earlier there is no real difference between the activity of living a giraffe's life, and the activity of living a healthy giraffe's life, for in order to live a giraffe's life, you must follow the teleological principles implicit in the form of giraffeness. And so leading the life of an unhealthy giraffe is not a different activity from leading the life of a healthy giraffe. It is the same activity, badly done.

1.4.4 According to this picture of the nature of living things, a living thing is engaged in an endless activity of self-constitution. In fact to be a living thing is just to be self-constitutive in this way: a living thing is a thing that is constantly making itself into itself. And notice that the apparent paradox involved in the idea of self-constitution does not seem to arise here. No one is tempted to say: how can the giraffe make itself into itself unless it is already there? The picture here is not of a craftsman who is, mysteriously, his own product. The picture here is of the self-constitutive process that is the essence of life. The paradox of self-constitution, in this context, is no paradox at all.

And the same applies to personhood. Aristotle believed that there are three forms of life, corresponding to what he called three parts of the soul. Each supervenes on the one below it. At the bottom is a vegetative life of nutrition and reproduction, common to all plants and animals. According to Aristotle, animals are distinguished from plants in being alive in a further sense, given by a functionally related set of powers that plants lack. Aristotle emphasizes perception and sensation, but notes that these are necessarily, or at least usually, accompanied by imagination, pleasure and pain, desire (*orexis*), and local movement

(OS II, 413b23). What is distinctive of animals is that they carry out part of their self-constitutive activities through action.

The third form of life, distinctive of human beings, or as I will say, of persons, is the life of rational activity. Rational activity, as I will argue, is essentially self-conscious activity, and it is this that leads to the construction of personal identity. Thus personhood is quite literally a form of life, and being a person, like being living thing, is being engaged in an activity of self-constitution.

In other words, to be a person is just to be engaged in the activity of constantly making yourself into a person. In the next few lectures, I will argue that the basic rules for being a person, the rules of self-conscious action or self-constitution, are the principles of practical reason. That is why they are normative, and why action that departs from them is defective. It will follow that being a bad person is not a different activity from being a good person. It is the same activity, badly done.