

# Does the Origin of Normativity Stem from the Internalization of Dominance Hierarchies?\*

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**Abstract:** Many natural scientists explain the evolutionary origin of morality by documenting altruistic behaviour in our nearest nonhuman relatives. Christine Korsgaard has criticized such attempts on the premise that they do not put enough effort in explaining the capacity to be motivated by normative thoughts. She speculates that normative motivation may have originated with the internalization of the dominance instincts. In this article I will challenge the dominance hierarchy hypothesis by arguing that a proper investigation into how and when dominance inhibits behaviour does not seem to reveal a minimal normative dimension.

**Keywords:** Christine Korsgaard, dominance, normativity, authority, evolution of morality

Beginning with Darwin, many natural scientists have explained the evolution of morality as a matter of degree; specific characteristics develop from basic elements or from the interaction between separate processes. Darwin tentatively believed that moral conscience resulted from an interplay of social and cognitive abilities:

Any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well-developed, as in man (Darwin 2009, 71).

Recently, the primatologist Frans de Waal, argued along Darwinian lines, that a gradual evolution from sympathetic feelings to targeted helping and cognitive empathy:

has provided us with the psychological makeup, tendencies, and abilities to develop a compass for life's choices that takes the interests of the entire community into account, which is the essence of human morality (de Waal 2006, 58).

Natural selection has fostered sympathy and empathy because cooperation and sharing produces great advantages for survival and reproduction.

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\* ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133675.

Christine Kosgaard (2010) has dubbed this naturalistic approach *content based evolutionary explanations*, because morality is defined by a characteristic outcome such as helping behaviour, reconciliation, loyalty, cooperation, sharing, empathy. Against this type of explanation, Kosgaard argues that an important feature of morality is ignored, namely what she calls “normative self-government” – a capacity to be motivated and act according to what we believe we ought to do upon reflection (Kosgaard 1996, 2009, 2010). Human beings reflect upon their beliefs, have doubts and engage in an inner dialogue to figure out what is the right thing to do. Subsequently, such normative thoughts have motivational power over future action. Kosgaard explains,

the capacity to act from what we familiarly call a sense of obligation, grounded in consciously held principles of good or right action. To be morally motivated in this sense is not just to have motives with a certain characteristic content (Kosgaard 2010, 6).

She rightly points out that evolutionary accounts of morality that focus on prosocial behaviour (helping, avoiding aggression or refraining from inflicting harm) are incomplete. An origin story needs to be told about how we acquired the capacity to be normatively motivated. Kosgaard's account suggests that the origin of normative self-government may have started with the internalization of mechanisms of dominance, which gave us the possibility to inhibit our instinctive reactions. Why should we look at dominance? Kosgaard believes that dominance has a normative dimension similar to authority. Where authority is recognised, an individual will refrain from taking an action which contravenes authoritarian demands or, alternatively, might perform a required action even without the autonomous desire to do so.

In this article I will challenge the dominance hierarchy hypothesis. First, I will differentiate normative motivation from content based motivations as presented in Kosgaard's evolutionary account. My argument will be premised on the following considerations. A proper investigation into how and when dominance inhibits behaviour does not seem to reveal a normative dimension of authority. I will make the case that dominance inhibits behaviour based on an imbalance of power, rather than on attaching some value to conformity *per se*. Third, I consider possible reactions to my analysis, and conclude that evidence from natural history about modern humans' unique collaborative abilities points to a different framework as the origin of normative motivation, which, nevertheless, fits easily with Kosgaard's work on practical identity.

### **The Problem of Normative Motivation**

We praise and demand altruistic behaviour. People who help others and at least do no harm are often regarded as individuals of good moral standing. For example, firemen, and other emergency services, who sacrifice their lives to save others, or individuals living in poverty who still share their last reserves of food

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with others in need. To be loyal, altruistic or demonstrate solidarity inspires us to action.

The essential feature of human morality is therefore comprised of two components. One the content – the actions of morality that are praised and demanded and two the need to justifying one's actions. Since early stages of development, children are trained to provide reasons for their actions. Parents often ask their children why they acted in certain ways towards other children. For example, when a child intentionally harms another child, they are required to provide answers with some justificatory force (e.g. the child who was hurt had instigated the fight by acting in a mean manner). At mature stages of development, the process of providing reasons becomes fully internalized and more complex. Sometimes we manage to stop at the brink of taking action to ask ourselves if this is really what we ought to be doing and whether our motives are the correct ones.

In his famous derivation of the duty against false promising, Kant suggests the thought process that takes place in such reflective moments:

Another sees himself pressured by need to borrow money. He knows full well that he will not be able to repay, but also sees that nothing will be lent to him unless he solemnly promises to repay it at a determinate time. He feels like making such a promise; but he still has enough conscience to ask himself: is it not impermissible and contrary to duty to help oneself out of need in such a way? (Kant 2011, 4:422).

By the term “enough conscience” Kant means there is a moral baseline which functions as a measure for when actions digress. The agent is pulled by his inclinations to make false promises, but at the same time his consciousness signals that the course of action is not the appropriate one. It is this awareness that initiates a process of normative reflection.

The process of taking a “reflective distance” from the motive of action, followed by normative questioning, is defined as a capacity for normative self-government (Korsgaard 2010, 18). The ability to take a reflective distance gives rise to the need to justify actions because we are able to raise normative questions, in the same way that the subject does from Kant's story. When I am aware that a lack of material resources pushes me to make false promises, I am still able to question my actions and ask whether it is morally justified. The answers to such questions constitute the normative making features that motivate us to avoid false promises. In line with this, Korsgaard's point is that

what makes some actions required and some wrong must also be the source of our motivation for doing and avoiding them accordingly (Korsgaard 2010, 15).

This approach implies that moral motivation cannot rest only on sympathetic feelings. I may feel sympathy towards someone and, consequently, relieve his distress. However, if I am not moved to action by what makes it a required action, without further intervening factors, I am not normatively

motivated. Therefore, to be normatively motivated one must recognize that right making features have authority over us as rational beings. This is what Kant called the “authority of the moral law” (5: 38). It is the value we attach to respecting what the moral law demands from us. In military organizations, one has to obey orders from superiors because this is required by the nature of the hierarchic order. Recognizing the authority invested in superior positions makes people respect and conform to orders. In some cases, orders might not make complete sense or we might not agree with the individuals who issue them but they are still obeyed because we accept that orders, in certain situations, have to be respected outright. Thus, when we are normatively motivated we presuppose that the right making features of an action have the authority to guide our behaviour and that respect for what authority demands is the appropriate course. Korsgaard contends that this is a unique feature of human moral motivation which needs evolutionary explanation, alongside the natural history of solidarity/cooperation and altruistic behaviour.

### **Korsgaard’s Origin Story of Normative Self-Government**

How did we become normatively governed animals? Korsgaard suggests that a constant effort to inhibit our instinctive responses, to be aggressive against our own instincts, has led to an increase in mental capability, which grew into a new form of self-consciousness, namely the awareness of how our mental activity contributes to perceiving the world. Here, the capacity for normative self-government becomes the solution to the need for justification posed by the awareness of our potential motives for action. This is explained fully in the following paragraphs.

Korsgaard relies on theories offered by Nietzsche and Freud to suggest how the control over instincts might have originated. Both Nietzsche (1967) and Freud (1950, 1961) believed that guilt is not just a feeling that signals wrongness of behaviour, but a dark psychological mechanism which springs from our aggressive nature to hurt ourselves when we cannot hurt others. Once aggression is turned against our instincts, an interesting psychological structure emerges that allows us to forgo some of the strongest behavioural causes.

What is important for Korsgaard in Nietzsche and Freud’s reflections is the formal structure of behaviour which allows mental activity to inhibit instinctive responses. Reflecting on the natural science of social animals, Korsgaard fills in this structure with the dominance hierarchy hypothesis to explain how mental controls may have formed. A dominance hierarchy among social animals is an advantageous evolutionary strategy to reduce fatal conflicts. Animals do not have to fight each time for food, water or mating partners if there is an established hierarchy which informs the group who is first in line to benefit any of the resources available. When an animal dominates a rival in singular or reiterated encounters a relationship of superiority is established for future interaction. If the dominated animal manages to control his impulses, he has

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more chances to avoid potential troubles. Thus, it becomes possible to avoid fighting each time when there is competition (both want the same resource). For examples, high ranking chimpanzees do not only dominate weaker individuals in conflicts over food or mating partners, they also intervene and settle conflicts that disturb the whole group; they do policing work and control the social dynamics of the group, sometimes even setting aside social ties (de Waal 2014).

Korsgaard takes interest in dominance hierarchies because it seems to have a normative dimension:

I think that such dominance is interesting in this context, because dominance looks a lot like something that we think of as essentially normative: it looks like *authority* (Korsgaard 2010, 20).

She explains that what makes a dominated animal refrain from doing something that it needs or desires is not because the circumstances are unfavourable to the outcome of the action – for example when the animal is outnumbered by competition – but rather because avoiding a specific course of action is required due to his place in the group hierarchy. The fact that a low ranked animal recognizes the standing of a high ranked animal in itself inhibits the instinctive responses. It is not necessary for the dominating animal to send threat signals to the dominated animal in order for the latter to be submissive. Korsgaard points out that

in some animals dominance hierarchies can be inherited and apparently go unchallenged for longish stretches of time (Korsgaard 2010, 20).

In such cases, the use of aggression is not necessary to maintain hierarchies.

We observe that authority based motivation seems to share an important feature of normative motivations – the intrinsic value that makes an action right also motivates that action, without any intervening mechanism. Similarly, authoritarian dominance determines the prohibition of an action and, at the same time, constitutes a source of motivation for avoiding that action, without the use of aggression. Animals in dominance hierarchies are motivated to avoid certain actions by ways of status recognition. This is why Korsgaard believes that fear of consequences does not always play a role in status recognition as an inhibitory mechanism. She argues, for instance, that when a pet dog is trained and controlled successfully, the nature of this relationship is not based on fear. The dog submits to commands not because he is afraid, but because he recognizes a relationship in which he is supposed to follow orders. The acknowledged dominance is the main motivation for the dog's submission.

Established relationships in dominance hierarchies seem to motivate by themselves the actions which should be avoided, without involving directly prudential calculations. To a certain extent it influences behaviour independently of desires or prudential rationality. According to Korsgaard, dominance based authority has a normative dimension because it is not always established, maintained and transmitted by use of punishment, and because fear

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of consequences does not always play a motivational role. Mainly, the recognition of a relationship in which an animal dominates others seems to motivate them to override their instincts.

Korsgaard suggests that normative self-government through a mechanism of dominance may have originated as an inhibitory system. This, she argues, is independent from direct cost-benefit calculation:

we began to become rational animals when we began, as individuals, to exert a kind of dominance over ourselves – to inhibit our own instinctive responses (Korsgaard 2010, 21).

The manner in which we began to exert restrictions over our own actions must be a significant one because not every instinct control mechanism has been overcome by mental activity. When a hungry animal sees prey he does not immediately attack, but rather plans his moves and waits for a good chance to be successful. On many occasions youngsters may spoil food opportunities, yet as they gain experience in controlling their reactions success will come about. Short term planning, thus, is not possible without some behavioural sensitisation. However, in order to make the transition to rationality, a more ambitious mental control is needed. Korsgaard believes that controlling our actions by internal guidance of status recognition may have the potential to put significant pressure on a much wider range of instinctive responses, producing important changes in our mental activity resulting in a general takeover.

In concurrence with Nietzsche, she contends that the process of controlling our instincts independently of threats, fear of consequences or desires, is linked with a development of mental activity, or as she puts it with “a kind of deepening of consciousness itself” (Korsgaard 2010, 21). In order to take place, the process of internalization needs more mental abilities than the mere inhibition generated by fear of consequences. So, we can imagine that dominance hierarchies create an authority based inhibitory system that overtime expands mental activity, perhaps in order to conform to more easily.

### **Do Dominance Hierarchies Have a Normative Dimension?**

In what follows my analysis does not aim to question Korsgaard’s general speculation that internalized authority may have led to a general takeover over our mental life, but rather to challenge how she instantiates the general speculation by appealing to the dominance hierarchy hypothesis. I will provide details of how dominance hierarchies are learned, established and maintained, which are in tension with Korsgaard’s description of the inhibitory system involved in recognizing dominance.

An experiment was carried out with Rhesus monkeys. To start the monkeys went without water for three hours, when later provided with water they drank in hierarchical order (de Waal 1993), behavioural data suggests an elusive normative dimension inspired by hierarchical dominance. It has been

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shown that in circumstances where resources are limited, and where one might expect the rational survival behaviour to disobey hierarchies, rhesus monkeys continue to act in conformity with a dominance order. However, a closer look at the documented behaviour of primates will reveal that hierarchical dominance does not look like the authority that marks the inception of normative motivation.

Dominance hierarchies are an evolutionary response to manage competition for limited resources and mating partners, having the function to reduce costly aggression. Coe and Rosenblum (1984) designed an experiment to see how dominance influences sexual behaviour in low-ranking macaques and other primates. They set up two conditions, one in which the alpha male had visibility over the group but was kept in a transparent box, and another in which the alpha male was removed from the premises. In the first condition, low-ranking males kept the distance from females even though the alpha male was confined to a box, indicating that, despite the possibility to mate without any short term costs, low-ranking males were guided by hierarchic order. However, as soon as the alpha male was removed from the premises, the same males immediately approached the females and began copulating. It is also reported that when reuniting with the alpha male the low-ranking males greeted him with wide submissive teeth-baring. Coe and Rosenblum take this to suggest an implicit recognition of social code violation. Nevertheless, such an interpretation is ambitious. The submissive gesture might indicate a willingness to endure aggression in exchange for reduced punishment. The possibility of being seen, even if the alpha male is absent, should be taken into account by the strategy of submissiveness, which signals to the potential aggressor that there will be no retaliation in the face of punishment. The alpha male might be satisfied with scaling down punishment if there are no costs for retaliation. Even if we grant the interpretation that the submissive gesture is an implicit recognition of social code violation, it does not follow that the violation of hierarchic order *per se* triggers remorse or guilt feelings. It might be other factors, such as fear of consequences, anxiety of uncertain outcomes or possible damages to valuable relationships play a role in submissive behaviour in the context of social code violation. Obedience can function as a precautionary declaration of peace or as a disposition to settle potential conflicts at minimum costs.

In several studies of “guilty-looking” behaviour in dogs after violation of human imposed rules, it has been documented that beyond the effect of direct human behaviour there is no sign of rule internalization (Vollmer 1977; Horowitz 2009). Prohibitions do not trigger any psychological disturbance for dogs when there is no direct human consequence. Others report studies show more cunning “disobedience” in the face of hierarchic order (Tomasello and Call 1997). For example, in one investigation, a female baboon ingeniously managed to deceive an alpha male in order to groom with a subdominant male. In spite of the fact that the alpha male had visibility, which involves high risks of severe

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punishment, she slid her body behind a boulder in a way that only her head was within sight of the alpha male. In that position, the female began to groom with the subdominant male. This shows that submission to hierarchic order is conditioned to the presence or absence of dominant individuals.

Korsgaard claims that dominance is not always established by aggression arguing that

in some animals dominance hierarchies can be inherited and apparently go unchallenged for longish stretches of time (Korsgaard 2010, 20).

It seems that in such cases it is not the fear of consequences that guides the behaviour of a dominated animal but the recognition of the standing of another animal. This recognition is what makes the dominated animal to inhibit the course of action he would otherwise pursue. While aspects of this are true, Korsgaard's claim is an overstatement about how dominance hierarchies can be maintained. Status recognition does motivate the inhibition of instincts, but more needs to be said about how the standing itself of the dominant animal is established and maintained. What do dominated animals actually recognize in the standing of a dominating animal?

The rank in a hierarchic order is established primarily by domination through physiological size and strength, and it is learned and enforced by punishment and exclusion (Aunger and Curtis 2015; de Waal 2014). The dominance-subordination relationship is, therefore, characterised by an asymmetric distribution of power (Preuschoft and van Schaik 2000, 78). Juvenile rhesus monkeys and apes, for instance, ignore the hierarchic order until their third or fourth year of life, and only learn the rank order afterwards, mainly through punishment. Frans de Waal reports that the rank order is forcefully established for youngsters with dramatic punishments especially when they dare to approach sexually attractive females:

Young males need only one or two such lessons. From then on, every adult male can make them jump away from a female by a mere glance or step forward (de Waal 2014, 189, 53)

After severe punishment, it is enough for young males to sense threat signals in order to control their sexual drive, which shows that fear of consequences for disrupting the rank order is the main effective inhibitor of instinctive reactions. Thus, punishment and aggression must be at the heart of dominance hierarchy if it is to be maintained and transmitted to younger generations. Moreover, the preservation of social order is dependent on the presence of powerful alpha males. Flack and her colleagues (2005) show that temporary removal of powerful conflict managers generates group destabilization, defined as increased levels of conflict and decreased positive interaction.

Korsgaard also overstates her claim when she says that hierarchic orders may go unchallenged for longer periods of time, implying that the hierarchy by itself will keep defectors at distance without other intervening mechanisms.



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Again, more needs to be said to understand the social dynamics involved in maintaining the overall ranking order and what is behind the decision not to challenge dominance orders. Indeed, it is part of the dominance order to be an evolutionary stable strategy that reduces the costs of social contests for access to resources (Cummins 2006). It is expected not to be challenged constantly since everyone wins something even if only a few get the biggest prize. However, attention to the detail of how dominance hierarchies are secured and challenged will throw some light on to the kind of authority that is at play.

Dominant primate males must first obtain their status by a means of aggression and establish decisively the asymmetry of power to demonstrate that their rank can be defended. If the asymmetry of power is not clearly secured, the new status is hard to defend, becoming more vulnerable to challenges. This is why alpha males, even after establishing their rank, continue to communicate their power superiority and seek to gain the support of the group. It has been observed that high ranking males constantly perform the typical bouncing displays of high-status, they signal fighting abilities and show off (de Waal 2014, Aunger and Curtis 2015). The asymmetry of power provides opportunities to successfully maintain the rank order. Winners of past contests tend to escalate conflicts, whereas losers are less likely to do so, securing the hierarchy by a reinforcement mechanism (Aunger and Curtis 2015, 57). When an animal has power superiority he will be more willing to engage in conflicts which easily confirm his status. The more confirmations, the more positions of standing are entrenched and will be acknowledged and accepted within groups. Thus, the occurrence of conflicts favours dominant individuals because they gain leverage to reinforce and advance the existing rank order. We may say that this puts dominant individuals in a “virtuous” circle and dominated ones in a “vicious” one.

Those who hold dominant positions also get involved in third parties fights, providing further opportunities to reinforce hierarchy positions by exerting dominance. For example, high-ranking male chimpanzees often intervene to stop fights or to reduce the level of aggression among group members (de Waal 2014). By virtue of power superiority, dominant individuals acquire the reputation of effective conflict managers requiring others to ask for their intervention. When in-group conflicts escalate, bystanders inform the alpha male and ask for his intervention to control the situation (de Waal 2014). These are further opportunities to perfectly demonstrate that dominance has been well established, although in such situations the benefits are distributed across the group by maintaining social harmony. If a dominant individual is able to keep social harmony then the group has an additional interest to accept the existing hierarchic order.

Dominant individuals also try to win the support of the group by social measures, which can be less costly than direct aggressive measures. Apes have a preference to interact with those individuals who manifest positive attitudes (de Waal 2014). This implies that the group will prefer “good guys” over “bullies.”

There are mainly two types of dominant individuals among hierarchic orders in primates: aggressive dominants and group leaders (de Waal 1989). Aggressive dominants have a bullying profile, harassing others without justification, whereas leaders do not use force immediately, choosing first rather to send warning signals. Also, leader dominance tends to calm things down after fights through the use of calm gestures and reconciliation. De Waal emphasises that “it is these diplomatic dominants who enjoy popularity, not the bullies” (de Waal 1989, 253). Since the group’s support (for a leader) is also fostered by pro-social means, dominants have incentives to take into consideration such attitudes, at least when it contributes to the acknowledgement of their position in the overall ranking.

Because a hierarchic order determines the priority of access to resources, it becomes attractive to conserve and improve one’s status. Thus, status motivates individuals to improve their social position in order to have priority of access to resources (Aunger and Curtis 2015, 58). Low ranking individuals will seek to enhance their position, whereas high ranking will seek to maintain the *status quo* and to monitor it. This develops into informal challenges and tactics. Low ranking individuals will make targeted contributions to their social group and draw attention to these contributions, submit more easily to authority or join dominant aggressors against other subordinate individuals (Aunger and Curtis 2015, 58; Preuschoft and van Schaik 2000, 88), while high ranking individuals will monitor closely the dynamics of power, form coalitions, alliances and opportunistic reconciliations (de Waal 1989, Preuschoft and van Schaik 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Once we identify the challenges and tactics occurring at the high end of the hierarchy, it becomes clearer that hierarchic authority is vulnerable to struggles for power because the asymmetry – superior or inferior – is not a stabled fix position. Frans de Waal suggests possible rank challenges at the high end of the hierarchy in a chimpanzee colony (de Waal 1989, 20). In one observation the group was dominated for a long time by a coalition of two adult males, Nikkie and Yeroen. Nikkie was more powerful, but Yeroen had more experience in power games. Nikkie managed to become leader and maintained the position with the help of Yeroen. However, this placed him in a relationship of dependency for he could not defend on his own the dominant status. As long as their relationship was harmonious, they could easily enforce the rank order, nevertheless when they fought each other third party challenges emerged. While Nikkie and Yeroen were chasing each other, a third male, Luit, made his move of claiming dominance by “spectacular intimidation displays, hooting with his hair on end and hurling stones and branches in every direction” (de Waal 1989, 21). Luit continued to terrorize the females and show off closer and closer to the two

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<sup>1</sup> Low ranked individuals are interested in power dynamics and take part in forming coalitions but their position hardly allows them to lead the effort.

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dominant males. When Nikkie felt that the challenge was quite serious he started to make reconciliatory gestures to Yeroen, by stretching his hand with a broad nervous grin on his face. As soon as Yeroen accepted to make up, Nikkie went to reinforce his position in front the rival by performing a display of dominance. In return, Luit responded with submissive behaviour, acknowledging Nikkie's continued dominant status.

This story about complicated group relationships deeply illustrates that hierarchic orders will be challenged if the asymmetry of power between dominant and subordinate individuals is narrow enough for potential candidates to have a chance of overturning the group ranking. Competition for status in the overall ranking of a group is pervasive in primate societies. Subordinates are opportunists who will use any unbalance in power relationships (Chapais 1992, 1995). On the other side, the reason why most of the time hierarchic orders will go unchallenged is that the asymmetry of power between dominants and subordinates is too wide for rivals to even begin considering the possibility of reshaping the group ranking. Dominance hierarchies are most secure over time when there are no changes in individual or coalition strength (Preuschoft and van Schaik 2000, 87).

By reflecting on the way dominance hierarchies are learned, established and maintained, I have suggested that this is not consistent with Korsgaard's picture of how dominance motivates behaviour. Indeed, dominance is not always established by aggression and hierarchies may go unchallenged for long periods of time. This does not suggest that this behaviour is motivated by mere recognition of a hierarchic relationship. A closer look at the documented behaviour in social settings of dominance hierarchies tells another story. Submission to authority in dominance hierarchies takes place in the presence but not in the absence of dominance, which implies that the effect of status recognition on instinct inhibition is drastically limited to direct visibility and monitoring. The hierarchic order succeeds in keeping defectors in line when dominant figures are in a position to monitor group interactions. But when dominant positions have no direct visibility or social interaction subordinates transgress rank prohibitions, and the social order may even break down. So, it appears that the presence of high rank individuals is the glue for conformity to hierarchy and maintaining social order, implying that status recognition is mixed with the acknowledgement of potential aggression. The essential mechanism of establishing dominance is through exerting and communicating fighting abilities. Hierarchic order is mainly learned and enforced by punishment, threats of punishment, exclusions and escalation of aggressiveness because it is ultimately based on fighting abilities. Where aggression is not used, dominants capitalize opportunities to strengthen their position, gaining group support through prosocial behaviour and conflict management. Regarding the maintenance of hierarchy, Korsgaard is right that it can go unchallenged for a long period of time, but it is misleading if she associates this to prohibitions and concludes rank

order has sufficient authority alone to discourage disruptions. The main two reasons why dominance hierarchies go unchallenged for long periods of time is because of the wide asymmetry of power between dominants and subordinates and lack of changes in individual or coalition strength. When strength superiority is ambiguous, hierarchies are seriously vulnerable to power shifts.

All this suggests that the dominance does not have the features that Korsgaard expects to have. Dominance functions as an inhibition system limited to direct encounters and monitoring. As soon as direct monitoring lacks or can easily be avoided, self-inhibition breaks down. I am not claiming that dominance did not contribute to a better control of mental activity. It may have increased the capacity of self-control to a certain extent and made behaviour more flexible in the face of instinctive reactions or, as others claim, formation of hierarchies in primates may have been an emergent property of individual behavioural rules (Aunger and Curtis 2015). Also, submissive behaviour facilitates rule following. However, what I am claiming is that a proper understanding of documented behaviour in dominance hierarchies suggests that the internalization of dominance is not an appealing starting point to explain the origin of normative motivation. Once individuals are presented with opportunities for defection, dominance loses its motivational power. This contrasts with the fundamental feature of internal normative guidance which is much more independent from prudential reasoning when situations present advantages with small costs of breaking the rules. Animals in hierarchic orders are still opportunists who will attend their instincts when “authority” is not around. Moreover, without the dominants’ superiority to impose sanctions, hierarchic orders are vulnerable. The authority inspired by dominance hierarchies evaporates when there is no direct control and no clear power asymmetry.

Korsgaard might reply that after all her speculation is that dominance hierarchies contain only the thing that becomes one’s authority over oneself *once it is internalized*, not that the dominance hierarchy embodies a genuine form of normativity or authority. However, Korsgaard needs to explain why she chosen dominance authority. What is so special about inherent features of dominance that once they are internalized it becomes an authority over us? The answer would still have to face the conclusions of my analysis because there must be a close connection between the inherent features of dominance that once they are internalized it becomes an authority over us and germinal forms of normative motivation. If there is no close connection then it is not clear what features can become an authority over us once they are internalized. Korsgaard herself says that dominance is interesting because it is similar to normative authority.

Further, she could say that the kind of internalization which is at the origin of normative motivation is more extended in scope and range, so that behaviour will normally conform to rank order even in the absence of high-ranking individuals and inarticulate power superiority. This is a deeper internalization of dominance based authority which indeed could be a source of normative

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motivation. But one has to ask how this fits with natural history. The transition from primates to *homo* species marked a significant shift in group structure and resource allocation. The rise of early humans produced profound shifts in behavioural patterns and cognitive abilities, previously unseen in primates. It is unlikely that the internalization of dominance based authority has expanded, because early humans experimented with new ways of social interaction.<sup>2</sup>

It is documented that *homo sapiens* had an egalitarian social order, and it is likely that dominance hierarchies may have been worn away already by hominids (Boehm 1999). The specific feeding ecology of foraging caused humans to adopt highly collaborative strategies, creating an interdependence which is unprecedented in the primate order (Tomasello and Vaish 2013). The profound changes in how individuals collaborate levelled the playing field, thus, tempering the competitive mental setup which is the framework in which dominance hierarchies emerge.<sup>3</sup> There is conclusive evidence that modern humans have unique levels of cooperation, collaboration and social cognition (Tomasello 2009, 2014). These highly developed behavioural repertoires are, among others, the building blocks of human uniqueness. So, it seems more appealing to look in this direction for the origin of normative motivation. For example, Philip Kitcher (2011) has argued that the only available source of genuine normative guidance is the practice of group members to discuss and formulate commands. Whilst, Michael Tomasello (2014) proposes that collective intentionality, which lacks in primates, may have led to normative self-governance.<sup>4</sup> Collective intentionality has pushed individuals to think of themselves as group members with a particular group identity. This group-mindedness has led to collective moral expectations that motivate behaviour towards group members.

Interesting enough, Korsgaard's work on the meta-ethical sources of normativity fit with this approach. Her claim is that ultimately the source of normative reasons is what she calls practical identities, defined as a set of normative standards of "dos and don'ts" (Korsgaard 2009, 21). For example, the practical identity of motherhood contains what mothers should do in order to fulfil their role. Similarly, we can imagine that group identities specified the "dos and don'ts" which were internalized more deeply once individuals identified themselves with the group. It seems to me that it is more natural for Korsgaard

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<sup>2</sup> Because early humans were not significantly dimorphic, this can be taken as additional evidence for dropping out dominance hierarchies due to the fact that dimorphism favours dominance hierarchies (Coolidge & Wynn 2009, 90)

<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this might be a deeper issue for Korsgaard's proposal, but I will not develop here. The fact that dominance hierarchies are responses to problems in competitive settings may be a decisive reason why mental activity control has not developed more in the direction of becoming less opportunistic.

<sup>4</sup> In his account of the origin of normative thinking, Tomasello makes reference to Korsgaard's meta-ethical work on normative self-governance. See also Tomasello and Vaish (2013).

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to look at the dynamics of collaborative expectations and commitments for the origin of normative motivation.

## Conclusion

Korsgaard's insistence that there is more to morality than its specific content has significant merits to developing a more complete outlook of the origin of morality. Independent of morally good motives, which spring from sympathy with others' conditions, the capacity to govern ourselves in accordance with what we believe we ought to do for its own sake is also central to human morality. Korsgaard proposes that dominance has a normative dimension because it looks like authority. I have argued that a closer look at the documented behaviour in social settings of rank order reveals that dominance does not contain the features which are relevant for normative authority. Dominance inhibits instinctive reactions without being exercised each time, but it fails to guide behaviour beyond its presence, communication of strength and clear power superiority. We must look for authority somewhere else if Korsgaard's speculation is to become more robust.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Bogdan Olaru and Claire Ward for useful comments. I also benefited from Christine Korsgaard's reaction to the draft of this paper. My gratitude to them does not imply that they agree with the ideas herein.

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