

ABSTRACT

What Makes Moral Claims True?
Korsgaard versus Brewer on Metaethics and Practical Unity

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Among those philosophers who think that moral claims are sometimes true, there are two basic positions about what makes these claims true: realism and constructivism. Realists hold that moral claims are true because some thing (a moral fact, property, form, etc.) makes them true; constructivists hold that moral claims are true because they are binding on rational beings just as such, either because they are the product of certain of our activities in their ideal form or because of some feature of our nature. In this thesis, I present in detail the view of a leading thinker in each camp, then explore how each might incorporate, evaporate, or otherwise deal with some of the concerns that guide the other's project, focusing specifically on the issue of practical unity.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Realist-Constructivist Dispute and Why It Matters

“It is admitted that the objects of religion are ideal in contrast with our present state. What would be lost if it were also admitted that they have authoritative claim upon conduct just because they are ideal? The assumption that these objects of religion exist already in some realm of Being seems to add nothing to their force, while it weakens their claim over us as ideals, in so far as it bases that claim upon matters that are intellectually dubious.”

-John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 29

The Driving Question

The meta-ethical dispute between constructivists and realists is at bottom a dispute about how to answer Dewey’s question. What do we lose by thinking that the “objects of religion” (read: moral goodness or moral truths) are merely ideal? Ideals seem normative just as such, so why do we need to think that goodness or moral truths have some sort of more objective existence? Constructivists side with Dewey, insisting that we lose nothing and in fact gain the strengthened conviction that comes with increased surety of the validity of our ideals. Realists¹ oppose Dewey, claiming that we lose something quite serious, though accounts vary in regard to what precisely is lost, be it the objectivity of our moral claims or the intelligibility of certain moral intuitions and practices or some other similarly grave forfeiture. But why should *you* care about this quarrel? In order to

¹ Though on fairly standard use of the term realism only implies affirming that moral claims are intended to report facts and that some of these facts are true, for my purposes, I will use the term to refer only to substantive realism, which adds that what makes moral claims true is something metaphysical, that there is some non-constructed truthmaker, be it a property, an object, a form, etc. I gloss these possible truthmakers under the term “distinctively moral entities” throughout.

answer this question, we first need to explicate the main theses and motivations of each camp.

Constructivism

Let us first turn to constructivism. Constructivism is the thesis that the good or the right is in some fundamental way dependent upon human activities in an idealized form.² That is not to say that the good or the right is in any way subjective in the sense that thinking makes it so, but simply that the objective truth about what we ought to do is determined by features of the practical standpoint of some class of subjects and thus by what these sorts of subjects would agree to under ideal conditions. In this way, constructivism attempts to carve out space in the meta-ethical landscape between strict anti-realism, which holds that there are no true answers to moral questions because the entities necessary to deliver such answers cannot or do not exist, and substantive forms of realism, which hold that there are answers to moral questions because there are certain existing entities.

Constructivism attempts to deliver an objective ethics that avoids the metaphysical issues confronting realists by developing a practical, rather than metaphysical standard for objectivity. On this view an ethical claim C is objectively true for S iff it follows from the practical standpoint of S. Constructivists then say that certain moral claims follow from the practical standpoint of rational beings or some other

² In her SEP entry on constructivism, Carla Bagnoli distinguishes between constructivism in ethics and constructivism in metaethics. The difference is that the former makes no statement on whether there are in fact normative truths, but simply says what normative truths are like if there are any, while the latter holds that there are such normative truths. In what follows, I will use the term “constructivism” to refer to the meta-ethical position.

practical standpoint just as such and so there are objective moral truths that hold for beings of that sort (i.e. us). John Rawls' theory of justice is a helpful analogy in political theory.

According to Rawls, justice is fairness, so a just government is one that treats its citizens fairly. Further, what it means for a government to treat its citizens fairly is that in making its laws, the government takes into consideration only those properties its citizens have simply qua citizens. Considerations such as race, gender, social status, intelligence, and so on would not come into play in any way in such a process of deliberation because these things are not features essential to the status of citizen. Just laws then are those that a group of deliberators attending only to the properties of citizens qua citizens would decide to adopt. Given the concept of justice as fairness, facts about what is just are supposed by Rawls to fall right out of the practical perspective of the citizen considered as such, without appeal to anything existing beyond a group of deliberators bound in some way to solve a problem together.³ So too in ethics, constructivists suppose normative facts to be determinable simply by attending to the practical standpoint of agents faced with a certain problem.

The primary motivation for constructivism is wariness of the metaphysical and epistemic problems that appear to confront realism. If the right or the good depends upon the existence of metaphysical moral entities (facts, properties, forms, etc.), these entities must be rather unlike anything else in the world it seems. As J. L. Mackie notes, moral entities of this sort must have both motive and direction built into them; they must be

³ See Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 113-115 for a helpful discussion of Rawls and the concept/conception distinction.

capable of telling an agent what to do and of making her do it.⁴ What sort of thing could be like *that*? Moreover, there is a puzzle concerning how we could come to know about the existence of such unique entities. Why would an animal develop an awareness of these sorts of entities? Not to mention, *how* could an animal develop such an awareness? If we want an ethics consistent with naturalism,⁵ then the distinctively moral entities posited by the realist would apparently have to play some evolutionary role in the development of beings like us and thus would have to be causally related to the mental states of certain animals and render these animals more reproductively fit; but coming up with a plausible account of this seems rather hopeless. For all these reasons, the constructivist despairs of the possibility of such entities and so tries to account for what we want from them—normativity and value—by less problematic means.

Realism

Realism, by contrast, holds that there *are* entities that can both direct and motivate. The truth of moral claims is determined by the way the world is, independent of the thoughts, activities, and indeed existence of beings like us. Thus normativity and value are first-order properties of the world, woven inextricably into its very fabric. Realism is in this way a much more straightforward view than constructivism. If one asks a realist if a moral claim C is true, the realist will simply direct his inquirer to examine

⁴ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 40.

⁵ I take consistency with naturalism to be a desideratum for ethical theories, though by no means a necessary condition.

the way the world is: if C is true, then there is some distinctively moral entity whose existence makes it true.

Realism is motivated by its apparent alignment with common sense and some of our intuitive commitments concerning morality. The positing of certain distinctively moral entities is thought to be justified by their ability to explain certain phenomena, namely various features of our moral lives: since the price of abandoning these features of our moral lives is too steep, we are justified in believing in distinctively moral entities despite the potential metaphysical and epistemic problems they may bring. At last we may turn to the question of why the answer we give to Dewey's question matters.

Why It Matters

There are several reasons to care about the debate between constructivists and realists. One obvious reason is that moral thought plays a very important role in our lives, so understanding the nature of moral truth is valuable as a part of understanding our lives and the world in which we live them, which, I submit, is intrinsically valuable. But there are stronger, more immediately practical reasons than this.

One major reason that the dispute about how to answer Dewey's question matters is the implication of a realist answer for philosophy of religion. If the realist is right, we are stuck with the problem of explaining how we know about the sort of entities the realist posits. On atheism, our formation of a reliable sense for the good seems highly improbable at best because of the difficulty of explaining how our minds could be causally related to distinctively moral entities and why being so related is or was adaptive

(or at least piggybacked on an adaptive feature).⁶ On theism though, our possession of such a sense seems quite likely indeed: an all-good, all-powerful being would care greatly that creatures live lives of maximal value and consequently would take what steps it could to ensure that those creatures capable of moral reasoning had at least a largely reliable ability to perceive goodness. So, on its face, a realist answer to Dewey's question lends some support to theism.

A further reason this dispute matters is that different answers will seemingly yield different conceptions of how to practice ethics properly. If the constructivist is right, ethics seems to be a highly rationalist project. The way we discover what we ought to do is through thinking about the sort of being that we are and what the practical standpoint of such creatures is, and then reasoning to whatever will satisfy the requirements inherent in the practical outlook of beings such as us. On the realist picture, however, ethics seems to be a much more empirical and perceptual pursuit—a refining of a sense for the good rather than a purely deliberative practice. If we get this question wrong, we will set out to do ethics in a wrongheaded fashion and presumably have much less success in discovering what moral standards or values there are.

Relatedly, we will form a much different picture of moral education. If we believe that ethics is a highly rationalist practice, we will seek to promote the ability to reason in a strictly logical fashion above all and will teach children to seek moral truths and exemplars in different quarters than if we believe that ethics is a strongly empirical venture. If we hold with the realists, we will seek to cultivate a more holistic ethical

⁶ Some naturalists do try to give or at least gesture towards such an account. See Erik Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

sense, prizing a variety of virtues beyond the strictly rational. We will direct children to attend to their experiences as the means of discovering the good, rather than simply to the features of their practical situation. Given the differences that would apparently result in ethical practice and education, getting Dewey's question right is of great practical importance.

Now we see the significance of the constructivist versus realist debate generally, but why care about understanding these particular authors and how they might be conversation with one another? Christine Korsgaard and Talbot Brewer are respected figures in the field, each held in high esteem by their respective camp. If we seek truth, then we should examine proposed views in their best form; therefore, we should read those figures that the various groups in a dispute take to be among the best champions of their cause. I take it that Korsgaard and Brewer are two such figures and hence that their writing merits careful reading and reflection.

In what follows I will present first Korsgaard's view, primarily as developed in *The Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*, with limited supplementation from each work's companion anthology, then I will present Brewer's view as developed in *The Retrieval of Ethics*, with limited supplementation from his other work. This order will be helpful for understanding Brewer because his view is developed largely in reaction to figures like Korsgaard. In the final chapter, I will attempt to put Korsgaard and Brewer into fruitful conversation, challenging each to deal with the central concerns of the other. Ultimately, I conclude that though Korsgaard may have a means to escape Brewer's

critiques, Brewer can develop a strain of his thought into an argument that Korsgaard cannot answer.

CHAPTER TWO

Korsgaard's Constructivism

Christine Korsgaard has developed a nuanced and fascinating example of Kantian constructivism through her books, *The Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*, as well as the corresponding anthologies, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* and *The Constitution of Agency*, respectively. This chapter seeks to answer two questions about Korsgaard's view as presented in these works: First, how are moral claims justified?¹ Second, what account of moral psychology is implied by or expressed in this view? I will take the questions in the order given.

Korsgaard's Starting Point

Moral thought is a consummately practical endeavor for Korsgaard, concerned first and foremost with generating action guidance and propelled by the necessity of choice, not a theoretical project aimed at knowledge of the good and propelled by curiosity or the inherent attractiveness of the good. This pragmatic view of ethics follows quite naturally from what Korsgaard says about how moral thought begins.

Korsgaard claims that moral thought starts from the fact that, from the first-person perspective, we find ourselves "condemned to choice." We find ourselves confronted by an incentive, to which we are subject when we are "aware of the features

¹ This will necessarily be a rather rough sketch, hitting on what I take to be the highlights and trying to explain Korsgaard's arguments for them, and thus omitting many, many details and oversimplifying Korsgaard's view somewhat.

of some object that make the object attractive or appealing,”² and we, being conscious of the pull that these features of the object are exerting upon us, must decide whether to heed their force. Though our attention may be diverted and we may unthinkingly abandon our reflection, as long as we continue to reflect, this decision faces us.

From this alleged fact of our experience, Korsgaard infers that we are self-conscious, reflective beings.³ By “self-conscious” she does not mean that we are literally able to encounter the self in our experience, but rather that the reflective nature of our consciousness forces us to have a self-conception.⁴ The reflective nature of our consciousness is revealed by the fact that we can bring our desires into view as mental objects—we can think about them as things, rather than simply feel them as forces or experiences. When we think about desires as objects—which we do when we are aware of desires as such—we inevitably form a conception of ourselves as something over and above those desires, something which is having them, and bring ourselves into view in much the same way that we brought the desires into view (although we may not be able ever to fully abstract or step back and attain complete reflective distance from ourselves

² Christine M. Korsgaard, “Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsburg, Guyer, and Schneewind,” *Ethics*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (October 1998): 49-66. For the sake of style and clarity, I will often speak of our desires rather than incentives. Take “X desires to ϕ ” as equivalent to “X is subject to an incentive to ϕ ” and “desire” as equivalent to “the fact that one is subject to an incentive.”

³ Korsgaard calls the self-conscious, reflective nature of our consciousness our “humanity,” but I think the term personhood is more accurate, for the arguments Korsgaard employs would apply to any non-humans with a similarly structured consciousness and it is conceivable that there could be such non-humans. So, I propose to use the terms “personhood” throughout, understood as meaning “the self-conscious, reflective nature of our consciousness” instead of Korsgaard’s preferred term “humanity.”

⁴ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 92-93, 100.

as we can with desires).⁵ This is all Korsgaard means by “self-conscious.” Now, when we bring a desire into view as a mental object, we achieve what Korsgaard calls “reflective distance” and then must ask whether we should heed the desire and act upon it. Insofar as we continue to reflect, we cannot proceed—we cannot act—until we have a reason. But we must act. This is what Korsgaard calls “the normative problem.”

Reasons

What is a reason though? On Korsgaard’s view, “reason” is just a term for reflective success.⁶ When we find that we can reflectively endorse acting upon an incentive, then that incentive is a reason.⁷ A reason is an incentive whose force we find appropriately motivating. Incentives make some act in response to an appealing feature of an object seem worthwhile, so, given that an action is an act-for-an-end (as I will explain below), an incentive says to us that some action is worthwhile. Therefore, it must be the whole thing, the act-for-the-sake-of-the-end, that we endorse when we endorse our

⁵ Although Korsgaard thinks we gain reflective distance from and thus need to endorse our perceptions as well as our desires, and therefore that this practical approach applies to epistemology as well, I will speak only about desires, as it is the justification of actions with which I am here concerned. A treatment of Korsgaard’s epistemology is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 97.

⁷ Clearly, there must be standards for endorsability by which our reflection on incentives must be guided, but to detail what Korsgaard thinks these standards are would be getting a bit ahead of ourselves here. The nature and source of these standards will be filled in later, but first we need to examine a few further points Korsgaard makes about reasons.

incentives and thus a reason is a description of an action (which is to say, a maxim) that we reflectively endorse.⁸

This brings us to a distinction that is crucial to Korsgaard's view: a reason for an *action* is not the same as the end for which an *act* is done. If Rosy asks where Samwise is and we tell her that Samwise has gone to Mordor, she will likely ask why he has gone on such an expedition (it is rather un-hobbitlike after all). Her request here is for an end or goal that will make sense of Sam's performing the act "going to Mordor," which of course is something like "in order to help his friend Frodo on his journey to destroy the One Ring." The end may look like it is the thing that gives Samwise a reason to go, but this, Korsgaard says, is an illusion created by the fact that the end is often the missing piece we seek when asking why an agent performed an act. We cannot understand what an agent does (what action she performs) until we know both the act and the end;⁹ since the act is often apparent or given by itself in answer to an inquiry as to what a certain agent did, the answer to questions concerning why an agent performed a given act is often a citation of the agent's end or purpose. Korsgaard, following Aristotle, claims that

⁸ Korsgaard, "Acting for a Reason," in *Studies in Practical Reason*, ed. V. Bradley Lewis (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, forthcoming): 227. A maxim denotes an act-for-an-end, as in "I will write a thesis in order to graduate" or, as hopefully is the case for me, "I will write a thesis in order to gain valuable experience doing philosophy and to explore an issue of personal interest" (the end need not be singular after all). So, what an incentive proposes to us is that we take a certain maxim to be a law. But perhaps that's getting ahead of myself. For now let it suffice that an incentive proposes that we act on a maxim.

⁹ Korsgaard's own example will serve well here. Suppose a friend of yours walks by you without even acknowledging your presence. What has she done? Well, argues Korsgaard, that depends on why she failed to acknowledge you. If she saw you and ignored you anyway, she snubbed you; if she simply did not see you, then she has not snubbed you. Or (this is my own extension of the example) perhaps moments before a madman told her that he'd kill the first person she greeted; then she hasn't snubbed you, she's saved your life. Thus, what action she performed depends on the purpose for which she failed to acknowledge you.

the products of our deliberation are actions, so the end is simply a part of the description of what an agent does when she acts, a part that makes it intelligible as an action: what Sam does is “go-to-Mordor-to-help-his-friend,” not simply “go-to-Mordor.”

Further, reasons are supposed to have normative force, but if what provided the normative force was the end alone, then the end would justify any action, no matter how disproportionate to the value of the end.¹⁰ What needs to be normative is the whole maxim, the combination of the act and the end, not just the end. We may have some ends unconditionally, which is to say, we may have some ends that make normative any action in whose description they appear. In this case, no act done in pursuit of these ends forms a maxim such that the resulting action is reflectively unwillable; rather, every act when combined with such ends forms a reflectively endorsable maxim, and that maxim is what gives us a reason to act. The reason for an action is that the maxim describing it is one that solves the normative problem for us by surviving the test of reflection. This does not mean that, in the example above, if Sam’s maxim passes the test of reflection, what Sam has reason to do is the *act* (to go to Mordor); rather he has reason to do the whole thing, that is, the *action* (to go to Mordor in order to help his friend). Sam really does go to Mordor in order to help Frodo, but the reason he performs that action is because he sees it as a good thing.¹¹

¹⁰ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

¹¹ See Korsgaard, “Acting for a Reason,” 219-222 for her discussion of the above.

From Reasons to Identities

Now that Korsgaard's view of what counts as a reason is on the table, we can return to the central argument and see why it is that we must act on reasons: if we cannot reflectively endorse a given action, then, Korsgaard argues, in a very real sense we cannot perform it. We can perform the act alright—say if we stop reflecting too soon or do not reflect at all and behave mindlessly—but we cannot perform the act for the end. If we act on a desire whose incentive we do not endorse, we are not acting, but rather being acted upon; one who performs an action that she does not endorse to her seems to be a captive of her desires and thus not an agent.¹² So, if we are to be agents and to act, then we must act on desires that we endorse.

Given that we need to act on incentives that we can endorse, we need a way of determining which desires we can endorse, which is just to say our will needs a principle, i.e. a law.¹³ Yet Korsgaard agrees with Kant that we must act under the idea of freedom (which as she points out, is implied by the fact that we find ourselves faced with a *decision* and see our desires as *potential* grounds for action). There seems to be quite a mystery concerning what such a principle could be; after all “the law of a free will”

¹² Strictly speaking, the possibilities here are not binary. As I will explain later, Korsgaard thinks that action is a concept that admits of degrees, so there are good actions, defective actions, and non-actions. For now I will stick with this oversimplification for dialectical purposes.

¹³ Of crucial note here is that a principle is not something that functions as a premise in a practical syllogism, but is analogous to logical rules of inference. A principle just describes what an agent who takes certain considerations to count in favor of an action is doing, so one does not say, “I believe in the principle of race negligence, so I will not take a person's race to be a consideration that can be a reason.” One's belief in a principle is expressed not as a premise in one's deliberation, but in one's actually taking certain considerations to be reasons and rejecting others, just as *modus ponens* is not a premise, but rather a description of how one draws conclusions. See Korsgaard, “Acting for a Reason.”

sounds paradoxical, but Korsgaard, continuing to follow Kant here, adopts his argument that the principle of the free will is the categorical imperative:

The problem faced by the free will is this: the will must have a law, but because the will is free, it must be its own law. And nothing determines what that law must be. All that it has to be is a law. Now consider the content of the categorical imperative.... The categorical imperative merely tells us to choose a law. Its only constraint on our choice is that it has the form of a law. And nothing determines what the law must be. All that it has to be is a law.¹⁴

The will must act in accord with some law, but the free will cannot have this law imposed upon it from without. So, the free will must act in accord with the law of its choosing, but that is its only restriction, so the principle of the free will is simply “Act in accord with a law,” which is the categorical imperative (henceforth CI). Korsgaard acknowledges that the CI alone does not give morality content (at least not much), so her argument is not yet complete.

Korsgaard, again departing from Kant, distinguishes the CI from what she calls “the moral law.” The CI tells us simply to choose a law for our will, while the moral law tells us to choose laws that “all rational beings could agree to act on together in a workable, cooperative system.”¹⁵ Korsgaard takes the argument she has presented thus far to establish that the law of the free will is the CI, but acknowledges the need for further argument to establish the domain over which this law extends.

To this end, Korsgaard returns to the beginning of her argument, namely that we are self-conscious, reflective beings. The fact that the reflectivity of our consciousness forces us to have a conception of ourselves as something over and above our desires

¹⁴ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

when we deliberate means that we must regard the principles by which we bring our deliberation to a close as expressive of ourselves.¹⁶ When we act in accord with principles of our choice, we are a law to ourselves. There are all sorts of different laws we can be to ourselves; what sort of law we are is determined by the self-conceptions, or in Korsgaard's terminology, practical identities, that we have. Practical identities are not self-conceptions that are necessarily factual; rather they are "better understood as a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking."¹⁷ Further, our principles are expressions of our practical identities because the conception of ourselves as over and above our actions, in conjunction with our determination of our action by a given principle, implies both that we are the sort of agent who acts on such a principle and that we value being this sort of agent, which is just to say that we have a certain practical identity.

It is helpful to notice that many—perhaps all—of our concepts of identities that we value are inextricably teleological, for instance "friend" and "scientist."¹⁸ As

¹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., 100-101. It is a bit mysterious why only the self-conceptions that matter to us (that we value) are relevant, but I think some sense can be made of this claim. If we thought we were an American, but found that to be an entirely worthless fact that had no bearing on the value of our lives, then we would not guide our actions by this fact and would neither fear nor mourn the loss of this identity. Since obligation for Korsgaard is ultimately a psychological force, though a necessarily occurrent one, and one that stems from fear of the loss of identity, it follows that the identities we do not fear to lose cannot obligate us.

¹⁸ In fact this seems necessarily true for any contingent identity, i.e. any identity we are capable of losing. If we have an identity but do not value it, then it will never play a role in guiding our action. If we do value a contingent identity, there must be some possible situation in which we would see it as making a practical demand on us, minimally to preserve it.

Korsgaard points out, we make claims on ourselves and others by direct reference to these roles: “I can’t do that, I’m his friend!” or “You can’t publish that, you’re a scientist for heaven’s sake!” We conceive of a friend as someone whose action is guided by a concern for the good of another; we conceive of a scientist as someone whose action is guided by the systematic pursuit of truth by empirical means (or something along that line). Perhaps these are not true ontological categories we can fall into or metaphysical identities we can possess, and certainly they are in large part influenced or entirely produced by our particular culture, but Korsgaard thinks that these points are of no detriment to her view. What matters is that we have the concepts and that insofar as we think of ourselves as the sort of thing our concept notes, we must act in accord with the principles inherent in the identity concept in question, for it is logically impossible to think of ourselves as a being of the sort that guides its actions by a principle X and yet reflectively endorse an action not guided by X.¹⁹ So, we have reasons to act on the principles of our practical identities and obligations not to act in ways that violate them.

Concerns About Contingency and Relativism

Why, one might ask, should we take on any practical identities in the first place, especially if they are so culturally contingent? And how does a view that holds that what

¹⁹ Where the identity in question is not trumped by another, deeper identity. Of course one may have a deeper identity (or several) that conflicts with the identity “being-that-guides-its-actions-by-X,” in which case one may not do as X bids. However, I do not think Korsgaard would say one is not guided by X in this case. As long as X is among ones endorsed practical identities (i.e. there is some circumstance in which one would do as X bids) and the identity that trumps “being-that-guides-its-actions-by-X” is deeper, then one’s action is in a sense guided by X or at least not destructive of the identity “being-that-guides-its-actions-by-X.”

we ought to do is a product of the contingent identities we simply think we have avoid being entirely relativistic?

The answer to the first question has two parts. The first is to notice that we unreflectively develop many practical identities in the course of our maturation. We do not choose these practical identities, but rather absorb or inherit them from our parents, peers, culture, and evolutionary heritage. Yet perhaps, in the course of our maturation, we did not develop a sufficient set of practical identities to deal with all the decisions we face; this brings out the second piece of the answer. If we find ourselves faced with a situation that our set of practical identities is incapable of guiding us through, we have reason to take on a practical identity that will do so. To see why, we must return to the origin of the problem: the fact that we must act. From this, Korsgaard derived the claim that our consciousness is reflective and that we are self-conscious, implying that we all necessarily have a practical identity as self-conscious, reflective beings. This, as we saw from Kant's argument for the CI as the law of the free will, means that we must adopt a principle in accord with which we act. But such principles only come from further, contingent practical identities; so, we have reason for (that is, we can reflectively endorse) adopting any practical identity that gives us a principle to guide our action. So, when we find ourselves missing such a principle, we have reason to adopt some contingent practical identity that will supply it. Here the problem of relativism arises once more, as it seems that we could have reason for and be entirely justified in acting in accord with all sorts of heinous identities, so long as they provide principles to guide our

actions. Fortunately for the constructivist, the situation is not so dire and the solution to this worry is already in hand.

The Necessary Practical Identity

In fact, the solution is the same as the consideration that reintroduced the problem: there is one practical identity under which we all must view and value ourselves, namely our conception of ourselves as self-conscious, reflective beings.²⁰ The conception of ourselves as self-conscious and reflective is implied by the bare fact of the situation in which we find ourselves. So long as one accepts the premise that we can become conscious of our desires as such, one is committed to the view that we are self-conscious, as the view of a desire qua desire requires a subject who has the desire. Regardless of any issues with the plausibility of such a thing from a strictly scientific viewpoint, it is a fact about the first-person view of the situation that we have such a self-concept and it is within the first-person view of things that we decide and act. By the same token, we can also see that we necessarily conceive of ourselves as reflective. The ability to bring concepts of our self and mental forces like desires into view as mental objects just is reflectivity. Given that we all necessarily view ourselves as self-conscious, reflective beings, and given that our practical identities must form a compatible set,²¹ we

²⁰ At least insofar as we value anything. Korsgaard doesn't really argue against nihilism, but in my view, nihilism is untenable anyway, so all persons are bound by this if it works.

²¹ The compatibility premise is also derivable from the necessity of acting. Suppose we have two conflicting identities. At some points or at all points, they will deliver contradictory action guidance. In order to resolve this dispute—which we must do because we must act—we must either subjugate or abandon one of the identities. If the identities only conflict in certain situations, we may maintain both, but we must assign one lower value to resolve the conflict. If they are incompatible, i.e. conflicting at all points, then we must abandon one.

may conclude that we can only reflectively endorse acting on the principles inherent in practical identities that are compatible with this one universally necessary practical identity. That is to say, we cannot value ourselves as much or more under any description than we value ourselves as self-conscious, reflective beings, since our identity practical identity as persons is the very reason for taking on or possessing any contingent practical identity in the first place.²² So I misspoke when I claimed that we can reflectively endorse *any* practical identity that delivers action guidance where we previously lacked it. There is a serious and universal restriction on the practical identities we may adopt, which prevents an objectionable relativism from creeping into Korsgaard's constructivism and, with a bit more argument, ultimately gets us into moral territory.

The Publicity of Reasons

So far, Korsgaard thinks she has shown that we must act on principles that are compatible with our personhood; that is to say, we must act in ways that respect our personhood. So far, Korsgaard's view seems rather egoist. "Alright," one might ask, "so we are obligated by our own personhood, but what about the personhood of others? Are we obligated by the value of our own personhood or some other private reason of our own to value the personhood of others? Surely all our own obligations and reasons are

²² I believe this is the insight behind Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative in *The Groundwork* (The Universal Law requirement). We cannot act under a conception of our self that undermines a conception of our self as the sort of thing that can act at all, namely a self-conscious, rational being. The universal law requirement cannot be used as the sole guide for moral action because it has minimal (though not, I think, zero) content, as Korsgaard realizes, so the rest of the picture must be filled in by the third formulation, the making of laws for the Kingdom of Ends requirement and our contingent practical identities and the publicity of reasons (which will come into play later). One can see here how Korsgaard's view is inspired by Kant's, while sensitive to common criticisms of Kant's view, at least as presented in *The Groundwork*.

not derived from the value we place on ourselves?” If this were the case, Korsgaard agrees, neo-Kantian ethics would indeed be implausible, for it would be terribly out of sync with common moral intuitions. Fortunately the neo-Kantian is not in such a bind. Egoism—even a sophisticated egoism that holds that we do have reason (albeit on account of private reasons) to see the reasons of others as our own—is false because it is based on a false premise, namely that reasons are private.²³ Reasons, like meanings, are inherently shareable. They cannot exist without being public. In *The Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard sets out an argument for this conclusion that is supposed to be analogous to Wittgenstein’s private language argument.

If reasons were not public, Korsgaard claims, then those participating in an exchange like that of a student and a teacher deciding upon a time to meet outside of class would see the other’s (private) reasons as obstacles to be avoided or tools to be used in adherence to their own (private) reasons. So, the student and the teacher each would use whatever tactics or spin she could in order to get the other to agree to meet at a time convenient for herself, rather than trying to deliberate together and come up with a time that works well for both student and teacher.²⁴ But this is not what happens. It seems to us that we really do deliberate together and arrive at shared decisions, and absent some compelling reason to think we are mistaken on this point, we can conclude that this is indeed what we do. So, Korsgaard concludes that reasons are public.

²³ Ibid., 133-135.

²⁴ Ibid., 141.

Here Korsgaard seems to rely implicitly on the premise that reasons are either exclusively private or exclusively public. While she never states this premise, she must be relying on it, as all her argument about the interaction between the student and the teacher shows is that reasons can be public. As Joshua Gert notes, absent some compelling argument for thinking that reasons are by nature all private or all public, Korsgaard's argument fails to go through because it fails to bridge the gap from the possibility of reasons being public to the necessity of reasons being public.²⁵ A plausible third option is to say that reasons are not inherently private or public, but can be both. Why not think some reasons are private and others are public depending upon whether or not we are joining our wills to another in pursuit of a shared good (as Kant thinks we do in friendships and marriages)?

Korsgaard revisits the debate on the privacy of reasons in *Self-Constitution* and presents a couple of new arguments, which are much clearer and more plausible. First, Korsgaard gives an argument derived from her account of personal identity—specifically, her idea that we constitute ourselves by the choices we make. If who we are is constituted by our choices, rather than prior to them, Korsgaard notes, there is no sense to be made of the category of reasons which count only as one's own because “that category—the category of incentives which count as mine and from which I construct ‘my reasons’—gets its ultimate shape from the choices that I make.”²⁶ Reasons are things on which one draws in order to constitute one's identity and thus cannot spring from one's identity in

²⁵ See Gert, “Korsgaard's Private-Reasons Argument,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Mar., 2002): 303-324.

²⁶ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 199.

the way reasons would need to if they were to be private. So the idea of reasons as in some clear way one's own is empty and reasons therefore cannot be private. This argument relies on Korsgaard's theory of identity as something that is constituted by action and not something that exists prior to action, so if one denies her theory of identity, one will find this argument is unsound, but it is a valid argument for her conclusion.

A second new argument for the publicity of reasons that Korsgaard presents in *Self-Constitution* runs as follows:

1. Interaction requires public reasons.
2. Action is interaction with the self.
3. So, action requires public reasons. (1, 2)

Interaction, Korsgaard says, is the uniting of wills and necessarily involves the sharing of reasons; this we cannot do if reasons are private. Or perhaps more clearly, we cannot have private reasons for interaction.²⁷ Korsgaard asks us to consider the case of two people each of whom finds that he would benefit from cooperating—say a fire threatens both their farms and they can fight it more effectively together, as in Korsgaard's own example. If they each realize their private reason for joining forces and act from this, then neither is giving any force to the other's reasons at all—each is simply using the other's reasons as tools to his own end and so they are not forming a united will at all, but simply acting each on his own will, the objects of which happen to coincide. Thus, they are not interacting.

But perhaps we can make an explicit agreement to treat each other's reasons as our own. Suppose two persons agree to take the other's reasons as their own in the

²⁷ Ibid., 200-203.

pursuit of a goal they share. There will be two problems with such an agreement according to Korsgaard. First, it is hard to see why each party to the agreement should not free ride on the other's efforts and why, if each recognizes this, she should trust the other, and thus why the agreement should be forged in the first place. Second, the motivation for this agreement is suspect. If each party agrees for private reasons, then there seems to be no sense in saying that each is treating the reasons of the other as reasons rather than tools. Adopting an instrumental stance toward another's reasons is not compossible with treating them as reasons. So, we must already find another's reasons to be reasons, if we are to make agreements, if we are to unite our wills. So, reasons must be public if interaction is to be possible and (1) is true. For the defense of (2), Korsgaard commandeers an example from Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*.

A young Russian nobleman has rather liberal values and believes that his coming inheritance should be given to the poor of his town, but he also believes that as he ages his values will become significantly more conservative such that he will no longer think that he ought to give his inheritance to the local poor by the time he comes into it and he will keep it for himself. In light of this view of his future, the young nobleman signs the control of his inheritance over to his wife via some legal document and secures her promise that no matter what his older self says, she will give away his inheritance. It is important to note that the young nobleman does not think that his older self's values will be irrational, but merely different; what he fears is not irrationality but change of identity.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., 185-187, 195.

In acting on a maxim on which he does not think he will later be able to act, the young nobleman is failing to forge a universal will that runs through his present and future selves. He is acting on a consideration that his later self cannot endorse and so treating his later self's reasons as obstacles to be avoided and not as reasons binding on him. He is willing in a particularist manner, which is to have no will at all, for a will is a causality and causes are essentially law-like. Korsgaard reminds us that particularist willing is unavailable to us, as the CI is the principle of the free will and insofar as we see ourselves as free, we must be a law to ourselves. Further, she argues, being a law to ourselves means legislating reasons that we can act on at different times and in different situations, for there is no sense in which we are acting on a law or principle when we act on reasons that we can only act on at one time and in one situation. A principle by its very definition ranges over different settings, so insofar as we act on principles, we act on reasons that remain binding despite changes in position.²⁹ Thus the young nobleman, by acting on a consideration that he cannot share with himself, is not acting at all. So, when we act, we must do so for reasons that we can share with our self, which is just to say that we must act on reasons we can share with others, i.e. public reasons.

As it turns out then, Korsgaard claims, her view is able to avoid an objectionable relativism.³⁰ Upon reflection on the implications of the situation in which we find ourselves—being faced with decisions about our response to the desires that arise—we

²⁹ Korsgaard notes that this shows us in another way why reasons must be public: being someone else is just a change of position. See *Self-Constitution*, 205.

³⁰ Korsgaard's view not only avoids relativism, but also leaves space for a healthy pluralism. Given that there are multiple, coherent sets of contingent practical identities that are compatible with an agent's necessary practical identity as a person, there are, on Korsgaard's view many ways of being a good person or rather many distinct good persons that agents can be.

find ourselves to be bound by the reasons that arise from practical identities that are compatible with our personhood and, as we must act on public reasons, from the personhood of others (as well as their contingent practical identities). So, Korsgaard concludes, Kant was right and moral obligation does arise from the value of our personhood.

It may be helpful for critical discussion of Korsgaard's constructivism to construe her theory more explicitly in terms of value. Given one premise about value, namely that anything that has normative force has value, Korsgaard thinks that we can see that the value we have merely by virtue of being self-conscious, reflective beings is the condition for all other value and so, if we value anything, we must value our personhood.³¹

Here is how this is supposed to work. An agent's identity as a self-conscious, reflective being means that she is subject to the normative problem: she must act, but she can act only on incentives whose force she can endorse— that is, on reasons. It is this fact about her that makes incentives that can function as reasons normative for her, i.e. valuable to her. Since she needs principles of volition in order to determine which incentives can function as reasons, principles of volition that she adopts are normative for her and thus must be valuable to her. Valuing a principle or finding it normative for her requires an agent to have a conception of herself that is normative for her and thus valuable to her, i.e. a practical identity. Principles of volition are just embodiments of practical identities; insofar as an agent takes the principle(s) of volition associated with

³¹ Korsgaard does not actually explicitly give this premise, but she seems to trade on it as she moves without argument from the claim that our nature as self-conscious, reflective beings gives rise to obligation to the claim that our nature as self-conscious, reflective beings gives rise to value.

an identity to be normative, she values herself under a certain identity. So, in order to have reasons, in order to see anything as worth doing, an agent must value some conceptions of herself, which is to say that she must have practical identities. But the root of all this is the fact that she is a self-conscious, reflective being. If this were not so, then she would have no need of reasons, no need of principles and practical identities, and nothing would be normative for and thus valuable to her. So, her identity as a self-conscious, reflective being just as such is the condition for all other value.³² If an agent were to cease seeing herself as valuable under this description, she would lose the very reason for valuing anything at all; therefore her personhood is the source of value for everything that she values. Since the source of an agent's need for values, and therefore the source of her values, is the self-conscious, reflective nature of her consciousness (her personhood) she cannot, on reflection, value anything that is incompatible with her personhood as such.³³ Since she must value personhood qua personhood, an agent must value other instances of personhood as well.

³² Why an agent must value her personhood *as such* may be unclear. "But isn't it the fact that this instance of personhood is *hers* the reason she is set with the normative problem? And doesn't that mean she must only value her personhood, not personhood as such?" one might object. I think Korsgaard would say that this objection, natural though it may be, is incoherent. After all, it is the nature of personhood that creates the normative problem, not any particular instance of personhood. Interestingly, though Korsgaard does not note this herself, given her argument for the public nature of reasons, valuing your own personhood seems to amount to the same thing as valuing personhood as such. Notice that since reasons are public, valuing your own personhood means acting on reasons that you can share with yourself at different times and in different situations, that is, acting on reasons that can survive a change of position. But according to Korsgaard, being a different person is just a change in position. So, valuing just your own personhood requires acting on reasons that you can share with others. In other words, there is no way to value personhood as one's own; valuing personhood at all entails valuing personhood *qua* personhood.

³³ Another way of saying this is to point out that, insofar as one values anything, one must value the source of value at least as much as anything else one values. For if the source of value is destroyed, all value goes with it. So one must "protect" the source of value by not valuing things that are contrary to the source.

So far, I have traced Korsgaard's view through *The Sources of Normativity* with only minor supplementation from her later work. In *The Sources*, Korsgaard's primary project is to show that the source of our obligation (the source of normativity) is the fact that we are set with a certain problem and that the only or best solution to this problem turns out to be adherence to a neo-Kantian moral theory. The problem is that we must act and that we must do so on the strength of considerations we endorse (i.e. reasons) because we are self-conscious, which, she argues, means that we must follow the categorical and hypothetical imperatives. To be made clear, this conclusion needs to be filled in with an account of reasons and actions. We have already examined Korsgaard's account of reasons in as much depth as necessary, but we will benefit from a deeper grasp of her action theory, which she introduces in her newest work, *Self-Constitution*, developing her broadly Kantian view along Platonic and Aristotelian lines.

Korsgaard's Action Theory

An action, Korsgaard claims, is “an intentional movement of an animal that is guided by a representation or conception that the animal forms of his environment.”³⁴ Intentionality here is not a unique feature of human action, but rather a sort of directedness in movement that even low-order animals possess in virtue of their form and function. Like clocks, the movements of animals are subject to standards of success and failure because we can sensibly describe them as trying to do something given their

³⁴ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 97. “Movement” here is perhaps a poor choice, for later (95-96) Korsgaard tells us that to act is to bring about a change in the world by bringing about a change in oneself and that though the way we bring about changes in the world is often by movement of our limbs, changes that we bring about in ourselves that do not manifest in bodily movement still count as action if they are intentional and guided by a representation of our environment. For instance, remaining seated counts as an action when one consciously decides to do so.

arrangement. To be a clock is to be the sort of machine that accurately reflects the passage of time; thus we can say that the clock that runs too slow, or ceases to run at all, fails in some definite sense. This we call being broken, though if it ceases to run at all, it is not truly a broken clock, but rather a heap of gears and springs that used to be a clock. Likewise, to be an animal is to be arranged so as to maintain one's form by moving based on a perception of one's environment; thus we can say that the cockroach is trying to run under the toaster and that he fails if he is squashed by the swiftly-hurled shoe because perceiving oncoming massive objects and moving out of their path is a part of the way things arranged as the cockroach is maintain their form.³⁵ This we call disability or if severe enough, death, though perhaps what we often call being a vegetable (and possibly what we would carelessly call being an animal) counts as well.

Of course, the cockroach does not form an intention to dodge the fast-approaching shoe; we cannot ascribe that sort of intentionality to him. But Korsgaard claims that sort of intentionality is just that: a sort of intentionality. What distinguishes persons on Korsgaard's view is not that they act, but rather the particular form of their action, or better, the form of intentionality present in their action, namely, that they act based on their conception of a law.³⁶ As I will explain below, Korsgaard holds that all agents are motivated by the interaction of an incentive and a principle (i.e. a law). Non-human agents are agents because their movements are determined by principles, but these principles are their instincts (where instincts are a sort of intelligent disposition). Our

³⁵ Ibid., 96-97.

³⁶ Strictly speaking, Korsgaard does not think that we act that way either. We do not form intentions, then act on them because to form an intention is to decide and to decide is to commence acting.

movements, however, are not just determined by the principles of our causality, i.e. the laws of our will; we choose the principles of our causality and so are agents in a deeper sense.³⁷ This deeper sort of agency explains why we are subject to the normative problem while other animals are not: we can conceive of the principles of our causality and can therefore ask whether we should allow them to be the principles of our causality.

For Korsgaard, the question of which principles to adopt as the principles of our causality is the same as the question of who to be. To be an agent is to be a type of causality, so to ask which principles of causality one should adopt is to ask which particular causality one should be and thus which particular agent one should be. In acting, one adopts some principle or set of principles of causality and thus constitutes oneself as a particular sort of agent. Acting is essentially self-constitution; the function of action then, is self-constitution.

Platonic Elements in Korsgaard

Following Plato and the analogy of the city, Korsgaard thinks there are better and worse ways of being constituted (more and less unifying constitutions that an agent can have), so there are not simply agents or non-agents and actions or non-actions, but better and worse agents and actions along a scale from good agents to non-agents, good actions to non-actions. Thus, since action has a function and is not an all-or-nothing phenomena, Aristotle was right: the goodness or badness of an agent or an action is teleological, it is goodness or badness of its kind. Good agents are the most complete agents and good actions are the most complete actions. Agents are essentially authors of actions; actions

³⁷ Ibid., 110.

are essentially changes in the world attributable to and constitutive of agents. So, a good agent is most completely the author of her actions; that is to say, her actions are not the product of some force in or on her, but rather products of her, of her whole self. So, the good agent, as Plato tells us in the Republic, is the fully unified agent. Since the actions of an agent define or constitute her agency, good action “constitutes its agent as the autonomous and efficacious author of her movements.”³⁸

Now one may rightly wonder how that bit about autonomy and efficacy got in there; we were moving along quite nicely with some pillars of classical thought, discussing the Platonic idea that the good soul is the fully unified soul and the Aristotelian idea that goodness and badness are entirely teleological notions, when suddenly Kant seems to have crashed our little party sans invite. “What is he doing here,” one might think, “Kantian ethics and virtue ethics are supposed to be rivals!”³⁹ Not so, claims Korsgaard. She argues that, though the particulars of their accounts are different, they are in some fundamental way barking up the same tree; they are perhaps on different sides of the tree, but if we will only walk round it with her, she claims, we will see that fundamental pieces of each of their views can be synthesized into a coherent, compelling view.⁴⁰ The Kantian imperative, the principle of practical reason,⁴¹ comes into the picture

³⁸ Ibid., xii.

³⁹ At least in the minds of deontologists and less radical virtue ethicists. The more radical voices in virtue ethics like Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and (as we shall see) Talbot Brewer see deontology and other modern ethical theories not as rival ways of answering the same questions as virtue ethics, but as asking wholly different (and confused) questions.

⁴⁰ I should note that this sudden insertion of Kant is a product of my presentation of Korsgaard’s work and the way she brings Kant into the picture in *Self-Constitution*.

because it is only by making the Kantian imperative the principle of our causality that we can be unified. The only way to be good at being agents, to be unified agents, is to adhere to a form of Kantian ethics.

When we face the normative problem, our soul (or psyche if you prefer) has become disunified; it has been rent asunder by our self-consciousness; we now feel ourselves pulled toward an action, yet wondering whether to perform it or not; the appetitive part is chomping at the bit (or at least gnawing it somewhat—not all desires are blazing passions after all), but the rational part hesitates, holding firm the reins. In order to act, we must find some way to break the paralysis, some way to decide whether to loose the reins on the appetitive part of the soul or to turn it aside or simply restrain it; that is, we must impose a constitution on the soul. Following Plato, Korsgaard distinguishes five ways the soul can be constituted by action: aristocratically, timocratically, oligarchically, democratically, and tyrannically. I will say more about imperfect constitutions later, but for now all that matters is that these constitutions are embodied in different principles and that the principle embodying the best constitution, the aristocratic constitution, is the Kantian imperative. An agent unifies herself best by being autonomous and efficacious; in other words, by willing universally and taking the means to her ends.

Autonomy, given the Kantian argument discussed above, just is making the CI the law of one's will. To say that an agent makes the CI the law of her will is to say that

⁴¹ Korsgaard thinks that the categorical imperative (autonomy command) and the hypothetical imperative (efficacy command) are not two principles but one; the distinction is created merely by focusing on two different pieces of this single principle. "To act," Korsgaard says, "is to constitute yourself as the cause of an end" (*Self-Constitution*, 72). An agent must constitute *herself* as the cause of the end (and so must be autonomous) and she must constitute herself as the *cause* of the end (and so must be efficacious).

she wills universally, i.e. she acts only on reasons that can bind her at different times and places, which makes the will one throughout her life, not in the sense that what she wills never changes, but in the sense that her will is never divided against itself like that of the Russian nobleman. Efficacy is required not so much to unify the will, but as a constitutive principle of the will; if one does not take the means to an end, then one simply does not will the end in question and if one does not will an end, one cannot act so as to achieve the end.

So, the conclusion of *Self-Constitution* is the same as that of *The Sources* (as Korsgaard says, she is always making the same argument). What Korsgaard does in her newer work is simply apply her action theory to the arguments of her first book, drawing on Aristotle to explain the sense in which we can ascribe intentionality and drawing on Plato to explain the sense in which we can ascribe authorship of actions. *Self-Constitution* can be seen as Korsgaard's attempt to show that Plato, Aristotle, and Kant need not be read as wholly conflicting, but simply as arguing for the same conclusion in different ways, or providing different parts of the whole picture—namely, that integrity is the master virtue, that being a good person means being good at being a person, that is, being a unified agent, and that this is to be done by willing only that which we can will to be a law and taking the means to our ends.

Korsgaard's Moral Psychology

Although the moral psychology attendant to Korsgaard's constructivism is apparent to a large degree in her argument for grounding morality in the value of persons and much of her project just is a thesis about moral psychology, I think it will be helpful

for what comes after to distill precisely the account of moral psychology interwoven into Korsgaard's arguments for her neo-Kantian theory of moral justification. As a means to clarifying her moral psychology I will examine the answers her account gives to two questions. First, what motivates agents, both good and bad? And second, how does the moral deliberation of each of these agents go?

On Korsgaard's account, what motivates an agent—any agent, good or bad—is an incentive that is “operating under a certain principle, or viewed from the standpoint provided by that principle.”⁴² An agent is moved to act when a principle that guides her picks out an action presented by an incentive as worthwhile, which is just to say that an agent is motivated by the interaction of an incentive and principle. Whenever an agent acts on an incentive, she does so because it is her principle to do so; this sounds a bit odd, but as Korsgaard conceives them, a principle is “a description of the mental act of taking certain considerations to count in favor of certain acts.”⁴³ When an agent has an incentive to perform an action, if one of her principles is to act on such incentives, then she will act. That is what Korsgaard means when she claims that agents are motivated by the interaction of incentives and principles.

As noted above, Korsgaard follows Plato in distinguishing five constitutions, and thus five general principles of causality, that the soul may have. The four vicious constitutions are bad because the principle of each only unifies the agent who has it in certain propitious conditions, whereas the virtuous constitution is good because its

⁴² Korsgaard, “Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self,” 50.

⁴³ Korsgaard, “Acting for a Reason,” 228.

principle unifies its agent in all situations. This good constitution is the aristocratic constitution. This constitution is embodied by the Kantian imperative and renders the agent who has it fully unified because her will is universal, ranging over herself extended through space and time.

Next is the timocratic constitution, which is almost as good as the aristocratic constitution. The law of the timocratic constitution is to do what is honorable, to do what has the aesthetic character of the good. Timocratic agents get along pretty well, but in non-ideal cases where honor and goodness come apart, their agency is destroyed.⁴⁴ Think here of the knight who is so concerned with his honor that he is willing to fight and kill the one who slanders it, or of the soldier in Korsgaard's own example who, seeing surrender as dishonorable, is willing to continue a battle that is annihilating the city, even in the face of obviously impending defeat.⁴⁵

The third best constitution is the oligarchic constitution. Korsgaard conceives of the agent with this constitution as the rational egoist that haunts modern theorists, whose principle is the prudent maximal satisfaction of his desires.⁴⁶ The will of this agent appears to be unified because he seems to have a clear goal toward which he strives. But there is incoherency in his will as well, for either he is seeking subjective satisfaction of his desires, which he cannot sanely do as the value of subjective satisfaction is conceptually dependent upon objective satisfaction, or he is seeking objective

⁴⁴ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 165.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁶ "Prudent" here is to be taken in the everyday sense, not in the fuller sense employed by virtue theorists like Daniel Russell in *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*.

satisfaction, in which case he needs a substantive theory of the good to assign weights to his different desires. In the latter case, the idea of maximizing satisfaction does not come into the picture unless the good in question is subjective satisfaction, but then he is again on the road to madness.⁴⁷ Moreover, since the reason the oligarchic person suppresses some of his desires in pursuit of the fulfillment of other desires is the strength of these latter desires, the suppressed desires might break forth given sufficient temptation and then he will be divided against himself.

Continuing along the degression, we come next to the democratic constitution. The democratic person is a wanton and the principle of her constitution is the satisfaction of whatever desire is strongest at the moment. Unlike the oligarchic person, in the democratic person all desires are on par, so if she turns out to have any unity, it is entirely accidental, the product of a chance alignment of her desires.

Finally, the worst constitution is the tyrannical constitution. The tyrannical constitution exhibits a terrible unity in the subjection of the rest of the person by one dominating desire. Far from being autonomous, the tyrannical person is enslaved. His principle is to satisfy one desire, to bring about one end, whatever the means, so he is not choosing actions; his desire is a force in him that determines his behavior; he is not the cause of his movements and so is no agent at all.

What then does moral deliberation look like in these cases? Once a good agent is presented with an incentive, her reasoning takes one of two paths according to Korsgaard: either she recognizes immediately on the basis of an internalized principle of volition that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 168.

the proposed action is one that is good (i.e. is compatible with or issues from her set of practical identities, including her necessary identity as a person, and thus will constitute her well), or she considers whether the identity implied by the principle that picks out the incentive is worthwhile (i.e. one that is compatible with or issues from her set of practical identities, including her necessary identity as a person and thus will constitute her well).⁴⁸ If the identity is one that is destructive of her personhood or the personhood of others, then the good agent, recognizing that she is obligated not to act on the principle that embodies the identity in question and so not to take on the identity, rejects it. Conversely, if the identity is one that is compatible with her personhood, then the good agent, recognizing that she has a reason to act on the principle that embodies the identity in question and so to take on the identity, accepts the principle and acts in accord with it.⁴⁹

The view of the good agent's deliberation on Korsgaard's view may seem to be too intellectual, requiring an agent to reflect upon every proposed action's compatibility with her set of principles of volition or practical identities, but if the point is put a bit more naturally, this requirement of reflection appears much less onerous. A more plausible way of viewing what a good agent's mental process looks like according to Korsgaard is to say that an agent, when confronted with an incentive, either immediately recognizes the action presented as one that is called for or prohibited by some practical

⁴⁸ Here Korsgaard's view leaves room for an agent's character to be a relevant feature of moral thought, where one's character is one's set of instincts or the subset of her instincts that is formed by the principles of volition she has internalized after reflecting on their viability.

⁴⁹ Actually, the agent must also consider the compatibility of the identity with other contingent practical identities that she already has and if a conflict is detected, she must reject or subjugate one or the other, though what the criteria for choice here would be are not clear to me. I will return to this issue in Chapter 4.

identity she has, or she reflects on whether the action is called for by some practical identity she has. Even that reformulation sounds too technical; essentially, the agent asks herself, “Is this an action that someone whom I want to be does? Is this action compatible with who I think I am and who I think other persons are?” If the answer is no, then the agent experiences obligation not to perform the action. If the answer is yes, then the agent has a reason to perform the action.

What about the varieties of bad agents? After all, evil action, or at least wrong action, cries out for explanation just as much as good action.⁵⁰ Korsgaard largely follows Kant, claiming that agents go wrong by acting on the wrong principle. But where Kant has only the principle of self-love opposed to the principle of duty, Korsgaard inserts any practical identity that is incompatible with the agent’s personhood or with other contingent practical identities. In other words, an agent acting on any principle that does not fully unify her is acting badly. There is only one way to be virtuous, but awfully many ways to fall into vice.

And for the most part it seems that this is precisely what Korsgaard thinks that immoral agents do: they fall into vice, they do not plunge headlong. Evil is privative on Korsgaard’s view, not an opposing force, but a lack of goodness. Bad agents choose the wrong principle due to a lack of reflection. They simply fail to grasp that the solution to the problem of what to do is to make the CI the law of their will. Instead, they stop short of full reflection, either because they cannot see the incoherence in their will or, in the

⁵⁰ There may be no distinction in the philosophical literature between evilness and mere wrongness (I am not in position to know either way), but in everyday usage, evil seems to imply malice or a willful rejection of the good, while badness or wrongness does not imply malice.

case of the tyrannical person, because they are enslaved to their will. Here Korsgaard seems to run into a puzzle about responsibility: if the agents are less in control the further we go down the scale, are they less responsible? The short answer is no (though Korsgaard admits she is not sure what to say in the case of tyrannical persons). She views responsibility as more like responsibility for omissions: one is responsible because what one failed to do was one's job. Given that we are self-conscious, it is our job to solve the normative problem, to become a person, so when we fail to constitute ourselves as autonomous, efficacious, and unified agents, we are responsible because we in some sense allowed this to happen, we somehow failed to "pick up the reins and take control."⁵¹

So bad agents think about what to do, some possible answer arises, and they jump the gun, so to speak. They act on principles which, if they were to reflect on properly, they would see are incoherent and insufficient solutions to the normative problem. They do this because of many different causes (laziness, stupidity, distractedness, etc.) leading to various constitutions, at least a few of which are displayed by the bad constitutions Plato describes in the Republic, but no matter the way (except perhaps in the case of tyranny), they are responsible, for as reflective beings, they essentially act on considerations that they reflectively endorse and failure to do this is failure to do what is in some very real sense their job.

⁵¹ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 175.

CHAPTER THREE

Brewer's Retrieval of Realism

An Important Difficulty

One will be hard pressed to construe Brewer's work in *The Retrieval of Ethics* as answering the same questions as Korsgaard, for Brewer sees himself as retrieving an ancient conception of ethics that one cannot discuss in the terms of modern moral theory without feeling the sort of misalignment Anscombe spoke of in her seminal paper, "Modern Moral Philosophy." Nevertheless, I will try to present Brewer's view in a way that usefully parallels my presentation of Korsgaard's thought.

Beginnings and Desires

Brewer thinks that moral thought is initiated by our desires, which are seemings of goodness.¹ When we desire some action, object, or person, we represent it as good and are then drawn to respond to this goodness, sometimes by acting to promote it, though our response may be simply to adopt an attitude like respect or admiration. According to this account, we constantly face the problem of how to understand and respond to the goodness that we see in actions, objects, and persons when we desire them.

Brewer contrasts his conception of desires as appearances of goodness to the more common view that desires are propositional attitudes with what he calls "a world to mind" direction of fit. He enumerates and rejects three "dogmas of desire" that ground the common account of desire:

¹ Brewer, Talbot. *The Retrieval of Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009: 25.

The first... [dogma] is that desires are attitudes towards propositions. The second is that desires are distinguished from other propositional attitudes by the typical or proper direction of fit between the world and the desirer's mind (or, more exactly, the propositional object of desire). The third is that we can formulate a rationalizing explanation of any action by tracing it to a belief/desire pair consisting in a belief that the action will bring the world into conformity with some proposition and a desire that takes the same proposition as its object.²

Brewer realizes that many moral theorists think these dogmas are neutral ground from which competing normative theories can draw upon equally, but he claims that they represent a substantive ethical view that is “at once worldly, progressive, and anti-contemplative” and ultimately untenable.³

The First Dogma

Brewer argues that the first dogma is false because the objects of many desires cannot be captured in propositional form. In ordinary language we speak of desires for persons and objects, as well as desires to do one thing or another. Desires for objects may be put into propositional form as the desire that one possess the object in question, but Brewer is skeptical that desires for persons can be so readily fitted into this form. One will have a rather difficult go of it trying to find a single proposition that specifies entirely the desire one person has for another, for when one person desires another she might want many things—for instance, that her beloved hold her hand as they walk down the street, that he share his passions and his pains with her, that he come to know her as deeply as humanly possible, and so on. Nor, Brewer claims, is it clear that we can simply

² Ibid., 14.

³ Ibid., 14.

call the conjunction of all these propositions the object of desire.⁴ Further, one can reasonably want her desire for another not to be satisfied. A loving wife may want to have a desire for her husband that is present in every moment of her marriage and may count as a genuine loss those moments when her desire fades on account of fatigue, frustration, or forgetfulness.

Desires to perform some action, Brewer argues, are similarly resistant to specification as propositions. When we desire a state of affairs such as “that I go fishing,” the object of our desire is the fishing itself (i.e., the truthmaker, the state of affairs), not the truth of the proposition. As Brewer (referencing Stephen Darwall) points out, “[I]t is possible to want it to be true of one’s life that its narrative includes engagement in an activity without wanting to engage in the activity.”⁵ All but the most virtuous of students know firsthand what this is like: one wants it to be the case that one does one’s schoolwork, yet one has no desire to do said work.

Yet this is not normal way of things. The reason I want the proposition “that Brandon play basketball on Friday” to be true is because I love basketball. What I want here is what the proposition picks out. If someone forced me to choose between i) taking a drug that turned me into a Chalmers-style zombie for two hours while I played basketball or ii) doing something else I desire much less than playing basketball, I would

⁴ Brewer does not elaborate here, but it seems more plausible to view these propositionally-specifiable states of affairs as resulting from, rather than constituting one’s desire for another person. For instance, it seems that couples (ideally) decide to marry *because* they love each other; they need not marry before they can be said to love one another (although their love will grow deeper and truer through the course of their marriage if things go aright).

⁵ Ibid., 21; Darwall, Stephen. *Welfare and Rational Care*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002: 93.

undoubtedly choose the latter (instrumental reasons for each aside). The only way to make sense of such a response is to admit that there is a distinction between propositions and their truthmakers and that it is the truthmaker that is desired. Given this distinction between true propositions and their truthmakers, the view (which Brewer calls “strong propositionalism”) that the object of any desire is a proposition, not a state of affairs, seems to be false. Given this distinction between true propositions and their truthmakers, the view (which Brewer calls “strong propositionalism”) that the object of any desire is a proposition, not a state of affairs, seems to be false.

The proponent of propositionalism may then want to retreat to “weak propositionalism,” which is the claim that the object of any desire is capturable in a proposition; unfortunately, this fails as well, Brewer contends, because any propositional formulation of a desire with an infinitival object leaves out the representational content of the desire.⁶ Weak propositionalism entails that the truth of the proposition specifying the desire is a necessary and sufficient condition for the desire’s satisfaction. A counter to this then would be an example in which the satisfaction of the desire and the truth of the proposition that is supposed to capture its object come apart. This is precisely what Brewer gives us.

For this counterexample Brewer uses his own desire to go fishing. The proposition that would capture the object of this desire seems to be something like “that Talbot Brewer goes fishing,” but there are several distinct ways that fishing could appear desirable. Fishing may be desirable as an escape from the stresses of his professional and

⁶ Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 22.

familial life or as a way of bonding with his children or as a means to procuring a tasty dinner, but the state of affairs that makes the proposition “that Talbot Brewer goes fishing” true might secure any one of these (or none of them), which means there must be more to his desire than a state of affairs; there must be something like an aspect under which the state of affairs is desirable. Therefore, the object of Brewer’s desire to go fishing is not capturable without loss in propositional terms and consequently, weak propositionalism fails and the first dogma is false.

The Second and Third Dogmas

The second dogma is that desires are propositional attitudes whose essential characteristic is a world to mind direction of fit. This too, Brewer argues, is untenable. If desires have only a world to mind direction of fit, then they cannot incorporate evaluative content, they cannot light up their object as good or choice-worthy, and must therefore be only attitudes that dispose one to bring about certain states of affairs in the presence of certain beliefs about how to actualize those states of affairs. But if a desire is simply an attitude that disposes one to bring about some state of affairs, Brewer asserts, the propositional account of desire cannot succeed.

The propositional account of desire must fail, Brewer thinks, because the mere presence of a disposition is not the sort of thing that can play a role in rationalizing explanations of our actions. If this is true, then the conjunction of the second and third dogmas is incoherent. The presumed coherence of the second and third dogmas depends on an account of agency on which action is a species of production, and bodily movements need only to be interpretable as attempts to bring about a state of affairs in

order to qualify as actions.⁷ If this account of agency falls, then the second and third dogmas of desire cannot be jointly true.

If all it takes to be an agent is to be able to be seen as attempting to bring about some state of affairs, Brewer contends, then such things as thermostats and heliotropic plants are as much agents as we are; but that is patently false, so there must be something more to agency than that.⁸ An example will help make this clear. Suppose that after a pleasant spring rain, you go for a walk and sit down in a patch of mud and commence making mud pies. After you have been at it for a short while, a friend, also enjoying a walk in the fresh, post-pluvial air, happens by and asks why you are sitting there making mud pies.⁹ Answering such a request by replying that you “just want to” is not sufficient, Brewer thinks. It may in fact be the case that your disposition is the reason you are sitting there piddling about in the mud, in the sense that it may be the cause of this odd behavior, but that is not what your friend wants to know. Giving an account of the causal history leading up to your mud pie making does not explain your action in the sense your friend has requested; he wants to know the reason for your action in the justificatory sense, he wants to know why you did it, not why it happened to you or through your body. Indeed, a merely causal explanation may reveal that your mud pie making is not an action at all, for the explanation may not include any intention or other feature to differentiate your

⁷ Ibid., 21-24.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ This is a sort of imaginative filling out of an example Brewer gives that he in turn borrows from Anscombe. See Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 23 and Anscombe, *Intention*, pp. 70.

behavior from paradigmatic cases of non-action such as a tic or a reflex. Your friend's request is for whatever feature differentiates action from mere behavior; he is asking for something that will help him make sense of it as an action, rather than as a compulsion or a complex sort of seizure. The only way to properly answer this request, Brewer argues, is to tell your friend what you see as good about making mud pies, what makes you see it as worth doing.

To see why, remember that on the modern view desires are attitudes that dispose one to bring about a certain state of affairs when joined with a belief about how to bring the state of affairs about, so saying "I just want to" is equivalent to saying "I am disposed to." But being disposed to behave a certain way does not give one a reason to behave in that way, for being disposed to ϕ is consistent with thinking that ϕ -ing is something wholly worthless that one has conclusive reason not to do. For instance, one might think that drinking soda is a horribly unhealthy thing to do and that this negative health factor far outweighs any benefit delivered by the delicious taste and delightfully refreshing carbonation, yet still be disposed to drink a soda. But even the propositionalist takes actions to be behaviors undertaken for a reason—after all, this is assumed by the third dogma. So, Brewer concludes that the second dogma of desire is inconsistent with the third.

The Evaluative Outlook Concept of Desire

Brewer contends that since the primary philosophical desideratum here is the core of the third dogma and the first two dogmas are thought plausible mainly because of their support of the third, an account of desires that preserves the notion at the heart of the

third dogma—the role of desires in rationalizing explanations of behavior—is more plausible and philosophically valuable than an account that preserves propositionalism, yet is inconsistent with the core notion of the third. This line of thought motivates Brewer’s “evaluative outlook conception of desire,” on which desires are “seemings of goodness or of reasons for action.”¹⁰ Brewer thinks that we are forced to this account because it alone incorporates the evaluative content he believes is required if we are to hold on to the idea that desires can figure prominently in rationalizing explanations. Further, Brewer thinks that we must take desires to be appearances of goodness, not of reasons, because accounts that ground out in reasons rather than value cannot make sense of certain attitudes like admiration.

When we admire someone or something, Brewer argues that we see the object of admiration as having a sort of value we call merit. On an account such as T.M. Scanlon’s, which holds that value is reducible to reasons given by the object’s natural features, Brewer asserts that merit seems to reduce to reasons for admiration. If that is so, then a vicious circle ensues because the features of the object that have merit are just features that call for admiration, which is to say, features that call for seeing it as meritorious, which is to say features that call for admiration... and so on.¹¹ If attitudes like admiration (and also respect and love and perhaps others) are to bottom out, then we must take goodness to be fundamental. Reasons then arise from goodness because different sorts of

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 156.

goodness make certain ways of responding apt. In light of this, if our desires are to play a role in rationalizing our actions, then we must take them to be appearances of goodness.

Agency

This view of desire goes hand in hand with Brewer's account of agency. Brewer asserts that to be an agent is "to set oneself in motion (or to form the intention of doing so) on the strength of one's sense that something counts in favor of doing so" and that actions are "events produced by a conscious being out of a sense that they are in some way worth performing."¹² So, when a being finds herself with a desire, if she seeks to respond in a way that strikes her as an appropriate response to the goodness that is at least dimly apparent to her, her response is an action and she is an agent. That desires can rationalize action is clear on this account, for acting on a desire is acting from a view of the good. This view of the good may be one that the agent rejects upon reflection and thus the action guided by this view would not qualify as fully rational, yet it would be at least minimally so. Being taken in by a view of the good that you on consideration reject is clearly different than simply acting as one is disposed to act. If you tell your friend that the feeling of the cool, thick mud in your hands and the rest that such a cognitively undemanding task promised made you think that making mud pies was the thing to do, you will have sufficiently answered his question, even if you mention that you really should be working on an essay that is due tomorrow. There is nothing more that one can request by way of explanation of action than the fact that one saw certain features of it as having a specified value, so if desires include a representation of their object as valuable,

¹² Ibid., 28; 13

they can provide at least a partially rationalizing explanation of action as responses to goodness.

Not all actions are responses to goodness apparent in desires though, Brewer thinks. We can sometimes act in ways that we have no desire to act because we have a more active sense of the goodness that counts in favor of the action.¹³ The goodness of apologizing for a certain transgression may not appear in the passive and visceral way desires bring goodness into view, yet one may still think that there is goodness in apologizing and undertake to deliver an apology on account of this thought. Thus, although desires can play a key role in a rationalizing explanation of action, they are not necessary for such an explanation. The necessary and sufficient condition for an action is that it is a movement motivated by the agent's sense that some goodness counts in favor of it. This account of agency as a response to what one takes to be good is to be preferred to the propositionalist's account, Brewer argues, because it both rules out obvious non-agents such as thermostats and heliotropic plants and allows for a plausible explanation of the role desires play in rationalizing explanations.

Further, Brewer contends that the evaluative outlook conception also has other explanatory advantages. First, it can explain what disparate desires have in common. What is common to desires is that each involves an attention to or dwelling on a sort of goodness or value in the things toward which they incline us.¹⁴ Next, taking desires to be seemings of goodness explains how we are largely passive with respect to our desires, as

¹³ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

well as how they can they conflict with our considered judgments. Desires are in the practical sphere more or less what sensory perceptions are in the theoretical sphere. Like sensory perceptions, they are shaped by our experience, but not, or not always, immediately alterable by act of will. This recalcitrance of desires explains some of the conflict between our desires and judgments. The rest can be explained by pointing out that desires, as appearances, can come loose from reality in much the same way that visual perceptions can come loose from reality. If we are walking in the dark or if we are under extreme stress, we may see things that are not there, either because we lack enough information to properly order the shadowy figures around us and our brain fills in the picture with what we might call its best guess at what is missing (a phenomena known as completion) or because atypical activity in the brain throws our visual processing off. In the same way, appearances of the good may come loose from our judgments due to an unconscious filling in of the picture in the absence of sufficient information perhaps or due to warping on account of stressors.

Given all these advantages of the evaluative outlook conception, Brewer thinks we should abandon the propositionalist conception of desire and agency. Brewer does not stop at rejecting the modern conception of desire and agency, however. He thinks that an even more fundamental assumption of modern moral theory, its picture of practical thinking, must also be discarded.

An Alternate Picture of Practical Thinking

On the modern picture, practical thinking is static, temporally bounded, and easily distinguishable from theoretical reason. That is, practical thought gets going when

something sparks a moment of reflection and an agent tries to bring the circumstances into view, identify their relevant features, determine what they give her reason to do, and then initiate an action or form an intention with a wholly non-evaluative object, at which point practical thinking terminates.¹⁵ For example, suppose I am hungry. I am struck by the thought that I should get something to eat, so I begin to run through my options, taking stock of what restaurants are open, how much money is in my checking account, what food I have here at my house, etc. I then decide that given my financial situation and workload, I should get something quick here and decide to go to the fridge to get the left overs from my last meal. This intention “to go to the fridge to get the leftovers from my last meal” contains nothing that needs further clarification; each piece is straightforwardly action guiding, describing precisely what is to be done.

In contrast to this, practical thought on Brewer’s view is not a discrete event that takes place in a moment of stasis before action and ends upon the formation of an intention, but rather an ongoing activity, continuous with our actions. Practical thought, being continuous, cannot be said to start or stop in the way the modern view supposes, but new avenues for practical thinking are opened up when an agent is subject to an appearance of goodness and attempts to understand and respond aptly to this apparent goodness. An excellent practical thinker displays an ongoing attention to her attempts to understand and respond to apparent goodness, altering her behavior in real time as she

¹⁵ Brewer, Talbot. “Two Pictures of Practical Thinking.” *Perfecting Virtue: New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2011), 118-120.

comes to better understand both the nature of the goodness that draws her as well as what counts as an apt response to this goodness.¹⁶

Take for instance, a young man (call him Chad) in an affluent class in an affluent nation whose friend (call him Todd) is feeling rather down and is complaining about his life. Chad desires to be loving towards his friend Todd, but has only a vague notion of what loving someone entails. He tries something that seems to fit his conception of behaving lovingly towards Todd, namely listening intently and commiserating with him. But suppose Chad notices that his behavior seems to be pushing Todd further into the mire of self-pity. Now, Chad is rather sure that loving someone involves trying to secure the good for him and that wallowing in self-pity is not good for anyone, so he changes course and rebukes Todd, reminding him of how great he has it and how manageable his problems really are. Chad's desire was initially unspecifiable in descriptive terms, so he had to try some candidate actions for the satisfaction of the desire and, by attending to the way these fit with his conception of being a loving friend, refine them. Nowhere did Chad explicitly deliberate; rather his actions were mediated by a sort of on-going attention to the success of his attempts to love his friend. This alternative picture of practical thinking seems intuitively attractive, but why should we prefer it over the modern picture? Brewer argues that the modern picture cannot make sense of a certain class of activities that are both tremendously important and highly plausible.

Brewer claims that sometimes we engage in activities that (i) are temporally extended, (ii) we regard as intrinsically valuable, and (iii) have a self-unveiling

¹⁶ Ibid., 123-131.

character.¹⁷ In claiming that these activities are self-unveiling, Brewer means that our engagement in them, when it goes well, provides “a further stretch of understanding of the goods internal to them, hence of what counts as a proper mode of engagement in them...”¹⁸ In other words, attempts to participate in these activities at least ideally give us a better grasp of the intrinsic value of the activities and thus of what counts as a performance of the activity and of the place of this activity in the well-lived life. Such activities must be launched into without a clear idea of the nature of their goodness or what counts as an apt response to it; these things must be learned through repeated trial and attention. These activities Brewer calls “dialectical activities” and argues that we have compelling reason to think that we do engage in such activities and that the proponent of the modern picture of practical thinking cannot make sense of these activities, concluding that we therefore must embrace a much richer vision of practical thought.

Dialectical Activities

Activities such as philosophical reflection, creative writing, painting, making music, science, and friendship seem to be intrinsically valuable pursuits whose goods, Brewer contends, are not clearly explicable prior to attempts to perform them. Brewer claims that it is difficult to see what independent goods they could be seen as aimed at producing or promoting, so if they have value (as we think they do) it must be intrinsic. Moreover, precisely what counts as good philosophy, writing, painting, music, science

¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

and friendship is not something someone who has little or no experience doing these things will be able to understand or articulate.

Brewer thinks that the defender of the modern picture may try two tacks to incorporate dialectical activities. First, she may say that deliberation sometimes yields “intentions or plans that specify a certain end to be produced” and that there is a more continuous sort of practical thought that initiates course corrections when necessary to stay on track with the intention or plan. This proposal does not capture the idea of dialectical activities according to Brewer because when we engage in a dialectical activity, we come to more clearly grasp the constitutive goods of the activity and hence change our end, our idea of what it is we are doing, not just the means for attaining a stable end.

The modernist may then point out that we sometimes form vague intentions such as the intention to get some exercise within the next week. We then look for ways to fulfill this vague intention, such as accepting an invitation from a friend to go for a jog. This too fails to capture the notion of dialectical activities Brewer observes, for when we participate in dialectical activities, our focus is on the activity itself and there is a lack of clarity as to what counts as proper performance of the activity that is irresolvable prior to attempting to engage in the activity, whereas in the specification example, our focus is on finding ways to make a given end specific, which could easily be done in advance of acting on the intention.¹⁹ Further, Brewer argues that the specification of vague intentions

¹⁹ Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 82.

cannot make sense of our conviction that sometimes we gain greater clarity about the goodness that draws us.²⁰

The second way of incorporating dialectical activities into the modern picture that may be tempting is to see them as being modified in media res by repeated episodes of practical deliberation each yielding new, slightly amended intentions. Unfortunately for the modernist, this too fails. Brewer argues that since the objects of these intentions have to be non-evaluative specifications of the actions to which they point, the acts to which they lead will be unified only by spatio-temporal contiguity. If one's actions do not aim at a single ideal or standard of excellence, but demonstrate only this spatio-temporal contiguity, then they will be fractured into "a series of unrelated shifts in one's behavior" and will not be intelligible as a single activity.²¹ Given the failure of the modern picture to make sense of intuitively plausible and important dialectical activities, Brewer concludes that we ought to take up a less restrictive picture of practical thinking.

On this more liberal picture, practical thought is concerned with obtaining a clearer picture of the goodness that is apparent in our desires. If we think, as we must

²⁰ Ibid., 83. For example, it yields the absurd conclusion that Augustine's eventual religious devotion that became dialectically articulated through his early life, was just a more specific way of fulfilling the same vague intention that led him to brothels and seminars. Augustine, after his conversion, claimed that the desire for God was what was drawing him all along, even through his early life when he frequented brothels and was attracted to Manichaeism. Augustine took himself to be misguided in these early days and to have gained an understanding of the goodness that he was mistakenly seeing in brothels and false religions when he became a Christian. But if this plausible line of thought (of which a secular analogue may be readily developed if you find this too dependent on certain religious convictions) is correct, the specification account cannot work. For the antics of Augustine's youth and his later love for God cannot be plausibly construed as specifications of the same vague desire. What desire could that possibly be? The only way to make sense of them as responses to the same desire is if some of them are simply mistaken responses, products of a misunderstanding, not simply an alternate means of satisfying the desire.

²¹ Ibid., 83.

according to Brewer, that our desires can really track goodness, then we must have a sort of ethical sense, an ability to perceive goodness. This sense is in some respect parallel with the bodily senses—sight, hearing, taste, etc.—in that, while fallible, it is at least somewhat reliable and, given that our attempts to engage in dialectical activities sometimes allow us a clearer grasp of their goodness that alters both our active and passive (desires) thoughts about goodness, it is improvable. Practical thinking then is about shaping our evaluative outlook, in both its active and passive respects, in order to obtain an increasingly clear view of the goods that constitute the dialectical activities that constitute a well-lived (i.e., eudaimon) life. This is where the virtues come into the story.

Virtue

The virtues are character traits that allow one to pursue effectively a clear vision of the goodness present in one's activities. The virtues are "structural constituents of selves" that actualize the proper potentiality of their possessors, pulling them together as "full-fledged instances of the human kind."²² Vices are different ways of being blinded to the good, which can occur through fear, laziness, despair, greed, and many other ways; some virtues just name the avoidance of these blinders. Virtues are constituents of the self because vices are ways that the rule of reason is subverted, ways humans can fail to achieve their telos of a leading a deliberate, reason-guided life. The more vicious one is, the less governed by reason one is and, since things are defined in terms of their telos, the less of a person one is. This illuminates the sense in which virtues are good for their possessor: to be wholly devoid of them is to be no one at all and to have them is to

²² Ibid., 198-9

approach the ideal of humanity, to achieve the good life.²³ Ultimately, the virtues are good because they allow us to reshape our evaluative outlook to track the good more accurately and thus to be most ourselves and live the well-lived life.

Morality and Friendship

Here Brewer feels pressure to retrieve something recognizably moral, where morality is understood to be “concerned in large part with articulating and abiding by fair terms of cooperation with others.”²⁴ To this end, Brewer argues that if our evaluative outlook, our sense for the good, is to be virtuous, we must be engaged in character friendships, that is, friendships in which both parties seek the other’s good out of appreciation for the other’s character (evaluative outlook), for it is through this sort of relationship that virtue is learned; moreover, such friendships are a valuable part of the eudaimon life and thus will be pursued by the virtuous. As character friendship approaches its ideal form, the evaluative outlooks of the involved parties must tend towards universal self-affirmability, the ability to endorse every deliverance of one’s own evaluative outlook when instantiated in another, and consequently towards shared and mutually agreed upon terms of cooperation. This occurs because both parties in character friendships appreciate the evaluative outlook of the other at least in part, and therefore give some credence to the other’s opinion of the good so that where they disagree about

²³ Note that this is distinct from Korsgaard’s view, despite the apparent consonance here. Brewer thinks that the virtues unite us, which then allows us to pursue valuable activities and a fuller understanding of the good unhindered. The unity that the virtues bring is not the end of the story so to speak, as it is for Korsgaard. They allow one to be a good person, but it is the activities that one pursues after sufficient unity is obtained that constitute a good life.

²⁴ Ibid., 238

the good, they will jointly seek resolution via a clearer picture of goodness affirmable by both. This process will be reiterated ceaselessly, bringing their evaluative outlooks ever closer together, approaching the limit of universal self-affirmability.

Brewer's total view is one on which goodness is fundamental. We find ourselves beset by appearances of goodness and must figure out how best to respond, how to live the eudaimon life, which we can only do by hurling ourselves attentively into experiments in living and reshaping our evaluative outlooks accordingly. The appropriate attentiveness is possible only by developing character traits that combat certain blinding attitudes and emotions, that is, by becoming virtuous. Becoming virtuous in turn is something we can only do through our interaction with others with whom we share a mutual respect, which means that our evaluative outlooks face a sort of universalizability requirement that ensures the presence of at least potential terms of cooperation that hold for all of us.

Brewer's Moral Psychology

On Brewer's neo-Aristotelian ethics, the moral agent sets herself in motion in ways that strike her as apt responses to goodness. As she attempts to answer to her considered view of the good, she does so attentively, taking note of the ways her actions appear to fall short of her view of the good or to reveal errors in her view of the good and strives to bring her actions and beliefs into line with this new information. In order to do this, the moral agent must have some modicum of virtue, which may both allow for the sharpening of her moral sense and further development of virtue.

The immoral agent fails to set herself in motion in accord with her considered view of the good, as the view of goodness she acts on is distorted by pride, cowardice, greed, envy—any number of the vices. The immoral agent still acts on a view of the good, for action on Brewer's view just is setting oneself in motion on the strength of some apparent goodness, but she is not fully an agent as she does not act on the view of the good that she would affirm absent the biasing power of vice, and she is less of an agent the further from this view she falls.

Moral deliberation takes the form of an examination of one's desires and testing of the goodness apparent in them by reflection upon one's current and past actions. If the moral agent finds herself with a desire, she asks herself whether this coheres with her more active, stable view of the good, which she has arrived at by attentively acting in response to the apparent good of desires in the past as well as through moral instruction. If the desire conflicts with the agent's considered view of goodness, she will attempt to see more clearly what it is that is drawing her and if there is a way that it may be brought into line with or may alter her active view of goodness. For the immoral agent, moral deliberation looks much the same, save that the immoral agent mistakenly halts the process, acting on some desire for an apparent good (that is, one that conflicts with her considered view) due to the presence of some vice or set of vices, which alters her evaluative outlook, making a less good or perhaps positively evil action appear best.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Pictures of Practical Unity

A Common Concern

The preceding chapters have made clear that reaching a conclusion on the fundamental disputes between constructivists and realists is a project that could fill the curriculum vitae of several philosophers; therefore, in this final chapter I want to focus on a single theme central to the constructivist and realist projects of Korsgaard and Brewer respectively: unity in practical thought.

As we have seen, Korsgaard claims that to be a good person is to be good at being a person, i.e. a rational agent, which is to be a synchronically unified self at the moment that one acts. Alternately, Brewer argues that a complete picture of practical reason must be able to deliver a satisfactory explanation of the diachronic unity of our dialectical activities—what makes their constitutive actions over time all part of the same activity—and that the received picture of practical thought fails because it cannot do this. Though both authors are centrally concerned with the significance of a certain sort of unity in our practical lives, they clearly are not concerned with the same sort of unity. In what follows I will try to explain how the concern for their preferred type of practical unity arises for each author and subsequently what each author says, or could say from within his or her perspective, regarding the type of unity that is central to the other's view.

Korsgaard's Motivation

The motivating force behind Korsgaard's work in *The Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution* is the desire to develop a moral theory that can explain the phenomenon

of normativity in such a way as to demonstrate how moral claims become normative and, therefore, binding on an agent.¹ The only way to demonstrate that something is normative for an agent, she claims, is to show that it is something the agent is already at least implicitly committed to.² Thus Korsgaard, like Rawls, seeks a way of establishing commitments that are inherent in the practical point of view and thus inescapable for beings with that practical outlook. Unlike Rawls, Korsgaard is doing ethical theory rather than political theory, so the practical standpoint she seeks is not that of the citizen of a liberal democracy, but rather that of a rational being just as such. Rational beings are characterized by their ability to reflect about what to believe and do and to make choices in light of this reflection. This essential reflectivity of rational beings is where Korsgaard thinks that she finds the inescapable commitment from which normativity can be derived. By the very nature of reflection, one is committed to acting. When we reflect we ask ourselves what we ought to do; coming to a conclusion on this question is to embark on an action (Korsgaard follows Aristotle in holding that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action); therefore, the only way to properly bring an episode of reflection to an end is to act. So we are committed to acting. Here Korsgaard thinks we can insert the story from chapter two about reasons and practical identities, and so on, in order to show that we are committed to a full-fledged morality.

Given this commitment to acting, we can see almost immediately why Korsgaard centers her view on the synchronic unity of agents. What is required by our reflective nature is that we act, which means that all we need is some way (at the moment of acting)

¹ Korsgaard is also concerned to develop an account of normativity that is consistent with her commitment to naturalism, which also pushes her in the direction of Rawls-style practical objectivity conditions, rather than the more substantive objectivity conditions of realists like Brewer.

² Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 32.

to obtain and employ action guidance; all we need is to be agents. To be an agent is essentially to be the thing that does something X based on a representation of its environment, but to be the thing that does X based on a representation of its environment requires being a thing, being a whole, i.e. being unified.³ Moreover, being the thing that does X based on a representation of its environment requires being whole at the moment of action. So, whatever makes us unified as agents is binding upon us just as rational beings and if, as Korsgaard believes, what makes us unified as agents is adhering to certain principles that lead us to behave in distinctively moral ways, then it turns out that being moral just is being a synchronically unified self.

Brewer's Motivation

By contrast, Brewer begins with a much broader picture of the object of practical thought. For Brewer what we aim at primarily is to live an excellent life. As lives are constituted by the activities of the agents who live them, this amounts to striving to engage in projects that are worthwhile; it is only in service to this striving that we aim to perform particular actions. Thus if we are to make sense of our actions as valuable or rational, we must be able to see them as part of a larger whole that we take to be intrinsically valuable. This is why the diachronic unity of our actions into activities is so crucial on Brewer's view: it is only as parts of an intrinsically valuable activity inspired by intimations of specific, perceivable goods that actions can be valuable or intelligible at all, for the ultimate meaning of actions is not in the action itself but the activity of which it is a constituent part.

³ Being the sort of thing that is forms a representation of its environment means having a form composed of parts, for there must be an appetitive and cognitive aspect to the being at least. This is why unity comes into the story, for if something is composed of parts, it is identical to the union of the parts (or something created by their union), not any one part.

Now that the differing sorts of unity and their respective motivations are on the table, we are ready to try to put Korsgaard and Brewer into conversation. We will be well served to begin by exploring how Brewer may handle Korsgaard's thoughts about synchronic unity, agency, and normativity.

A Brewerian Perspective on Korsgaard's Concerns

Though the diachronic unity of dialectical activities is fundamental to Brewer's view, he seems to have left himself room to incorporate the sort of synchronic unity that Korsgaard focuses on. For one, he claims that the virtues are "structural constituents of selves, in whose utter absence we cannot bring into view a self but only a chaotic array of drives."⁴ Thus, he considers some level of synchronic unity of the self to be required for one to count as an agent at all. Moreover, Brewer does not claim that recovering the ancient picture of practical thought means we must entirely rid ourselves of the modern conception. Brewer could perhaps accept that there are moments when we step back, in a manner of speaking, and run through explicit deliberation ending with the adoption of an intention. Perhaps this happens when we are dealing with goods for which the question of whether they are to be done is in some respect dependent upon the circumstances in which we find ourselves and of which we have rather clear conception. Brewer does note that, while the circumstances do not fix the right answer to the question of what to do, they do sometimes rule out certain actions or bring practically relevant information.⁵ So perhaps the modern picture is what we use when we are dealing with relatively clear understandings of dialectical activities to which the circumstances are relevant.

⁴ Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 199.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88-9

One thing Brewer's view does seem to be missing is an account of normativity. Luckily, as William Fitzpatrick argues, he can simply adopt Korsgaard's. As she says, "If you recognize the problem to be real, to be yours, to be one you have to solve, and the solution to be the only or the best one, then the solution is binding upon you."⁶ Nothing about this "practical-problem-solving conception of normative force," as Fitzpatrick calls it, requires that the solution be a constructivist one.⁷ The sort of goodness posited by the substantive realist could equally well play this role. If an agent sees each of a set of principles as capable of solving the problem of what to do, then the principle that is true will be the best principle and thus normative for the agent.⁸ Further, the problem may not be, "What should I do?" in the sense of what particular action one should perform, but rather "How should I live?" Various goods present various activities to us as answers to this question. Insofar as one takes an activity to be intrinsically valuable in the circumstances and not outweighed by some more valuable possible activity, one sees it as the best solution to this problem and thus it is normative for one. It is a constitutive principle of agency that one act in ways one sees as worthwhile in at least some respect and it is the ideal of agency that one act in ways one sees as maximally worthwhile, as on par best. These actions thus turn out to be normative for just the reason Korsgaard notes: constitutive principles of agency require them and constitutive principles are normative principles. Still normativity is not the whole story. The actions are good or not

⁶ Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism," 116.

⁷ Fitzpatrick, "The Practical Turn in Ethical Theory," 659.

⁸ See Fitzpatrick, "The Practical Turn in Ethical Theory," 685. Of course, Korsgaard thinks that principles on her theory are true as well, so perhaps I should make clear the distinction and say that the principle that correctly describes the way the world is independent of us is the best of a set of practically equal principles.

independently of their normative status. Normativity, like epistemic responsibility, is dependent upon the agent's perspective. Goodness, like epistemic justification, is independent of the agent's perspective. Normativity is ethically valuable just like doxastic responsibility is epistemically valuable, but only because they represent the best an agent can do to achieve goodness or truth respectively. With this sketch of how Brewer may handle Korsgaard's work in hand, let us turn to an examination of the prospects of a Korsgaardian response to Brewer.

A Korsgaardian Perspective on Brewer

The first step to determining if Korsgaard can make sense of the unity of dialectical activities is to examine what an account of dialectical activities would look like on her view. Recall the definitive features of dialectical activities: (i) they are inherently aimed at internal, intrinsic goods and (ii) they are self-unveiling. To unpack that a bit, we may say that the object of the desire that inspires an engagement in a dialectical activity is the activity itself in its highest form (i.e. the intrinsic goods that constitute the activity) and attempts to engage in a dialectical activity deliver successively clearer visions of the object of the original desire. Taken together, Korsgaard's claims that the object of a desire may be substances, states of affairs, or activities and that one must be guided by an activity in its perfect form in order to count as participating in that activity at all yield the conclusion that for her as well, the object of the desire that inspires an attempt to participate in a dialectical activity must be the activity itself.^{9 10} So far, so

⁹ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 68. Technically Korsgaard is speaking of the object of incentives, but she uses "incentive" to mean "a desire that one is aware of."

¹⁰ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 28-34. Oddly enough, Korsgaard goes so far as to say that Plato's theory of forms is true for activities. Given her commitment to naturalism and constructivism, this seems a

good. What about the claim that activities are constituted by intrinsically valuable, internal goods? Can Korsgaard give an account of activities that makes sense of this?

An intrinsic good is a thing that is good for its own sake; an internal good is a good that is inherent in the activity performed well and is not conceptually independent from the activity. Examples of external goods go some way towards conveying the idea and are easier to point to, so let us start with them. Consider for instance, the wealth accrued by star athletes or the sex appeal that comes with being a gifted musician (or at least a famous musician). Take the athlete's wealth away and he is still just as excellent an athlete; take away the musician's sex appeal and he is still just as excellent a musician. Those excellences whose removal would render the athlete a poorer athlete or no athlete at all are the internal goods of the activity of playing whatever sport he plays; likewise for the musician. Notice that though these internal goods may include technical abilities, not all of them will be technical abilities. Remove the athlete's love of the game and he becomes a sort of businessman, not an athlete. If LeBron James plays basketball to pay the bills, then the activity that he performs on the hardwood is a different activity than the one performed by someone, say Michael Jordan, who plays for the love of the game, despite their behavior being potentially indistinguishable to a spectator.¹¹

On Korsgaard's view, the good is a name for whatever settles the question of what to aim at. Additionally, an intrinsic good is something that is good in virtue of its own features. So an intrinsic good is whatever settles the question of what to aim at in

rather odd position. I take it that she is speaking a bit facetiously here or else has some naturalistic account of the Forms, though I am a bit baffled about what such an account could be.

¹¹ This is entirely tangential, but notice that if this were true of LeBron, the debate about whether LeBron or Jordan is the greatest of all time would be over. LeBron couldn't be a better basketball player than Jordan because he wouldn't even be a basketball player! But I think it is false that LeBron is just a businessman and clearly true that he is indeed the greatest.

virtue of its own features. The features of an activity that count as its own are the goal to which the actions that compose the activity strive and the actions themselves. Now the goal of an activity can be good, can settle the question of what to aim at, only by spawning good actions, so ultimately it is the actions that constitute an activity that must be good for the activity to be intrinsically good. Korsgaard does not spell out how this might work, but we can construct a story about this for her, adapting some of her thoughts that were directed at other concerns.

Some proposed goal settles the question of what to aim at when aiming at it generates viable answers to the question of what in particular to do. So, we might say that an activity is intrinsically valuable if all of the actions that compose it are viable solutions to the normative question. As Korsgaard says, an action A is a solution to the normative question if and only if A embodies a law—that is, the maxim describing the action is capable of being willed by a rational being. Further, what makes a maxim capable of being a law is the way the act and the end it contains are related. What sort of relation between them allows a maxim to be a law? Take as a rough approximation that a law is a description or plan of behavior that is imposed upon an entity by a legislator. The act then must be an act that, if all goes well, could secure the end, else the action described by the maxim will be impossible and one cannot impose an impossible action upon oneself. Assuredly, one may want to and try to impose an impossible action, perhaps even in some cases where one knows it is impossible.¹² Yet one cannot in fact impose such a maxim, i.e. one cannot will it and so it cannot be a law. This is perhaps the best way to characterize the relation that the act and the end must have in order to be fit to be a law:

¹² See Albritton, Rogers, “Freedom of Will and Freedom of Action,” 244-5

they must jointly describe an action that is imposable by the will upon the acting self, i.e. an action that is possible and choosable. If the maxims of the actions composing an activity have this property of potential lawfulness, then the actions are good and the activity is an intrinsic good.¹³

Now that we can see how Korsgaard's account may support the notion of intrinsically good activities, the task at hand is to show that these activities may be self-unveiling. More precisely, it is to show that Korsgaard can give a plausible explanation of how one may gain a clearer or deeper grasp of the perfect form of an activity through one's attempts to engage in it. For this sort of clarification to occur, one must have both an initial, hazy conception of the activity in its perfect form and a somewhat reliable ability to detect when and in what ways actions fail to measure up to this form. An examination of how Korsgaard might explain a particular example of this increase in clarity seems the best way to proceed here.

Imagine an adventurous young child who wants to climb a tree. She can tell what counts as a tree and what does not on sight, but she does not yet have a clear grasp of what makes for a good instance of tree climbing and thus does not yet have a clear grasp of what trees are good for climbing. She walks into the forest, selects a tree with low branches (she knows that a good climbing tree is one that at least has reachable limbs),

¹³ One might wonder at this point how Korsgaard's story is constructivist, for to this point we have been talking about goodness without reference to any projection or creation by conscious beings. The answer to this worry is that maxims are not laws until we actually will them, for laws are patterns of behavior actually imposed on entities. In this sense, we construct the value of our maxims and the actions they describe, for it is the lawfulness of maxims that make them intrinsically normative and make the actions they describe good. See Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 112. There may also be another sense in which we create value. If the universe contained no agents (in the most minimal sense in which Korsgaard uses the word, see Chapter 2 here and XX in Korsgaard), then there would be no value according to Korsgaard. Since value exists only because beings of a certain sort exist, value in some sense must be created by such beings. On this view, value exists whether we ever will any maxim at all, so I am not sure how to bring these accounts together, except perhaps by saying that our existence creates the potential for value and our willing a law actualizes this potential. But this is a discussion for another paper.

and commences to climb it. The tree turns out to be a rather bushy and gnarled pine and above the low branches is a morass of prickly needles and cock-eyed, sappy branches. After climbing up through this obnoxious mess for a few feet, our intrepid little climber finds herself wholly unable to enjoy her climb and returns to the ground to seek a better tree.

Next she selects a small southern live oak with only a few sparsely foliated branches and eagerly makes the simple ascent to the high point of its sprawling crown. Arriving at the top, our climber finds that she is disappointed with the ease and brevity of her climb: she is not out of breath and was not scared even once on the way up, nor is she at all nervous now that she has summited the oak because it is rather short. In light of this, she sets out to find a tree that is taller and offers a more difficult climb. In the course of climbing this tree, the child finds herself physically challenged by the length of the climb and the strength required to move between certain branches, yet not hindered in her enjoyment of the climb by accruing sap or running into small branches or pushing through prickly foliage. Moreover, as she approaches the summit, she finds herself rising up above the surrounding trees and becoming increasingly excited as she gradually gains a greater view out over the rest of the forest. This child has learned that tree climbing at its best affords one an exciting physical challenge and an enjoyable, progressive attainment of an intriguing and newfound vantage point on one's surroundings without leaving one covered in sap and scratches.

Brewer thinks such increased understanding of the activity one is striving to participate in must include increased understanding of the goods possible in an ideal engagement in the activity. For Korsgaard, this must entail that the agent gains a clearer

grasp of what actions are possible as a part of the activity. In other words, the agent comes to have a clearer understanding of the range of lawful maxims possible in an activity. An agent who gains this increased clarity must have learned something about what ends it is possible to achieve by participating in the activity in question or about what acts can secure these ends. Korsgaard may say that our tree climber learned that tree climbing affords the opportunity for the excitement of a physical challenge that involves some genuine risk and for unique and pleasantly progressive experience of gaining a wonderful and new view. Our climber may also be said to have learned that the act of climbing a short tree with easy transitions between branch levels and the act of climbing a tree with a host of convoluted branches and dense foliage will fail to secure either of these ends. This indeed appears to be a quite plausible account of the climber's experience, so Korsgaard can explain how an agent may gain a progressively clearer understanding of constructed, intrinsic, internal goods of activities. Despite this, we ought not rush to conclude that Korsgaard has evaded Brewer's argument yet, for the heart of Brewer's critique is that proponents of the modern picture of practical thought cannot make sense of the unity of dialectical activities. So what remains is to examine how Korsgaard may account for the particular sort of unity Brewer claims is present in dialectical activities.

Brewer argues that what unites these actions into one activity and what allows us to see them as more and more apt realizations of the activity they strive towards is that they are the product of the same desire, the same intimation of goodness, and the later actions in the activity are informed by the successes and failures of the earlier ones. So there are two ways that the individual actions in a series are united: (i) they are inspired

by the same good(s) and (ii) earlier actions are taken into account by the practical thinking that guides each action without any retreat into explicit deliberation. The tree climber's successive climbs are all part of a single activity because they each issue from her hazy perception of the goods of tree climbing and they are the objects of the climber's practical thought, each climb informing the next. Brewer intends his argument (that I presented in chapter three) to show that philosophical positions that employ the modern conception of practical reason cannot adequately accommodate these points because the objects of desire on the modern view are insufficient to lend any unity to actions and the modern picture of practical thinking cannot make sense of the way later actions are informed by earlier actions and exhibit greater depth or clarity.

How may Korsgaard get out of this? Certainly she does seem to endorse the modern conception of practical thought as her account is founded on the necessity of bringing to an end the episodes of explicit practical reasoning that arise when the goodness of a course of action that we desire to perform is called into question. The problem is to account for the way the tree climber from our example applies the increased clarity she gains from her earlier climbs to her later climbs without engaging in explicit deliberation. Brewer noted that there were two basic strategies open to the modernist: (i) hold that explicit deliberation ends with the adoption of an intention that is either subject to course corrections as circumstances (and hence the means to securing the object of the intention) change or is subject to later specification or (ii) hold that dialectical activities are altered by repeated deliberations yielding new, slightly changed intentions. The first cannot make sense of the fact that what changes when an agent gains clarity about a dialectical activity is the agent's understanding of the goal, not merely her means to that

goal. The second disconnects the individual actions that constitute one's engagement in a dialectical activity because they can no longer be said to be responses to the same ideal or to the same desire. Brewer claims that one's intention remains the same throughout a stretch of dialectical activity because one is striving to respond properly to the same intimation of goodness with each new action. Korsgaard seems to be in agreement with Brewer here.

For instance, Korsgaard says that the perfect version of the activity (read: the activity in its highest form, the activity performed maximally well) is both constitutive of and normative for attempts to perform the activity.¹⁴ She claims that one must be guided by the perfect version of the activity in question in order for one's actions to count as performances of that activity rather than another and what one ought to do is set by the perfect version of the activity in question because it is what one's actions are aiming for.¹⁵ One's actions then may be unified as attempting to adhere to the ideal that is inherent in the concept of a given activity and that one gains a clearer grasp of this ideal by learning what acts can secure the ends characteristic of the ideal as well as what ends are obtainable by the various acts one performs in the course of one's attempt to answer to the ideal. One learns what maxims can be willed in the area circumscribed by our idea of a given action and in this way learns what can constitute the intrinsic value of the activity and thus what the activity one strives for is. If Korsgaard's thought really parallels Brewer's, then she may be able to simply add the ancient picture of practical

¹⁴ See Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 46.

¹⁵ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 28-34. Oddly enough, Korsgaard goes so far as to say that Plato's theory of forms is true for activities. Given her commitment to naturalism and constructivism, this seems a rather odd position. I take it that she is speaking a bit facetiously here or else has some naturalistic account of the Forms, though I am a bit baffled about what such an account would be like.

thought to her view, such that it governs the actions we perform in a stretch of a dialectical activity, but the modern version governs instances of explicit deliberation.

This sounds promising, but there is a disanalogy between Korsgaard's and Brewer's views that here gives rise to a problem that appears to prevent Korsgaard from being able to sensibly uphold the story about activities that we imagined her telling. Brewer thinks that we are inspired to launch into dialectical activities by an appearance of a concrete but indistinct sort of goodness. This appearance makes some course of action seem worth doing and when we take that course, our sense of what this goodness is and what it calls for may change because we literally have a sort of ethical sense that can at least somewhat reliably detect goodness and goodness is a part of what is "out there" independent of us, part of the objective, sensible world. So the concept of different activities and the actions they make apt may arise from literal interaction with various sets of connected goods whose nature and connection may have been explored by generations prior, leading to the activity being given a name and sufficiently clarified and distinguished from other activities so that older generations may impart some sense of the nature and value of them through language. Brewer may tell this story about how we gain our initial concepts of dialectical activities and how the activities make apt certain responses, but it is unclear what story Korsgaard could tell about this because she seems unable to take intimations of goodness to be perceptions of anything. The principles delineating the actions called for by an activity are supposed to drop right out of the very concept of the activity, but how have we gotten these concepts? It cannot be through personal interaction or learning from the collected interaction of our ancestors shaping an evaluative sense if there are not extant goods that we can perceive and it is hard to see

how we could perceive goods on Korsgaard's account. Korsgaard does not, to my knowledge, gesture at an answer to this question, so I will attempt to do so for her.

Our concepts of activities, if not arising from interaction (ours or others') with substantive goods, must be grounded in something else that can make sense of the claim that the changing courses of action we take in attempting to participate in dialectical activities are attempts to answer to the same ideal. Maybe Korsgaard can give some account on which all activities are aimed at doing something and this something that the activity aims at defines at least the minimal standards of the activity. For example, the activity of house-building is essentially aimed at joining four walls and a roof to keep out the elements. Perhaps all activities are like this, where there is something that we can do, i.e. build a house, climb a tree, unite ourselves to another person in mind and body, obtain truth, etc., the very concept of which gives the minimal standards for counting actions as performing the activity of pursuing it. The concepts Korsgaard needs to explain then are the concepts of houses, trees and climbers, marriage, truth, etc. This seems much less problematic.

In fact, Korsgaard goes some way towards defining these in *Self-Constitution*. As she sees it, objects are arrangements of matter that can serve a function. What makes something a house is that it can keep out the elements; what makes something a vacuum cleaner is that it can remove dirt in a certain way.¹⁶ This allows for a story about how we gain concepts like "house": we see some arrangement of matter performing a function, like providing shelter, then we give a name to things that serve this function. Perhaps this story can be applied to concepts like "friend" and "marriage" as well. Two people take a

¹⁶ See Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 28-37.

natural liking to one another and on a largely instinctual basis, begin promoting one another's interests in some way, however small, such as sharing a bit of their meal. Someone sees how these two are working together and names this sort of relationship "friendship." Once we conceptualize whatever we see some set of things as doing, we can make that an end to strive for and seek new ways of performing that function. So it may turn out that Korsgaard can give some story involving perception, though it is not perception of the kind of good Brewer thinks it must be. We perceive some set of things doing something and we gain a concept of an activity, a concept of something calling for actions that promote it. In a way then, what we perceive is a potential good, because the actions called for are good, are fully actions. This account is rather sketchy and needs much argument and filling in of gaps, but it strikes me as at least a possible out for Korsgaard.

Supposing that Korsgaard can come up with the sort of story sketched above, she appears able to respond aptly to Brewer's argument not by becoming a realist, but by somehow incorporating the ancient conception of practical thought into her account alongside the modern picture. There is a second sort of practical thought, she may say, a sort of attentiveness to our doings, but what it tracks is not some metaphysical goodness, but rather the normal things in our environments and their doings. Further, the modern picture still holds for episodes of explicit reasoning, which still give rise to normativity as she describes. Of course, it may turn out that weaving together a broader picture of practical reasoning from the combined ancient and modern pictures is not possible, in which case Korsgaard must find a way to ground her view of normativity in the ancient conception of practical thought or concede to realism. But even if Korsgaard can escape

Brewer's arguments concerning the unity of dialectical activities, there is another argument that Brewer may give against her view, an argument that seems rather damning.

Is Integrity Enough? Trouble for Korsgaard

Korsgaard holds that integrity is the master virtue: temperance, wisdom, courage, honesty, etc. are all virtues because they contribute to or constitute a just soul. But is integrity enough? Is being a good person just "being good at being a person" as Korsgaard says? Brewer certainly does not think so. He might respond to Korsgaard by asking us to consider the example of the mud-baker. Suppose the mud-baker (henceforth "Dirty Harry") has only three practical identities: person, animal, mud-baker. Dirty Harry sits in the mud hole all day and makes various muddy faux foods—mud brownies, mud pies, mud cakes, mud pudding, mud soufflés (he is quite the talented fake baker), etc.—stopping only to do what is necessary to keep his body intact and healthy (eating, defecating, showering, sleeping, etc.) or when the preservation of someone else's practical identity requires it, which, let us suppose, is not often because he lives far out in the country and has no family or friends. Dirty Harry seems to be, well, off in some way. Surely he is missing out, surely he has a rather misguided view of the good? Can Korsgaard explain what is wrong with him by appeal to lack of agency? It is hard to see how she could.

Dirty Harry seems to be acting on a maxim that is willable as a law for the kingdom of ends. The general maxim seems to be something like "Do what you love unless the preservation of the practical identity of some person or animal requires that you not." This maxim demonstrates that Harry has a set of properly ordered practical identities whose principles are always the ones he acts on. So, Harry is a fully unified

rational agent. All Korsgaard can say is that there are more diverse ways of being a unified rational agent, but not that Harry is missing out or misguided. It seems that Korsgaard cannot explain what is wrong with Dirty Harry.

Or can she? One way that Korsgaard could escape this argument is to show that one's identity as a person requires much more than mere preservation of the practical identities of agents who cross one's path. She must show that one's practical identity as a person requires either seeking out more than just the minimal consistent and properly-ordered set of practical identities or seeking out ways one may help preserve the practical identities of others. Given her argument that we must value ourselves qua persons and thus must value other persons in the same way, she may say that so long as there is anyone starving or suffering in any way or even trying to live up to any viable practical identity, Dirty Harry is obligated to help them in whatever ways he can (without obstructing the ability of others to live up to equally important practical identities of course). Spelling out exactly what this would commit Harry to will be difficult, but even in such rough form this line of thought allows Korsgaard to say what is wrong with Dirty Harry.

But suppose that he has a full set of practical identities—he has many loving relationships and hobbies, etc.—one of which is as a mud-baker. The time Dirty Harry spends playing in the mud still seems pointless, even if he could not be promoting the practical identities of anyone else during this time. Harry still seems to have a misconception of what is worth doing if he cannot think of anything more worth doing with his time than making mud pies (suppose he is not as talented and fancy as we imagined earlier, so that his creations cannot be construed as art or in any way beautiful

or valuable—maybe he even just slops around without making anything at all). Even if he spends *no time at all* making mud pies, his desire still seems screwy. The problem here is that Korsgaard's view does not seem to give us any tool with which to order our practical identities beyond the necessary one; in effect it comes down to a gut feeling about who you want to be. If you want to be a mud-baker rather than a philosopher, well, that is just fine if it is who you think you are. But surely developing some talent, like playing the piano or painting, or developing one's mind, say by reading literature or listening to lectures on mathematics, is more valuable than playing in the mud? There seems to be no way to support this intuition on Korsgaard's view.

One way to think of this problem is as an extreme magnification of the idea that some values are incommensurable: among those practical identities that are consistent with one's necessary practical identity as a person, there is no way of comparing the value of any proposed practical identities. This seems obviously false; being a musician or an artist or a philosopher is better than being a mud baker. As this feature seems inherent in Korsgaard's view and indeed is explicitly noted by Korsgaard, I take it to tell strongly against the prospects of her constructivist picture.

Concluding Thoughts

Here is where things stand. While Korsgaard may be able to give us a story about how we obtain the concepts of the goals that guide our activities and employ Brewer's alternate picture of practical reason that works with her constructivism, there appears to be an inescapable problem of extreme incommensurability on her view. On top of this, Brewer seems rather easily able to adopt Korsgaard's view of normativity and of synchronic unity as a requirement for agency in to his own picture. Given the problems

with Korsgaard's constructivism discussed above, a theory which captures the crucial features of her view while avoiding its pitfalls is to be preferred and thus a substantive realism like Brewer's has a distinct advantage, at least in regard to the issues discussed herein. Of course, the debate between constructivists and realists depends on many other factors and the advantage gained here may be outweighed by losses in other areas such as metaphysics or epistemology.¹⁷

¹⁷ Such worries strike me as much less onerous to the theist, for theists already have at least one non-natural entity in their ontology and have a good explanation of why we have a sufficiently reliable sense for the good.

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