

MORALITY, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND CONFLICT: A RESPONSE TO CHRISTINE KORSGAARD

Over the course of her third lecture in *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard argues that insofar as we value anything, we must value humanity as an end in itself. Concomitantly, if we acknowledge the existence of practical reasons, we must affirm that humanity is a necessary and objective end. Interestingly, however, Korsgaard concedes that it is possible for us to experience “intractable conflicts” between obligations that we have in virtue of our humanity and obligations that we have acquired as a result of our adoption of particular practical identities over the course of our lives.¹ Given her posit that humanity is a necessary condition for the adoption of *any* practical identity, it seems counter-intuitive that she would, in the same lecture, claim that conflicts between obligations associated with our practical identities and obligations associated with our humanity are not immediately decidable. In this paper, I argue that Korsgaard’s claims about the supposed intractability of such conflicts are not only inconsistent with traditional interpretations of particularly relevant aspects of Kant’s practical philosophy, but also, and more significantly, that they are equally inconsistent with the more prominent features of her own argument.

¹ Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. See p. 128.

In the section that follows, I provide a rough sketch of Korsgaard's argument for valuing humanity as an end in itself in order to (1) clarify why it is, according to Korsgaard, that we ought to value humanity as an end in itself and (2) to explicate and define what she takes to be the relationship between our practical identities and our basic humanity. In section II, I discuss and ultimately argue against Korsgaard's claims regarding the potential intractability of conflicts between our obligations *qua* beings with humanity in our persons and obligations that we acquire as a result of adopting particular practical identities – specifically, those commonly associated with personal relationships.

I.

It is in virtue of our humanity that we are able to adopt what Korsgaard calls practical identities. The practical identities that we adopt express our most basic conception of ourselves, a conception that we have insofar as we are self-conscious beings in the possession of reflective minds. The concept of practical identity is perhaps most easily understood in terms of the roles and practices we adopt over the course of our lives. For example, one might identify herself as a mother, a friend, a sister, a philosopher, and so on. All of these roles constitute her various practical identities and thus her conception of herself. This conception, Korsgaard argues, is to be 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.”² One sets and pursues ends in accordance with her practical identities and these identities determine what count as reasons *for her*. To illustrate, it can be said that a mother has good reasons to take care of her child; she has these reasons *in virtue of her practical identity as a*

² Korsgaard (1996) p. 101

mother. If one were to ask her, “Why take care of that child?” She could definitively reply, “I am that child’s mother.” And the matter would be settled. In addition to providing reasons for action, one’s practical identities commit her to particular obligations. The statement, “A mother does not neglect her child,” stands well enough on its own. It does not require an obligatory “ought;” the normative force of this statement is “built into the role” of being a mother.³

So, how do these considerations lead Korsgaard to conclude that humanity is an end in itself and that, as such, we ought to value it? Roughly, Korsgaard claims that it is our humanity, our capacity to set and pursue ends, which allows us to develop a conception of ourselves. Without such a conception, Korsgaard argues, our lives would be without purpose or value. We would have no ends to strive for and as such, no reasons for action. The basic idea, then, is that if we value our practical identities and those actions and/or responses that our practical identities warrant, we must also value what gives rise to them; namely, our humanity. While we might come to adopt or abandon various roles or practices over the course of our lives, our identity *qua* human beings is inviolable; it is the natural constant that allows for the development of our practical identities over time. Korsgaard writes, “Since you cannot act without reasons, and your humanity is the source of your reasons, you must value your own humanity if you are to act at all.”⁴

Now, while she has thus far given us reasons to value the humanity in ourselves, Korsgaard has not yet made it apparent why we ought to value the humanity in others. While

³ Korsgaard (1996) p. 101

⁴ Korsgaard (1996) p. 123

it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the specifics of Korsgaard's position on this issue, it will be assumed henceforth that there *are* good reasons for us to value the humanity in others and that these reasons give rise to particular commitments; the commitments associated with morality.⁵ Insofar as we recognize the humanity in others, we recognize our common identity – that is, we see that there is humanity in their persons just as there is in our own. And this shared identity, according to Korsgaard, is a *moral* one. It, unlike other practical identities, is “inescapable and pervasive” and thus, the obligations to which it gives rise are not relative or contingent – they are necessary.⁶ But, what are we to do when the obligations associated with our humanity come into conflict with the obligations associated with our various practical identities? Are we to concede, as Korsgaard suggests, that such conflicts are intractable? In the following section, I discuss this problem in more depth and proceed to offer, what I take to be, a reasonable solution.

II.

In the third paragraph of §3.5.1, Korsgaard makes it explicitly clear that her argument does not have the following implication: “that moral obligations always trump all others.”⁷ Korsgaard writes:

The argument requires – and our nature requires – that we do have some more local and contingent identities, which provide us with most of our reasons to live and to act.

⁵ Without going into too much detail, I think her argument is roughly the following: that valuing humanity in our own person rationally requires us to value the humanity in the persons of others. Korsgaard (1996) See p. 121.

Korsgaard (1996) p. 122. These obligations will be referred to as ‘moral obligations’ for the remainder of this paper.

⁷ Korsgaard (1996) p. 125

Moral identity *does not swamp other forms of identity*: no one is simply a moral agent and nothing more.⁸

However, Korsgaard stipulates, this does not mean that our obligations, whether they are moral or otherwise, are not unconditional. Of course, if our obligations were conditional, conflicts between them would be mere inconveniences. One might arbitrarily decide to act in accordance with one of her obligations rather than another and do so without the slightest apprehension. Simply, she could opt to act in accordance with one of her obligations in lieu of another and feel comfortable leaving her neglected obligation behind. This, however, does not seem to accurately reflect our experience of such conflicts. When we find ourselves in conflict we feel genuinely *conflicted* – that is, we feel ‘damned if we do, damned if we don’t.’ And this seems appropriate. As Korsgaard says, “that’s just one of the ways in which human life is hard.”⁹

In what follows I argue that, contrary to Korsgaard’s aforementioned assertion, in instances of conflict between moral obligations and obligations associated with our practical identities, the former ought to *always* trump the latter. However, before I proceed, I should point out a distinction that Korsgaard makes between two sub-species of conflict that fit into this more general class. It is conceivable that one might adopt a practical identity that is “in and of itself contradictory to the value of humanity.”¹⁰ Korsgaard uses the identity of an assassin to illustrate this point and rejects any conflicts that might arise between moral obligations and those stemming from the adoption of such an inhumane identity. It seems clear enough that such conflicts would be easily resolved given the following consideration: “Insofar as the

⁸ Korsgaard (1996) p. 125 (my italics).

⁹ Korsgaard (1996) p. 126

¹⁰ Korsgaard (1996) p. 126

importance of having a practical identity comes from the value of humanity, it does not make sense to identify oneself in ways that are inconsistent with the value of humanity.”¹¹ The second, and more interesting sub-species of conflicts consists of those between moral obligations and obligations associated with practical identities that do not stand in such obvious opposition to our humanity. According to Korsgaard, this second kind of conflict is not so easily resolved by the aforementioned consideration. Thus, it is what I will tentatively refer to as a *genuine conflict*.

While Korsgaard acknowledges that there are likely many possible sources of genuine conflict, she discusses a particular source in especially great detail; specifically, she discusses conflicts that arise between moral obligations and obligations associated with our practical identities *qua* members of personal relationships. Operating on a Kantian account of personal relationships, Korsgaard defines such relationships as “a reciprocal commitment on the part of two people to take one another’s views, interests, and wishes into account.”¹² Simply, to be in a personal relationship with another human being is to engage in a reciprocal adoption of one another’s ends and to aid one another in the pursuit of those ends. Korsgaard’s worry is that our practical identities as members of such reciprocal relationships give rise to unusually ‘deep’ obligations; that is, we experience our obligations to our partners in such relationships as having a force wholly independent of our obligations to “humanity at large.”¹³ And, as she sees no obvious reason why our obligations associated with this particular kind of practical identity ought to be subordinated to our moral obligations, she concludes, “personal relationships can

¹¹Korsgaard (1996) p. 126

¹² Korsgaard (1996) p. 127

¹³ Korsgaard (1996) p. 128

be the source of some particularly intractable conflicts with morality.”¹⁴ To illustrate, consider the following scenario: A loved one approaches you and asks you to lie on her behalf, say, in order to facilitate the achievement of one of her desired ends. As you are obligated, in virtue of your personal relationship with her, to take her desired ends into account and also, to aid her in her pursuit of those ends, it seems that you ought to comply with her request – that is, it seems that you ought to lie. However, insofar as you recognize that there is humanity in your person, you cannot help but acknowledge that you have an unconditional *moral* obligation to tell the truth and thus, you are conflicted. This is one example of a conflict that Korsgaard would likely find intractable.

I must admit that I am inclined to depart from Korsgaard here. It seems to me that there are good reasons to argue, *contra* Korsgaard, that our obligations to humanity *in abstracto* must ultimately trump our obligations to particular individuals with whom we have become involved in reciprocal relationships. While I understand that we sometimes *feel* that our obligations to these individuals make overriding claims on us, I am not convinced that they *actually* do. In other words, I am not convinced that the obligations that spring from our involvement in personal relationships can, in any case, supersede the obligations that we have in virtue of the fact that there is humanity in our person. Thus, I wish to propose a serial ordering of humanity and person-specific practical identities in which humanity holds the primary position – that is, I want to assert the priority of humanity over *any* form that our practical identities might take.

¹⁴ Korsgaard (1996) p. 128

If we take seriously Korsgaard's claim that if we value anything, we must value humanity as an end in itself, it seems to follow that we ought to prioritize humanity in this way. And if it does, the possibility for *genuine* conflicts between obligations associated with our humanity and those associated with our practical identities must be rejected. To clarify, my view is that if it is the case that humanity is a necessary condition for the expression of *any* practical identity, we must always maintain our respect for humanity in performing the practices associated with the practical identities that we adopt. More simply, we must acknowledge that if it were not for the humanity within us, we would be unable to act in ways appropriate to, or consistent with, our practical identities at all. If one acts in accordance with an obligation associated with her practical identities in lieu of an obligation that stems from her humanity, she acts without regard for the ultimate source of the practical identity that has given rise to the obligation that she now favors. And this seems inconsistent. In fact, it seems just as inconsistent as a case in which one adopts, and thus abides by the commitments associated with, a practical identity that is "contradictory to the value of humanity" (recall Korsgaard's example of the assassin).¹⁵ If we choose to privilege obligations associated with our practical identities over those associated with our humanity, I contend that it is only because we are *inclined* to do so. Specifically, in regard to personal relationships, we *prefer* to honor our commitments to a significant other rather than honor our implicit commitments, our moral commitments, to humanity at large. In Kantian terms, we choose to act in accordance with hypothetical

¹⁵ Korsgaard (1996) p. 126

imperatives, imperatives that apply to us conditionally¹⁶, rather than categorical ones, ones that apply to us insofar as there is humanity in our persons.

While it is true that Korsgaard makes no claim about the degree to which her theory adheres to standard interpretations of the Kantian theoretical framework, I take this aspect of her theory to seriously depart from the convictions typically associated with Kant's practical philosophy. In contrast, I take my view to be more consistent with Kant's doctrine. For instance, I doubt that Kant would endorse acts of dishonesty on the grounds that the acts were committed in the course of honoring one's obligations to a particular individual. In fact, if we consider Benjamin Constant's famous objection to Kant's idea that lying is never permissible, even if lying would prevent *the death of a friend*, this point should become explicitly clear. For emphasis, consider the following excerpt from Kant's reply to Constant:

...though by a certain lie I in fact wrong no one, I nevertheless violate the principle of right with respect to all unavoidable necessary statements *in general* (I do wrong formally though not materially); *and this is much worse than committing an injustice to someone or other*, since such a deed does not always presuppose in the subject a principle of doing so.¹⁷

I should introduce an important caveat here: my intent is not to deny that our practical identities give rise to obligations, but rather, to claim that the obligations to which they give rise are *second-order* obligations; obligations that must be subordinated to *first-order* obligations, the obligations associated with our humanity. If we accept this account, we can reasonably endorse Korsgaard's more general claims about the sources of normativity, whilst rejecting the

¹⁶ 'Conditionally' here is meant to refer to the person specific nature of practical identities, not to the nature of obligations associated with practical identities.

¹⁷ Kant, Immanuel. *On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy*. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*. Ed. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 605-15. See p. 615 (my italics)

possibility for “intractable conflicts” of the kind that have just been discussed. Also, it should be made clear that I am not suggesting that it is impossible for one to *feel* conflicted if she is faced with what she *perceives to be* a conflict between one of her moral obligations and one of the obligations associated with her practical identities – rather, I am suggesting that such conflicts are not *genuine*.

Perhaps Korsgaard might reply to the objection that I have leveled against her in this paper by claiming that it assumes her interest in strictly adhering to standard interpretations of the relevant aspects of Kant’s practical philosophy. As I previously acknowledged, it is true that Korsgaard makes no claim about the degree to which she takes her theory to be compatible with a more traditional Kantian position and, as such, I am reasonably sympathetic to this reply. However, I am inclined to press Korsgaard a bit further and say that even within the specific context of her own theory, her views in regard to the intractability of the kind of conflicts that have been the primary focus of this paper seem inconsistent with the more general features of her argument.

For instance, given her assertion that it is possible for us to face genuine conflicts between obligations associated with our practical identities and obligations associated with our humanity, it seems that Korsgaard could, at least *prima facie*, be interpreted as advocating what might be called a ‘no priority’ view.¹⁸ That is, she could be interpreted as suggesting that while having humanity in one’s person is a necessary condition for one’s adoption of practical identities, we should not regard the obligations associated with our humanity as making significantly stronger claims on us than those associated with our particular practical identities.

¹⁸ Special thanks to Professor Kathleen Moran for assisting in the development of this point.

To illustrate via analogy, consider Kant's notion of the categories of understanding. While it is true that the categories are *conditions* of phenomenal experience, it is not true that they therefore hold some kind of pride of place in Kant's metaphysical system. Simply, it is not the case that Kant prioritizes the categories over other aspects of persons and the world that similarly contribute to the constitution of our phenomenal experience. If we map this point about Kant's categories onto Korsgaard's notion of humanity, the proposed analogy becomes apparent – namely, that perhaps Korsgaard's notion of humanity is very much akin to Kant's categories insofar as humanity, like the categories, should *not* be thought of as having any kind of priority. More specifically, perhaps Korsgaard's view is that obligations associated with our humanity should not, *in any case*, be prioritized over obligations associated with our practical identities. Admittedly, if this *were* Korsgaard's position, she *would* be justified in regarding conflicts between obligations associated with our humanity and obligations associated with our practical identities as being intractable.

However, I take it to be evident that this is *not* Korsgaard's position. Remember, for Korsgaard, there are certain practical identities (like assassinhood) that stand in such obvious opposition to our humanity that under no circumstances would one be warranted in claiming that she faces a genuine conflict between an obligation associated with such a practical identity and an obligation associated with her humanity. It is, according to Korsgaard, nonsensical to identify oneself in ways that are inconsistent with the value of humanity. Therefore, any obligations that stem from the adoption of a practical identity that *is* inconsistent with the value of humanity cannot be regarded as having the potential to come into genuine conflict with the obligations that one has in virtue of her humanity. In light of this, it seems clear that Korsgaard

in fact *does* prioritize humanity, and thereby the obligations to which it gives rise, at least to *some* degree. And, as such, I am admittedly unclear about why she thinks that this prioritization does not carry over to *all* instances of conflict, particularly those that have been the primary focus of this paper.

Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. *On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy*. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of*

Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy. Ed. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 605-15. Print.

Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.