

# A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANDREA STAITI AND CHRISTINE KORSGAARD ON THE SOURCES OF NORMATIVITY

**CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD**

*Department of Philosophy*

*Harvard University*

christine\_korsgaard@harvard.edu

**ANDREA STAITI**

*Dipartimento di Discipline Umanistiche, Sociali e delle Imprese Culturali*

*Universita' degli Studi di Parma / Philosophy Dept. Boston College*

andrea.staiti@unipr.it

## **ABSTRACT**

In this short exchange, Christine Korsgaard and Andrea Staiti address some of the salient theses and issues raised by Korsgaard's seminal book *The Sources of Normativity*.

## **KEYWORDS**

Normativity, Reflective Endorsement, Identity; Agency; Kant

## *Introduction*

In the Spring of 2017 I had the pleasure to teach a seminar on Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity* at the University of Parma. I had met Christine Korsgaard a few years back during my tenure at Boston College and I was deeply struck by her approach to practical philosophy; I thus decided to start my teaching activity at Parma with a close reading and discussion of her work. The book "teaches itself", as the saying goes: it is clearly and beautifully written and it combines original insight with thought-provoking analyses of past philosophies. On a side note, the Italian translation does full justice to the English original. Toward the end of our seminar my students and I decided that we would try to ask some of our questions to the author and see if she could help us better understand her argument. We thus sent her an email with three broad

questions that emerged in our discussions. The exchange below reproduces Christine's answer to that email, which she kindly agreed to publish in the present issue of *Etica e politica*.

A few words to justify the decision to publish a personal exchange are in order. We thought that, in spite of their understandable brevity, Christine's answers offer clear indications of how she would go about replying to some of the critiques that were raised against her philosophical account of normativity. The first question addresses the charge of "intellectualism" that has been raised, among others, by Heideggerians such as Steven Crowell. In her reply Christine Korsgaard draws a sharp distinction between movements that count as actions and movements that don't. If one accepts that distinction, then the point about skillful coping being unreflective is moot. Skillful coping just isn't a kind of action on Christine Korsgaard's account. The second question addresses the problem of the publicity of reasons and sketches out a brief account of why we are more likely to resist the others' reasons for action than the normativity of language. The third question gets its bearings from an article by Chris Gowans and it elaborates on Gowans' worries about the *value* of practical identities. The final part of the question is an implicit gesture toward phenomenological accounts of practical identities as found in philosophers like Husserl and Scheler<sup>1</sup>. Christine Korsgaard's reply leaves no doubt about her view: "I don't think we *discover* ourselves. I think we *make* ourselves". This is a commendably clear statement of the kind of existentialism championed by Christine Korsgaard's original version of Kantianism. Such a strong statement invites the question as to whether one could develop something like a more complex dialectic between making and discovering when it comes to the self<sup>2</sup>, but obviously this goes beyond the scope of this short exchange.

I would like thank Christine for reviewing her answers and agreeing to publish them, as well as Roberto Redaelli for arranging publication in this special issue of *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics*.

(Andrea Staiti)

**Staiti:** The first question is about reflective endorsement. You argue that humans are intrinsically reflective beings. Do you mean to say that some kind of reflective

<sup>1</sup> I have developed a more thorough analysis of how the phenomenological account of practical identities might supplement Korsgaard's view in Andrea Staiti, *Praktische Identitäten aus phänomenologischer Sicht: Husserl und Korsgaard*. Phänomenologische Forschungen (2015), 171-188.

<sup>2</sup> I have tried to offer something along these lines in a forthcoming essay: Andrea Staiti, *Existential Choice: Husserl Meets Heller*, in Marco Cavallaro/George Heffernan (eds.), *The Existential Husserl*. Springer: Dordrecht.

endorsement (or rejection) happens all the time in humans when they act? Or that it *should*? The first option sounds a bit too optimistic and might be accused of rationalism. We all know a lot of very un-reflective people. Moreover, there seem to be a lot of actions that draw on what Heideggerians might call “mindless coping”<sup>3</sup> in the world, rather than a reflective deliberative attitude. The second option seems more realistic but if people *should* be reflective, then is this something that can be commanded or at least rendered desirable in some indirect way?

**Korsgaard:** There is a sense in which I do think that nearly all human actions involve reflective endorsement. Even if we do not always think about what we are doing, we have a different form of consciousness than the other animals and cannot just revert to purely instinctive action. (I give an account of the difference between instinctive and rational action in *Self-Constitution*, 6.1<sup>4</sup>, and a more detailed account in *Fellow Creatures*, 3.2<sup>5</sup>). As I think of it, there is a gap between our initial motivational response (desire, fear, whatever) and action, and that gap has to be crossed. When we cross it, we are in effect adopting a principle, a principle that permits acting that way in that kind of case, even if we don’t think much about it.

The story here is complicated by a certain practice that human beings have of attributing principles to each other. Suppose your partner spends a lot of money from an account you hold jointly on a risky investment, without telling you about it until afterwards. Suppose he’s not being sneaky – it’s just that the opportunity seems so good to him that he jumps at the chance. He’s even eager to tell you about it afterwards, but instead of sharing his enthusiasm you are appalled that he didn’t consult you first. You might say, “Did you think it was *all right* to risk that much of our joint funds without so much as asking me what I thought?”. When you say that, you are in effect attributing a principle to him (“I may decide on behalf of my partner without consulting her when I think the opportunity is good enough” or something like that). You know that he didn’t exactly recite that to himself, and perhaps you even know that if he had, he would have immediately seen what is wrong with it. But you attribute the principle to him, because it is the one implied by his action, and since we are in general responsible beings, we are responsible for the principles they imply.

The “mindless coping” idea raises issues about what counts as an action. Sometimes the people involved in that debate mention things like “turning the wheel to the right” as examples of actions. What I mean by an action is an-act-chosen-for-the-sake-of-an-

<sup>3</sup> See Crowell, Steven G. (2013). *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. (2009). *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. (2018). *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, Oxford University Press.

end (See *Self-Constitution*, 1.2). That is the kind of thing that I think is subject to moral assessment, and I argue in *Self-Constitution*, and in *Acting for a Reason*<sup>6</sup> that it is the kind of thing that both Aristotle and Kant thought is subject to moral assessment. In general, I think the literature on moral philosophy is insufficiently attentive to the question what’s included when we talk about “an action”. For example, when people talk about doing the right thing for the wrong reason, they are assuming that the reason for an action isn’t part of the action itself. People regularly contrast “consequentialism” with “deontology”. But consequentialism is a theory which accords moral value to acts on the basis of their ends, while at least some deontologists, such as Kant, accord moral value to an-act-for-the-sake-of-an-end on the basis of its universal form. These kinds of theories cannot really be straightforwardly contrasted because they involve different views about what the object of moral assessment is. I don’t think it makes any sense to compare choosing an act-for-the-sake-of-an-end with a simple instance of know-how like turning the wheel to the right.

**Staiti:** The second question is about the analogy between linguistic meanings and reasons for action. We all agreed that linguistic meanings have immediate normative force for competent speakers of a language, and you describe this quite compellingly. But do you want to argue that reasons for action have the *exact same* immediate normative force? Isn't this just reasoning by analogy? It seems that while the publicity of spoken language is encompassing and it rarely fails, the publicity of reasons for action admits of degrees. Some very obvious reasons for action are thoroughly public (I seek food because I'm hungry), but many other reasons are more private or intimate and it is more difficult for others to grasp them. In other words, aren't reasons for action intrinsically more personal than linguistic meanings? That might be why we are inclined to attribute more significance and value to reasons vis-a-vis linguistic meanings.

**Korsgaard:** Thomas Nagel agrees with you on this, in *The View from Nowhere*<sup>7</sup> – he gives a theory of what sort of reasons are public (or as he calls it “objective”) and what sort are private or “subjective”. I replied to him in *The Reasons We Can Share*<sup>8</sup>.

I think that both practical reasons and linguistic meanings have immediate normative force, but we are more likely to have grounds of resistance to the force of practical reasons. (People do, however, sometimes fail to understand things out of personal resistance). When there is no grounds for resistance, because what reason demands of

<sup>6</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. (2008). *Acting for a Reason*. In *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, 207-229. Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Nagel, Thomas (1986). *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. (1993). *The Reasons We Can Share: An Attack on the Distinction Between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values*. In *Altruism*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred Dycus Miller, and Jeffrey Paul. Cambridge University Press. Previously published in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10, no. 1: 24-51.

us isn't much, we respond pretty directly to other people's reasons – telling people what time it is, picking up objects they've dropped, warning them of imminent dangers or unpleasantness, opening doors. When more is demanded of us, we are more likely to resist.

But part of your question concerns our ability to understand other people's reasons. I do talk about that part of it a little in *The Reasons We Can Share*. Sometimes we draw a blank when we try to understand other people's tastes, for instance, and therefore we are inclined to doubt that those tastes really give them reasons, or the reasons they think it gives them. Imagine someone who simply cannot understand his friend's interest in a certain sport, or why he thinks a certain comedian is hilarious. In these kinds of cases, sometimes the one who cannot understand is tempted by what I think of as a “diagnostic” explanation, or rather explanation-away. Ned thinks he really enjoys developing the grace and skill elicited by playing ping-pong, while Joe thinks that what Ned really likes about it is that he always wins. Joe thinks that the comedian's act is genuinely hilarious, while Ned thinks what Joe really likes about it is that it panders to his sexism. Sometimes these diagnostic explanations are on-target, and sometimes they are not. I think we have to give people the benefit of the doubt, unless we are really sure.

I think the reason we attribute more significance and value to practical reasons is that they are personal in a slightly different way than you have in mind here. I think our practical identities are constituted by our choice of reasons. That's what *Self-Constitution* is about.

Incidentally, in *Self-Constitution*, chapter 9, I give a different argument for the publicity of practical reason, one that does not depend on the linguistic analogy at all. I argue that reasons “hold us together” at a time and over time, and that they could not do that if they did not have public normative force.

**Staiti:** We read an article by Chris Gowans<sup>9</sup>, who argues that your account of practical identities does not provide resources to distinguish between identities that are strongly normative and those that are only weakly normative. Assuming that some identities are indeed stronger than others (i.e., they are richer and more robust sources of criteria for action), what do you think happens when two strong identities enter into a kind of conflict that cannot be resolved but by giving up one of the two? Don't we need criteria to say yes or no to a strong practical identity that has become problematic in the very same way in which we need criteria *based on* practical identities to say yes or no to what an impulse suggests? What would the criteria be in this case? They cannot be provided by another practical identity, nor can they be provided by the general practical identity

<sup>9</sup> Gowans, Christopher W. (2002). *Practical Identities and Autonomy: Korsgaard's Reformation of Kant's Moral Philosophy*. In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, No. 3: 546-570.

“person” because that identity only prescribes that you need *some* practical identity, not which one. Wouldn't we need to have some notion of true self, some Socratic *daimon* or some other kind of fundamentally individual ontological essence of the person to appeal to when we need a criterion to decide whether we are going to drop a practical identity that has entered into a conflict with another?

**Korsgaard:** Sometimes one practical identity is more fundamental than another because it is, as it were, more centrally located in the web of our identities. Since many of my friends are philosophers, my identity as a philosopher matters to those relationships as well as to my work, for instance. I also think we have human needs and individual needs that favor some forms of identity over others, as matters of what is good for us, although this may not be decisive. For instance, humans are social, and some humans are more social than others – a form of identity that goes with a solitary lifestyle might not be best for them from the point of view of their own good. I also think that human beings have the attribute Marx and Feuerbach called “species-being”. We think of ourselves as members of the human species and of our lives as part of the ongoing life of the species. Even apart from morality, that attribute can make it part of our good to feel that we have made some sort of contribution to the ongoing life of the species, and that gives us reason to choose certain occupations and causes over others. Those two factors, interestingly, can pull apart. A scientist who felt herself to be on brink of an important discovery might (reasonably) neglect some of her ordinary human needs to devote herself to making that discovery.

But I certainly don't think there is any “fundamentally individual ontological essence”. I don't think we *discover* ourselves. I think we *make* ourselves. We can do that well or badly, but leaving morality aside, I don't think we can do it rightly or wrongly. That affects both what our identities are, and how we choose between them when they conflict. I think it's a mistake to believe that practical reason can or should settle all the questions about who we are to be, rather like thinking practical reason should settle all the questions about what should happen next in a novel or whether to use dark blue or green for a certain spot on a canvas. I think there is a certain randomness in the construction of identity that you just have to accept, just as you have to accept the fact that you aren't going to marry someone who is “made for you,” but rather someone in the neighborhood. This is why I wrote on 241-242<sup>10</sup> about the importance of “making the contingent necessary” – for example, making it true that you and your spouse are made for each other. Even if there's a certain randomness in the content of your life, it's up to you to give it the right form.

<sup>10</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. (1996). *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press.