

---

---

## Choice and Practical Identity in Korsgaard's Ethics

Joseph Carlsmith

In her recent book *Self-Constitution*, Christine Korsgaard presents a new angle on the broadly Kantian approach to ethics she has taken in previous works. This new angle places a more direct emphasis on the constitution of agency. The fundamentals of her theory, however, remain roughly the same; like in *Sources of Normativity* and *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Korsgaard rests her account on the "plight" of human choice, the reflective distance we have from our inclinations, and the free will's legislation of universal maxims. In this sense, though Plato and Aristotle play a more prominent role in *Self-Constitution* than they do in its predecessors, Korsgaard is still on firmly Kantian turf.

Such turf has traditionally been criticized for its inability to capture the richness of our normative lives. Hegel, for example, contrasted the abstraction of Kantian universality with *Sittlichkeit*, the concrete ethical life. To buttress her account against such critiques, Korsgaard emphasizes the role of what she calls "practical identities" – value-laden conceptions of ourselves that govern our choice of actions. In this paper, I will argue that such a buttress is inadequate. My argument will focus on a particular type of choice that a Korsgaardian agent must make: the choice between different morally-permissible practical identities. Such a

---

Joseph Carlsmith will graduate from Yale University in May 2012, with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. His primary academic interests include ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of religion. After Yale, he will spend two years in Oxford University's BPhil in philosophy program. After that, he will either continue on in philosophy, or he will do something else. His other interests include: jazz piano, zoos, and Vipas-

---



---

choice requires reasons; we must think of some practical identities as non-morally better than others. Korsgaard, I will argue, cannot give a satisfactory account of such reasons. To demonstrate this, I will examine three possible ways in which Korsgaard could explain choice between permissible practical identities – in terms of existing identities, in terms of epistemic ideals, and in terms of pure will. None of these possibilities, I submit, can get Korsgaard what she needs. Examining them, though, reveals the central problem: despite her attempts, Korsgaard has not adequately addressed the problem of the empty self. I will conclude by suggesting a way she might be able to do so, were she willing to weaken her voluntarism about practical identity.

### I.

Korsgaard's account rests on a number of key Kantian premises. The first is a claim about human consciousness, which, in *Self-Constitution*, receives its most explicit elucidation during Korsgaard's discussion of the differences between non-human animals and humans. Animals, for Korsgaard, are presented with motivationally loaded representations – what Korsgaard calls “incentives” – just as humans are, and animals, like humans, respond to those incentives on the basis of principles. For animals, however, these principles are simply instincts; the animal plays no role in choosing them. Developments in human consciousness, however, have liberated our species from the control of instinct: “self-consciousness opens up a space between the incentive and the response, a space of what I call reflective distance.”<sup>1</sup> In this space, we must *choose* the principles that will govern how we respond to our incentives. In doing so, we freely determine what we will take to be worthwhile and valuable. Such a choice is not optional. Rather, it is the human plight. We are condemned to choose, and choice requires that we treat some things as reason-giving.

From the necessity of this choice, Korsgaard attempts to derive the normativity of the categorical imperative. In *Sources of Normativity*, her route to this destination is straightforwardly

---

---

Kantian; for our choice of a principle to be free, it must be entirely self-determined. We must, in Kant's language, give the law to ourselves.<sup>2</sup> The only constraint on our doing so is that the law we choose must have the form of a law – that is, we must be able to will our maxim universally. In *Self-Constitution*, Korsgaard arrives at this same conclusion from a slightly different direction. One of the essential attributes of an agent, she argues, is autonomy. An agent's movements must be her own, stemming from her own free, unified causality rather than a force acting on her or in her. Such autonomy, says Korsgaard, precludes any kind of "particularistic willing." Unless the agent wills her maxims universally, she will be identified completely with the incentives she acts on, and will thus be rendered "not one person, but a series, a *mere heap*, of unrelated impulses."<sup>3</sup> The categorical imperative, then, is a constitutive principle for acting as a genuine agent.

For the purposes of this paper, whether either of these arguments succeeds is in some sense irrelevant; what matters is that even if they do succeed, they leave whole territories of normativity uncharted. The categorical imperative only tells us which incentives we are obligated to refrain from acting on, thereby whittling down the set of possible actions to include only those that are morally permissible. But among these remaining actions, some options are still better than others. Presented with the choice between picking my nose and learning to paint, I receive no guidance from the categorical imperative. Nevertheless, we want to say that there is another, non-obligatory type of normativity that grounds my choice to pick up the brush. Indeed, it is primarily this type of normativity that we deal with on an everyday basis. Most of our decisions – what to eat, which subject to study, who to befriend or marry – do not depend on our view of moral obligation but rather on our conception of what is valuable, prudent, and intrinsically worthwhile – in essence, what we think about the good life. As Sidgwick and Anscombe have both suggested, this separation between the Good and the Right – where only the latter implicates notions of obligation, blame, and legislation – is a uniquely modern development.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, an adequate analysis of normativity has to capture both.

In order to do so, Korsgaard builds into her account a central role for what she calls “practical identities” – i.e. “descriptions under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions worth undertaking.”<sup>5</sup> Korsgaard allows this definition extremely wide scope. It encompasses “roles and relationships, citizenship, memberships in ethnic or religious groups, causes, vocations, professions, and offices” – anything that provides you with a conception of the good robust enough to facilitate choice between different morally-permissible actions.<sup>6</sup> For example, I choose to paint rather than to pick my nose because I identify as an artist and not as a professional nose-picker. Note, however, that my practical identity is not the end for which my chosen action provides the means.<sup>7</sup> Under normal circumstances, I do not paint so that I can be or remain an artist. Rather, my identity as an artist is what gives value to painting; insofar as I am an artist, I will take incentives to paint as reason-giving. Of course, the mandates of my practical identities must be consistent with the moral law. The identities themselves, though, guide my choices in a way that the moral law cannot.

Because of its capacity to capture the normative richness of everyday life, Korsgaard’s account of practical identity is one of the more attractive features of her project. Problems arise, however, when we begin to ask questions about the normativity of the practical identities themselves. These questions are provoked by Korsgaard’s insistence that our participation in our practical identities is entirely voluntary. For Korsgaard, we humans are uniquely tasked with making ourselves who we are. Of course, many of our identities are deeply contingent – I did not choose to be born in this particular country, for example, or to be endowed with this particular set of talents and interests – but Korsgaard makes clear that “whether you treat [these identities] as a source of reasons and obligations is up to you.”<sup>8</sup> If I so choose, I can leave any of my identities behind and take up another set (though I will need at least one identity in order to act at all). Thus, I am constantly engaged in a process of choosing and re-choosing the identities that will be reason-giving for me: “whenever I act in accordance with these roles and identities,

---

---

whenever I allow them to govern my will, I endorse them, I embrace them, I affirm once again that I am them."<sup>9</sup> This voluntarism grounds my personal responsibility; on Korsgaard's view, I create myself in precisely the manner that opponents of responsibility deem impossible.<sup>10</sup>

Later in this paper, I will claim that this extreme voluntarism about practical identity is implausible, and that Korsgaard would benefit from softening it. For now, though, I'd like to examine whether she even has the resources to sustain it at all. The problem is this: how do we choose between different morally-permissible practical identities? Voluntarism requires that we do so, and once again the Categorical Imperative offers no help. Indeed, in essence this is the same problem that we confronted with regard to choosing between morally-permissible inclinations – a problem that practical identities were meant to solve. Now, though, it seems that the problem has only been pushed back. If my practical identity grounds my choices, what can ground my choice of practical identity?

If we look to common-sense deliberation, of course, the answer to this question is fairly obvious: for a variety of reasons, we think that some practical identities are better than others. When choosing a career, for example, criteria such as impact, pleasure, social status, fitness to my interests and talents, etc. all combine to give me more reason to be an artist than a professional nose-picker. Korsgaard's challenge is to make sense of such reasons. Few of her comments do so explicitly. Drawing on other aspects of her account, then, I will examine three ways in which she might attempt the task.

## II.

The first is this: Korsgaard could appeal to contingent facts about what you take to be important. This is the approach most obviously continuous with Korsgaard's project; as she puts it in *Sources of Normativity*,

Kant urges us to take things to be important *because they are important to us*. And this means we must do so in full acceptance of the fact that what specifically is important

---



---

to us is at bottom contingent and conditional, determined by biological, psychological, and historical conditions that themselves are neither justified nor unjustified, but simply there. In a deep way, all of our particular values are ones we *just happen* to hold.<sup>11</sup>

Taking such an embrace of contingency as our foundation, we could imagine choosing a practical identity on the basis of what we “just happen” to value; at the career fair, I introspect, discern that art happens to be more important to me than nose-picking, and decide to network with career-representatives accordingly. Such a picture has some intuitive plausibility, but critical scrutiny begins to reveal complications. First of all, Korsgaard’s talk about “what is important to us” can be taken in two ways. “Important to us” could mean “desired by us,” or it could mean “endorsed by us via rational choice.” The first falls flat; desires cannot ground the choice of practical identity by themselves, because for Korsgaard our bare desires are not reason-giving.<sup>12</sup> Rather, desires only generate reasons when we freely endorse them. The second option, then, is the only one yielding genuine normativity. Recall, though, that we only endorse desires on the basis of our existing practical identities (provided they are consistent with the moral law). Thus, reasons to choose a new identity or to discard an old one could only be generated by the identities we already have. For example, when I introspect at the career fair, it must be something like my current identity as a hipster that renders art important to me, and thus that grounds my choice to become an artist; by itself, a desire to make art is insufficient.

Given the continuity between many people’s practical identities – businessmen who become golfers, journalists who become novelists, environmentalists who become vegans – this view can seem intuitive. However, its capacity to account for most of our choices about practical identity is extremely limited. Perhaps *some* such choices issue straightforwardly from existing practical identities, but a great many do not. Imagine, for example, a young man raised in an atheist household. One day, he happens to page through the family bible, which his father keeps as an object of curiosity and occasional ridicule. Struck by a passage

---

---

from Matthew, the young man begins to wonder: should I become a Christian? When he consults his existing practical identities for guidance, however, he receives none. All that they tell him is that right now he is an atheist, and that he values rationality, science, and the eradication of faith from the modern world. But this is no help at all, because his question is not "what *do* I value?" but "what *should* I value?" A nose-picker at an art gallery might wonder the same, or a businessman chatting with a social worker: "Right now I value money, prestige, and my spot at the yacht club. This man, though, seems to value helping the poor. Am I doing it wrong? Should I value what he values?" These questions seem genuine, and they cannot be answered by one's existing practical identities, because it is precisely one's existing practical identities that are being called into question. The accused cannot also be the judge.

Some commentators – for example, Rachel Cohon and Christopher Gowans – take considerations like these as evidence in favor of some form of moral realism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Gowans points out, many practical identities seem to carry realist presuppositions embedded within them.<sup>14</sup> Christianity, for example, claims your allegiance whatever your existing practical identities; you may *happen* to worship that false idol, but you *should* accept Christ into your heart. Artists and social workers, though perhaps less evangelical, may give similar objective weight to their endeavors. To ground the choice of such identities solely in contingency, then, seems to prevent full participation; in many denominations, if I *just happen* to be a Christian, then I am not a genuine Christian at all. Some kind of objectivity about value, then, seems implicit not only in our deliberations about practical identity, but also in many practical identities themselves. Of course, such realist presuppositions may be mistaken. Insofar as Korsgaard wants to allow us to embrace identities containing them, though, she needs to give some account of normative objectivity, and an appeal to existing practical identities cannot do so.<sup>15</sup>

One obvious response to this problem would be to posit a set of independent normative facts or truths to which our identities

---

and deliberations attempt to respond. Of course, this move brings with it its own epistemic and metaphysical issues, but we need not consider them here, because such a move is not open to Korsgaard; in both *Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*, she explicitly denies the existence of objective normative facts.<sup>16</sup> Other accounts of normative objectivity, though, may still be open to her. Recall the distinction she draws between substantive moral realism and procedural moral realism.<sup>17</sup> Only the former posits intrinsically normative entities. The latter, by contrast, posits a *procedure* according to which normative questions can be correctly answered. The categorical imperative test is one such procedure. However, it cannot help us choose among morally-permissible identities. Appeal to existing identities is another such procedure, but, as we have seen, it cannot account for the distance between what we happen to value and what we *should* value. Perhaps, though, there are still other procedures that could do so, while remaining consistent with the assumptions undergirding Korsgaard's project.

### III.

This brings me to the second option I would like to examine: an appeal to ideal epistemic conditions.<sup>18</sup> On this view, an agent's reasons to choose one morally-permissible identity over another derive not from what happens to be important to her right now, but from what *would be* important to her if she were completely rational and fully equipped with the information relevant to her choice.<sup>19</sup> Such an derivation is familiar from discussions about ideal judgment theory, but it receives surprisingly little attention in Korsgaard. Our question, then, is not whether Korsgaard *actually* appeals to ideal epistemic conditions, but whether she *could* do so and still remain consistent with the rest of her project. At first glance, such an appeal seems promising. It implicates none of the objective normative facts for which Korsgaard has such distaste, but it accounts for a kind of objectivity nonetheless – a distance, created by our epistemic imperfection and our lack of information, between what we currently value and what we should value. Such a distance is precisely



---

---

what Korsgaard needs. Indeed, it may seem well-equipped to make sense of the examples cited previously. The atheist teenager, Korsgaard could suggest, does not trust his secular practical identities because he is unsure of the facts they are based on. What if there is, in fact, a God? What if Jesus really were resurrected? If the teenager had all the facts relevant to the situation and were devoid of biases and cognitive deficiencies, he could discard or adjust his practical identities accordingly.

Such epistemic hypotheticals certainly play a role in our deliberations: "if you only knew how much the poor are suffering," says the social worker to the businessman; "if you only knew how sore your nostrils will get," says the artist to the aspiring nose-picker. Christopher Gowans, however, suggests that they ultimately yield Korsgaard little advantage. I agree with this conclusion, but I think that the focus of Gowans' critique is misguided.

Gowans rightly points out that just as many practical identities carry with them beliefs about objective value, so too do many identities carry convictions about what conditions count as epistemically ideal.<sup>20</sup> For example, a Buddhist (Gowans' example) might consider mindfulness meditation an essential feature of an epistemic ideal, whereas a Christian might include biblical interpretation, and a logical-positivist would dismiss both. How, then, are we to choose between these different epistemic ideals? Gowans considers a number of options, but dismisses them all, concluding that this is yet another question that Korsgaard cannot adequately answer.

Such a conclusion, I think, is premature. Korsgaard may be a constructivist about value, but she is not a constructivist about epistemology – at least, not in *Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*. Thus, it is perfectly within her power to overrule conflicting epistemic commitments and to specify an epistemic ideal valid whatever your practical identity. All it would take to do so would be to figure out whether meditation does in fact yield insight into ultimate reality, or whether biblical interpretation is in fact essential to knowledge of the universe, and to build those results into the epistemic condition. Such a task poses prac-

tical difficulties, but philosophically it is relatively straightforward – there is, so to speak, a fact of the matter, and nothing in Korsgaard’s account denies her theoretical access to it.

Gowans considers this approach towards the end of his paper, but he argues that it would compromise what he calls the “Discretion Condition” – a constraint that requires that the epistemically ideal agent be sufficiently similar to the everyday agent that the latter could recognize the former’s choices as “her own.”<sup>21</sup> On this view, if the epistemic ideal were to include mindfulness meditation, it would be too distant from the Christian’s current practical identity, and it would therefore fail to motivate her existing self. Gowans deems this distance unacceptable.

I, however, see it as essential. The whole point of the epistemic ideal is to *justify* our reasons to choose identities that do not spring from the ones we already have. Since we do not have an independent normative ideal to do so, we appeal to an independent epistemic ideal instead. Precisely because the validity of this epistemic ideal does *not* depend on our existing identities, it can exert pressure on them, creating the distance between what we do value and what we should value that Korsgaard needs. Gowans’ emphasis on the Discretion Condition is therefore misguided. If a reasonable, philosophically genuine young-earth creationist were to learn for certain that the Bible, taken literally, does not yield an accurate picture of world history, this challenge to his epistemic commitments would not fall on ears deafened by his existing identity; rather, it would give him reason to change that identity. In this sense, facts about the correct epistemology are included in the set of facts relevant to deciding between identities – a set to which the epistemically ideal agent has complete access. If such access rules certain epistemically-misguided identities out of court, then all the more reason to choose anew.

Pace Gowans, then, the problem with appealing to such an ideal is not that different identities carry different epistemic commitments; rather, it is that in many cases such an ideal does not adequately determine the type of normativity looked for when choosing among morally-permissible practical identities. To see

---

---

this, let us return once again to the businessman and the social worker. The former says to the latter, "should I value what you value?" The latter responds, "You would if you knew how much the poor were suffering." But say that the businessman *does* know how much the poor are suffering. His (morally-permissible) job requires thorough and accurate knowledge about the conditions of the world's poorest populations. In fact, the businessman knows substantially *more* about poverty than the social worker, and he is far more rational to boot. In every relevant sense, he is much closer to the epistemic ideal than his interlocutor. Yet his knowledge of the facts quickly ceases to help answer his question, because his question is about how he should value those facts. Even in epistemically ideal conditions, this question would remain, and in a sense we would be back where we started, appealing to existing practical identities and finding them inadequate to the task.

Perhaps a defender of epistemic ideals could respond that the businessman is not, in fact, as close to the epistemic ideal as I have suggested. Sure, he can rattle off statistics about global poverty, he even has comprehensive knowledge of its history, consequences, and connection to other world affairs, but he has not *realized* his knowledge – it's just a bunch of dry facts. To really understand what's going on, he needs to spend days looking into the eyes of starving children, or denying medicine to mothers in need. He needs to be *touched*, to find certain facts reason-giving, and until he is, he cannot be considered epistemically well-equipped. Such a view could be hashed out in two ways, both of which are not open to Korsgaard. The first would be to say that certain values need to be included in the set of facts that an epistemically ideal agent "knows." As we have seen, though, Korsgaard explicitly denies the existence of normative facts or entities, so this option is off the table. The second would be to say that an epistemically ideal agent must be pre-equipped with certain values governing its reaction to the facts. For Korsgaard, though, this would be to saddle the epistemically-ideal agent with a practical identity. The problem, then, would be to decide which among the morally-permissible identities to choose, and

the whole problem would start all over. Thus, while a substantive moral realist might be able to embrace this view of ideal epistemology, Korsgaard cannot.

Ideal epistemic conditions, then, can no more ground our choice of practical identity than our existing practical identities can. Before moving on to a third and final option, though, I want to say a brief word about a larger objection that has been looming over the last two sections of this paper. On both an existing identities view and an ideal epistemic conditions view, the will is almost entirely passive. Its only real contribution to an agent's choice is to test her principle against the categorical imperative, which is the will's only internal law; for the rest of the will's normative work, it must rely entirely on resources external to itself – in this case, on the incentives endorsed by an agent's existing practical identities. Such passivity runs counter to Korsgaard's repeated insistence throughout both *Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution* that we actively make our practical identities what they are: "we enter into their construction... they are in part the result of our own activity."<sup>22</sup> This tension should motivate us to seek a way to choose between permissible practical identities that gives a more active role to our free will.

#### IV.

An extreme view of how to do so could be this: there is nothing that grounds your choice of practical identity but the choice itself. When confronted with such a decision, you need not and you cannot look to your existing identities, to ideal epistemic conditions, or to your incentives for help; you must, so to speak, *just choose* – albeit, in a manner consistent with the moral law. When you do so, your chosen identity *becomes* normative for you in a way it could never be prior to your choice. Your endorsement makes its object important.

Such a view gives to the free will the active role in constructing normativity that appeals to existing identities and epistemic ideals cannot. What's more, it fits well with many of Korsgaard's remarks about our ability to choose our non-moral ends. For example, in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* she claims that "the dis-

---

---

tinctive feature of humanity, *as such*, is simply the capacity to take a rational interest in something: to decide, under the influence of reason, that something is desirable, that it is worthy of pursuit or realization, that it is to be deemed important or valuable."<sup>23</sup> Our freedom consists in the opportunity to make this decision on our own, liberated from the external forces impinging on our autonomy. When we do so, we are not responding to "good-making properties of objects"; rather, "it is our own choices that ultimately confer value on objects."<sup>24</sup> On this view, it is the artist's choice to value art that makes being an artist normative for her, the social worker's choice to value the poor that makes her work worthwhile. The agent is the source of normativity; even beyond the Categorical Imperative, she remains truly her own law.

The problems with this view, however, are manifold. The first and most obvious is that it is quite counter-intuitive. A social worker does not see the value of helping the poor as a product of her choice to do so; rather, she sees her choice as a product of its object's value. Moreover, while this view can account for the normativity of the chosen identity, it cannot account for the normativity of unchosen identities. As Stephen Darwall points out, I may have chosen to be an academic philosopher, but I still see the value in all sorts of other identities that I did not choose.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, such a view struggles to capture any kind of comparison between identities at all. We want to say that being an artist is in some sense *better* than being a nose-picker. Prior to our choice, though, how could we do so, if the choice is what confers the identity's value? What's more, if choices are their own ground, how can we evaluate any as better or worse? The threat of the arbitrary quickly looms. In fact, such a view seems to eliminate the need for practical identities altogether. Provided that we remain within the bounds of the moral law, why not simply choose freely from among our desires? After all, our decisions will justify themselves.

Perhaps because of these obvious difficulties, Korsgaard often waffles on her constructivism, giving a greater normative role to desire and inclination than some of her constructivist

---

comments would suggest.<sup>26</sup> For example, she claims in “Two Distinctions in Goodness” that desire “is the initial combination of the goodness of many good things, and so a main source of the goodness of those things.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, she says in “The Reasons We Can Share” that “chocolate gets its value from the way it affects us. We confer value on it by liking it.”<sup>28</sup> Since we do not choose to like chocolate, this last quote is in direct tension with the claim quoted above, that “it is our own choices that ultimately confer value on objects.”<sup>29</sup> Such tension is part of a larger ambiguity running through Korsgaard’s work, between, on the one hand, the claim that we create our reasons, and on the other, the claim that we discover them.<sup>30</sup> Korsgaard is quite clear that, prior to endorsement, an impulse does not provide us a reason; rather, “that is what you have to decide about.”<sup>31</sup> But she also says that “when an impulse presents itself to us, as a kind of candidate for being a reason, we look to see whether it really is a reason.”<sup>32</sup> But how can we do so, if it is up to us to choose the answer? To get around this dilemma, Korsgaard seems to allow pre-endorsed but morally-permissible impulses a kind of pseudo-normativity, arising from desire, which calls the will to bestow upon them the real deal. Such impulses are not yet valuable per se, but they “answer to our nature in welcome ways.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, though we create our own reasons, we have pseudo-reasons, so to speak, to create the reasons that we do.

At best, such pseudo-normativity is on shaky ground. Its force is unclear, its relationship to its big brother is questionable, and the combination of both creates an uncomfortable overlap, provoking the suspicion that there are, so to speak, too many normative cooks in the kitchen. Whatever its rational stability, however, the place of pseudo-normativity in Korsgaard’s account is quite revealing. Having released the will from all its earthly bonds, Korsgaard needs to reign it back in. She cannot give reasons, because the will must make its own reasons, so she entices it back with pseudo-reasons arising from desire, which the will then ratifies. But now it seems that the will is not so free after all. Left on its own, it has no internal content, save the Categorical Imperative, to guide it. Thus, it reels briefly in the moral-

ly-permissible emptiness, then must return home to the earthly impulses that originally held it in bondage.

To put this another way, what Korsgaard is confronting is the problem of the empty self. When you abstract yourself from all of your impulses and identities in order to choose among them, you are, as Korsgaard herself puts it, "too distant from yourself to make choices... your empty self can have no reason to do one thing rather than another."<sup>34</sup> Our practical identities are meant to solve this problem, but when we must choose our practical identities, it arises once more. Korsgaard acknowledges this issue in *Self-Constitution*, but addresses it directly with only a few cursory sentences:

This is a false dilemma, arrived at by an artificial freezing of the observer's mental frame. It assumes that the endorsement of our identities, our self-constitution, is a state rather than an activity... but self-constitution is not a state that we achieve and from which action then issues... [rather], it is action itself.<sup>35</sup>

The brevity of this argument makes it difficult to penetrate, but seen in the light of the discussion that follows, it becomes clearer. Throughout *Self-Constitution*, Korsgaard emphasizes that in everything we do, we are always already both self-constituted and self-constituting. We never empty, but neither are we ever full; rather, our actions and our practical identities exist in a dynamic interplay, each in a constant process of shaping the other. The empty self problem, Korsgaard suggests, comes only when you attempt to freeze this process and abstract the self from the basis of its choices. In reality, though, this never happens, so the problem does not arise.

But we can accept this as an objective picture of our self-constitution, and still maintain that from the perspective of a deliberating agent, the empty-self problem remains forceful. Even if I am never empty in reality, in order to choose my practical identities autonomously I cannot take any of them for granted. Rather, I must step outside of them, even if only for the purposes of

thought. Otherwise, my choice will not be truly *mine*; my decision to remain a Christian will not be made by me myself, but by my Christian practical identity – hardly a real choice. Indeed, Korsgaard understands this well: as she puts it in *Sources of Normativity*, options at hand are “the passively confronted material upon which the active will operates, and not the agent or active will itself.”<sup>36</sup> When we must choose among our practical identities, the necessity of such a distance renders the problem of the empty self unresolved.

Indeed, if we look back at the three ways of choosing we have considered –existing identities, epistemic ideals, or pure will – we see that in a sense the empty self has been our problem all along. Korsgaard’s account rests on the free will, but the free will needs practical identities to give it content. When we step back from such identities to choose among them, though, we are once again empty. Existing identities are no help, because they too have been called into question, and epistemic ideals are no help, because the epistemically ideal agent is also empty. Absent independent normative facts to guide us, the pure will seems the only resource left, but it *too* is empty, so its brute choices, though morally-permissible, are arbitrary and groundless. In this sense, it is Korsgaard’s failure to adequately address the problem of the empty self that prevents her from giving a satisfactory account of our choice of practical identities. Her free will is, so to speak, too free.

I will conclude by briefly suggesting one possible step towards resolving this problem. From the very start, one of the most implausible aspects of Korsgaard’s account has been her extreme voluntarism about practical identity. Many of our practical identities are contingent, she admits, but whether you take them as reason-giving is entirely “up to you.”<sup>37</sup> But as Rachel Cohon points out, for many practical identities this just seems wrong: “we can try to repudiate them, but it may not work,” for their hold on us is too deep.<sup>38</sup> A wife may try to reject her allegiance to her husband, or a citizen to her country, and find that nevertheless she cannot help but take those practical identities as reason-giving. In this sense, Korsgaard’s extreme voluntarism is



unrealistic. Perhaps, though, if we were to soften it, we could give certain practical identities such de facto pull that they could not be abandoned or plausibly stepped-back from. Certainly, this would limit our freedom; we would no longer wholly "create ourselves" in the manner Korsgaard wants.<sup>39</sup> But perhaps such constraints are precisely what she needs to give the empty self some content. Of course, this proposal will clash with other aspects of Korsgaard's project, and it leaves many questions unresolved. Nevertheless, given the implausibility of Korsgaard's extreme voluntarism, it seems a promising place to start.

---



---

### Notes

1. SC 116.
2. SN 97.
3. SC 76.
4. See Anscomb, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 26-31; and Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed (London: Macmillan, 1967) 106. Stephen Darwall points out their agreement in his unpublished paper, "Grotius at the Creation of Modern Moral Philosophy."
5. SC 20.
6. SC 20.
7. SC 21.
8. SC 23.
9. SC 43.
10. SC 20.
11. 242, emphasis in the original.
12. In Section IV of this paper, I examine the normativity of desire more explicitly and suggest that some ambiguity surrounds it. For the purposes of this section, though, Korsgaard's clear statements that desires themselves cannot generate reasons are sufficient.
13. See Gowans, Christopher. "Practical Identity and Autonomy: Korsgaard's Reformation of Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. 64, no. 3 (May 2002) p. 557; and Cohon, Rachel. "The Roots of Reasons," *The Philosophical Review* vol. 109, no. 1 (Jan. 200) p. 74 footnote.
14. Gowans 557.
15. Gowans 557.
16. Sources 34-48, Self-Constitution 64-65.
17. SN 35-6.
18. In his article "Practical Identities and Autonomy: Korsgaard's Reformation of Kant's Moral Philosophy," Christopher Gowans suggests and then critiques this possibility. As will become clear, I disagree with his critique. My initial discussion, though, is based off of his.

19. Stephen Darwall suggests to me that such a view requires a further caveat: that an epistemically ideal agent choose not for herself qua epistemically ideal, but rather for herself in everyday epistemic conditions – conditions that the ideal agent will, so to speak, “re-enter.” I am not aware of the research that motivates this caveat, but it seems plausible, and everything I say should be consistent with it. For the sake of simplicity, though, I have chosen not to build it into the present discussion explicitly.
20. 564.
21. 569.
22. SN 239.
23. 114, emphasis in the original.
24. SC 123.
25. Discussion at Yale University on April 29, 2011.
26. Hannah Ginsborg examines this waffling in “Korsgaard on Choosing Nonmoral Ends,” *Ethics* 109 (October 1998) p. 7 footnote.
27. CKE 268.
28. CKE 284.
29. SC 123.
30. Ginsborg and Cohon both point to this ambiguity. See the Ginsborg footnote cited above and Cohon, “Roots of Reasons,” 68.
31. SC 123.
32. SN 108.
33. 123.
34. SC 43.
35. 44.
36. 241.
37. SC 23.
38. Cohon 70.
39. SC 20.

---

---

## Bibliography

- Anscomb, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).
- Cohon, Rachel. "The Roots of Reasons," *The Philosophical Review* vol. 109, no. 1 (Jan. 200).
- Ginsborg, Hannah. "Korsgaard on Choosing Nonmoral Ends," *Ethics* 109 (October 1998).
- Gowans, Christopher. "Practical Identity and Autonomy: Korsgaard's Reformation of Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. 64, no. 3 (May 2002).
- Korsgaard, Christine. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).
- Korsgaard, Christine, with G. A. Cohen, Raymond Guess, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams. *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).
- Korsgaard, Christine. *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).
- Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed (London: Macmillan, 1967) 106.