

Practical Identity, Obligation, and Sociality

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Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what your identity forbids ... an obligation always takes the form of a reaction against a threat of a loss of identity.

(Korsgaard 1996a, 101, 102)

Introduction

By characterizing obligation as a reflective rejection of what threatens one's identity, Christine Korsgaard introduces a suggestive approach to this normative concept. This approach is mediated by the notion of "practical identity," which she first characterized in *Sources of Normativity* 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" (Korsgaard 1996a, 101). She has basically maintained this approach in her more recent work focused on agency and self-constitution (Korsgaard 2009, 20). However, since obligations are usually toward others, her account could seem too self-centered; that is, by explaining obligation through identity, the other person enters the picture too late. In this article, I explore the way in which Korsgaard's approach to obligation in terms of "reflective rejection of what threatens one's identity" can be brought into harmony with the fact of human sociability, which accounts for our obligations toward others.

The problem arises because, if it is only upon reflection that we find that the other is a relevant part of us, such that hurting the other is akin to hurting one's self, it is not entirely clear how to separate obligations toward the other as such and those toward one's self. William FitzPatrick (2013, 42) has suggested that Korsgaard is unable to avoid this sort of "psychologization" of moral experience, and Stefan Bird-Pollan more explicitly pointed in this direction when he asked, "Is interaction really only with one's own principle or is it with the other, actual, people who have their own principles?" (2011, 377)

To this objection Korsgaard might answer that for every kind of obligation (and not just obligations toward others), interaction is not primarily with a principle, but rather with parts or dimensions of oneself; this is the same sense in which Immanuel Kant explains obligation as resulting from interaction between *homo noumenon* and *homo phaenomenon* (Kant 1996 [MM 6:418]). Still, this alone does not entirely address Bird-Pollan's point insofar as it does not explain why obligations toward others cannot merely be reduced to obligations toward oneself.

In order for that to happen, a further distinction is needed, namely, the distinction between the reason why a law applies to someone—for instance, French law applies to you insofar as you have French citizenship—and the object of a particular obligation ensuing from that fact—say, you ought to pay taxes in France.

According to this distinction, too, moral law applies to you, and you are subject to obligations, insofar as you are a rational being, but the specific content of those obligations derives from different circumstances, which impinge upon your humanity. Especially relevant among these are other people, who provide you with particular reasons for action that you find binding precisely because of your identity as a human being. Thus, being a physician provides a general reason why certain obligations fall to doctors, yet a particular patient in need provides the particular reason for going through with certain medical action; more generally, your identity as a human being provides the basic reason why you are receptive to the demands that the other's reasons convey, urging you to act in a certain way.

From this perspective, our identity as rational beings can be viewed as a source of obligations toward others without losing the genuine sense of being obliged to/by others; it suffices to remember that no obligation becomes real unless a particular reason is provided, and others can provide that particular reason. In this regard, it should be further noted that, from a psychological point of view, the thought that others are expecting something from us very often constitutes more powerful reason to perform an action than when we think of certain actions merely as duties toward ourselves. After all, the other's reasons are embodied and alive, that is, they enjoy a factual reality that our own "private" reasons—that is, the reasons we give to ourselves to ground a certain behavior—often lack.

Nevertheless, the compelling force that an obligation can exhibit due to a variety of psychological considerations is not as much of interest here as is the normative force derived from the intrinsic structure of practical reason. In effect, motives should be rational in order to be normative. As I will argue below, the very structure of practical reason demands the articulation of a universal premise, which our rational nature provides, and a particular one, which depends on various circumstances.

In this context, the noteworthy part of Korsgaard's account pertains to her argument about "the shareable character of reasons." Indeed, she has noted that, while in some cases the other can provide that particular reason, with his or her specific needs and claims, it is neither "your" nor "my" reason that obligates me, but rather reason in general—a reason that we can share insofar as we share its principles and are also knowledgeable of the particular reason in charge of bringing those principles into practice in a given case. By resorting to the "shareable character of reasons," Korsgaard is able to counter the previous objection about the self-centered nature of her account of obligation. Indeed, as I would like to argue, reason is neither self-centered nor other-centered; rather, it is the space where the self and the other can meet and find common ground.

In what follows, I will further analyze this argument about the connection between obligation, identity, and sociality. In order to do so, however, I would like

to start by stressing the fact that some sort of reflection is unavoidable in ethics because of its association with the very notion of human agency. On this basis, (i) I will resort to Aristotle to explore the kind of reflexivity implicit in the ethical relationships of justice and friendship; (ii) I will then resume Korsgaard's account of obligation toward others as arising from our identity as rational beings, and, more precisely, (iii) from the shareable nature of reasons. With this established, we also need to address the opposite objection: (iv) What makes the other's reasons *different* from my own? What is it that makes my reason actually mine?

1. Reflexivity and the Other: Justice and Friendship according to Aristotle

The idea that the nature and quality of moral relationships with others *depend* on the nature and quality of relationships with one's self does not lack philosophical support. According to Aristotle, "friendly relations with one's neighbors, and the marks by which friendships are defined, seem to have proceeded from a man's relations to himself" (Aristotle 1984 [NE, IX, 4, 1166a1–2]).¹ Ethical relationships with others—basically friendship and justice—are ultimately rooted in the sort of self-love that is proper to rational beings, which Aristotle explicitly distinguishes from selfish self-love (NE, IX, 8). Reference to the self can never be entirely bypassed: properly caring about ourselves is a condition for caring about others. Some sort of reflexivity—what can be called "structural reflexivity"—is embedded in every act of care.² Yet, it is precisely the nature of this structure that we must understand. In this section, I argue that the reflexivity proper to ethical relationships is mediated by some sort of law, which we share with other rational beings.

While from a psychological point of view it is clear that we develop a moral conscience in interaction with particular others, understanding the very *possibility* of establishing relations of a moral kind requires—to put it in Kantian terms—understanding the possibility of taking the other not solely as a means, but always also as an end. Thus, moral relationships require that we relate to others in terms that differ from those proper to instrumental reason—that we relate to others not in terms of master and slave, but rather as equals. This kind of moral relationship is encapsulated in the idea of justice and, even more perfectly, in the idea of friendship, which culminates the features of freedom and reciprocity that are also characteristic of relationships of justice. This explains why Aristotle claims that "when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality" (NE, VIII, 1, 1155a26–31), something that is surely connected with equity (NE, V, 10, 1137b9–26).

Indeed, saying that true friendship "has no need of justice" is not meant to say that friends are unconcerned with the objective requirements of justice; rather, it stresses the fact that they usually exceed the requirements of that kind of justice. Along those lines, Aristotle considers injustices against friends as particularly appalling: "injustice increases by being exhibited toward those who are

friends in a fuller sense” (NE, VIII, 8, 1160a1–6). For him, justice constitutes a dynamic reality that is intrinsic to every relationship and cannot be reduced to legal justice; the latter only represents an external measure that sets the *minimum* of reciprocal freedom required in human relationships.³ While the virtue of justice cannot be equated with friendship, it demands more than strictly abiding by the law. In this way, Aristotle’s approach to both justice and friendship suggests a dynamic continuity between them. Friendship can flourish between those who are just. In the meantime, however, there is a significant difference between them; that is, from the perspective of justice the other appears primarily as an “equal,” subject to the same law, and therefore endowed in principle with the same rights that one claims for one’s self; from the perspective of friendship, by contrast, the other is regarded as “another self.”⁴ In other words, while justice stresses otherness, friendship stresses identity—my friend is a part of me, a quasi-extended self. In this way, friendship makes room for basic solidarity to emerge, which does not cancel out the equality highlighted by justice, but rather presupposes it. Indeed, recognizing the other as an equal, as is required by justice, already involves comparison with one’s self, and hence a connection with the self. Such connection, however, emerges even more clearly when it comes to friendship, where it is closer to identity; Aristotle even says that, in perceiving his friend, the good man perceives himself (NE, IX, 9, 1170a32–1170b13; NE, IX, 12). The good man finds his reflection in his friend almost as if he were looking in a mirror. Interestingly, Aristotle speaks of “perception,” and not of “reflection,” thereby reducing the epistemic distance between friends. For our purposes here, we can regard this perception as a form of embedded reflexivity, made possible through reflexive habituation. By “embedded reflexivity” I mean self-awareness mediated through the presence of one’s friend; this kind of self-awareness evolves in the context of long-term friendships. Indeed, friends who have been acquainted with each other for a long time develop a peculiar knowledge of their own selves in the context of their relationship.

Now, I would like to suggest that such reflexivity is nothing other than the full development of what human beings first realize when they recognize the other as an equal, that is, as a person subject to the same law. Aristotle, of course, does not stress the fact that the recognition of the other as an equal is an act mediated by the law, but he does indicate that there is justice among those subject to the same law.⁵ While here he obviously refers to positive law (he does not usually talk about law in any other sense), an implicit reference to the mediating character of the law is already at work when he notes the possibility of friendship between master and slave *insofar as the slave is a man*. His argument goes as follows:

Where there is nothing common to ruler and rule, there is not friendship either, since there is not justice; between craftsman and tool, soul and body, master and slave ... neither is there friendship towards a horse or an ox, nor to a slave qua slave. For there is nothing common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave. *Qua* slave, then, one cannot be friends with him. But *qua* man one can; for there seems to be some justice between any man and any other who can share in a system of law or be a

party to an agreement; therefore there can also be friendship with him in so far as he is a man. (NE, VIII, 11, 1161 a 31- b7)

Conversely, the fact that master and slave can be friends, *insofar as both are human beings*, suggests that there is *some justice* between them because they “can share in a system of law or be a party to an agreement.” *Being able to share in a system of law*, therefore, underpins the development of justice and friendship. This is important in order to understand the nature of the reflexivity that both justice and friendship entail; in both cases, reflexivity is mediated by an implicit reference to the law, which signals that we are equals. This also means that obligations toward others cannot be entirely traced back to obligations toward one’s self, at least not in an obvious sense. It is only through the mediation of law that the rational agent comes to recognize the other as an equal, as an end rather than a means, and as a source of moral reasons for action.

Insisting on the mediating character of the law is important to show that one’s idiosyncratic self does not serve as a criterion for recognizing the other as an equal; rather, it is the law, working in a particular self, that leads one to treat the other as an equal, that is, as another particular self under the same law. By formulating the problem this way, we find ourselves in Korsgaard’s terrain.

2. Obligations toward the Other as Derived from One’s Identity

There is an obvious sense in which obligations toward the other depend on reflection, that is, “if you are going to obligate me I must be conscious of you” (Korsgaard 1996a, 136). Yet, being conscious of you as an equal, and hence in a position to make moral demands upon me, requires a further step. In the previous section, I noted that reflection upon the demands you make becomes a moral reflection insofar as it is implicitly mediated by the thought of a law that impinges upon both you and me as human beings. We could also say that, in order to avoid making one’s obligations toward the other contingent merely on one’s self-conception, it is important to see the necessary relationship between whatever practical identities we may have and the moral identity derived from our rational nature, which Korsgaard describes as *essential* practical identity (Korsgaard 2009, 22; 1996a, 113–25).

There is a sense, of course, in which one’s obligations toward the other are contingent on one’s self-conception. After all, if a waiter is obliged to serve coffee to a patron, that obligation is based on the waiter–patron relationship, which could disappear if the waiter quit his job. As long as he is a waiter, however, some obligations follow. In Korsgaard’s view those obligations can be accounted for as deriving from the reflective rejection of everything that one perceives as a threat to one’s identity (Korsgaard 1996a, 100, 113–25). This seems especially clear in the case of professional identities with definite boundaries and for practical identities that incorporate specific roles or tasks, that is, as a member of a family or citizen of a certain country, and so on. Otherwise, when practical identities are

not so institutionalized, human beings feel the need to reflectively frame their actions so as to provide them with a certain structure, defining, in the process, their position and hence their obligations toward others. This framing is a matter of reflective judgment; if it is meant to specify an obligation, however, it is only because it manages to connect the situation at hand with the most basic requirements of our humanity.

To illustrate the above, imagine a train accident in which one passenger realizes that she is the only person without serious injury; this realization leads her to *conclude* that she is particularly obliged to help other passengers. Of course, being ultimately *moved* to help other passengers is not based just on being the only uninjured passenger; being a passenger is a fleeting, *ephemeral identity* representing just *one* of the premises that could lead to such a conclusion. Yet, this minor premise brings to light a deeper solidarity hidden in any concept of identity. Indeed, every time we attribute an identity to an individual—say, physician, lawyer, woman, American—we make him or her part of a group that shares in that particular identity.

Through this very act of attribution we create a particular reason for solidarity, providing particular content that activates the major premise, which is implicit in any ethical action, namely, “a rational animal *is moved* to help her fellows.” Usually this major, universal premise does not need explicit articulation; it operates silently, but efficaciously, through particular premises—in this case, the perception of injured fellow passengers. Both premises together *naturally* lead the uninjured passenger to a conclusion that reflectively informs her choice to help. This is what it means to have a human nature, after all. Indeed, if a rational agent is expected to consider human nature as normative, it is only because, upon reflection, she does not object to anything in that kind of natural impulse,⁶ which is ultimately rooted in a basic solidarity that is antecedent to conventional social differentiations. On the contrary, were the agent not ready to help her fellow passengers, she would certainly feel that she had betrayed her identity as a human being.

In my view, this reference to our humanity is implicit in every moral obligation. This is also the case for Korsgaard, insofar as she recognizes a link between the practical identities we happen to have and our rational, moral identity; while the former provides immediate incentives for action, only the latter contains normative force:

Unless you are committed to some conception of your practical identity, you will lose your grip on yourself as having any reason to do one thing rather than another—and with it, your grip on yourself as having any reason to live and act at all. But this reason for conforming to your particular practical identities is not a reason that springs from one of those particular practical identities. It is a reason that springs from your humanity itself, from your identity simply as a human being, a reflective animal who needs reasons to act and to live. And so it is a reason you have only if you treat your humanity as a practical, normative, form of identity, that is, if you value yourself as a human being. (Korsgaard 1996a, 120–21)

While the necessary link between a certain practical identity and our humanity is only *discovered* upon reflection, it is operative throughout; in valuing our own humanity, we begin to value other things (Korsgaard 1996a, 123). In *Self-Constitution* (2009, 25), Korsgaard reviews the same argument: “In order to be a person—that is, to have reasons—you must constitute yourself as a particular person, and ... in order to do that, you must commit yourself to your value as a person-in-general, that is, as a rational agent.” Indeed, to value our humanity in this way is to have what Korsgaard calls “moral identity,” which is “just like any other form of practical identity. To act morally is to act in a certain way simply as a human being, to act as one who values her humanity should” (Korsgaard 1996a, 129).

Reflectively endorsing one’s own humanity provides one with basic reasons for action. Yet, in order to act, one must flesh out those reasons, which is where incentives that resonate with our nature and our practical identities come in. They represent the starting point of practical deliberation, but in order to *decide* whether a particular incentive should be taken up as a motive for action, one must ultimately ask, in a Kantian manner, whether one would be able to will the purported maxim as a universal law (Korsgaard 1996a, 108). It is only in this latter case that an inclination becomes a right *reason for action*, able to create or reinforce one’s identity in a way that is consistent with our humanity.

In Kant’s case, the possible universalization of any given maxim, or reason for action, would automatically be a mark of its moral permissibility. Korsgaard, however, introduces a distinction, which Kant’s work lacks, between the categorical imperative as law of free will and the moral law, which specifies the full domain of that imperative. Accordingly, “only if the law ranges over every rational being ... the resulting law will be the moral law” (Korsgaard 1996a, 99).

By adding this qualification, she is considering the possibility that a particular agent establishes as his or her law something like “acting on the desire of the moment,” which would in fact preclude the very notion of agency. Similarly, if “the law ranges over the agent’s whole life,” but excludes the needs of others, the possibility of becoming “some sort of egoist” arises (Korsgaard 1996a, 99). Thus, while the law that egoists impose upon themselves constitutes them as a particular kind of agent, with an associated practical identity, it is not a moral law; the identity that egoist agents create for themselves is not open to the requirements of others and they are unable to care for others as they care for themselves, that is, as equals subject to the same law. This indicates that only when the law that regulates human choices *expands its domain* so as to include all rational beings—as manifested in the third formula of the categorical imperative, the Kingdom of Ends—do we get a truly moral law. Once we arrive at this stage, it is clear that we may be obliged by others as much as we oblige ourselves because of the simple fact that in both cases we are obliged by the same law.

Now, following Joshua Gert (2002, 316), we might ask if this argument should be interpreted as saying that some agents’ practical identities do not include being members of the Kingdom of Ends, while others do identify with

this membership. If we consider that being members of the Kingdom of Ends is another way of identifying with our own rationality, this amounts to saying that egoist agents do not identify with their own rational condition. Yet, this is not exactly the case since they do identify with some form of rationality, albeit instrumental. Therefore, the problem lies in finding a way to “secure” a reflective transition from instrumental to moral rationality.

Bernard Williams doubted that an argument for such a transition could be made;⁷ from another, more existential perspective, Søren Kierkegaard thought there is no rational transition whatsoever, but rather only a leap of faith from the esthetic to the ethical stage, and from the ethical to the religious one. By contrast, Kant himself thought that a rational argument for morality exists; indeed, his entire moral philosophy revolves around it. Yet, he also thought that the transition from nature to morality is never merely a natural one; even if becoming a full member of the Kingdom of Ends is a process of moral education, achieving a moral character is never just a matter of natural progress, but rather a revolutionary step. As he argued, “that a human being should become not merely legally good, but morally good”—he writes in the *Religion*—“... cannot be effected through gradual reform but must rather be effected through a revolution in the disposition of the human being” (Kant 1998 [RGV, 6:47]).

Still, this revolution could be sustained on the basis that human beings are not merely natural beings for whom reason is just an instrument to satisfy otherwise particular natural goals. Rather, they are rational beings in a deeper sense, that is, beings capable of redefining their goals in accordance with the universality of reason, a fact that sooner or later they must reflectively endorse when confronted with other facts, including those related to their own human nature and social life. Now, if this is the human condition, there must be a way of showing that the reflective endorsement of the egoist’s identity contradicts our deepest identity. This is what Kant attempted to show when he argued that by endorsing his maxim, the egoist introduces a contradiction in his will (Kant 1997a [GG, 4:424]). Arguing from the second formula of the categorical imperative, Korsgaard conveys the nature of this contradiction by showing that 1) whatever one chooses, and therefore values, implies that one is willing one’s person as a source of value, as someone whose value is not relative, but rather absolute, and 2) once one has recognized one’s value as an end, one becomes further committed to granting that value to other human beings.⁸ It is this second step that interests us here because, in arguing in favor of it, Korsgaard departs from routine arguments in ways directly relevant for understanding the nature of our obligations toward others.

3. Shareable Reasons

According to Korsgaard, rational accounts of morality differ depending on whether they start from self-interest or from a moral conception of the self (Korsgaard 1996a, 132 ss).⁹ While the former usually refers back to Hobbes and shows how self-interest inspires reason to participate in a moral system, the latter

goes back to Kant and tries to show how a moral conception of the self gives reason to regard others as equally moral. According to Korsgaard, many of the latter accounts defend the transition from the recognition of one's own value to the recognition of the other's value as if it were just a matter of logical consistency, that is, "since I regard my humanity as a source of value, I must in the name of consistency regard your humanity that way as well" (Korsgaard 1996a, 133). Now, while this sort of argument differs from the attempt to derive moral obligations from self-interest, it shares with it a focus on private reasons because both are concerned with showing how certain private reasons that the agent holds give him reason to take others' reasons into account and vice versa. In contrast, Korsgaard suggests that "reasons are not private, but public in their very essence":

If reasons were essentially private, consistency would not force me to take your reasons into account. And even if it did, it would do it in the wrong way. It should show that I have an obligation to myself to treat you in ways that respect the value which I place on you. It would show that I have duties with respect to you, about you, but not that there are things I owe to you. But some duties really are owed to others: we may be obligated by others, I will argue, in much the same way that we may be obligated by ourselves. (Korsgaard 1996a, 134)

As Peter Fristedt (2011, 537) notes, this argument is connected with Kant's formula of humanity because valuing our humanity is valuing our rational nature, and hence valuing reasons as reasons. While Korsgaard's argument on this point has been an object of criticism (Cholbi 1999; Gert 2002), it is important to note that it is an argument about the nature of reasons, which are not just private psychological acts issued by a particular agent; we should not forget that those psychological acts point toward an object that can be shared by other agents, and this object is also what we call "a reason." Accordingly, "to act on a reason is already, essentially, to act on a consideration whose normative force may be shared with others" (Korsgaard 1996a, 136). This is the cornerstone from which she argues for the recognition of others' claims. In her reply to Bird-Pollan, she elaborates further:

I do not see how we can recognize the claims of others unless reasons are already, or rather essentially, public or intersubjective. If I am simply a being who follows my desires, the desires of others will be nothing to me unless I happen to desire that their desires should be satisfied. If we were weakly autonomous, we could not recognize the desires of others as having a claim on us, because we could not recognize in others what we do not find in ourselves. A being that acts only on its immediate desires does not recognize the idea of a claim. Our ability to acknowledge the claims of others is essentially tied to our ability to make claims on ourselves: there is no intelligible route from wantonness to autonomy through the claims of others. (Korsgaard 2011, 392)

Implicit in the preceding argument is the idea that our ability to recognize the claims of others is linked to the ability to obligate ourselves. Indeed, if we can recognize the claims of others, it is only because we can recognize claims at all, and, in order to recognize the persistence of the claims others make upon us, we need a sense of our own persistence. This is why Korsgaard develops an argument

about the persistence of the self in order to explain why others make claims upon us, saying that one can only obligate oneself by linking one's present self to one's future self; this link is the work of practical reason. By achieving this unity, one is in a position to interact with and recognize the claims of others:

We must learn to acknowledge the reality of others, to put it in Nagelian terms, and that is easiest (in some ways) with the near and dear (Nagel 1970). But as a matter of metaphysics, I think that our encounter with the publicity of reason is more intimate than that. ... I argue that reasons must be public in their normative force in order to bring unity to the self ... the idea is that unless I recognize the normative force of the claims of both my present and future selves, I cannot hold my own agency together over time well enough to interact properly with others ... whenever we act for reasons, we make claims even on ourselves: claims whose normative force is public, in the sense that they reach out from one moment or aspect of the self to another. That is what enables us to recognize the claims of others: that we see our own condition reflected in them. (Korsgaard 2011, 393)

In the above passage, Korsgaard develops an old idea (Korsgaard 1996b, 369–70) that is innovative insofar as she traces a parallel between the recognition of “our” future selves and the recognition of *other* selves. After all, if we can call “our” future selves “ours,” it is only because we establish a practical relationship between our present and any “future” selves, which somehow is at the basis of the relationships we have with others. This should not strike us as completely unexpected because, as seen above, relationships with others, both in the realm of friendship and in the realm of justice, develop out of the relationship we have with our selves. Both in *Sources of Normativity* (1996a, 102) and in *Self-Constitution* (2009, 134), Korsgaard refers to Plato's analogy between the order of the soul and the order of the republic, which we also find in Aristotle (NE, VIII, 11: 1161a10, 30). Arguing along these lines, she concludes, first, that, “in the same way that we can obligate ourselves, we can be obligated by other people and, second, that we have obligations both to, and with regard to, other living beings” (Korsgaard 1996a, 92).

In order to understand the latter point—our obligations with regard to other living beings—let us remark that, although Korsgaard resorts to Wittgenstein's argument against private language (Korsgaard 1996a, 137–39), her intention is not to make an argument about language, and even less so to discuss the conflicting interpretations of those passages in Wittgenstein's work, but rather to introduce an analogy with the intrinsic universality of reasons,¹⁰ whether they are conveyed linguistically or not. Taking this latter point into account resolves the objection Michael Cholbi raised when noting that “Korsgaard overstates the power of her hypothesis about the publicity of reasons, trading on an ambiguity between ‘sharing reasons’ by articulating them in a public language and ‘sharing reasons’ by having common ends” (1999, 494). In my view, the analogy with language is just that. Desires and emotions, not just words, can also provide the agent with incentives to formulate shareable reasons. When a person is thirsty, she can express her thirst in words or she can just look around for something to drink. Whoever is able to interpret those signs understands or shares the reason embedded in that behavior. This reason can also be embedded in an animal's

particular behavior, although unable to articulate it. If the animal's "reasons" are not entirely conclusive and normative in the same way that human reasons are, it is only because animals are not ends in themselves, that is, they do not possess their own reasons reflectively the way people do.

At any rate, the important point here is that reasons, be they my own or another person's reasons, linguistically articulated or not, are essentially normative. Obviously this does not mean that every time someone voices or otherwise exhibits a particular reason we should immediately act upon it. As Fristedt puts it, "even while we feel their normative pull, we feel a greater normative pull from other reasons" (2011, 548). Indeed, before acting in accordance with another's reason, one may need to take other reasons into account, including those derived from our own subsistence. Balancing some reasons against others—their urgency, their content, and so on—is a matter of judgment. As in Korsgaard's example (1996a, 140), you may call out to me, which is certainly a reason for me to stop and go to you, but I may have *other* reasons not to do so (interestingly, I am usually obliged to give some sort of explanation, and failing to do so would be considered wrong).¹¹

The "intersubjectivity" of reasons is especially apparent in the process of shared deliberation, which ultimately involves the fact that all human beings are rational animals. As Aristotle saw it, rationality brings with it a deeper source of sociality that is particularly manifest in the phenomenon of articulated language (*Politics*, I, 2, 1253a7–18). Korsgaard also stresses this fact:

Human beings are social animals in a deep way. It is not just that we go in for friendship or prefer to live in swarms or packs. The space of linguistic consciousness—the space in which meanings and reasons exist—is a space that we occupy together. (1996a, 145)

Although Korsgaard argues this point in *Sources* by resorting to Aristotle, the *rationale* for it could also be drawn from Kant. Indeed, arguing for the shareable character of reasons amounts to arguing for the structure of morality that Kant uncovers with the formula of the Kingdom of Ends, which is meant to provide us with the form of a moral community that is able to overcome our "unsocial sociability" (Kant 2007a, Idea 8:20). For Kant, being moved by practical reason means acting according to a maxim that can be universalized (as required by the formula of the universal law) and aiming at an end compatible with that universal form—which, as the argument for the formula of humanity shows, explains the human capacity of setting ends for oneself. Taken together, both requirements lead us to explain the internal structure of the moral law according to the formula of the Kingdom of Ends (Kant 1997a [GG4: 438]).

Be it from an Aristotelian or from a Kantian perspective, by defending the shareability of reasons Korsgaard bypasses the problem of the derivative character of obligations toward others, asserting that others are a source of obligation insofar as they are rational; as such, they are sources of reasons that carry external, as well as personal, normative force precisely insofar as we are rational and able

to share in those very reasons.¹² To the extent that one can understand what others are saying, one cannot fail to recognize their humanity, not only as a source of reasons for themselves, but also as a source of reasons for oneself.

This solution, however, immediately raises the opposite objection: if the normativity of reason is grounded on its intrinsic shareability, then what is it that makes the other's reasons different from my own? What is it that makes my reasons actually mine? Is there nothing deeply personal about the reasons I can share?

4. Shareable, but Different, Reasons

Regarding these latter questions, it is important to keep in mind that reasons are advanced by and embodied in actual people such that being obliged by reasons equates to being obliged by other people. From this perspective, answering the preceding questions means explaining the embodiment of reasons. It involves realizing that human beings' rational activity is conditioned by empirical—biological, psychological, and social—circumstances. As reflective agents and holders of reasons, we are required to distinguish the universal validity of reasons from their particular and empirically contingent genesis. While recognizing the contingent source of the many particular reasons we hold, we also realize the role they play in the configuration of our own practical identity and in our engagements with others. Being able to recognize those contingent reasons as our own and reflectively endorse them is a sign of maturity:

Contingency itself is something that may either be actively embraced or passively endured, and this makes all the difference: the mature attitude is the one that actively embraces it, not the one that passively endures it. ... Kant urges us to take things to be important because they are important to us. And this means that 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 ... Kantian agents transform contingent values into necessary ones by valuing the humanity that is their source. (Korsgaard 1996a, 242)

The embodiment of practical reason presupposes that human beings' capacity to set ends for ourselves, along with our capacity to ascribe to other human beings the powers we discover in ourselves, are prefigured in our sensible nature. According to Kant,

[Man] has a character which he himself creates, because he is capable of perfecting himself according to purposes which he himself adopts. Consequently, man as an animal endowed with capability of reason (*animal rationabile*) can make himself a rational animal (*animal rationale*). On these grounds he first preserves himself and his species; secondly, he trains, instructs, and educates his species for social living; thirdly, he governs the species as a systematic whole (arranged according to principles of reason) which belongs to society. (Kant 2007b [Anthropology, 7: 321–22])

Somehow prefiguring Korsgaard's idea of "practical identity," and in line with the ancient doctrine of *oikeiosis*, Kant depicts human beings as a particular animal that is endowed with the capacity for reason and that can turn himself into a rational and self-conscious animal with a regard for his own dignity. Of course, much depends on whether we view ourselves merely as sensible beings or as moral beings (Kant 1996 [MM 6: 435]). Still, in speaking of "animals endowed with reason," Kant stresses the fact that we share a sensible nature with other animals, which makes us receptive to the feelings of joy and sadness that we see in others. While those feelings alone cannot make an action, and much less a *right* action, they provide human reason with particular starting points for formulating maxims, which can be reflectively tested against the categorical imperative. Thus, even if sympathy alone cannot ensure that we treat others in accordance with their status as rational beings, it makes us receptive to their needs and reasons, inducing us to treat them as equals and treat the humanity of others as an end in itself, that is, just as we *should* treat our own humanity. This naturally involves reflection upon the material conditions of human life and what it means for human coexistence. Along these lines, Right constitutes itself in the basic condition of external freedom.

In the meantime, it is obvious that there are features of human interaction that cannot be reduced to shareable reasons, features that resist reason, sociality, and morality. Interestingly, we do not just find these features in others, but also within ourselves. Indeed, they constitute the basis for the moral law's coercive character (Kant 1997a [GG 4: 413]; Kant 1997b [KpV 5:72]). Yet, along with these features, we find others that simply represent different practical standpoints from which to access the universality of reason. As Christopher Gowans (2002, 564) notes, apparent resistance to reason very often simply derives from the particular way each person has of interpreting and realizing moral obligations; as noted above, there are particular ways of being in the world, different practical identities, which lead people to diverge on what they consider truly important in practice.¹³

Yet, such diversity does not represent the last word on human coexistence. Rather, it constitutes an invitation to search for a shared reason that grounds a new, higher sense of common agency.¹⁴ Now, as long as we have to coexist with one another, there *is* such a reason and such an agency. That common agency, which can and should be articulated around the fact of human coexistence, is what we call political agency. It is an agency that does not cancel out human diversity, but rather invites us to structure decisions and adjudicate between conflicting claims under the guidance of moral reason.

5. Concluding Remarks

Korsgaard's account of obligation as a reflective rejection of what threatens one's identity opens up the question of the other's place in her account, namely, can the other be regarded as a real source of obligation for us if all obligations

derive from reflective rejection of anything that threatens our own identity? In order to clarify the nature of this problem, I began by stressing the role of reflection in ethics and, specifically, the peculiar reflexivity found in the Aristotelian account of ethical relationships such as justice and friendship. While Aristotle himself does not speak in terms of obligations, he does claim that ethical relationships in which the other is regarded as an equal assume an implicit reference to a law. This can be interpreted as saying that the reflexivity implicit in justice and friendship does not involve referring the other to my idiosyncratic self, but rather to my rational self. This way of arguing brings us close to Korsgaard's own position, that is, the morally normative force we find in a contingent practical identity derives from our essential practical identity, that is, our identity as rational beings.

I have suggested that the interplay whereby contingent practical identities and moral identity engender moral obligations, which Korsgaard illustrates both in *Sources of Normativity* and in *Self-Constitution*, can be compared to the interplay between particular premises and universal premises of practical reason in any practical syllogism. In order to be practical and generate an action, reason requires the combination of a universal premise provided by our rational nature and a particular one that emerges from contingent circumstances. Moral obligation emerges when our identity as human beings is called into question in particular circumstances.

This being the structure of practical reason, Korsgaard's main contribution to our problem consists in resorting to the shareable character of reasons as a way to defend our obligations to others on the same footing that she defends obligations to ourselves. Indeed, obligation as "reflective rejection of what threatens one's identity" can be brought into harmony with the fact of human sociality by recognizing the deeply social character of human identity; human beings are social not only because they share in a sensible nature, but also because they share in a rational nature and in the reflective structure of consciousness.

Now, if reasons are shareable, others can share in my reasons as much as I can share in theirs. This means that moral obligations, whether or not they appear excessively self-centered from a motivational point of view, remain, in the normative sense, profoundly social. While in *Sources* Korsgaard resorts to Aristotle in order to argue this point, her position makes equal sense from a Kantian point of view since the shareable character of reasons is implicit in the moral structure of the Kantian formula of the Kingdom of Ends. Nevertheless, this deeply social character of obligation, grounded on the shareability of reasons, does not cancel out human diversity because there remains a difference between reason's universal validity and its particular and contingent genesis in individual human beings. While mature moral agents realize the contingent source of many of their particular reasons, as well as the role these play in the configuration of their rational identity, they do not take those practical identities as ultimate principles, but rather regard them as different standpoints from which to develop a common agency under the guidance of moral reason.

This article was possible thanks to a research period at Harvard University, with a Grant awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, under the program Salvador de Madariaga (PRX14/00108). It is part of the Research Project “Bonds, identity and emotions” (FFI2015-67388-P), funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. I would like to thank Christine M. Korsgaard for her valuable comments on the first draft of this text, and also the anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Social Philosophy for the clarifications they induced me to introduce in the final version.

Notes

- ¹See also NE, IX, 12, 1171b32–33. (Aristotle’s and Kant’s works will be cited as usual).
- ²In other words, it need not be a conscious reflexivity. This downplays differences between Korsgaard’s position and that of Martin Heidegger, which Steven Crowell noted (2007).
- ³Aristotle does speak of a kind of political friendship, which involves fellow citizens (NE, IX, 1167b2–3). Yet, there is reason to argue that even this kind of friendship is not limitless (NE, I, 7, 1097b9–14). He actually says that “it is well not to seek to have as many friends as possible, but as many as are enough for the purpose of living together” (NE IX, 10, 1171a9–10).
- ⁴NE, IX, 9, 1166 a 31; NE, IX, 9, 1170b6.
- ⁵“For what is just exists only among people whose relations are governed by law, and law only among those liable to injustice, since legal justice consists in judgment between what is just and what is unjust” (NE, V, 6, 1134 a 31–33).
- ⁶This is what Korsgaard calls “reflective endorsement of our nature,” a position that she ascribes to Shaftesbury and David Hume (see *Sources of Normativity*, chapter 2).
- ⁷In his reply to Korsgaard’s lectures, included in *Sources of Normativity*, Williams asked “1) How are the considerations about others relevantly activated in reflection, 2) How do they mesh into ‘practical identity’ in such a way as to satisfy Kant’s requirement that one speaks to oneself, and under an identity which one does not ‘just happen’ to have? ... even if there is (which of course I doubt) a consideration linking practical identity in a sense that is inescapable with acknowledgment of others in a sense that is morally sufficient, how can this link be mobilized normatively in reflection?” (Williams 1996a, 216–17)
- ⁸“To value yourself just as a human being is to have moral identity, as the Enlightenment understood it. So this puts you in moral territory. Or at least, it does so if valuing humanity in your own person rationally requires valuing it in the person of others” (Korsgaard 1996a, 121).
- ⁹While whether or not all rational accounts of morality fit into this division is up for debate, it is broad enough to include all the approaches that G. E. M. Anscombe characterized as “modern moral philosophy.”
- ¹⁰“Why shouldn’t language force us to reason practically together, in just the same way that it forces us to think together?” (Korsgaard 1996a, 142)
- ¹¹The fact that one has personal reasons for not doing what another asks need not be explained in psychological terms. Although one’s own reasons— first originated from one’s own inclinations or practical identity—have more psychological force than others’ reasons, this psychological fact is not in itself a sufficient reason to privilege one’s own reasons over those of others; at most, it is a fact that eventually will need to be taken into account in order to keep personal agency going, or for moral reasons, which again can be argued and shared.
- ¹²“If our social nature is deep, in the sense that it is the nature of our reasons that they are public and shareable, then justifications of morality can and should appeal to it” (Korsgaard 1996a, 136).
- ¹³Gowans (2002, 564) tries to show that identity constructivism cannot adequately deal with the epistemic commitments embedded in certain practical identities. He gives the examples of languages and religions.
- ¹⁴Compare Korsgaard (2009, 126 and 190 ff.)

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