

Acknowledgements:

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Abstrakt

Det antas av mange filosofer at kantianske teorier i prinsippet er for hardhjertete eller for abstrakte til å kunne fange hvordan vi handler og burde handle i verden. I møte med noen som spør «finnes det virkelige grunner for handling?», antas det, vil slike teorier ha lite å tilføye diskursen. Christine Korsgaards teori, som hun beskriver som fundamentalt kantiansk, møter den samme kritikken. I denne oppgaven forsøker jeg å svare på slik kritikk mot Korsgaard. Det generelle målet med denne oppgaven er å rekonstruere de grunnleggende korsgaardianske/kantianske-ideene som forutsetter at vi handler på handlingsprinsipper, at vi er underlagt det kategoriske imperativ og at vi bør handle fra plikt. Denne rekonstruksjonen prøver å fange hva enkelte andre teoretikere betrakter som grunnleggende i etikk, nemlig at vi kan handle moralsk i verden uten refleksjon og at våre handlinger alltid foregår mot en viss bakgrunn. Dette er ideer som Korsgaards språk har vansker med å få tak på da hun til tider snakker om refleksiv tilslutning som en reflekterende prosess og om identiteter som noe en kan fraskrive seg fullstendig. Jeg vender derfor blikket mot to andre teorier: Hubert Dreyfus' og Sean Kellys teori om mening, og Alasdair MacIntyres aristoteliske teori om dygd og det gode liv. Jeg argumenterer for at Korsgaards teori kan ta imot verdifull innsikt fra de to andre teoriene, og at Dreyfus & Kelly og MacIntyres argumenter mot Kant ikke treffer Korsgaard.

Når jeg presenterer denne rekonstruksjonen forsøker jeg å løse et problem som Michel Houellebecq har pekt på i romanen *Underkastelse* fra 2015. Houellebecqs protagonist, François, er nettopp en slik person som spør om det finnes virkelige grunner for handling – om noe noen gang virkelig er verdt å gjøre. François mislykkes i å finne meningsfulle handlinger fordi han alltid må ta kritisk avstand fra verden. Han må alltid ta steget ut fra situasjonen og vurdere sine grunner, men oppdager at han ikke har noen da han har forlatt verden som oppfordret handlingen i utgangspunktet. I tillegg handler han mot en bakgrunn som beskrives som i ferd med å forfalle: en usikker kultur som ikke lenger har en forståelse av hva som er godt og hva som er rett. Jeg kombinerer elementer fra Korsgaard, Dreyfus & Kelly og MacIntyre for å analysere hvorfor François liv er så pinefullt, hva han gjør feil og hva han burde gjøre.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Houellebecq and Korsgaardian Ethics	7
1.1: Michel Houellebecq's <i>Submission</i>	7
1.2: Korsgaard on Action and Normativity	12
1.2.1: The problem of action	13
1.2.2: Practical Identity and teleology	17
1.2.3: The problem of normativity.....	20
1.2.4: The virtue ethic of Korsgaard	23
1.3: Against Korsgaard.....	25
1.4: Conclusion: Korsgaard on who to be.....	28
Chapter 2: Dreyfus & Kelly on finding meaning in the world	33
2.1: Embodied coping in a valenced world	33
2.2: Affordances and Solicitations	34
2.3: Meaning and Valence	36
2.4: Dreyfus & Kelly's Groundless Virtue Ethic.....	40
2.5: Against Kant	43
2.5.1: Teleology and Valence.....	44
2.5.2: Disclosive Coping.....	46
2.5.3: Valence and Reason.....	51
2.6: A note on Wesley Autrey and virtuous coping.....	56
2.7: Conclusion	57
Chapter 3: MacIntyre and the Narrative Self.....	59
3.1: The virtue ethics of MacIntyre	59
3.2: Aristotelian virtue ethics	60
3.3: Virtue and Practice as Background	63
3.4: Embedding Practices	66
3.5: Narratives as Background	69
3.6: Finding the Good	72
3.7: Finding Joy	75
3.8: Wesley Autrey and Background.....	77
3.9: The tension between virtue and duty	79
3.9.1: Acting from virtue vs. acting from duty	79
3.9.2: Unity of life vs unity of will	81
3.9.3: Universal rules vs. judgement.....	83
3.10: Conclusion:.....	84
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	87

Bibliography 97

Introduction

The thesis before you is comparative and reconstructive in nature. It is supposed by many philosophers that Kantian theories are in principle somehow too cold-hearted or too abstract to capture how we act and ought to act. Christine Korsgaard's theory, which she describes as fundamentally Kantian, naturally faces a lot of the same criticism. I attempt to respond to such criticisms of Kant at various points and the general aim of this thesis is to reconstruct the fundamental Korsgaardian/Kantian ideas that we act on principles of action, that we are subject to the categorical imperative and that we should act from duty. This reconstruction attempts to capture what some other theorists have taken to be fundamental to ethics, namely that we can respond morally to the world without deliberation and that our actions always take place against a certain background. This is the idea from which I chose the three theories I will be discussing: Christine Korsgaard's essentially Kantian theory of morality, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly's theory of meaning, and Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelian theory of virtue and the good life. I argue that Korsgaard's theory can accommodate valuable insights from the other two theories and that Dreyfus & Kelly's and MacIntyre's arguments against Kant fail to apply to Korsgaard.

My thesis is also a sort of reply to a particular type of person. Philosophers often characterize the problem they are attempting to solve as being embodied by a certain kind of person, perhaps noticing that our attitudes and beliefs have consequences and that one such consequence is the ability to ask particular questions. Thus, moral theories are frequently framed as a response to the moral sceptic who asks "Why should I do what morality dictates?"; the nihilist who asks "Why should I do anything at all?"; or the emotivist who, thinking that moral proclamations are the expressions of attitudes rather than being truth-apt statements about actions or states of affairs, asks "Why should I accept your attitude over any other?" There is, I believe, a sort of person who is much overlooked by the responses to these kinds of questions, namely the person who asks "Is there ever a real reason to do anything?" A cousin to the nihilist, to be sure, but not identical to him.

Such a person is different from the others in important ways. He is not like the sceptic for he is not only denying that morality carries any force on which we should act. He is denying that any reason whatever carries any real force. He is unlike the nihilist because he is not entirely free of the world's normative constraints. He is subject to impulses and perceived reasons to act in certain ways, he just denies that these reasons matter. Finally, he is unlike the emotivist

because he desperately needs his reasons to be true; to genuinely carry the force he perceives in them.

This kind of person is the character of François in Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* (2015). François is constantly annoyed and slightly bitter, yes, but more than that he is in pain. Like anyone he perceives the world in what I will call a valenced way, meaning that his interaction with the world is fundamentally evaluative, yet somehow he finds himself unable to act on this valence. I borrow the term "valence" from psychology where it is meant to capture the goodness (positive valence) or badness (negative valence) of an experience. The view of valence that I start from and which I develop in chapter two and three differs from how it is usually used in psychology. First of all, it is often taken to apply mainly (if not only) to emotions.¹ It is thought of as what is good about joy or bad about pain. For my purposes valence refers instead to perceiving something as to be acted on in some way. Positive and negative valence (although I do not make much of these terms) apply to the way in which we take the objects of our experience to be acted on, in positive or negative ways. Contrary to Solomon and Prinz, this behavioural approach to valence does not take the behaviour that springs from perception (the specific action carried out) to be what constitutes our valenced experience, but rather the kind of action called for.² If we take an apple as to be eaten, that object carries a positive valence. If we take the tiger to pose a threat that must be dealt with in some way (by fleeing or fighting), it carries a negative valence. Second, valence is not in the first instance something that is prior to evaluation. It is not that we discover we are afraid of something (a negative valence) and on the basis of this conclude that the object of our experience is bad. Valence just is an evaluation: it is taking the object of our experience as to be acted on in some way. We burst into a room and perceive the chair as being in our way or an inviting place to sit.

This must always be how we are engaged in the world, I argue, because otherwise we could not act at all. One might think that perceiving the world in a valenced way (as we all do) enables François to act and have a conception of what it is to act well, as that is generally how we engage with the world. Perceiving something as to be acted on in some way leads us to act on it. Perceiving someone as interesting enough to ask out on a date is what leads us to do that. However, it is here that the peculiarities of François start to reveal themselves for he is unable

¹ See Solomon, R. C. (2003). Against valence ('positive' and 'negative' emotions). *Not passion's slave*, 162-177, and Prinz, J. (2010). For valence. *Emotion Review*, 2(1), 5-13.

² Although I will not deal with their arguments directly when I discuss how valence relates to emotions, it is important to notice that I am not arguing that valence is to be specified strictly in terms of approach (positive) and avoidance (negative) behaviour. My view is more nuanced than that.

to act on the valenced world because he cannot take the fact that some action appeals to him as making it worth doing. He takes his desires to be arbitrary rather than meaningful. And so he asks “Is there ever a real reason to do anything?” He is what I come to call a “reflective nihilist”.

I start from Houellebecq’s François in order to examine how three different moral theories fare in the face of this character. These theories are generally taken to be in conflict as well as purporting to respond to different people: one attempts to answer the sceptic, the other the nihilist and the third the emotivist. My aim is to show how different aspects of these theories can be made a coherent whole which answers the character of François – it explains his pain, what he is doing wrong and what he ought to be doing. All theories, however, face their own problems and so I attempt to show what elements of these theories should be adopted and which ought to be discarded. Christine Korsgaard’s theory of action (a fundamentally Kantian theory) and self-constitution makes sense of what it is we are doing when we undertake an action. However, Hubert Dreyfus & Sean Kelly argue that such Kantian theories fail to capture what it is we are doing when we are engaged in coping: when we without reflection act successfully in the world. Dreyfus & Kelly in turn fail to capture what it is for something to be morally wrong or right. I attempt to bridge the gap between these theories by developing the concept of disclosive coping in chapter two.³ However, both Korsgaard and Dreyfus & Kelly notice but fail to account fully for how we act against a background. In view of what do we take our actions as to be carried out? We have to act against a background that makes the action intelligible, but in what does this background consist? Korsgaard argues that the categorical imperative is always operative, but this is not a sufficiently substantial background against which to act. It is to solve this problem that I rely on Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of practice, narrative and tradition in chapter three. There I also argue that MacIntyre is wrong in his critique of Kantian theories.

Why, one may reasonably ask, attempt to respond to a fictional character? I do not think he is a fictional character. Or rather: his state of being is not fictional. Stories such as François’ disclose a plausible way of being, of relating to the world and oneself. But more than that because what a person does he is not doing in isolation such characters tell us something about the background against which one acts. In François’ case it is a culture unsure of itself, what is good and what is right. I try to show that François is not just someone who asks a particular kind of question (as the sceptic, the nihilist and the emotivist appear to be), but someone who

³ I am indebted to Ståle Finke for suggesting the phrase “disclosive coping”.

lives and must live in a particular way. Such a life is agonizing and robbed of value, as I explain in chapter one. In chapter two I attempt to show why the life François leads is insufficiently engaged with the world and what he ought to be doing. In chapter three I try to capture the background against which he acts, one consumed by conflict. Finally, in the conclusion I sum up François' predicament and what he ought to be doing on the theory I develop here as a coherent response to his reflective nihilism.

In combining the three theories, I argue that Korsgaard is essentially right about self-constitution. Undertaking an action is to make yourself into a certain kind of person, creating a practical identity that is normative for us. It is to obligate yourself in some way by acting on a principle and endorsing that principle as partly constitutive of who you are. The way in which we constitute (or ought to constitute) ourselves is described by the categorical imperative. Acting in the right way is to test some motivational impulse against the categorical imperative. This view is perhaps better captured by saying that we run our impulses *through* the categorical imperative, seeing whether our principle of action can be willed as law and whether we in acting treat others as ends in themselves. However, as I just did, many writers influenced by Kant tend to describe actions internal temporal processes of one sort or another. If we must run our impulses through the categorical imperative, how is it that we can be able to act in the right way without reflection?

This is essentially Dreyfus & Kelly's critique. They argue that acting well is to be "wooshed up" in our experience, experiencing the joy of acting well as one may do when rising with others to applaud a feat of excellence. They illustrate this point by invoking the story of Wesley Autrey, who in 2007 threw himself onto the tracks of a New York City subway station, rescuing a man who had fallen in front of an oncoming train. Without hesitation, Dreyfus & Kelly note, Autrey left his two daughters behind and jumped onto the tracks, pressing his body down to ensure the man's safety underneath the train. Dreyfus & Kelly report Autrey as in an interview claiming that he did not think he did anything special and that he just saw someone who needed help.⁴ Acting heroically in this way, they remark, is to experience oneself as being called to act, as if the action is drawn forth by something outside of oneself. The essence of their argument is that the Kantian view of action cannot explain such a phenomenon because of the Kantian distinction between inclination and reason. If we must somehow decide to act, rather

⁴ Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 2.

than have the action drawn out of us, such instances of heroism are utterly unfathomable to the Kantian view of action and normativity.

Chapter two is devoted to examining this line of argument. I attempt to reconstruct Korsgaard's position in such a way that she can account for this phenomenon of being "wooshed up": to be entirely absorbed in action without reflection. Here I argue that we do indeed perceive the world as one of actions and constituting oneself well is to respond to the call to act in the right way. Treating someone as an end in himself does not necessarily involve having an impulse and then stepping back and reflecting on how to act. We can act from the perception of someone as an end in himself. I then return to these arguments in the conclusion where I try to show that François' distancing himself from the world entails refusing these calls to action. Moreover, he cannot act on them because he does not take himself to be an end.

MacIntyre's argument is essentially that when we act, we always act as someone within a practice and within a tradition. These constitute the standard of success and failure for us. When we act well, we realize the goods internal to a practice. Here MacIntyre and Dreyfus & Kelly face the same problem. If all there is to acting well is to act well within our concrete situation, there can be nothing over and above in light of which our actions can be deemed right or wrong, regardless of the context within which we find ourselves. This poses a problem rejected by Dreyfus & Kelly, but an attempt to solve it is made by MacIntyre. To engage in a practice at all, we must stand in some particular relation to one another. MacIntyre refers to what sustain such relationships as the "cardinal virtues" which must be realized in any and all corners of our lives. I argue that cultivating the cardinal values is one way of acting on the categorical imperative.

In chapter one and two I attempt to develop a view of what action is that can capture the phenomena of "coping" and what it is to act in the right way. When we act, we essentially constitute ourselves as a certain kind of person. But that leaves us with a problem: who are we to be? Korsgaard fails to develop an adequate answer because she at various points argues that we can leave our practical identity behind. Although we cannot act as no one, she argues, because we necessarily have a practical identity as human beings, we can refuse particular identities such as our relation to our family or our nation. This is right in a way, but MacIntyre convincingly argues that we cannot escape communal ties. Although I can choose to flee my nation, I am still someone in relation to that nation. So it is with familial ties: leaving home does not stop

one from being a son. It just puts you in a different relation to the family. You may become a self-righteous, bad or courageous son. But one does not stop being a son.

Accepting that we are always someone, I go on to present MacIntyre's view that we are narrative selves who must attempt to live out the right sort of narrative within our communal ties. The ultimate aim is to unify our lives, MacIntyre argues. This is not entirely right, I claim, for it is not the disunity of the Nazi way of life that makes it bad. It is bad, and that creates disunity. I argue, essentially, that the unified life and the unified will necessitate one another and unifying our wills is what we do when we act from the categorical imperative.

In the conclusion I attempt to tie all of this together using François as my framework. I argue that Dreyfus & Kelly capture what it is to fail to be engaged with the world and Korsgaard captures why he fails. François fails to constitute himself as an end, taking his valenced experiences (calls to act) to be normative. MacIntyre and Korsgaard capture what is wrong with his life, why he fails to find meaning in his practices, and why his life of conflict is making him miserable. He is an agent in conflict with himself, yearning for reconciliation. And unifying his will and life is precisely what an agent does when he acts well, when he is able to aim at something with his whole being rather than undermining his will.

I must, finally, point out that my aim here is not to reconstruct Kant. Although I borrow heavily from Kant at various places and describe Korsgaard's theory as essentially Kantian, I am not looking to take a position on what Kant meant or ought to have meant in his various writings. I will not engage in the usual practice of examining precisely what a law, a duty, an imperative and so on mean and their relation to each other. I take as my starting point Korsgaard's reconstruction of Kant, and the question for the reader ought to be whether I am doing Korsgaard justice in my reading rather than Kant. I am trying to show that Korsgaard's theory can incorporate elements from the others to respond to the reflective nihilist's predicament. It can capture what it is we are doing when we respond to the valenced world and why François cannot. It captures the experience of making oneself into a sort of person and how we do that in the right way. It captures what we are doing when we unify our will and life and aim at something with our whole being.

Chapter 1: Houellebecq and Korsgaardian Ethics

1.1: Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*

Well-written dystopias are capable of embedding themselves in our conversations in very important ways. The works of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley seep into our minds, looming directly overhead whenever political power or gene manipulation become topics of discussion. But while both authors are still profoundly important to our culture, they remain noticeably twentieth-century literary figures, so close to us but somehow still distant. Having a television screen in our homes, and several cameras (two on every phone seems to be the minimum), is now perfectly banal, which justifies a modern reader of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) being numb to what would once have been considered a serious threat to privacy. Time can take the sting out of dystopias, leaving them – though not necessarily less important – not entirely indicative of our future, nor painting a sufficient picture of what is to be avoided.

The really remarkable thing about dystopias is that they are, as just suggested, in some sense truth-apt. This led Huxley, upon reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to criticize Orwell for being wrong rather than having written a poor book. Indeed, Huxley wrote, the book was excellent, it was just wrong. Citing, among other factors, the “felt need for increased efficiency”, and the promise of hypnotisms and classical conditioning, he was able to argue, right or wrong, that his dystopian future as presented in *Brave New World* (1931) was a more accurate dystopia than Orwell's.⁵ It is not entirely clear how such works can be described as truth-apt, but considering the arguments made by Huxley, it appears that the most accurate work is one that describes something in our society today as leading (through its logical extreme or just by high-probability) to the dystopia of tomorrow. Orwell's work indicates that it is the lust for power of the political elite that will impose an almost unliveable society on the people (at least the antagonist, O'Brien, says as much). Huxley, on the other hand, reminds us that we should be careful not to underestimate our ability to impose such a society on ourselves, all the while insisting on “amusing ourselves to death”, in Neil Postman's phrase.⁶

Michel Houellebecq is one contender, if not the only contender, for being the dystopic writer of our times. Closer to Huxley than Orwell, Houellebecq envisions a world of meaninglessness that is self-imposed rather than brought on from the outside. It is true that he sometimes laments the fall of Christianity, almost describing himself as an atheist by force rather than choice, but

⁵ A letter from Huxley to Orwell on 21st October, 1949. Sourced from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2111440/Aldous-Huxley-letter-George-Orwell-1984-sheds-light-different-ideas.html>

⁶ Postman, N. (2005). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Penguin Books.

even such dramatic changes in our societies as the “death of god” have their origin in us, even in us as individuals. They are not forced upon us by some malicious being hiding its true intentions behind double-speak and brute force. Houellebecq does, however, inherit from Orwell the focus on a single individual who is crushed by forces experienced as working on him rather than arising from within him (as we will see, Houellebecq’s François does not perceive very much of worth as arising from the individual, or very much of worth arising at all). What makes his work different from both twentieth-century writers is that he does not stake his dystopia on our societies changing very much. There does not need to be some grand technological development, or even a grand political development, in place in order for a society like ours to become a dystopian one. We are already well on our way.

Submission (2015), the focus of this thesis, tells the story of François, a professor of literature who has lost most interest in the world by the time we meet him. Already sick of repeating the same lectures to students whose faces are substituted through the years without any real change, he is annoyed with what he takes to be the banality of life, and the people around him, going so far as to hold inner monologues in which he ridicules his colleagues as pathetic for not noticing of how little importance their work is. François is not angry, or even particularly vindictive, he is just tired. He is already suffering under the feeling that it is all meaningless. He is stuck rewriting and publishing old articles as though they were new and holding the same lectures, never encountering anything new and exciting. From such a summary, François may strike us as the modern equivalent of Ebenezer Scrooge, and we might diagnose his problem as being the immediate absence of anti-depressants. But that is not his predicament any more than it is Scrooge’s. He is incapable of perceiving anything as worth doing, but is not blessed with the ghosts necessary to remind him of all that is good in the world. He experiences the world as valenced – he perceives objects in evaluative terms, as to be pursued or avoided – but rarely as normative. I.e., François does not take his impulses to really be worth acting on.

In the year 2022, François flicks through the channels on his TV one day and notices that there is an election taking place in France. It all seems to go along as usual: there is much talk of Marine Le Pen’s National Front, but no one is actually expecting them to win. As the election goes on, however, it becomes obvious that the socialists have lost their ability to be an important force in French politics, due to much infighting and reluctance to stand for much. The moderate right, meanwhile, are not sensitive to the problems of ordinary people and like the socialists seems to diminish by the hour. After the first round of the election, there are only two parties left: National Front and a Muslim party, led by a charismatic moderate Muslim who is,

according to one of François' friends who is knowledgeable on such matters, entirely capable of being diplomatic all the while strengthening Islam's grip on France every chance he gets. The political left immediately rallies behind the Muslim party, as does the moderate right so as not to appear racist by backing Le Pen. The Muslim party wins, and everyone at the universities are immediately suspended, eventually notified that (due to Gulf funding) they, including the Sorbonne, where François works, are now only permitted to employ Muslim professors. If he wishes to return to his work, François is told, he must convert. He is not obligated to believe, but he must follow Islamic customs and declare himself a believer.

Much can be written about this characterization of future French politics. The infighting and inability to get anything done on the political left, and the right being terrified of being called racist appears particularly plausible. But this is not really what the book is concerned with. It is almost just set-dressing for what is to come, describing a France that has lost the ability to fight back against external threats. Actually, that characterization misses the mark slightly, for Islam is not really taken to be an external threat. It is, however, what is most confident in itself. Houellebecq is almost ambivalent about Islam, especially in contrast with some of his previous work, such as *Atomised* (1998) where Islam was described as "the most stupid, false, and obscure of all religions". The threat of Islam is not the subject of *Submission*, it is a society that has lost faith in itself. In contrast with Western culture, Islam is almost praised for its certainty, if not its contents. Houellebecq is not concerned with ideology, he is concerned with loss of certainty and meaning.

Having been suspended, François reflects on what he should do, but is not able to find any answers. He is visited by his young, Jewish girlfriend who explains that she, like most Jews, intend to travel to Israel as France does not seem safe anymore. After a sexually athletic encounter, she leaves him alone in France with no prospects and no interests. In a striking section of the book, François decides to finally do something other than just sitting around watching TV. He is, for a time, regularly visited by prostitutes, but notices almost immediately that this brings little to no satisfaction. What is striking about François' endeavours here is that he so clearly denies the importance of anything. He does not take himself to have any real incentives to do anything. In the end he almost says to himself "If no desire is worthwhile, I might as well attempt to fulfil those that are most easily fulfilled". But as one can expect, he soon learns that the immediacy of a desire does not make it worth fulfilling, and he is left perpetually unsatisfied, not only sexually, but spiritually. This is what Houellebecq takes care to point out: the life of a nihilist such as François – not meaningless because nothing can be done, as in Orwell's

work, nor because he has been convinced that some banality is meaningful, as in Huxley, but meaningless because nothing in his society reveals itself as worthwhile – is not neutral, or a life in which everything is permitted. Such a life is painful, agonizing even. François is not just searching for something that is worthwhile, he is in dire need of relief from a painful existence. In the end, François decides to travel. Eventually he ends up in the monastery his literary idol (at least until literature too became meaningless), Joris-Karl Huysmans, once found Catholicism. Once comfortable within the monastery, however, François starts to notice that Catholicism now lacks the force and self-confidence needed to bring forth a conversion. He is in dire need of relief, but he cannot bring himself to believe the unbelievable.

This is a hunch which is confirmed shortly thereafter. Every day he walks to the statue of the Black Virgin of Rocamadour. Finally, praying before it, he comes close to a religious conversion:

I felt ready to give up everything, not really for my country, but *in general*. I was in a strange state. It seemed the Virgin was rising from her pedestal and growing in the air. The baby Jesus seemed ready to detach himself from her, and it seemed to me that all he had to do was raise his right hand and the pagans and idolators would be destroyed, and the keys to the world restored to him, 'as its lord, its possessor and its master'. ... Or maybe I was just hungry.

This scene reveals another important point about François' predicament. He is perpetually taking up the position of critical distance from the world. He is constantly holding long-winded inner monologues, never allowing himself to be swept up by an experience. He is entirely incapable of performing the leap that allowed Huysmans to become a Catholic, or the leap of considering anything worth doing. He later packs up and travels home.

François, like France, is in the end forced to submit. He eventually converts to Islam. As Douglas Murray writes:

And so he returns to Paris, and there the university authorities – now Islamic – explain to François (who they have generously pensioned off) the logic of Islam. And not just the logic that he will get his career back at the Sorbonne if he converts, but the logic it will make in other corners of his life. He will have wives (up to four, and younger – if he wishes – even than his usual tastes). And of course he will be part of a community of meaning for the first time. He will be able to continue enjoying most of the few pleasures he has had and will gain much more than he had thought possible in the way of comforts. Unlike the leap required to become a Catholic, the logic of Islam is practical and, in a society ripe for submission, becomes irrefutable.⁷

⁷ Murray, D. (2017). *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*. Bloomsbury Publishing

That the leap is practical is clear. While explicitly remaining sceptical of the claims Islam makes (its denial of evolution and its implausible creation story), François converts because of his dire need for some sort of relief. This explains the logic of the practical leap, but it also hints at why the conversion is unlikely to function as relief. He cannot bring himself to profess the same certainty that Islam does. He is simply too tired to fight back. The parallel between François and France (and, perhaps, Western cultures in general) is clear: they are both, as Murray writes, “ripe for submission”.

As a dystopia, Houellebecq’s novel differs from those of Orwell and Huxley in important ways. There is almost no violence, nor are there any particularly vindictive motives at play. This is just what happens when a society loses its confidence in itself. In addition, while the characters of Orwell and Huxley are motivated by clear if variably justifiable motivations (a sense of what is right in the former, and a lust for praise and status in the latter), François is almost solely motivated by the prospect of relief. All he wants is a sense that what he is doing is actually worthwhile, but he cannot find such a sense. He is perpetually taking a critical distance from the world, never fulfilled and never acting in a way he can be confident is right.

Why does the experience of François matter? Because he functions as a model of what can happen to a culture, a society, as a whole. Chantal Delsol has suggested that modern European man is an “Icarus fallen”, that is to say in the position Icarus would have found himself had he survived the fall. He has tried everything, Catholicism, Protestantism, fascism, communism, capitalism, etc., but all his projects have failed, and he is left on the ground, his wings singed, and yet he must live on.⁸ We need not accept quite such a depressing view of our societies to accept that there is something to this account. It is in principle possible to find oneself without a clear and motivating idea of what we should do and what we should live for. As Houellebecq suggests, such a condition is very painful indeed. The work of this thesis will be to attempt to describe a coherent account of how such an “Icarus fallen” as François can come to find something worth acting on without turning to religion. This hopefully unified account will take the work of Christine Korsgaard as its starting point, attempting to reconstruct her often fragmented account into a coherent whole. As I will explain toward the end of this chapter, Korsgaard’s description of what it is we do when we take on an identity is confusing and put into abstract terms leaving the reader without a coherent understanding of what it is to be obligated to constitute oneself in one way rather than another. Throughout this thesis I will attempt

⁸ Delsol, C. (2003). *Icarus Fallen*. *Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute*. Translated by Robin Dick.

to reconstruct Korsgaard's position on this and other matters. In doing this I will turn to two other accounts of what is worth acting on, arguing that Korsgaard is in principle able to accommodate important insights from both. The first will be the work of Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly who argue that to find something meaningful and therefore worth acting on is to cultivate some activity in the right way, turning it into an inherently normative activity which we perceive as worth acting on. The second is Alasdair MacIntyre's view of the self as a narrative being, finding meaning and worth against the background of a shared identity with others and the production of common goods.

The present chapter will lay the groundwork for the rest of the thesis by presenting Korsgaard's view of action and essentially Kantian account of normativity. I will explain what I take François' predicament to be in Korsgaardian terms, showing that her account is insufficient or anyway too fragmented to adequately respond to his problems. In chapter two I will present Dreyfus & Kelly's account, arguing that they go some way toward an adequate response, but fail to account for both morally right and wrong action and why we can take some activities to be more meaningful than others. I go on to argue that Korsgaard can accommodate Dreyfus & Kelly's important insights while also providing a moral foundation for action. Finally, in chapter three, I will present MacIntyre's theory of the self, arguing that it fits better with Korsgaard's account than his arguments against Kant would suggest.

1.2: Korsgaard on Action and Normativity

Korsgaard's methodology consists of two main elements. Firstly, in trying to flesh out a concept, she ties the concept to a particular problem. In John Rawls' theory of justice, she writes, "justice" is taken to be the solution to the problem of distribution and what is just will therefore be whatever solves this problem. "The concept names the problem, the conception proposes a solution."⁹ The second element is what she finds appealing in Immanuel Kant's moral theory. Any successful normative theory or argument must apply to someone actually engaged in an action. I.e., the theory must appeal to us in first-person: the theory must actually be normatively persuasive. This also applies to the normativity of conceptions, she writes: "If you recognize the problem to be yours, and the solution to be the best one, then the solution is binding upon you."¹⁰ This is the method we see applied throughout this chapter, and its implications will be carried over to the rest of this thesis. The problems we will look at are (1) the problem of action, and (2) the problem of normativity. These are chosen because they are the problems François

⁹ Korsgaard, C. M. (1996). *The sources of normativity*. Cambridge University Press. P. 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

faces and any solution to his version of what I will later describe as a reflective nihilism must therefore have a clear formulation of these problems. The two theories discussed in the next two chapters will be evaluated in terms of how well they solve these problems. In short, the problem of action asks us to provide an answer to how anything can be normative for us and thus considered worth acting on. The problem of normativity, on the other hand, confronts us with the question of whether what is normative for us is normative as such. By “as such” I do not mean to imply a form of realism. As we will see, on Korsgaard’s view the choice is not between realism or relativism (or, indeed, nihilism); a solution to the problem of normativity need only have a universal character, i.e. it need only apply to “no one in particular”.¹¹ There need not be any normative entities or substantial facts, as most realists claim, for something to really be normative.

There is one caveat I want to introduce before carrying on the work of laying out the problems Houellebecq’s character faces. In what follows, I will attempt to describe what Korsgaard takes to be the solution to such problems. It is the view of both Hubert Dreyfus and Alasdair MacIntyre that Kantians, of which Korsgaard describes herself as one, cannot solve the problems we are going to deal with here because Kantians insist that we take a fundamentally distanced stand toward the world, which is, incidentally, part of François’ problem as well. I will not attempt to deal with that argument here but reserve it for the next chapter as Dreyfus & Kelly are the most insistent in their critique of Kant. There is much to be said about what Kant could have said in response to this critique, but I will instead focus on whether the critique applies to Korsgaard as a defence of Kant would entail taking a stance on what Korsgaard gets right and what she gets wrong in her reading of Kant. Because the critique will be discussed in the next chapter, some aspects of her theory will be left out of the description of Korsgaard’s account of normativity; particularly the question of how automatic or instinctive action is guided by a sense of what is normative for us. This is the nature of Dreyfus’ critique: on Kant’s view action is only aptly ascribed to us if we have reflected on how to act. Real action must, therefore, come from a standpoint of critical distance, never engaged coping with the world.

1.2.1: The problem of action

The problem of actions entails two questions which we will attempt to answer in Korsgaardian terms: i) what is an action, and how do we come to undertake an action? and ii) how does the

¹¹ I borrow this phrase from Jonathan Rauch. In *Kindly Inquisitors* (1993), he uses it to describe a justification criterion within what he calls “liberal science”. For something to count as a justification for a claim, it has to appeal to “no one in particular”, i.e. it cannot be the case that something is a reason for you to believe X, but not for someone with a different background, ethnicity, etc. to believe X.

world come to be valenced? “Valence” here refers to how the world takes on normative character: seats are seen as better or worse suited as places to sit down, food is, or fails to be, seen as something to be eaten, and a friend is seen – as Sartre claims – as having-to-be-helped.¹² ii) will be answered in detail in the next chapter, leaving i) to be examined here. Characteristically, the problem of action arises, Korsgaard claims, from the sorts of beings we are: beings who must act in the world. This is something we share with the other animals. They must also act in the world, but not in precisely the way we do. We cannot take the mere fact that something appeals to us (as a “perceived reason”, something we will return to later) as itself a final reason to act. We can, after all, act on poor reasons. We are self-conscious beings who must take something to not only appeal to us, but be a morally good reason to act. We are aware of our reasons for actions and able to evaluate them. The problem of action, Korsgaard claims, is therefore the problem of how something can withstand reflection without being undermined or eradicated.

But, one might reply, this is not the difficulty someone like François faces. He does, after all, still act, even if he ultimately deems his own actions as not really worthwhile, but rather arbitrary. The problem of action, one might therefore suggest, cannot be the problem of reflection. This, however, is a slight misreading of François’ predicament. He does indeed act, but he acts precisely because his actions do withstand reflection, even if this process is flawed, an argument to which we will return. Recall that when François decides to be visited by prostitutes, there is a thought process involved, even if it is tacit. He in a way says to himself “All desires are arbitrary so why not attempt to fulfil whichever is easiest?” This is a sort of justification. He takes his desires to be worth fulfilling, if only minimally so in that he sees no reason why not. The problem of how to act is therefore, for François as for anyone, precisely the problem of how something can withstand reflection. We will return to François later on, but for now I will lay out the Korsgaardian view of reflective endorsement in general.

Impulses, Korsgaard argues, come to us as candidates for reasons, that is as possible grounds for action. In order to take them as grounds for action, they must be endorsed. Actually, that claim is almost a tautology because endorsing an action is taking an impulse to be grounds for action and vice versa. Furthermore, endorsing an action requires us to have principles. This is so, she argues, because an incentive and a principle are a natural pair.¹³ A principle functions

¹² Sartre, J. P. (1957). *The transcendence of the ego: An existentialist theory of consciousness* (Vol. 114). Macmillan. P. 56

¹³ Korsgaard, C. M. (2009). *Self-constitution: Agency, identity, and integrity*. OUP Oxford. P. 104-106. For further discussion of this point see 2.5.3.

in two ways, the first of which is determining how we respond to the incentive, which Korsgaard describes as a “motivationally loaded representation of an object”.¹⁴ It is the perception of a friend as to be helped that becomes the candidate for action. Endorsing it requires a principle like “I ought to help my friends”. This is a rather simplified account of how something is presented to us as a candidate for action, but it will do for now. What matters here is the function of the principle. Principles are not passive phenomena which only come into play upon the arising of an impulse. Principles structure our world. Indeed, it is the being guided by the principle that one should help one’s friends that makes us susceptible to the friend in need. Endorsing an impulse to act, then, is to endorse an action – an act done for some end – and, because actions are describable as principles, to endorse an action is to endorse a principle.

That is not to say that impulses arise as formalized principles. It is not that you always consider undertaking an action by saying to yourself “ought I do x for the sake of y?” As we will see in chapter two, actions can be perceived as drawn out of us. We may function on autopilot as we do when we are not concentrating on what we are doing, or are so engaged in an activity that we respond with our whole being to what is happening around us. Take the example of a footballer who instinctively moves into the perfect position for receiving the ball. In such moments, there is hardly time for deliberation of any form, let alone the formalizing of principles. What I have in mind is rather the being able to commit to an act understood against some background which forms a context and makes the act intelligible as done for some purpose.

Take the example of writing. A friend in the habit of writing song lyrics has explained to me that the first song is the hardest to write. One can hardly commit to any one line. One burdens the song with an astonishing amount of meaning, trying to write a magnum opus before acquiring the necessary tools. Having written a few songs, however, committing gets easier because you start to get a sense of what a well-written song really is. The lyrics can flow out of you, hardly registered as linguistic entities before hitting the page. The committing to a line is, in the sense I want to exploit in this context, the endorsing of an impulse. It is an act undertaken for some end that makes it intelligible. I will expand on this point in chapter two and further in chapter three. Here it is sufficient to understand the endorsement of an impulse as the undertaking of an act intelligible as worth undertaking against a background which forms an end. And the whole action, the act done for some end, forms a principle. And, as Kant argued,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

because we must take the means to our ends, we must will both the act and the end (or, rather the act *as done for the sake of* some end), that is to say the entire principle of the action.

How, then, do we endorse principles? If thought to be a phenomenon only available to us when we take up a critical distance from the world, one would think them to be abstract formulations that are available to us as verbalized propositions that we must reflect on. However, this is not what Korsgaard, or indeed Kant, has in mind. Consider what Kant wrote about friendships. He is not approaching the concept as though an understanding of it is to be found in pure abstraction. Nor is the answer to how and why we ought to cultivate friendships found in abstraction. There are two primary duties involved in a friendship, he writes: the first are those the performance of which obligates others as a sort of reciprocal act of obligation, the second are duties whose performance do not obligate others. They are owed, Kant writes.¹⁵ This claim is in a way made in abstraction, but Kant immediately places them in the world by writing that “Love and respect are the feelings that accompany the carrying out of these duties.”¹⁶ This claim requires a further explanation. Love is an inclusive concept capturing the feelings that arise once we make another’s ends our own, which is what Kant claims we do in friendships. That is, in friendships we make the other person’s ends our own. We take them as to be acted on. There are all sorts of feelings associated with this such as sympathy, gratitude and delight at our friend’s success (being happy for him). Love, Kant is claiming, is the concept that encompasses these feelings and which springs from the cultivation of duty – the cultivation of the friendship. Respect must go hand-in-hand with the taking of another’s ends, for respect is knowing that our friend’s ends are his to determine. And yes, although respect is in this sense a moral state of understanding, it is also a feeling on Kant’s view. It is keeping this view of our friend as self-determining always before our eyes.

Entering into a friendship, then, is the endorsement of principles. It is not that we only endorse principles in abstraction, as we do when we reflect on what we ought to do. It is also something that is built into us. On Kant’s view the duty to create and cultivate friendships springs from the sorts of beings we are. It is not that I have to reason in order to endorse the principle of friendship, the taking of another’s ends to be my own. Taking another’s ends to be one’s own is just what we do, as anyone with a friend will know perfectly well. The endorsement of

¹⁵ Kant, I. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. The doctrine of virtue, 6:448.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

principles are not exclusively done in abstract terms. We can take actions to be worthwhile without stopping and reflecting on them.

But if we are to take something to be worthwhile, in light of what do we do that? Actually, candidates for action always represent themselves as worthwhile in a primitive sense, otherwise they would not be motivationally loaded representations. What we must do is to take the action to be worthwhile in the final sense – that it is worth *actually* acting on. We have seen one way in which this can occur in François who fails to find a reason why not. This is in a way what always happens, because if we do act, we have failed to endorse the principle that we should not. But more often among people than among Houellebecq’s characters, we are ultimately guided by a principle of what we should do because we take it to really be worthwhile rather than just the best on offer. There are positive and negative reasons for action in the sense that we can take something to be positively worthwhile, or just act because one fails to find a reason why not. François, it seems, only acts on these negative reasons. In either case, the structure that makes the endorsement possible is that the impulse is seen as worth endorsing, as normative for us, even if the impulse is only worth acting on in the negative sense.

1.2.2: Practical Identity and teleology

The *for us* is important here because we essentially perceive the world in the first instance as for us, that is to say teleologically. Human beings face a particular problem, Korsgaard writes, because we have to carve the “sensible manifold into objects”.¹⁷ We need some reason for carving out specific bits of the world as meaningful in a particular way. The way we do this is by identifying some structure as a functional unity, as something that does something, an object with a point. This is so for rational animals, but we perceive the world teleologically in another way as well which we share with the other animals. The scurrying rat being chased by a cat perceives the sofa as something beneath which to hide. This is almost synonymous with saying that we inhabit a world of incentives: we perceive in the world possible actions we can undertake. Objects, yes, but objects with a point. We may conceive of a chair teleologically as a functional unity where we can sit down, but we may also perceive it as a shield with which to ward off an attacker, the legs of the chair becoming decent spikes for keeping our enemy at bay.

However, this teleology plays another important part in Korsgaard’s philosophy. She conceives of human beings as always doing something, namely constituting ourselves. If a reason is to

¹⁷ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 38.

really be *ours*, it must spring from the sort of persons we are. This is what Korsgaard claims happens with practical identity, which Korsgaard describes as a description under which you value yourself.¹⁸ For an impulse to actually be a reason to act it must in some way appeal to a sense of who we are. These practical identities, she writes, are also to be conceived of teleologically, as is action. Practical identities are roles with a point. And this gives them a constitutive, non-arbitrary standard. Being a builder is endorsing the sort of identity which – becoming the sort of person who – acts in the way characteristic of a builder. Being a builder is building. And because we remember from Aristotle that “the work of any given subject” is the same as “that subject good of its kind”,¹⁹ undertaking the building of a house just is undertaking the building of a *good* house, one that performs its function well. The builder is susceptible to incentives of a sort that one not engaged in the house-building activity (or someone who is simply incompetent and therefore not a good builder able to respond to incentives of the right kind in the right way) is not. He is sensitive to the sort of material used – how to interact with them and where they should go – that someone who is not a builder might not be. Undertaking the activity is attempting to take on the activity of a builder, and building well is what makes one a good builder.

Now, there is one aspect of Korsgaard’s theory of identity that can lead to some confusion and that is how practical identities relate to principles. In one section she writes that “we constitute our own identities in the course of action.”²⁰ Elsewhere she writes

One might think of a particular practical identity, if a little artificially, as a set of principles, the dos and don’ts of being a teacher or a citizen, say. But I think it is important, at least in some cases, to think of a form of identity in a more general way, as a role with a point.²¹

So, do we constitute our identities when we endorse an action and therefore a principle, or do principles spring from our practical identities as when the builder responds to incentives as a builder? Both. Constituting our identities is a forever ongoing process: “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.”²² To endorse a principle is a sort of action, not a separate event, just as recognizing that “if x then p” and “x” is to determine yourself to believe p. The principle “if x then p” is indeed a logical premise, but it is also a description of how we determine ourselves. So is the principle of non-contradiction. These are

¹⁸ Korsgaard, 1996, p. 101.

¹⁹ Aristotle. *Ethics*. Kindle Edition. P. 35

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 21.

²² *Ibid*, p. 43.

principles that are constitutive of thinking. If one does not follow the principle of non-contradiction but believes both that x and not x , one is not thinking well. So too, the builder-principles are what constitutes the builder as a builder, and being a builder is just to perpetually making yourself into a builder by being guided by (i.e. at least attempting to act on) the principles that is constitutive for that sort of person.

I just mentioned constitutive principles, which play an important part in Korsgaard's argument. They relate to another problem Korsgaard attempts to explain how we solve: the problem of how an action can fail. The answer, she claims, is that an action fails if it fails to be guided by the principle characteristic of its kind, the principle that constitutes it as that particular action. In building a house, one is guided by the principles of the house-building kind, the principles that constitutes the activity as being the building of a house. Performing an action, however, is not an all-or-nothing kind of thing. There are many ways by which one can fail, and they do not all imply that one was not really performing the action. If that was the case, there could be no failure; it would just be a different action. This is similar to the Aristotelian notion of *telos*. An action has some essential characteristic that makes it the sort of thing it is, and which makes it identifiable as good or bad of its kind. If one is sitting by a chessboard and moves the pieces around at random, one is not playing chess. But if one is guided by the constitutive principles of chess (its rules in this case), and merely fails to follow the rules every now and again, but is corrected, or makes a strategically unwise decision, one is still playing chess, although poorly.

From the groundwork laid out above, Korsgaard goes on to argue that action as such has a *telos*, a function: self-constitution. In endorsing and thereby engaging in builder-activity we are reaffirming our identity as builders, and an action is bad or good with respect to how well it constitutes us. The same is true of friendships: entering into a friendship is fundamentally the endorsement of a principle to make the other's ends our own. This is what we perpetually do when we constitute ourselves as friends and there are better and worse ways of doing this. That is the nature of action. But if the duty that forces us to create and cultivate friendships are really duties arising from us as the sort of beings we are, as Kant claimed, how does this duty arise? And are our duties to our friends really duties or just conditional on some reciprocal contract? If these duties so fundamental to our daily moral life are to carry their weight, there must be some way of grounding them as unconditional. That is the problem to which we now turn.

1.2.3: The problem of normativity

The problem of normativity is the problem of what justifies the claims normativity makes on us. In presenting the problem, Korsgaard identifies three conditions which she believes a successful theory of normativity must meet. First, it must address someone who is actually faced with the problem, someone who asks “but why should I do what morality obligates?”²³ As a caveat for this condition, she points out that we have to assume the person to be sincere, however, she does concede that in principle, it should be possible to explain to someone why he should take something to be normative. Second, the theory must meet the transparency-condition.²⁴ This condition tells us that the theory cannot be dependent on the agent’s ignorance of it. As an example, she mentions theories that ground ethics in evolution, telling us that we evolved to feel compelled by what we refer to as “morality”. Knowledge of this theory, if anything, does not strengthen or affirm our sense that morality actually does obligate us. As such, ignorance of it is required to feel compelled by it. If an answer to the problem is to be successful, it must be transparent. Finally, she writes, “the answer must appeal, in a deep way, to our sense of who we are, to our sense of our identity.”²⁵ It must, she adds, somehow account for why a moral failing can sometimes be worse than death in order to be truly compelling.

Clearly, Korsgaard is in describing the third condition hinting to her theory of practical identity. But what if we cannot endorse any one identity in particular because we cannot find worth in them? Korsgaard’s answer to this question is to point out that we already have practical identities as human beings, otherwise we could not take any incentive that arises as a reason to act. Even François appears to do this when engaging in sexual relation with prostitutes or, indeed, doing anything. As human beings, we must take some incentive to be worth acting upon, which means that we have to act on some principle. What principle, then, must we act on? The principle that we must have a law for ourselves. If a reason to act is to be *our* reason, it must in some sense arise (or derive) from us. And because we need principles to act, the principle must be ours. This tells us nothing about what principle we should adopt, only that it must be a principle. What we can say is that the principle must take the form of a law, it must be universalizable. This is so because otherwise we could not *will* them, meaning that we could not determine ourselves in light of them. If all principles were what Korsgaard refers to as “particularistic”,²⁶ we would never determine ourselves to do anything, but merely respond to

²³ Korsgaard, 1996, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 72-75.

impulses as they arose. In order to illustrate this point, Korsgaard dreams up a college student called Jeremy.²⁷ Jeremy is respondent to every impulse, making him a willer of particular impulses rather than the universalizable maxims Kant argued we must act on. He is restless when he sits down to read, so he takes a walk; he sees a book he likes so he moves towards it; he is interrupted by a friend who asks him to go to a bar; the bar is too loud, so he goes home. Jeremy is not able to do anything, and if he was, it would only be due to the accidental coherency of his impulses. Our principles are not always universal (we cannot expect to hit the mark right off the bat). But they need to be “provisionally” so.²⁸ Once we notice that our principle has faults, we must alter it.²⁹ We must strive to make our principles universal, otherwise we are not engaging in the activity of creating laws for ourselves at all.

What we have argued in support of thus far is the formula of universal law, as it was laid out by Kant. Deriving the formula of humanity, that one ought to treat every person as an end in himself and never a mere means to an end, is only a short step away. We take ourselves to be ends, otherwise we could never take our impulses to matter. Our impulses appeal to us and we take the *us* to be normative, creating a law that derives its normativity from us as self-governing beings. If this is to be universal, I must also take you, and therefore your principles to be normative for me. This does not mean that I have to act on the same principle, only that I must take the fact that something matters to you as providing a reason to help you realize it, if the duty is positive (sometimes called “imperfect”), or at least not get in your way if the duty is negative in character (sometimes called “perfect”). If what you take to matter is immoral, however, for example the taking of slaves, thereby using someone else as a means to your end (I admit this is an extreme example), I cannot be obligated to help you lest I treat people as means too. Your principle is therefore not providing me with a reason to act, and I will rather have the duty to stop you or otherwise help the people you hurt by treating them as means.³⁰

This is approximately where Kantians tend to start losing their audience. This does not capture our experience of being obligated toward another person. It is true that we do not first notice that we take some things to matter to us and so to matter in the final sense, and then notice that

²⁷ Ibid, p. 169

²⁸ Ibid, p. 72-75.

²⁹ The view of how we do this differs in this thesis from Korsgaard’s own explanation in crucial ways as will be made clear when I develop the concept of disclosive coping in the course of the next chapters.

³⁰ I am not going to say anything about the Kingdom of Ends Formulation here as all we need to establish in the first instance is some moral principle for the theory to be a moral one. I believe the formula of humanity does that, and that further arguments to establish other formulations of the categorical imperative is superfluous for my purposes.

other people also experience the mattering of the world and so find ourselves having to respond to its mattering lest we are confronted by a contradiction. We just experience people as ends, as obligating us. This reading of the argument above confuses duty as a phenomenon and as an experience. I can fail to obligate myself in accordance with duty, or obligate myself to, say, flick the light switch a certain number of times to avoid some imagined suffering being inflicted on my family, which would not be an actual case of duty. Korsgaard argues that we are often confused on this point, as when people claim that acting from duty involves a critical distance from the world that acting from love, say, does not.³¹ She responds that these are not alternative ends. Acting “from duty” is “the characterization of a specific kind of value that a certain act performed for the sake of a certain end may have.”³² Acting so as to save a loved one is not different from acting from duty. You simply obligate yourself in that way because you take the whole action (the act done for some end) to be your duty.

Let us return to friendships for a moment. Above I wrote that love and respect are the feelings that accompany the cultivation of duties. So, how can acting from duty and acting from love be essentially the same thing? Acting from love would be to act from a feeling, whereas acting from duty is surely not conditioned on having any specific feeling. However, as a feeling, love is essentially a certain sort of impulse. Love in the Kantian sense is what we experience when we are motivated to act. So when Kant gives the example of seeing a beggar, it is not supposed that we are motivated entirely by a kind of stoic sense of duty. In the first instance we can be motivated by sympathy. However, if we have also cultivated the feeling of respect, we must notice that he is a self-determining being and if we are to give him money, it must not seem to him to spring from pity or arrogance. Our generosity can humble him, Kant writes. Thus, “it is our duty to behave as if our help is either merely what is due him or but a slight service of love, and to spare him humiliation and maintain his respect for himself.”³³ Acting from duty in this way is to act from love and respect. But, as Kant takes care to point out, someone might very well be undeserving as the objects of these feelings. However, we still have the duty of practical love towards them as the cultivation of philanthropy. The duty of practical love, which Kant identifies with the maxim to “love your neighbour as yourself”, is our duty toward all human beings.³⁴

³¹ Ibid, p. 11.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kant, I. *Metaphysics of Morals*. Doctrine of virtue, 6:448

³⁴ Ibid, 6:450. What Kant says here is a little confusing for he first claims love is a feeling only to deny it soon thereafter. This may be tied to his view that perfect friendships are impossible in principle. Still, when Kant writes

The categorical imperative, however, is not the only normative element in Korsgaard's theory. Self-constitution is another. We must constitute ourselves as persons, making the categorical imperative normative for us because it describes the way in which we do that well. The categorical imperative – i.e. creating laws for ourselves and constituting ourselves as ends – describes the way we constitute ourselves in the right way. For our practical identities to really be normative, then, we must construct them by following the categorical imperative. This puts some restrictions on what sort of identity we can construct; we cannot be people who restrict another's freedom, for example, as that would not be treating him as an end in himself. But more than that, the categorical imperative accounts for what makes our identities normative in the final sense of normative for no one in particular and worth actually acting on. In endorsing an identity, we create a law for ourselves, which we take to be normative when we constitute ourselves as that identity. Furthermore, Korsgaard claims, because we cannot aim to will conflicting identities (see the example of Jeremy above), we are obligated to try to constitute a unified will. She borrows heavily from Plato and Aristotle here, arriving at a sort of virtue ethic grounded in the deontology of Kant.

1.2.4: The virtue ethic of Korsgaard

Against what she refers to as the “combat model” of the soul – the idea that virtue consists in having reason triumph over passion as one force triumphing over another – Korsgaard argues in defence of the “constitutional model” of the soul. On her view of self-constitution, different impulses can arise at the same time, forcing us to choose between them. On the combat model, choosing would be the result of one force triumphing and choosing right would have reason triumph. Endorsing an action, however, is a sort of reunification of the will. Endorsing in the right way is to be reunified well in such a way that our whole being is acting on it. Our being is in harmony rather than one force simply being too weak or one too strong. The just soul, she

that taking delight in another is not love, he separates this from being required to take part in realizing another's ends (6:451). Shortly thereafter he writes that practical love, also identified as practical benevolence, is making the well-being of others my end. Love, as a feeling, is no substitute for practical benevolence since I can feel closer to some than to others, but not have duties that are different in kind. These distinctions which become more finely tuned throughout the doctrine of virtue is built on premises that are perfectly disputable. Kant claims, among other things, that taking too much joy in the well-being of others is to revel in moral feelings which reduce the other to a means for our pleasure. This view of love for our neighbours does not exactly capture the joy in watching a friend succeed or a spouse perfectly content with his life. In the end, Kant identifies the cultivation of the feeling of sympathy as a duty, if only a conditional one in that it might (and I think clearly does) help in promoting another's well-being. It is the common-sense understanding of love as a feeling that Kant first expresses and later puts aside in favour of practical love that I am talking about here. Love as sympathetic joy and sadness springing from the taking of another's end to be our own. It is not separate from taking part in realizing another's ends, but an essential part of the enterprise when the other is related to us in the right way. It is a way of taking another's ends to be our own.

argues following Plato, is achieved when each part of the soul is doing what it does well.³⁵ We might say, building on what I have already argued, that when an impulse arises, that is the work of instinct. Endorsing it as a reason to act is what reason does, which is a sort of legislative act. Endorsing an action is to will that action as a law onto ourselves.

All this becomes clearer if we take an example of how one may fail to do this. The example of Jeremy provides one example. There the action is not willed as a law, but instinctively acted on. Reason always structures experience, but it can fail to will an action. Jeremy, then, is in a constant state of conflict, one impulse constantly triumphing over another for no particular reason. He is a kind of wanton or glutton, never subjecting his impulses to his legislative will. Let us take another example, one in which the legislative will is doing its job poorly. Douglas Murray has described a certain kind of political person as making his “home on the barricades”.³⁶ Without a life to go home to, this kind of person is perpetually at war even after his enemies are defeated. He might describe those who disagree with him as monsters rather than recognizing that they may have a legitimate argument against him or look for any opportunity to stand on a soap box. He is, at any rate, desperately in need of enemies to wage war on. Not being able to acknowledge nuance or even a possible plurality of goods, such a person is not really ruled by reason at all, but by sheer determination. He wills his principles as laws alright, but they are not good laws, not good principles of action. In order to keep himself together, in order to will anything at all, he must perpetually deny any conflict. If the conflict grows too fierce, however – if he notices that he has driven away all his friends or anyway not stood in the right relation to the world – his will must crumble. This being the case, such a person is not able to truly unify his will. His will governs in such a way that he has to deny complexity and nuance. Such a person will always be in danger of losing his ability to will principles as laws altogether, for he is not willing well.³⁷

Before concluding this chapter, it is relevant to first examine some arguments against Korsgaard. Here I will attempt to address two common arguments against Korsgaard’s view. These arguments attack her methodology; the first attacking constitutive arguments in general,

³⁵ See Korsgaard, 2009, chapter 7. There are two reasons why I will not rehearse her argument here. The first is simply an issue of space. The second is that I do not think her specifically Platonic description of the constitutional model is needed to fit with what I am going to argue in the third chapter and in the conclusion. What I say above will suffice in order to use MacIntyre’s theory of the unified life to create a coherent Korsgaardian account of what it is we are doing when we aim at the good, unified life.

³⁶ Harris, S. & Murray, D. (2017). #85 – Is this the end of Europe? *The Waking Up Podcast*.

³⁷ In anticipating an argument I make in 3.9.2, we might say that such a person would fail to live a unified life as well, because in order to will his principle as law, there will be aspects of life that he must deny.

and the second attacking reflective endorsement in particular. I will attempt to reply to both arguments by way of further describing and examining Korsgaard's theory of normativity before concluding the chapter by citing a third argument, the response to which will be developed in the subsequent chapters.

1.3: Against Korsgaard

David Enoch, in an aptly named paper titled "Agency, Shmagency",³⁸ argues that the constitutive arguments Korsgaard (among others) present fail to answer the claims of the sceptic. Such arguments attempt to show that there is some activity or system of principles (such as logic) that even the sceptic is necessarily involved in or applying. By showing that there are constitutive standards normative for whoever is involved in the activity or applying the system of principles, they conclude that there is something that is normative absolutely; that there are normative standards that apply to everyone (or, as we may say, no one in particular). In Korsgaard's version of such an argument, everyone is engaged in the activity of self-constitution: we are all constantly making ourselves into something. This is what agents do as it is the function of action in general. Because there are constitutive standards applied to actions, and indeed to self-constitution, there is some normative standard that even the sceptic is subject to. Even (or maybe especially) in questioning morality, the sceptic is engaging in the process of self-constitution by asking what, if anything, he should do. Therefore, the sceptic is always engaged in making himself into an agent and is therefore subject to constitutive standards.

Against such arguments, Enoch points out that the sceptic is fully entitled to engaging in whatever is being criticized by way of presenting a reduction ad absurdum. He writes that

"The skeptic" is entitled to use, say, logic because *we* are committed to the legitimacy of doing so. And he is entitled to engage his motives and capacities that are constitutive of agency even while putting forward a critique of them because *we* are (purportedly) committed to the legitimacy of him so doing. In other words, the skeptic is entitled to use our own weapons against us. If, using these weapons, he can support a conclusion that *we* are not willing to swallow – one stating, for instance, that the very weapons he is using are not ones *we* are entitled to use – then it is *we* who are in trouble, not him, because *we* have been shown to have inconsistent commitments.³⁹

From this he concludes that even if the sceptic must engage in the very activity criticized as arbitrary or somehow non-normative, this does not show that the purported normativity is non-arbitrary. He can still ask "but why should I want to make myself into an agent?" even if, in

³⁸ Enoch, D. (2006). Agency, shmagency: Why normativity won't come from what is constitutive of action. *The Philosophical Review*, 115(2), 169-198.

³⁹ Enoch, 2006. p. 184.

doing so, he is constituting himself as an agent. The sceptic could, after all, even if it is in his very nature to constitute himself as an agent; even if being an agent is inescapable, commit suicide.⁴⁰

Against this, Korsgaard could say, as she does, that we must have some conception of our practical identity, because if we did not we would lose our grip on ourselves and fail to have reason to do one thing rather than another. This, she writes, is to lose the grip “on yourself as having any reason to live and act at all.”⁴¹ This particular reason, she goes on, is not contingent, but springs from our humanity. If we take our humanity, then, to be a “practical, normative form of identity”,⁴² making yourself into *someone* must necessarily be normative for us. However, Enoch could still claim that suicide is still an option. We could decide that we do not care about having reasons to do one thing rather than another (or, more appropriately in the context of this thesis, that it seems nothing counts as a reason to do one thing rather than another) and opt out of life. Korsgaard at least agrees that these are the stakes, identifying a rejection of value with a rejection of life.⁴³

The question to ask here is whether this possible rejection of life should worry us. I take it to be Enoch’s view that if a theory fails to tell someone why they should remain alive attempting to build a meaningful life for themselves when they reject this possibility, it has failed to address the normative sceptic. Korsgaard, however, disagrees, arguing instead that it really is possible to live a life devoid of all values: “value only exists if life is worth living, and that depends on what we do.”⁴⁴ What does she mean by that? She appears to mean that because life, the ongoing constitution of ourselves as agents, is what generates reasons for acting one way rather than another, we could live in a world where we fail to generate sufficient reasons to go on constituting ourselves. She is, I think, speaking in first-person terms here: such a person could be wrong about her reasons or failing to constitute herself in the right way, but that does not exclude the possibility that the sceptic really does fail to perceive anything as worth doing, an existence Houellebecq plausibly portrays as being insufferable. Taking one’s life, on

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

⁴¹ Korsgaard, 1996. p. 121.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 161. Interestingly, Houellebecq too agrees that these are the stakes. Not only when he describes Francois as at times suicidal in *Submission*, but also when he describes Jed’s father being euthanised in *The Map and the Territory* (2010). Jed’s father is, from the perspective of the unreliable narrator if not Jed himself, described as ending his insufferable existence as a man with standards the modern world (and life) refuses to live up to in a peculiarly neutral tone indicative of complete understanding if not endorsement.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 163.

Korsgaard's view is to extinguish what gives rise to values and it would therefore be a horrible act, even if it made sense in first-person.

There will be more talk of perceived reasons and meaning in the following chapters. Going into the next argument, I think it is sufficient to note that Enoch does not exactly strike the blow against Korsgaard that he believes. Korsgaard, unlike the impression Enoch gives, does not dodge the problem of the sceptic, but does not view it as a significant problem either. Someone who sees his life as meaningless and insufferable – who rejects all value and therefore life – might well be right to take his own life (from his perspective), even if that is “a defeat for humanity”.⁴⁵

The second argument is made by Hilary Kornblith.⁴⁶ It goes something like this: On Korsgaard's view, to have a reason to do something is to reflectively endorse it, turning an impulse to act into something we take to be a reason to act. When we do that, we apply our reflective standards, but these can be of poor quality or simply fail because we stopped reflecting too early. We might have the wrong standards whose application only create bad reasons. Even if we imagine some perfectly rational being who was able to reason all the way back to that which we cannot doubt (in a Cartesian sense), it would be a mistake to a priori identify good action with that which has withstood reflective scrutiny.⁴⁷ We could, after all, be wrong about how we ought to think about moral matters. If this is possible, then we cannot a priori identify good reason with good reasoning, for we may have no idea what good reasoning looks like, only how *we* reason.

The problem with this argument is that it does not quite capture Korsgaard's view. Most importantly, it ignores the distinction she makes between first person and third person perspectives. Even when we stop reflecting too soon, that which we endorse becomes normative *for us*. The question remains whether there is something of value actually there. This would be a problem if Korsgaard had provided no theory of how to reflect, or a theory which could not support the deliberative process as normative for us as agents. But she has. The categorical imperative is constitutive of thinking and acting as agents. Sometimes that means that we must act in accordance with it, that it puts constraints on what we can do. But acting on the categorical imperative is, importantly, to reflect from it. It is to take yourself and others to be ends and

⁴⁵ Williams, B. (1972). *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. New York: Harper Torchbooks. Cited in Korsgaard, 1996. p. 162.

⁴⁶ Kornblith, H. (2010). What reflective endorsement cannot do. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 80(1), 1-19.

⁴⁷ Kornblith, 2010, p. 18.

to reason from this notion. Sometimes it requires little to no reflection: in seeing a friend in need of help we simply see him as an end, and we act from this perception, an almost primal instinct, which our principles can be if they are sufficiently cultivated and internalized. So too with our self-constitution: we need not reflect on who we are in every moment or attempt to reason back to the unconditioned. Our identities can be fundamental part of our selves, being precisely what motivates us to act. And to act morally is not simply to endorse whatever desire that can withstand some arbitrary standard for reflection we happen to apply (as a mobster or a saint), thereby turning that desire into a reason worth acting on. It is to act from our identity (as agents, as parents, etc.) in a way that is consistent with the categorical imperative.⁴⁸

1.4: Conclusion: Korsgaard on who to be

How does all this relate to François? The brief discussion on suicide is indicative of what is fundamentally wrong with his approach to life: he cannot take anything to be worth doing. Actually, that is a slight stretch for he does take himself to be an end, at least in a limited sense. He does take his life to be insufferable and in dire need of relief, which he seeks. We can therefore conclude that he takes himself to matter, and that a life with a sustainable meaning, a life he can take to be normative, is worth pursuing. François thus shows himself to be a sort of limited sceptic. He is what I will call a “reflective nihilist”, someone who perceives the world as valenced and take himself to matter but who, on reflection, finds nothing worth acting on. He is not the sort of sceptic either Korsgaard or Enoch has in mind who asks why one should bother to lead a life worth leading, or why he should be moral. François, like most of us, are compelled by the why. He is, however, unable to find anything worth doing.

There are quite a few ways of analysing why that is. One is explored in the next chapter. Korsgaard, however, follows the virtue ethic of Aristotle in saying that there is really only one virtue, but many vices, and that when we point to a specific virtue what we really mean is that one embodying that specific virtue does not have the corresponding vice.⁴⁹ The virtuous person is one who successfully constitutes herself as an agent, but there are many ways of failing to do this. The relevant problem for François is that he fails to take his perceived reasons to be reasons. This may sound like a contradiction and in a way it is. François’ contradiction (which makes him different from the normative sceptic) is that he takes himself to matter, but not really. He has impulses, he might find something momentarily interesting or compelling, as he does when praying before the Madonna statue. Upon reflection, however, he negates himself

⁴⁸ See chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the relation between perception and action.

⁴⁹ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 71.

at every turn. His nature is calling to him as something to act on, but he refuses. He somehow undermines his perceived reasons springing from his humanity and in denying them declares his humanity to not matter. He is, at the same time, constantly creating and extinguishing value. This is François' curse as an Icarus fallen. He finds no way by which to deem his impulses and therefore himself as worth acting on as ends. This is also reflected in *Submission's* depiction of future French politics. The culture as a whole only acts from external influences (the fear of racism or wanting to appear virtuous) and is therefore not able to will anything as worthy ends. This state of being, the state François embodies, is agonizing.

What does this mean? Could François simply endorse his nature and see his existential suffering consign itself to oblivion? Yes and no. That is, on Korsgaard's view what would happen if he did endorse his nature and successfully constituted himself as a someone worth being, someone whose identity is worth acting on for him. This, however, (contra an argument Dreyfus & Kelly makes against Kant and David Foster Wallace) is not, on her model, done by sheer force of will. Valuing, or deciding what is worth valuing, is not done in a vacuum, and it therefore seems unlikely that François' perpetual critical distance from the world is going to serve him well in this endeavour. He ought not stand alone at the precipice of action, attempting to decide what to do and ultimately find it worthless. Undertaking an action necessarily involves taking something to be worth aiming at and to therefore be meaningful in some way. This François cannot bring himself to do for he cannot give himself over to the world and endorse his human nature.

How to break down this barrier and what it means in a Korsgaardian context to engage with the world is examined in chapter two. Notice, however, that taking your humanity to be worth acting on means that you have to make yourself into someone in order to have reasons. But then who should you be? There are at least two problems with Korsgaard's account. Firstly, it is true that we do not start examining this question from the point of view of nobody, but this observation will not get us very far. It is still true that we can withdraw our commitment to who we are and attempt to be someone else. This makes our identities at each moment subject to scrutiny, and Korsgaard says surprisingly little about how we should go about resolving this problem. She just points out that we must necessarily be someone, some unified agent subject to the categorical imperative. At one crucial point, when discussing practical identities, she writes that most of our identities are contingent and that "conflict that arise between identities,

if sufficiently pervasive or severe, may force you to give one of them up”.⁵⁰ She goes on to argue that even though these identities may be contingent, one identity is not: that of being a human being who must act on principles. If we are merely arbitrary and shed our identities based on nothing in particular, we will lose our grip on ourselves.

Korsgaard is right about this, but this does not get us further than her conclusion that “we must conform to [our identities] not merely for the reasons that caused us to adopt them in the first place, but because being human requires it.”⁵¹ She is obviously not referring to any identity whatever. One cannot cite one’s identity as a human being in defence of continuing to endorse a horrible identity. She must be referring to those identities that spring from (or are compatible with) the categorical imperative. Being animals who must live in relation to others, say, we must make those relationships into a specific kind, namely that of friendship where we adopt the ends of another as our own, thereby endorsing the character of the other as an end in himself. That is to say that we must constitute ourselves as friends. But we are still left with the question of exactly how we ought to take up this role. Saying that identities are multiple realizable (that there are many ways of realizing an identity) does nothing to negate this problem either. We must still take up the role in some way, and it is not at all obvious how we ought to do this.⁵²

The second problem is tightly linked to the first. Which impulses ought we to act on? There are things that we are obligated to do and not to do, but seeing as it is not obvious how we ought to undertake any identity in particular ways, it is not obvious exactly which of the impulses that spring from these identity ought to be endorsed. I may have interests, but I cannot always treat this fact alone as a reason to pursue them. Many impulses may arise from my constitution, even mutually exclusive impulses. I may not have time to do all I want to do, for example, or acting on one may automatically exclude others. How does one go about deciding what to do, who to be?

Korsgaard has, I think, a particular answer to such questions in mind. However, she does not spell it out in detail, leaving pieces of a puzzle to be assembled. Chapter three will be devoted to examining one way of answering such questions, one put forth by Alasdair MacIntyre, and how this view ties in with Korsgaard’s fragmented solution. This answer involves a conception of the good that is mostly (if not entirely) ignored by Korsgaard. Chapter two, meanwhile, will

⁵⁰ Korsgaard, 1996, p. 120.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 121.

⁵² This is an argument that is discussed further in 2.5.2.

aim at resolving another problem faced by Kantians: how is it that we can act without taking up critical distance and still be responsible for our actions? I will start by explaining Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly's theory about what is going on when we experience actions as drawn out of us and attempt to reconstruct Korsgaard's theory to capture the experience they describe. I will attempt to show that Dreyfus & Kelly's account, arguing that such actions are inherently worth undertaking because they are meaningful in their particular sense, fails to account for why such actions are meaningful and lacks any moral grounding. As such we are left with what I take to be a coherent Korsgaardian view of the perception of action as worth undertaking (valence), and what makes our actions right, but without a theory of why some things really are worth aiming at. It is from this starting point, one that I have also hinted at here, that I will introduce MacIntyre's theory.

Chapter 2: Dreyfus & Kelly on finding meaning in the world

2.1: Embodied coping in a valenced world

The present chapter is concerned with the question of how we can take the world to be acted upon. Here I present Dreyfus & Kelly's view of meaning where to find something meaningful is to perceive the world as calling forth certain actions. The actions worth undertaking, they claim, are those that allow us to engage in an activity in such a way that the activity itself becomes ever more meaningful. Cultivating such activities involves learning to respond to the world in more appropriate ways. The main objection to their view presented in this chapter is that their theory fails to account for ethical action. For this reason, I will attempt to reconstruct Korsgaard's theory of action to accommodate coping of the kind described by Dreyfus & Kelly where one is acting directly (without active reflection) on perceived calls for action in the world. In short, I will argue that on Korsgaard's account we can respond directly on perceived reasons in the world without taking up a critical distance, all the while remaining moral agents.

Dreyfus & Kelly's work in the moral sphere can be viewed as an attempt to reenchant the world. The modern world, they claim, has lost (or risks losing) its enchantment, meaning that the things and practices that was at the root of the valenced world in the past has lost their significance. They attempt to reintroduce such enchantment in our everyday lives without a religious component (which was rather an important part of the valenced world of yesterday). In arguing against what they take to be the American author David Foster Wallace's attempt to escape nihilism, which appears to be us somehow imposing meaning on the world by sheer force of will, they argue that the world is permeated with meaning. In a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, a speech entitled "This is water", Wallace explains his point of view. Reflecting on the infuriating experience of grocery-shopping he says:

But most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it. This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.

This, Dreyfus & Kelly argue, is entirely wrong-headed. Bliss and meaning are not the sort of things we can just impose on the world, by sheer force of will. Any such bliss will be fleeting at best. While some Buddhist monks might beg the differ,⁵³ their point is well taken, especially when coupled with the fact that Wallace seems to believe this imposition of meaning on the world should make even the most banal experiences infinitely meaningful.⁵⁴ Their theory, rather than attempting to impose meaning on the world, claims that the world is already permeated with meaning. When everything goes well, they argue, we are responding to the world in appropriate ways, and reenchanting the world consists in noticing when we do this and cultivate this ability, endorsing the valenced world once more.

2.2: Affordances and Solicitations

The world, in Dreyfus & Kelly's work, is primarily understood as a phenomenological world in this context. We can describe the world as consisting of atoms and quarks and this world would be, in a sense, descriptive and neutral. But the phenomenological world is valenced. Apples are not neutral objects, sitting as they do on a neutral shelf that is a neutral distance from us. As embodied beings engaged in the world, and especially as hungry ones, the apple is seen as to be eaten, as something that calls out to us as to be eaten, and it is infuriating that someone put it on a shelf that is too high for us to reach. This is not entirely unlike the world of telos that Korsgaard claims we inhabit, but for this difference: things are indeed seen as for something, but we are not mindful, in the first instance, of its various function. This leads us to Dreyfus' crucial distinction between affordances and solicitations.⁵⁵

Affordances are rather like the function of something. We can be aware of something's being fit to be used to stand on so we can reach the shelf, which is the way in which we are aware of something as an affordance. But when we are really engaged in the world – when we are excellent football players, say – we are aware of the world in a different way. The ball tells you

⁵³ See, for example, Richard Wright's description of perpetually happy monks in his *Why Buddhism is True* (2017).

⁵⁴ They go on to suggest on page 48 of their book that such perpetual bliss would not even be particularly attractive because it would level all experiences and thus making it difficult to describe some experiences as better or more meaningful than others. In making this argument they hint at the common truism that a good experience derives its goodness only in contrast to other, worse experiences. I hint, when laying out Korsgaard's theory of emotions, at why I think this truism is untrue.

⁵⁵ Dreyfus, H. L. (2007). The Return of the Myth of the Mental*. *Inquiry*, 50(4), 352-365.

where to stand. The world, when we are engaged in it, is made up of solicitations, i.e. attractions and repulsions. When the ball rolls towards you, you automatically react to its solicitation as it comes rolling toward you and you move into position as you automatically get ready to kick it. All this is, when acting on solicitations, automatic in the sense that we do not have to be aware of something in particular. Where we should be in relation to the ball is built into perception, or more appropriately put: our way of being in the world. Dreyfus illustrates this point by comparing it to a beacon guiding an airplane. The plane may not have a specific target in mind, but is merely guided by a signal that intensifies if it deviates from its path:

Thus there is no experience of being on the beam. Rather, when the pilot is on the beam there is no experience at all, but the silence that accompanies being on course doesn't mean the beacon isn't continuing to guide the plane. Likewise, in the case of perception, the absence of tension doesn't mean the body isn't being constantly guided by the solicitations. On the contrary, it means that, given past experience in this familiar domain, everything is going exactly the way it should.⁵⁶

For this reason, critical distance from the world impinges successful coping; the football player simply does not need to reflect on where to be. He just needs to respond to solicitations in the world.

This does not mean that there is no room for reflective distance. Taking up the standpoint of critical distance is crucial to how we learn. That is, for example, how we learn languages. Being able to understand and apply concepts is, on Dreyfus' view, secondary to how we perceive the world when we are engaged in "embodied coping" letting solicitations guide our movements. But managing to use such concepts are in turn what allows us to learn the rules of chess, say, and when one becomes a master of chess, the critical distance recedes and we are once more able to respond to the solicitations of the world, this time of the chessboard (one can note that even though chess is often taken to be a particularly cerebral exercise, blitz chess leaves very little time for thinking, making the openness to solicitations paramount). Our capacity for reason in the form of critical distance also kicks in when something goes wrong. When making a cup of coffee for the thousandth time, one can act automatically with one's mind being elsewhere, maybe even unaware of the actions we undertake. But when something goes wrong – when one drops the cup or realizes one has no idea what one is doing, having just dropped the wrong item into the bin – one's mind is ripped out of the fog and one's thoughts immediately flock to what has occurred. This is also part of how we learn and how we solve problems. But reason here has a different role than on Korsgaard's view where it is the very thing willing the

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 358.

action and which is therefore always engaged even when we act in an automatic manner. The self is absent when coping successfully, Dreyfus writes:

Although when we step back and contemplate them *affordances* can be experienced as features of the world, when we respond to their *solicitations* they aren't figuring for a subject as features of the world. When one is bodily absorbed in responding to solicitations there is no thinking subject and there are no features to be thought.⁵⁷

This is what gives rise to Dreyfus & Kelly's argument against the nihilist who cannot find any meaning "out there" as François fails to do. The world has meaning and valence because it calls out to us, it solicits us. And this valence is not uncertain or arbitrary, for when we are acting well, there is no self there to question it. However, Dreyfus admits that it is not a certainty that is in any way permanent. At any moment, we can be ripped out of the embodied coping and forced to take up the standpoint of critical distance. Not even a call to attempt to cultivate such moments of embodied coping so that they become more frequent will help the nihilist, or, indeed, anyone struggling with the questions of daily life. An appeal to solicitations does not help us decide whether to forego our diet and have a piece of cake at a wedding, much less into what line of work one ought to go. We therefore require a theory of what role the total submission to a valenced, but mindless world should play in our daily lives.

2.3: Meaning and Valence

The form the theory will take is to be seen in the way Dreyfus & Kelly describe someone who does not have the skills needed for coping. They use the rise of technology as their example, arguing that

When the GPS is navigating for you, your understanding of the environment is about as minimal as it can possibly be. It consists of knowing things like "I should turn right now." In the best case ... this method of navigating gets you to your destination quickly and easily ... But to lose the sense of struggle is to lose the sensitivities – to landmarks, street signs, wind direction, the height of the sun, the stars – all meaningful distinctions that navigational skill reveals.⁵⁸

Skilful coping in the world thus has to play a role here. Developing skills, or sensitivities, as Dreyfus & Kelly write, can undoubtedly open the world in meaningful ways. Roger Scruton, in an essay where he criticises modern music and the way in which we moderns listen to music, writes "Put a young person in a position to make music and not just to hear it and immediately the ear begins to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Dreyfus, H., & Kelly, S. D. (2011). *All things shining: Reading the Western classics to find meaning in a secular age*. Simon and Schuster. P. 214.

recover from its lethargy ... [t]he next step is to introduce the idea of judgement ... [as] judgement is the precondition of true enjoyment, and the prelude to understanding art in all its forms.”⁵⁹ However, Scruton makes a crucial mistake here by separating judgement temporally from skill as though that comes separately and after learning the skill. Everyone who knows how to play an instrument must have a conception of better and worse playing (musically and/or technically). One needs to be able to make judgements, and actually make them in order to play efficiently, of where a note does or does not fit, what rhythm to play in, etc. These judgements are made possible by being sensitive to the background. Dreyfus (2007), uses the example of walking into a room and seeing that the blackboard is unsuitably positioned. The blackboard is not (only) poorly positioned in relation to us, but in relation to the room. The room as a background consists of many things: its purpose (being a classroom or a bedroom, say), its geometrical shape, and the other objects in the room, to name a few. By developing skills, we develop a sensitivity to the background, which makes judgement possible while those judgement in turn makes the further development of a skill possible. It is in relation to the whole song that the note is poorly played, and it is because we are sensitive to the whole song that we hear it as poorly placed.⁶⁰

This is one form the valenced world takes, one consisting of judgements, but there is another I want to call attention to. The world can be experienced, as Dreyfus & Kelly point out, as calling to us. One can see a thing as utterly appealing or calling forth an action even before engaging with it. One can notice, for example, that as one sits attempting to read a difficult book, one’s instrument is calling to be played from across the room. This is not, I think, explained entirely as a mere desire in the sense that one just happens to have a greater desire to play rather than read. It is not that you get this desire, and the call to action is reducible to a desire that simply grows within us. It is, rather, a feature of how we perceive the world. Actions can be drawn from us even when we sit passively, picking up the instrument as if in a trance and starting to play. Against the accusation of anthropomorphizing here – that I am simply interpreting the call to come from the instrument rather than some inner state – I want to appeal to the intuition that objects can be experienced as calling to us. It is close to impossible to appeal to a universal intuition however, because such calls are most commonly experienced by experts, as Dreyfus

⁵⁹ Scruton, R. (2015, 15. Nov.) A Point of view: Why it’s time to turn the music off. *BBC Magazine*. Sourced from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34801885>

⁶⁰ I do not want to inject too many examples into this chapter, but one seems particularly pertinent, if odd. Lou Reed’s album *Metal Machine Music* (1975) consists entirely of feedback from Reed’s guitar. There is no obvious rhythm, and there is barely the hint of a melody. And yet after listening to it a few times, the music starts to make a little more sense each time. It seems it is possible to become sensitive to even the weirdest musical works.

points out. How could an action be drawn out of us if we could not perform it? Looking at a guitar, I want to suggest, if one can play it, one perceives possible action. One anticipates where one should put one's hand and the sound it would make. And perceiving actions to be undertaken as *to be undertaken*, is what it is like to be solicited by the instrument. It is to hear the call of the instrument. Another version of hearing such calls, more primitive in the sense that one does not have to be an expert, is captured by George Orwell in *Coming Up For Air* (1939) when, in describing the fascination a child can have with fishing, he writes:

Is it any use talking about it, I wonder—the sort of fairy light that fish and fishing tackle have in a kid's eyes? Some kids feel the same about guns and shooting, some feel it about motor-bikes or aeroplanes or horses. It's not a thing that you can explain or rationalise, it's merely magic.⁶¹

The phrase “fairy light” is rather fitting. Orwell is here describing the experience of something standing out, shining (a term Dreyfus & Kelly make liberal use of), calling out as something does when it demands our attention or action. The valenced world is full of such fairy lights calling for our attention.

It is in this immediate valence the world takes on that we are able to find meaning, according to Dreyfus & Kelly. Meaning is already built into our way of being in the world. We act in the world in a fundamentally valenced way. The guitarist notices he is playing a note a semitone too low and has to reach a higher pitch, and this can happen entirely automatically. But this is not really an answer to the reflective nihilist because he might very well ask why he should act on this perceived normativity. This is not a question that will strike the guitarist in the middle of a song perhaps, but it is one he can ask before picking up the instrument, when the guitar calls out demanding to be played. Why should he do that rather than something else? Just because he notices the guitar's call is not an appealing answer. Dreyfus & Kelly does not exactly acknowledge this problem, but do take on a related worry that goes some way toward solving it. The problem they take on is “How is anyone to discover what is worth caring about?”⁶² The formulation of the question is rather telling as the problem is made into one of discovery. We are to *discover* what is worth caring about, implying that it must already be there. Indeed, it is supposed to already be there even when we take up a critical distance toward the world, something that is hidden but discoverable. They find this in “rituals”, a concept that is never really explained. They seem to refer to any activity that possesses what they call the “sacred”:

⁶¹ Orwell, G. (1939). *Coming Up For Air*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition. P. 33.

⁶² Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 215.

“whatever it is in a culture at which one cannot laugh.”⁶³ These are moments or phenomena that cannot be attacked in the curmudgeon-like way Houellebecq does most things, even when taking up critical distance: the death of a loved one or the coming together of a people. Dreyfus & Kelly want to find something like this in rituals: activities done for their own sake. Such activities will not be instrumental in the sense that they are means to some end and thus candidates for substitution for something that also achieves the end.

This conception of a ritual seems thought up to capture something like its religious significance while at the same time not being limited to transcendent experiences, but rather capturing everyday events cultivated in the right way. They use such everyday examples as having a cup of coffee. The question is whether (and which) parts of this activity are candidates for substitution. The answer here is of the kind that can be hidden, but discoverable. One could claim that one drinks coffee in the morning as a way to become awakened from one’s slumber, say. We could then ask whether the activity is substitutable with something else that fulfils this purpose, a horrifyingly cold shower or the taking of a caffeine-pill. If this is not entirely appealing, there remains the possibility that the claim made by the coffee-drinker was untrue in some sense. He may become aware of the fact that few parts of the activity are readily substitutable: he wants the coffee to be in his favourite cup rather than one made from Styrofoam, he needs to sit in his favourite chair by the window rather than be on the move, etc. The activity then seems to be guided by a valence that is not directly tied to his initially stated goal of waking up. The struggle is to cultivate such rituals, to make them ever more meaningful (without becoming a lunatic who insists on only drinking coffee in this one way). He will then develop a skill closely tied to the activity, becoming aware of his valenced world and sensitive enough to respond to its solicitations.⁶⁴

A search for meaning, then, on Dreyfus & Kelly’s view consists in cultivating activities and learning to respond to the valenced world in more appropriate ways, making everyday activities into rituals worth doing for their own sake. But how do we accomplish this? They write:

There are a wide variety of domains worth caring about and there are no objective, context-independent principles for determining which domains these are. You just have to try it out and see. Some people care about mathematics, others about music, some prefer baseball and others bullfighting. ... Whether a domain is worth caring about is determined by whether it

⁶³ Ibid, p. 194.

⁶⁴ There can be ritual and non-ritual forms of the same activity. If you oversleep, you might not have time to drink your coffee in the way that constitutes a ritual. A session guitarist has also made me aware that he will regularly be hired to play music he loathes. This will be a non-ritual form of playing guitar that is nonetheless valenced.

appropriately elicits further and further meaningful involvement. ... Because there are no objective rules about this, one must constantly be open to the possibility that the domain to which one is drawn will reveal itself as too brutal or too trivial or too isolating or too dull or in some other way inappropriate for bringing out everything at its best.⁶⁵

This goes some way toward explaining François' predicament, particularly why he lost his love of literature. Having already written his magnum opus, he is reduced by contractual obligation to hold the same lectures over and over and publishing rewritten articles on the same topic without developing something new. He, in short, fails to cultivate his role as a professor, never saying or doing anything new even when he notices that he does not possess the will to go on as before. Even in his dealings with women one can see this: after his girlfriend leaves for Israel, François does not develop any new romantic relationships, not because he does not want to, but because he does not think he can. He describes himself as too old, too unlikeable and not the type. He does not think he can cultivate any new romantic relationships.⁶⁶

2.4: Dreyfus & Kelly's Groundless Virtue Ethic

This, however, is where the limitations of Dreyfus & Kelly's view start to reveal the themselves. They write with a strong sense of right and wrong, calling for us to cultivate those situations where we ought to cheer with the crowd (a Martin Luther King Jr. rally, say) and those where we should absolutely keep a critical distance (a rally occurring under Nazi leadership), but it is not obvious where this strong sense that we should automatically know the difference comes from. It is clear that if one is participating in a free-speech rally and one starts to notice Nazi symbols popping up in one's peripheral vision, some alarm bells should immediately start to chime. But there is nothing within the cultivation theory itself that suggests this. On their account, it seems that any activity that one can turn into a ritual is worth cultivating, but this is obviously not their view. And yet the issue of immoral cultivation never shows up in their work. Something can be unfit for cultivation because it is too dull or too trivial, because "whether a domain is worth caring about is determined by whether it appropriately elicits further and further meaningful involvement".⁶⁷ Meaningful involvement, that is, for you, for there are "no objective rules". Having lain this groundwork, their theory hardly seems a normative theory at all because they do not attempt to justify the claims morality makes on us. Doing that

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 218.

⁶⁶ This is also the case with Jed, the protagonist of *The Map and The Territory* (2010). A very different character from François, he too refuses to believe he is able to cultivate a friendship even as his affection for Michel Houellebecq, himself a character in the book, grows. This is, he explains, because he has never had friends before.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

would require there to be something over and above the activities we are involved with that has normative importance. But having insisted that the mind is absent during embodied coping, it is difficult to see how such a thing could factor in the theory in non-realist terms. I.e. there could be something (some basic normative fact or intuition that points to something) that has normative importance in the universe, but Dreyfus & Kelly would deny that there could be such objective facts because the world is always a world for us (there is no “view from nowhere”), much less that they could be normative independent of our attitude towards them. It is therefore unclear how Dreyfus & Kelly are able to make moral proclamations because their theory leaves little to no room for them.

A related objection is that there is something odd about Dreyfus & Kelly’s account of meaning in that it is not, as they write, “objective” in any meaningful sense, leaving open the possibility that anything can be worth cultivating, all the while providing mostly mundane examples. What justifies the cultivation of coffee-drinking? It is doubtful that François can find a satisfactory solution to his nihilism in a daily cup of coffee or any such mundane activities. This is precisely why he turns to Catholicism only to find himself unable to make the crucial leap. There is, incidentally, a similarity between Dreyfus & Kelly’s theory and Catholicism here: they both require a leap. Dreyfus & Kelly demand that we be open to the world as the Catholics demand we be open to Christ, but why should François be able to make the former leap, but not the latter? Being open to the solicitation of a coffee-cup or a friendly face, or an interesting new place is something François cannot bring himself to do.

Having to justify this leap Dreyfus & Kelly seem to suggest that the experience of meaningfulness is self-justifying. I.e. they appear to claim that just the fact that something is experienced as meaningful makes it worth acting on. The problem with this view, I want to suggest, is that Dreyfus & Kelly conflate meaning with skilfully acting in a valenced world. Meaning, in the sense of being something we consider worth acting on, is prior to valence. It is in taking yourself to be an end that things show up as valenced, as having some appeal to you that is worth acting on. Dreyfus & Kelly therefore fail to develop a theory of meaning as they provide no reason to endorse it other than that it will bring valence to the world which in turn will enable us to act. There is nothing inherently wrong with this structure, however, it just does not get us to where Dreyfus & Kelly wants to take us. We must act, and to do this we require principles, which in turn demands that we have some practical identity. However, just as Korsgaard’s

critics argue that this structure provides no substantial view of who to be, Dreyfus & Kelly fail to develop an account in which some activities are inherently more valuable than others.

Let me try to more clearly state my concern. During a lecture on Heidegger, Dreyfus suggests that his becoming a professor was right because the “call” was built into him in that he was sensitive to the professor’s way of being.⁶⁸ This idea does not stray far from Korsgaard’s view of practical identity (although there is at least one crucial difference detailed below), but it leaves out an account of what makes such calls normative. Dreyfus seems to be saying (as do Dreyfus & Kelly) that responding to such calls just is normative, leaving out the distinction between normative for us (valence) and normative as such. In *Platform* (2001) Houellebecq includes this stomach-turning passage in which his main character attempts to find some meaning in this world after his girlfriend was slaughtered by jihadists on a beach in Thailand:

It is certainly possible to remain alive animated simply by a desire for vengeance; many people have lived that way. Islam had wrecked my life, and Islam was certainly something which I could hate; in the days that followed, I devoted myself to trying to feel hatred for Muslims. I was quite good at it, and I started to follow the international news again. Every time I heard that a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child or a pregnant Palestinian woman had been gunned down in the Gaza Strip, I felt a quiver of enthusiasm at the thought that it meant one less Muslim. Yes, it was possible to live like this.

There seems to be little Dreyfus & Kelly could say against such a cultivation of meaning in the form of hatred, other than argue that it is not a good source of meaning in the functional sense. That is, they could only say that hatred does not do the job well. It does not, for example, motivate you to form new relationships. Such a view is not inherently problematic, however. Both Plato and Aristotle grounded their virtues in what makes beings like us function well (what it means to have a just soul in Plato, and an excellence in Aristotle). But Dreyfus & Kelly do not ground their argument in human nature, but rather in human experience. If we experience an activity joyfully, if we are “wooshed up” in it, that is worth acting on. Thus, Houellebecq’s hate-filled character has the wrong attitude for this hatred is contrary to the joy they describe. Something is worth cultivating if it provides an experience of meaning, and this is why they cannot apply concepts like right and wrong, or even good in anything but the functional sense of what provides meaning well and is experienced joyfully. But what justifies this “wooshing up”? There must be something about the background, over and above the “woosh” that makes the action right or wrong. If we want to be able to say that there is such a thing as

⁶⁸ The lecture can be heard here: https://archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley_Lecture_02_Phil_185-Lecture_2_20423.mp3

good meaning, or morally right action, their theory will be insufficient. Is there really any difference between the cultivation of the coffee-drinking activity and the cultivation of philosophical activities? Only in that one is probably a greater source of meaning.

In chapter three I will argue that what justifies the “wooshing up” is the background against which the action takes place, and this includes the categorical imperative. However, in order to make that argument at all, I must show that coping is not in principle impossible on the conception of action I have been defending.

2.5: Against Kant

Dreyfus & Kelly are seemingly right in their Heideggerian view that a thing derives its valence from the context (background) in which it is set. Against what is sometimes called “mediational” theories of perception,⁶⁹ they argue that such theories where the mind plays an active role in structuring reality (by imposing categories and valence, for example), force us to approach the world with a critical distance that hinder us from being engaged with the world. In their critique of Kant, they represent the Kantian view in a way that will be familiar to most readers of the literature on Kant. Here Kant is said to be endorsing a sort of action-dualist view where action consists in first having an impulse and, after some deliberation, deciding whether to act on it. This is framed as a step-by-step process: the impulse arises, we actively reflect on it and only if on reflection we see the impulse as fit to be endorsed do we act. Dreyfus & Kelly write:

The mature thing to do at the baseball game therefore, in this Kantian sense of maturity, is to resist the power of the community response in order to decide as a rational individual what the appropriate response to the situation should be. One might well decide that an athletic feat merits applause, and if so, one might express one’s approval appropriately. But rising as one with the crowd is out of the question.⁷⁰

This, they add, sounds like a boring way to act at a baseball game.⁷¹ In other words, on Kant’s view we must always preserve a critical distance between us and the world making claims on us (as Dreyfus would say), and this would be close to an untenable way of being in the world.

This way of reading Kant is not entirely implausible, and some of the commentary on Kant at least speak in the same terms as Dreyfus & Kelly a lot of the time. Scruton, describing Kant’s view of judgements in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, says that “it seems to have two stages: the

⁶⁹ Dreyfus, H., & Taylor, C. (2015). *Retrieving realism*. Harvard University Press.

⁷⁰ Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, P. 203.

⁷¹ Ibid.

‘pure’ synthesis, whereby intuitions are grouped together into a totality, and then the act of judgement, in which the totality is given form through a concept.”⁷² This does not entail some critical distance from the world, but it does appear to support Dreyfus & Kelly’s claim that Kant, more often than not, viewed our being in and interacting with the world as a step-by-step process of receiving some impulse or intuition and then imposing a category on it; in the moral sphere the categories of right, wrong or permissible. The implication in Dreyfus & Kelly’s reading (if not in Scruton’s) is that these steps are temporally distinct, one occurring at time t1 and the other(s) at time t2. Many of Kant’s followers will undoubtedly agree that the reading of Kant presented thus far is mistaken, while maintaining that there is something to Dreyfus & Kelly’s critique. Such people may be tempted to argue that there is a crucial difference between Dreyfus’ view and Kant’s: mainly that on the Kantian view the world as such does not actually solicit us. They may claim that normativity is imposed on the world by us such that the baseball being hurled toward us while holding a baseball bat does not exhibit a to-be-hitness, but that we have merely decided to hit a ball and we take the ball to be of the kind fit to be hit. In Dreyfus’ terms, the world would be one of mere affordances and never solicitations. This is true in the case of Korsgaard as well, but only partially so, I am going to argue, because on the her view, the world will not be one of solicitations in quite the way Dreyfus describes, but nor is it going to be one on which we impose meaning that is either produced by a temporal step-by-step process or arbitrary. There really is such a thing as an apple’s having a to-be-eatenness about it and not merely a fit-to-be-eatenness. It is not that we realize we are hungry, see an apple and (after some reflection) decide that it is fit as the means to fulfil our desire. It is rather the case that, under the right circumstances similar to Dreyfus’ notion of embodied coping, we simply see an apple as something to be eaten. And, crucially, even when acting on such a solicitation we are still free agents responsible for our actions.

2.5.1: Teleology and Valence

The crucial difference between Dreyfus and Korsgaard is what they take as our primary form of perception. Korsgaard argues that teleology is fundamental to perception – that we see everything in the world as *for us*, as something we can interact with in certain way. For Dreyfus, teleology is the result of abstraction, and therefore not the primary form of perception.⁷³ We

⁷² Scruton, R. (1982). *Kant*. New York: Oxford University Press. P. 25.

⁷³ This is the theme of his whole critique of intellectualism from Dreyfus;2007 onwards. He also speaks at lengths about this in his lectures on Heidegger found here:

perceive the world in the first instance as a world, as a whole in which certain actions are drawn out of us. The chair placed in the corner of one's office derives its significance (as the blackboard does) from this whole, from the background. Pointing to it and saying "that is a chair for sitting on" is the result of abstraction from the whole. We do not perceive the world in those terms; as consisting of objects that make up the whole. The whole, the world, is prior to anything else in perception. Not necessarily prior in a temporal sense, but the world needs to already be there if we are to pick out any objects and their functions. This is what naturally leads to Dreyfus & Kelly's virtue ethic-like moral theory because if we are primarily living in a world of solicitations, appropriately responding to these solicitation must be primary in ethics, and Kant must therefore be wrong because the step back from the world is in some sense artificial – it is a sort of afterthought which stops us from engaging fully with the world. But as we have seen, because they do not ground this virtue ethic in human nature (as it presumably cannot as that would be to abstract the human out of the world), the theory does not get us very far.

But it is unclear whether this theory of perception does anything to negate Korsgaard's idea of constitutional standards, in the first instance, and of duties grounded in practical identity in the second. Why would teleology be at odds with their description of seeing a baseball hurled at you as to-be-hit? Presumably, the other animals are unable to perform such abstractions, but Korsgaard describes them as perceiving the world in teleological terms: "A perception of something as *dinner* or *danger* – that is *to-be-eaten* or *to-be-avoided* – determines the course of the animal's movements."⁷⁴ I do not want to discuss whether this picture of animal perception is right as Dreyfus has very little to say about animals in general (but he does hint in one of his lectures that he agrees with Heidegger that they have "something like a world, but not quite a world"⁷⁵). If this is what Korsgaard means by teleology, there does not appear to be much difference between her and Dreyfus in what they consider the primary structure of perception. The real argument, as Dreyfus points out, is whether action can be automatic; being called forth by the world when we see someone as to-be-helped. This, he claims, Kantians cannot agree with.

https://archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley_Lecture_03_Phil_185-Lecture_3_20424.mp3

⁷⁴ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 94.

⁷⁵ That particular lecture can be found here: https://archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley_Lecture_01_Phil_185-Lecture_1_20422.mp3

This objection is at least potentially relevant to Korsgaard because she argues that impulses arise as candidates for action, but we have to turn them into reasons on which to act by endorsing them. So there are really two questions here: 1) can action be automatic in the sense of being embodied coping? and 2) do we remain “mature” agents when we respond directly to the teleological structure of the world? Korsgaard has explicitly answered the first question by stating “we do not have to go through a process of reason-ing in order to arrive at a view of what morality requires on every occasion. Often, we simply know.”⁷⁶ She does not go on to explain what this knowing consists in, so I will provide a sketch of what I think she is committed to believe given her general theory of action and rationality.

2.5.2: Disclosive Coping

Paradoxically, what it is to “know” something is not at issue here, as a matter of good epistemology. The issue is not, say, what constitutes a justified true belief worth acting on, or whether it is really reliably true beliefs that makes up this “knowing”. What theory of knowledge one subscribes to might have implications here, but it is not in the first instance what is important. The question is one of practical reason: how can we take an action to be endorsed without first taking time to reflect on it? I think the answer to this question comes by way of examining what it is to endorse some principle of action. As we saw in 1.2.1, it is not thinking to oneself “I ought to endorse this”, and then doing it as two temporally separate events. Undertaking an action just is to endorse it. The question is, therefore, how can we know to undertake an action?

Part of the answer lies in our teleological perception, which, as we have seen, at the very least closely resembles Dreyfus’ idea of the primary mode of perception as we see some action as to-be-done. We see our friend as to-be-helped. It is not that we see him, evaluate the predicament and what possible actions we can undertake and then evaluate what we should do – even though such abstractions are an important part of what it is to be a moral agent, it is not this instant “knowing”. Actions are perceived in much the same way for Korsgaard as for Dreyfus: the world consists of actions that are called forth from us. If our principles really are operative, they have to be acted upon. This is not in conflict with Dreyfus’ theory, but requires a clarification. Perceiving the world teleologically has a means-end relation just the way maxims do. We do not perceive our friend in the vague terms as to-be-helped – or rather, we might, but in

⁷⁶ Originally an answer to *Templeton Big Question Essay* from 2010 asking “Does moral action depend on reasoning?” The only reprinting I have come across can be found here: <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/jvt002/BrainMind/Readings/MoralReasoning-Part2.pdf>

that case we would have to somehow work out what the “helping” should consist in, in which case active reflection will be called for and it would not be automatic action. We perceive our friend as to-be-pushed out of the way of a moving car. The friend constitutes an end, and we perceive the act called for “in the world”, against the background of things, as Dreyfus would say. But Dreyfus & Kelly notices a crucial point in their discussion of heroism: that there is a clear difference between knowing which action to undertake, from the point of view of a spectator, and the being called to action, from the point of view of the one who acts.⁷⁷ How is this automatic motivation possible?

This is where identities (even our general human identity) becomes important because they are what makes actions normative for us. Dreyfus & Kelly misconstrue practical identity when they write that “feeling a certain commitment to my identity as the father of my son doesn’t by itself tell me how to take up that role.”⁷⁸ Sometimes it might not, but, crucially, sometimes it does. Principles of action are inherent in our practical identities, and our identities are inherently motivating, at least identities of a certain sort. If you are a father risking your life for your child’s safety (to avoid a traffic accident, say), that action can be called forth by your human identity (as it is with ordinary people who take such risks for the sake of a stranger⁷⁹), but more than likely, it will be called forth by, and be a reaffirmation of, your identity as a father.

But there is an element of truth in Dreyfus & Kelly’s assertion that practical identities are not, as it were, self-disclosing. It is not like we can come to an understanding of what someone with a specific identity will or must do in any particular situation just by meditating on the nature of that identity. Identities are disclosed in engagement with the world. We never know if we can be the kind of person who risks his own life for another until that action is called forth by circumstance. This is when we experience the “shine” that Dreyfus & Kelly refer to: when the world calls forth an action, it discloses to us what we ought to do. Acting on these shining moments is a sort of “disclosive coping”. Our identities inform what we ought to do, but to act successfully by responding to normative forces in the world discloses to ourselves what our identity consists in. This is precisely what we would expect if, as Korsgaard argues, we are the kind of rational beings who constitute ourselves. We could not do this if we were not already

⁷⁷ Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 13

⁷⁹ See the discussion of Wesley Autrey in the introduction to this thesis, 2.6 and 3.8.

someone, but in order to constitute ourselves we must also take it that there is someone we should be. It is therefore true that we constitute ourselves by acting, and that it is in the action – being engaged in disclosive coping – that we disclose to ourselves the sort of beings we ought to be. Because acting is to act against some background that makes the act intelligible as done for some end, undertaking an action just is the endorsement of a principle and an identity. It is in disclosive coping that our principle of action becomes intelligible.

Thus, on Korsgaard's theory, we are constantly constituting ourselves and this constitution is normative for us. We do not have to constantly evaluate whether we should constitute ourselves as the sort of persons we are because constituting oneself is not done purely through contemplation. I just know how someone like me should act in some cases (I have presumably had enough practise being me). The sort of joke that will make my friend laugh does not come to me by way of reflection. I am me so the sort of joke I would tell is what comes to me, and I know my friend, so I know what will make him laugh. Identity consists in such knowing, and being motivated to act on it, which we often do. What arises from my practical identity can be automatically endorsed, and undertaking an action and endorsing it are not separate events. As she explains "acting on a rational principle need not involve any step-by-step process of reasoning, for when a principle is deeply internalized we may simply recognize the case as one falling under the principle, where that is a single experience."⁸⁰ Time to reflect, therefore, is not always needed for endorsement.

An argument against this reading of Korsgaard on knowing how to act would be to say that she clearly states that we perceive reasons to act, but also that those perceived reasons are not in and of themselves motivating. We turn impulses into reasons. Perceiving a reason to act, therefore, is not automatically motivating. The short answer to this objection is to simply reiterate what I stated above, that some perceived reasons are automatically endorsed as they arise – as they are disclosed to us as how we ought to act in the world. The crucial difference between actions and automatic events like salivating (not an example of coping) is that hunger, as a perception of a reason to eat (this will be explained below), causes salivation, but it is not causing you to find something to eat. You are causing that. But this point might become clearer as we explain Korsgaard's theory of emotions.

⁸⁰ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 107.

Emotions, on Korsgaard's view, are perceived reasons to act in some way. Or rather, the perceiving of reasons: the perception of the objects of our experience as welcome or unwelcome. When you are in pain, that is the perceiving of a reason to avoid it. Boredom, on this theory, is a form of pain in that it is perceiving something (listening to someone drone on about a dream they have had, say) as to be avoided. Fear, too, is a form of pain, but in a different way. The object of fear (unlike the object of boredom, unless one is fearful of boredom) is a potentiality. You fear the tiger because you fear what it can do. But the tiger is not the object of your pain. These individual differences between emotions, and therefore between the reasons we perceive, are what differentiate them under the broad categories of pleasure and pain. Pain is to be avoided, if one can, and pleasure to be sought and extended. Pain and pleasure, on this picture, are not entities that can be quantified in the way a utilitarian does. Pain and pleasure are ways of experiencing something, not experiences themselves. We do not experience grief, but we instead perceive the death of a loved one grievously.⁸¹ On a utilitarian conception of pain, say, experiencing pain just is a reason to avoid something. This is not so on Korsgaard's view. Pleasure and pain is instead a way of relating to the objects of our experience. We need not explain why we stopped doing something boring by saying that its boringness caused a painful sensation which we take as to be avoided. Saying that something is painful just is to say that we perceive a reason to avoid it, that it is too familiar or is not sufficiently engaging for our faculties. To appeal to the painful sensation as what we are attempting to avoid is unnecessary. We instead perceive something as painful if we take it as to be avoided.

Fear is not (or not just) some internal state, it is a way of relating to the world; a way of being in the world. Emotions are the perceiving of reasons to act in some way, or rather ways of responding to perceived reasons. This gives us a way of understanding what I referred to above as disclosive coping – the experience of constituting ourselves through action. To be aware is always to be aware of *something* and we are not beings who are neutrally aware (if there can be such beings, which I doubt). We always have attitudes toward the objects of our experience, which is just another way of saying that perception is fundamentally valenced in terms of what actions we should undertake. Emotions therefore disclose actions to be undertaken. Being in pain is to perceive reasons why its cause should be avoided; experiencing pleasure is to perceive reasons to prolong the activity. Again, pleasure and pain are not the objects of experience,

⁸¹ One could argue, from this point of view, that this is precisely what makes grief such a devastating experience: it is the perception of reasons to do something when there is nothing to be done. But, as I will argue, opening up to such interesting arguments is not the only benefit of this view.

but rather ways of experiencing. This is, on the view I take Korsgaard to be expressing, how emotions guide action: by disclosing actions as to-be-undertaken or to-be-avoided. It also explains why (as philosophers like Aristotle and Hume have argued) it is possible to have the wrong emotions. Emotions are not just internal states about which one cannot be morally wrong, but action disclosing ways of relating to the world such that feeling pleasure at the wrong place at the wrong time is to perceive actions that we ought not undertake as to be undertaken. Disclosive coping – constituting our identities by responding to perceived reasons in the world – is thus responding to our emotions in the right way by endorsing them when we should and take up critical distance when we ought not act. As Korsgaard writes: “When nature equipped us with pain she was giving us a *way* of taking care of ourselves, not a *reason* to take care of ourselves.”⁸² In other words, “pain” and “pleasure” are the names we give to the perception of something as good or bad for us, as welcome or unwelcome.⁸³

How is all this related to our knowing how to act? In virtue of the fact that we perceive reasons and often takes those perceived reason to be reasons. That you experience the loss of a loved one grievingly just is a reason for you to grieve, even if there are constraints on how to do this in a healthy way. You do not have to say to yourself “but is her death really a reason to grieve?” Nor, absent some good reason why not, do you have to stop to reflect on whether to enjoy the time you spend with a friend. You do not control whether to laugh at jokes, or experience a particular emotion, but you do chose to really enjoy yourself because attempting to maintain and prolong pleasure (or “cultivate”, as Dreyfus & Kelly would say) is what enjoying yourself is. There is an active part to emotions that we are able to cultivate, or (for example in cognitive behaviour therapy) do away with. Disclosive coping is an activity at which we can fail or be morally wrong. It is not done in isolation but in cooperation with the world. Self-constitution, therefore, is always done in engagement with the world. In conclusion, knowing how to act is therefore not always a matter of stepping back from the situation and reflecting, but being able to know which perceived reasons to endorse. And that is something we can just know.

⁸² Korsgaard, 1996, p. 147.

⁸³ I must point out that this is a very controversial view. This theory of mind must necessarily deny, among other things, that there is such a thing as “mad pain” (see Lewis, 1980) and a potential zombie replica of ourselves (see Chalmers, 1990). This view is also widely at odds with Prinz, 2010 and Solomon, 2003 whose view of valence takes pleasure and pain to be objects of experience rather than ways of perceiving the objects of experience.

2.5.3: Valence and Reason

This brings us to the second part of Dreyfus' argument against Kantians: do we remain "mature" agents when we respond directly to the teleological structure of the world?⁸⁴ The answer to this will consist in pointing out where we differ from other animals because the picture so far encompasses animals as well, at least to a large extent, but we do not want to claim that they are responsible for their actions even if they are able to respond insufficiently to perceived reasons (by fearing a nearby predator and running straight in front of a moving car in order to avoid it, say). In short, we are rational beings – meaning that we are aware of the grounds of our actions and beliefs. This is not to say that these grounds are always clear to us. They are often tacit. Yet, we are aware that they are there even if we are sometimes unable to express them. Dreyfus would deny that we are rational when engaged in embodied coping which means we have to say something about how this rationality is involved in coping on Korsgaard's account.

The other animals are, in a way, aware of their grounds for believing or performing some action too, but to a very limited extent. The cheetah stalking an antelope is in some sense aware of the inclination to take the antelope down in order to eat it. Otherwise the animal could not respond to it. But our awareness of our inclinations that we should perform some action is structured differently because we are rational animals. We are aware of them as *grounds* for action: potential good or bad reasons to act. An incentive is "a motivationally loaded representation of an object."⁸⁵ About such a motivationally loaded representation, Korsgaard writes that one is subject to it when "you are aware of the features of some object that makes the object attractive or appealing to you."⁸⁶ In what sense are we aware of such features? This seems like precisely the sort of account Dreyfus would criticize as taking abstraction to be the primary form of perception. And he would not be entirely wrong. Indeed, the account Korsgaard gives about this does not fit at all with the account of knowing I gave above.

However, this is just clumsily worded as Korsgaard goes on to explain that animals are capable of responding to incentives, and she does not think that animals are engaging in abstraction.

⁸⁴ We seem to have strayed a long way from teleology at this point, but that is only in appearance. Recall that teleology for Korsgaard is just perceiving the world as for us, as a place where actions take place and where some particular actions reveal themselves as to be undertaken or not. As such our emotions have a teleological structure as well because they are the perceived reasons to act in some way.

⁸⁵ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 104.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 105.

What she should say is that we perceive an object as to be acted on in some way. For such an action to be calling to us as a specific way of responding to the object, it must exist against a background that makes the action intelligible, and from which the object derives a specific significance. If you are a hungry caveman, stalking the African savanna, the antelope is represented to you as it is for the cheetah: an object to be eaten. The cheetah is perhaps not able to be aware of the antelope in precisely those terms (it cannot consciously represent the animal and its features to itself, which would be a form of abstraction from the background), but this awareness is built into the action. Otherwise there could not be standards for success and failure. If the antelope, when chased, runs off a cliff and falls out of the predator's reach, the predator will have failed because she was not able to respond in the right way to the features of the antelope that made it attractive. The animal would be dead, but not fit to be eaten. This is, in the first instance, how we are aware of objects and their features: even if we are not able to point to specific features as desirable in specific ways, it is built into the action called for by the object against a background.

Incentives are just one part of the story of how an action arises, however. They operate in conjunction with principles. Korsgaard explains principles in Aristotelian terms as the agent's contribution to the action, "the thing needed to make it voluntary."⁸⁷ This is what makes an action, like attacking a prey, different from a mere response such as salivating. The instinct of the other animals constitutes their principles, she claims. It is the instinct of the cat that makes her susceptible to perceiving the small scurrying animal as a prey and give chase. The cat takes the incentive as to be acted upon in some way, and some feature of the animal to be attractive in the sense described above. Human principles, however, work a little differently and this is where Korsgaard runs into trouble. What separates us from the other animals, she writes, is that we can take up critical distance, that the incentive is not automatically to be acted on. We can ask "should we act?" By providing this description she falls prey to Dreyfus' criticism, but again this is just clumsy wording. The focus here ought to be how principles in the human sense differ from instincts in such a way that critical distance is possible. The argument ought to be that our minds are structured in such a way that makes critical distance possible, and it is the same feature of our minds that makes us responsible for our actions even when we have not taken up a critical distance before acting.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

What is crucial here is that we are aware of our principles in a way that animals are not. They are aware of their incentives, motivationally loaded (I might say valenced) representations of objects, but they are not aware of their instincts. They are just there. But we are aware of our principles, and not only when we reflect on them. We can abstract principles (as we attempt to do when doing ethical thought experiments) and question them, but we are aware of them in a different sense as well. Our principles are at least partly constitutive of our identities and so our principles are available to us in the same sense that our identities are available to us. One is not aware of one's identity as a sort of abstraction. That is, one is not constantly saying to oneself "I am me, and being me consists in endorsing these principles." Our identities are found, and disclosed to us, in the heat of action. It is the friend in need that most clearly discloses to me my identity as a friend. It is therefore possible to discover in the heat of action that we are not who we thought we were. We might be more cowardly, more self-interested or more responsible than we thought. And so we feel ashamed or proud of who we are. This is also true of actions. It is possible to think an action brave and significant when it is not. In the article that popularized the term "virtue signalling", James Bartholomew pointed out how we can make statements that appear to express genuine attitudes toward something but are instead designed to show what good people we are. "I hate 4x4s!' you declare. This is an assertion that, unlike others, you care about the environment."⁸⁸ Bartholomew goes on to argue that "If you were frank and said, 'I care about the environment more than most people do' or 'I care about the poor more than others', your vanity and self-aggrandisement would be obvious."

Obvious to whom? Bartholomew is right that we can use language in this way. We do things with language other than making clearly discernible true or false statements about the world. However, he is wrong in that he appears to argue that "virtue signalling" is the purview of some members of our societies (namely politicians) knowingly attempting to disguise their self-interest and vanity as love of others. George Orwell wrote that that many socialists appear to be motivated by hatred of the haves rather than love for the have-nots.⁸⁹ Are we to suppose that such motivation and the virtue signalling of which Bartholomew speaks are available to the person embodying these attitudes? Yes and no. There is no reason to in the first instance suppose that we are always aware of our principles. However, our principles are available to us even if they are most clearly disclosed in the heat of action. Orwell's socialists might notice

⁸⁸ Bartholomew, J. (2015, 18. April). The awful rise of 'virtue signalling'. *The Spectator*. Sourced from: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/04/hating-the-daily-mail-is-a-substitute-for-doing-good/>

⁸⁹ Orwell, G. (1937). *The Road to Wigan Pier*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. Kindle Edition. Chapter 11.

that he is proclaiming to care about the poor all the while not attempting to do anything for them but proclaim that if he had his way, they would no longer be poor. Bartholomew's virtue signalling environmentalist might notice that he is failing to do anything to reduce his carbon footprint. Our principles, then, may very well be disguised, even to ourselves, but they are available to us none the less because our actions are available to us.

The arguments of Bartholomew and Orwell are at the very least valid on the Kantian model, suggesting that Dreyfus & Kelly are wrong in their view that Kantians would require us to take critical distance and know explicitly on what principle we act or else be absolved of accountability. It is not, I am arguing, that we take up critical distance which make our actions moral actions, but rather that we can take up critical distance because our actions have a certain character: we act on principles formed by the act against some background which makes it intelligible as done for some end – by engaging in disclosive coping where the principle on which we act becomes intelligible to us by being a way of constituting ourselves. We can be mistaken about what sort of actions we are undertaking, but we can only be mistaken because we are trying to do something and because we always conceive ourselves as trying to do something. Noticing that we are failing is what can brutally rip us out of the experience of coping but noticing that we are failing is only possible if we conceive ourselves as trying to do something.

This is so in two ways. The first is a point that is too often overlooked but hinted at by Dreyfus & Kelly when they write about being swept up in the experience of attending a civil rights rally or one with more nefarious ideas behind it. We have a responsibility, they seem to be saying, not to put ourselves in situations where we might be swept up in inappropriate ways. Speaking in Korsgaardian terms: situations where our principles may become what they ought not, or where we are tempted to act on principles we would not otherwise endorse. Starting an affair is a good example of this. Affairs are not the sort of thing that just occur out of nowhere. One ought to notice that when romantic behaviour ensues (that there is a tension when working late at the office, if we are to believe soap operas) that endorsing this behaviour and its principle is precisely the endorsing of the principle of the affair itself. That is not to say that they are one and the same, but it is to say that we are able to notice a bad principle before the damage is done, and to avoid its endorsement before it is too late, before we are swept up in the situation. The second way in which we are responsible even if we have not consciously reflected is related to the first. It is the endorsement of a principle that makes it normative for us, and sometimes we can just know that a principle is to be endorsed (as we saw above). It is also true that

we are able to recognize a principle as bad and be ripped out of the situation. Indeed, this initial noticing of a principle as bad is what forces up to take up a critical distance. But that means that principles can be bad in relation to something. Korsgaard thinks that this something is, ultimately, the categorical imperative. More generally, principles can be bad in relation to other principles that take priority, and at least one form of these perhaps higher sort of principles are what derives from (or constitutes) our practical identities. It is as a parent that hurting one's child strikes one as wrong (even when one ultimately knows some pain is necessary, such as from vaccinations).

Practical identities are especially important here because they are perpetually endorsed (if they are deemed worthy) and simultaneously that against which other principles are deemed fit for endorsement or not. And we are responsible for the endorsement of our identities, which confers responsibility on the adoption of other principles. It is often the identity endorsed (and the subsequent endorsement of principles that in some way follows from it) that is criticized. On June 16th, 2016, Labour MP and avid EU defender Jo Cox was brutally murdered by a man who when asked his name answered, "My name is death to traitors, freedom for Britain".⁹⁰ While the murderer suffered from some mental health issues, it seems clear that he was inspired, at least in part, by hateful rhetoric from some Brexit-supporters.⁹¹ Let us, for the argument's sake assume that he was not driven to act by an illness in order to illustrate the point. We are then able to say something about the identity's role here. In taking up the sort of view he did, of defenders of British EU membership as evil rather than just wrong, he made himself into a specific sort of person. He endorsed his identity as someone engaged in a sort of war against evil, and which could harbour nothing but contempt for people with opposing views. And this identity played an important role in his motive. Being responsible for what sort of person he is, the murderer is actually doubly responsible for his action: he is responsible for carrying out the murder, and for making himself into the sort of person he ought not, and which led to the murder being intelligible as an action to be undertaken.

⁹⁰ Booth, R. (June 18th, 2016). Jo Cox murder suspect tells court his name is 'death to traitors, freedom for Britain. Sourced from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/18/thomas-mair-charged-with-of-mp-jo-cox>. The murderer is sometimes reported as having said the same thing at the scene of the crime, but I have not found a reliable source to support that claim.

⁹¹ Cobain, I., Parveen, N. & Taylor, M. (November 23rd, 2016). The slow-burning hatred that led Thomas Mair to murder Jo Cox. Sourced from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-slow-burning-hatred-led-to-jo-cox-murder>.

The view presented here ought not to be taken to be of the sort Korsgaard refers to as a “theoretical” conception of responsibility.⁹² It is not that these facts that I appeal to in this discussion are facts about the persons mentioned and that these function as a sort of check-list in the sense that if a person has characteristics x, y and z, she must be responsible. It is not essentially a *fact* about someone that they are responsible. Korsgaard instead defends a “practical” conception of responsibility where holding someone responsible is something that we do. On this view, taking someone to be responsible means that they are responsible. Holding someone responsible is to adopt a certain attitude towards them, and we can have good and bad reasons for doing this. The facts given in the case of the murder of Jo Cox function as reasons why we hold the person responsible or why we think others should. But these facts are not in and of themselves what determines the murderer’s responsibility. I wrote above that we ought for the sake of argument to assume that the murderer’s actions were not caused by a mental illness, but even if it was, this fact would not fully determine whether to hold him responsible. Relationships, for example, are another factor. Taking away responsibility is a way of writing someone off as a person. I may conclude that someone was not responsible for his running away from his family. The stress of the family may be too much to bear for some. But it would be strange if his wife took that attitude, essentially describing her husband as victim of circumstance, the very same circumstance in which she found herself. Voluntariness is not all that matters, as Korsgaard points out when she writes that “if you cannot repress a victorious grin on learning that your rival has met with a gruesome accident, you ought to be blamed, precisely on that account.”⁹³

2.6: A note on Wesley Autrey and virtuous coping

However, even on this account of how we perceive the world as normative and how we may justifiably act on the valenced world, one crucial problem remains. In the introduction, I pointed to one of Dreyfus & Kelly’s strongest arguments. They argue that when Wesley Autrey leaps onto the train tracks in order to save the strange man’s life, there is something to his experience that is fundamentally different from just perceiving that something must be done.

⁹² Korsgaard, C. M. (1992). Creating the kingdom of ends: Reciprocity and responsibility in personal relations. *Philosophical perspectives*, 6, p. 312.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

There is a difference between observing and participating, they argue; between seeing that something must be done and seeing something as to-be-done.⁹⁴

There are, I think, a couple of problems with this argument, but I am not yet able to articulate these problems. Going into the next chapter, I can merely bring their argument to mind so that I am better able to respond to it there. Their argument essentially stands and falls on the assumption that the experience of seeing someone as to-be-helped (in this rather vague way) and to-be-acted-on-in-this-way are different in kind. I am not as certain as Dreyfus & Kelly are that the difference is one of kinds. I rather think that the difference is one of skill and attitude. Perceiving a threat, i.e. perceiving a reason to act in some avoidance-guided way, is what bystanders respond to when they gasp and freeze. The virtuous actor is not responding to a fundamentally different form of perception, he just knows how to, and is able to, respond well. Everyone perceives the man falling onto the tracks as to-be-helped, but Autrey experiences a specific action as drawn out of him. But then how does he do that? Dreyfus & Kelly are right to say that it is not mere situation-independent habit (who are making a habit of throwing themselves on the train tracks without a justifying context?).⁹⁵ Nor is he recognizing that something must be done, prompting a reflection on what sort of thing he should do. He is able to respond directly and well to perceived reasons. I hope to have shown that this is in principle possible on Korsgaard's account. However, I have not yet solved the problem of what justifies and draws the action out of the virtuous agent. For that, we need a conception of the background for action, and that is the focus of chapter three.

2.7: Conclusion

This is only a sketch of the argument I take Korsgaard to be making and there are a lot of details to be filled in about the psychology of action. However, I take Dreyfus' argument against Kantians to be refuted in that I have provided a Korsgaardian account of embodied coping that does not remove moral accountability from the agent. Let me now spell out where I think we are as we move into the next chapter. I hope to have shown that Dreyfus & Kelly do not provide someone like François with a way to escape nihilism, nor a way of making moral pronouncements that are moral in the final sense, without reference to the cultivation of meaning. As Korsgaard's theory is able to at least do the latter, and having already spelt out what I take her view of action to be, I am going to proceed by applying her view. However, there are ideas in

⁹⁴ Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Dreyfus & Kelly's theory that we ought to adopt, and which I think Korsgaard can. Firstly, there is the idea of cultivation as making some activity shine with ever more valence that we are able to respond to in more apt ways in the way a master does. Hand in hand with this idea goes the notion that one can fail to cultivate an activity, as François does when he fails to cultivate his role as a professor, finding his activity more and more pointless rather than more meaningful. The reason why I think Korsgaard can adopt this view is that her notion of teleology and Dreyfus & Kelly's theory of valence has such great similarities. I am not going to repeat that argument here, but rather point out that on Korsgaard's theory, this phenomenon would constitute a failure to make yourself into the sort of person you should.

Secondly, the Korsgaardian account of action ought to endorse what I have been calling disclosive coping. We perceive our actions as drawn out of us. Disclosive coping is to perceive in the world who you ought to constitute yourself as. But then, what sort of persons ought we be? This, I have argued, is disclosed to us by coping in the world. Actions present themselves as to be undertaken and it is in this that we discover what is called for by our identity, or indeed if an identity ought to be endorsed. But against what do actions present themselves in this way? What is the background for disclosive coping of this kind? This is the question that remains unanswered as Dreyfus & Kelly's theory failed. In the next chapter I will examine the view that we ought to take on identities that are well-suited for making sense of who we are as narrative selves. This is the theory of Alasdair MacIntyre.

Chapter 3: MacIntyre and the Narrative Self

3.1: The virtue ethics of MacIntyre

In the following chapter I will attempt to resolve, at least in part, the problems left over from chapter one and two. In chapter one I identified Korsgaard's main problem to be that of who we should be and pointed out that while she does propose an answer it is too fragmented to offer a unified account of what sort of person one should be. From chapter two we learned that Korsgaard can make sense of coping (disclosive coping, that is) as responding to perceived normativity in the world, but neither her nor Dreyfus & Kelly provide us with an understanding of *why* we perceive *that* normativity as opposed to something else. Dreyfus & Kelly, for their part, just take the brute fact that we perceive something as normative and as becoming more normative if we cultivate it as justifying its normativity.

In trying to resolve these issues, I will attempt to integrate central parts of Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of the virtues and how they relate to the narrative self into the Korsgaardian model. In this attempt I will pay special attention to three *prima facie* obstacles, namely (1) how to understand virtue and duty in a way where one does not exclude the other, (2) the problem of identifying a unity of life with a unity of will, and (3) MacIntyre's insistence that we cannot find any universal principles that govern how we are to understand ourselves within a tradition. (1) may not strike one as an obvious problem, seeing as Kant too had a concept of virtue. However, what Kant took to be a virtue and what MacIntyre takes a virtue to be are not the same thing. On the Kantian account, virtue is something like what will allow us to act in accordance with (or from) duty. In that case, duties are conceptually prior to virtues in that the virtues can only be identified once we have identified our duties. This is not so on MacIntyre's model, in which the concept of a narrative, practice and/or tradition is prior to the virtues, but where the virtues are central to the living of a good life and not just what sustains it. (1) is also closely linked to (2) because the nature of the virtues differs on conceptions of what we aim at, what we are trying to do when we act. Korsgaard takes it to be the *telos* of an action that we aim at unifying ourselves, that is constituting ourselves well as agents. The virtues are those that allow us to do this well. MacIntyre, although he does not neglect to include the unity of will in his conception of the good life, takes the unity of an entire life as a narrative to be what we aim at. The differences here are subtle, but consequential for the understanding of how we ought to conceive of our aims and of our lives, not to mention what constitutes and makes the act of unifying the will normative for us. (3) was in a way dealt with in the last chapter as we broadened what it means to act on a principle of action. However, MacIntyre's argument differs

from Dreyfus & Kelly's in important ways, making the account developed in chapter two too simplistic to deal with his concerns. We have to develop a deeper understanding of what it is to act against a background.

3.2: Aristotelian virtue ethics

In developing his account of the virtues, MacIntyre takes as his primary opponent the “emotivist” theories that removes any truth-value from the scope of ethics. “Emotivism”, he writes, “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgements [...] are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of an attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”⁹⁶ In addition to disproving this theory and elevating ethics to a practice where one can at the very least be wrong, he takes his aim to be that of providing a way out of what he describes as a “moral decline”.⁹⁷ A moral decline is when a culture loses its sense that there really are right answers to moral questions, eventually leading to a broad acceptance of emotivism. *Submission* captures a version of this moral decline in that, while some things are generally taken to be good, the understanding of *why* it is good has disappeared, leaving François to have some conception of the good life which he at certain times tries to live out, but which crumbles under his reflective scrutiny, leaving him to doubt that it was ever good after all. Against the emotivism MacIntyre finds in contemporary modern debates and at various points in history, he attempts to revitalize the Aristotelian tradition of identifying the good with our human nature and define the virtues as those that enable us to realize our human nature and thus lead good lives. It is in the Aristotelian tradition of identifying the good of man with the nature of man that normativity is to be sought.

Before laying out MacIntyre's position, however, I want to point out how his theory appears to relate to Korsgaard's. As followers of Aristotle (at least up to a point), they have much in common. In particular they both try to identify human nature – and in Korsgaard's case seemingly the nature of all sentient beings, including many animals – with a sort of function. For Korsgaard this function is self-constitution. It is the function of any animal to be perpetually making itself into something, namely the kind of being it is. The giraffe eats to continue making itself into what it is, and if it fails to do this, it will at some point stop being what it is. Humans not only eat and avoid predators and so on, we are moral beings with a greater conception of the good which is normative for us, and (following her Kantian leanings) we will principles for action as laws. In other words, we obligate ourselves and others. That is the function of human

⁹⁶ MacIntyre, A. (2011). *After virtue*. Bloomsbury Academy. Third edition. P. 13

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 21.

beings – our nature. And just as, in Aristotelian terms, “the work of any given subject, and of that subject good of its kind”⁹⁸ is one and the same, we must attempt to do this well if we are to do it at all, which we must because that is the sort of beings we are. On MacIntyre’s theory, however, the function of human beings is a little different as we will see. Whether these theories of human beings are in contradiction will be examined at a later point in this chapter, but MacIntyre’s argument certainly follows the same structure as Korsgaard’s. He too claims that our nature is normative for us such that if it is the case that we must understand ourselves in a certain way, doing it well just is normative for us.

What then is the nature of human beings? In presenting his theory, MacIntyre first lays out the Aristotelian position as it is generally understood and points out its weaknesses. Aristotle identified the good with the aim of our activities, arguing that that is just what we mean when we say something is good: that it is the sort of thing we characteristically aim at. The aim and therefore the good of law-givers, for example, is to “make the individual members good men by habituation” and if they fail in this they fail as law-givers.⁹⁹ If we then ask what the aim of all activity is, the highest good, we find eudamonia, not a feeling or mere mental state, but “the state of being well and doing well in being well.”¹⁰⁰

We will come back to what the good of man is in a minute. About the virtues, MacIntyre writes that they are what enable us to move toward eudamonia, but in laying out this claim he makes a crucial point about means-end relationships. The causal means-end relationship, that of doing something for some end external to the means – of eating an apple to stay alive – is not what Aristotle has in mind. It is not as if we attain virtue in order to be well in the sense that the being well is distinct temporally and conceptually from the attaining of virtues. That is not the sense in which virtues are related to eudamonia. The good life, one that embodies eudamonia, is a whole, complete life of which the virtues are a central part. The virtues and the good life is conceptually inseparable as well as temporally for the good life is a virtuous life. “We thus”, MacIntyre writes, “cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Aristotle. *Ethics*. Kindle Edition. Book I, section VII.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Book II, sect. I. Aristotle goes on to say that here lies the difference between a good and bad *constitution*, something that is a greater part of Korsgaard’s theory than MacIntyre’s.

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 174.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

So what does the virtuous person do? Similarly to the Korsgaardian theory presented in previous chapters, the virtuous person not only acts in the right way, but acts from virtue just as, on the Kantian model, he acts from duty. He not only knows what is expected of him, but understands why what is expected of him is good. He acts not for the good of something outside the action, but on the action's goodness. Acting well in this way is to exercise judgement. Indeed, just as in previous chapters, a judgement is a sort of action. Practical reasoning is a sort of syllogism the conclusion of which is an action. Of what does the practical reasoning consist? MacIntyre points to four elements of such reasoning:

- 1) Wants and goals presupposed by the agent's reasoning without which the reasoning would not have a context in which to take place.
- 2) A claim that having or seeking X is good for the sort of being I am.
- 3) Relying on a perceptual judgement, the agent asserts that this thing Y is an instance of X.
- 4) The conclusion: an action.¹⁰²

Let us return to the case of friendship. If you identify someone as a friend in the Kantian sense of someone whose ends you have made your own, this alone is not enough to know how to act. You identify the friend, and the state of the friend, against a background. If his ends are really your own, you may know what he likes and dislikes. You must know something about him. There are wants and goals here that must form the background for our reasoning. Knowing that he was involved in an unstable relationship, seeing him crying may lead you to assume that the relationship has ended. You will also have some conception of what a friend is and how that role ought to be taken up, implicit or otherwise, and this identity is important to you. You may also conclude that rushing over to console him is one way of taking up this identity. And so you rush over to comfort him, a conclusion as well as an action.¹⁰³

If this really is the form practical reasoning takes, the obvious question to ask is what is good for the sort of beings we are. One must notice, however, that the context will provide some limitations here. Reasoning takes place in a certain context, and the good (as well as the action) will exist in that particular context, giving it structure and intelligibility. The question to ask, then, is what sort of beings we are and in what sort of context do we find ourselves? Aristotle

¹⁰² This description of practical reasoning is lifted more or less verbatim from MacIntyre, 2011, p. 188-189.

¹⁰³ On the view I developed in chapter two, none of this needs be explicit however. You do not need to reflect on your identity to discover how you ought to take up some role. We perceive in the world actions to be undertaken and experiencing the call to act is just what it is to value one's identity.

has an answer in mind but MacIntyre more or less cuts him off by pointing out three problems faced by his theory. The first is that Aristotle's teleology – his description of our function and our ultimate aim – is based on an outdated understanding of biology. The telos cannot be found in a false description of what a living being is. The second problem is that the Aristotelian notion of the good for man in a polis is grounded in a society long gone. We must ask ourselves whether it is possible to realize the human good outside the Athenian state. The third problem is that Aristotle seems to hold an unsupportable position on the unity of virtues. If it is the case that the Nazi can be both brave and evil, it cannot be the case, as Aristotle supposes, that to have a virtue is to have them all. It will therefore be MacIntyre's goal to ground the human telos in a defensible description of us, to develop an understanding of the virtues that do not presuppose the existence of the Athenian state, and to develop a more reasonable position on what the virtues are, one that can explain the various ways in which goods and virtues manifest themselves and come into conflict.

3.3: Virtue and Practice as Background

MacIntyre's own conception of virtue springs from an examination of how different conceptions of the virtues throughout history can have been aiming at the same thing. How could the Homeric understanding of virtue as that which allows us to perform our social role, the Aristotelian understanding of virtue as tied to the telos of man, and the Christian idea that virtue is what enables us to move toward salvation all aim at the same concept? MacIntyre notices that at bottom what all these theories have in common is the idea that virtue "always requires for its application the acceptance for some prior account of certain features of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be defined and explained."¹⁰⁴ The features that are crucial here are threefold. The first is an account of a "practice".¹⁰⁵ A practice is any activity that is cooperative and socially established with some internal goods realized by taking part in the activity. Internal goods are those that can only be realized by participating in that specific kind of activity. The goods internal to football, for example, are those that are realized when the game is played well: the stamina, the embodied coping exemplified in the player who knows where to be at the right time, the strategic thinking of a team as a team, etc. External goods are those that are obtainable by any number of practices like fame or monetary gains. The internal goods partly define what the practice is in such a way that taking part in the practice just is to try to realize those goods. To play chess just is to try to play it well, to try to make the right strategic decisions

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

and follow the constraints inherent to the game. The result of trying to take part in the practice well is that “human powers to achieve excellence, and human conception of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”¹⁰⁶

In many ways this all sounds a lot like what I have been arguing in previous chapters. Engaging in an activity like chess, we saw in 1.2.2, is to act on the standards constitutive of that activity. MacIntyre simply gives us a word for the sort of activity that has constitutive standards and is more complex than the laying of bricks. The simple act of laying bricks, MacIntyre argues, is not a practice, but architecture is.¹⁰⁷ What does this mean? MacIntyre is surely not arguing that it is only architecture – the activity of designing a building – that is a practice, and not the building itself. What he does mean, however, is that the simple act of laying a brick happens against a background that provides the constitutive standards of the activity. It is, for example, what gives the laying of bricks a standard of success and failure. It is against the background of what we are trying to do, which springs from the practice we are engaged in, that our actions are made intelligible and subject to a standard of success and failure.

Another example MacIntyre provides of a non-practice is tic-tac-toe. Why is that not a practice? Just because it is not complex enough? Well, yes. Tic-tac-toe is the sort of activity that provides minimal room for excellence. Having learned the rules and understood that all one has to do to tie is to block whatever one’s opponent is trying to do, doing so is just about the easiest thing in the world. This explains why Dreyfus & Kelly are wrong in claiming that there are no objective rules for what sort of activity can be found meaningful. Some activities simply do not allow for a growing understanding of the goods inherent in the activity or human excellence. Not all non-practices are of this kind of activity (one can become very good at laying bricks), but these activities are all non-practices. Practices are those activities which provide our actions with a background against which to be intelligible, understandable and meaningful. It is the practice of building a house (of which architecture is part as well as being a practice in its own right) that makes the laying of bricks a meaningful activity at which one can excel because the practice of building a house is a meaningful activity at which one can excel.

The finest example of this in relation to François is in his attitude towards teaching. Dreyfus & Kelly are right in arguing that engagement with a practice and becoming more sensitive to the goods to be realized is tied to enjoyment and meaning. Or, as they would probably phrase it,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

that developing a skill that allows us to be open to the solicitations of the world entails enjoyment and meaning. François does not have an eye for the goods internal to teaching or the skills one must develop to bring them about. Teaching is just something that he has to do. He finds his students dull and naïve at their best, stupid and uninterested at their worst. This is inherent in teaching, François seems to think, as he watches old students leave his classes and new arrive without any important changes. Which class he teaches does not matter, they are all the same. Thus, there cannot be any development on his part. His students are or are not interested and clever. There is nothing François can do to remedy the boring experience of teaching the same things over and over again. On François' conception of the practice in which he is engaged, there are no particular goods or skills to be realized. He just has to get through it. There is no enjoyment or purpose to the activity. There is nothing that it is like to fail or succeed in teaching his students. It is not, on his view, a practice at all.

There are, however, within MacIntyre's conception of a practice an idea that is foreign to the argument I have been making thus far. I said in 1.2.2 that to engage in the house-building activity is to make yourself into a sort of person because you subject yourself to the standards of success and failure of that activity. On MacIntyre's view, it goes a little deeper than that. To engage in an activity is to understand the good of a certain kind of life internal to that activity. What MacIntyre says about this is a little curious, for he appears to contradict himself. He first claims that internal goods cannot be judged by those who lack the relevant experience.¹⁰⁸ He later writes that one form of good internal to the activity is "the good a certain kind of life", on which those willing to learn systematically about the internal goods can pass judgement.¹⁰⁹ So, do we have to have already engaged in that kind of life, or is it enough just to be willing to learn? If the first, then Dreyfus & Kelly might be right in a way when they say one has to engage in the activity before one can judge it to be meaningful. The answer appears to be that being willing to learn is to interact with the sort of life characteristic of the activity. Entering into a practice, MacIntyre writes, is to subject oneself to the authority of the standards of excellence, of performing the activity well.¹¹⁰ And that is what it is to be willing to learn. One must acknowledge that there are things one does not know or activities at which one is incompetent, and be willing to address these insufficiencies, which in turn involves subjecting oneself and one's abilities to some standard of excellence independent of oneself. Being willing to learn, then, is in a way to be already engaging with the practice. At what point during this

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

¹¹⁰ This fits perfectly with Korsgaard's theory of constitutive standards.

engagement are we fit to judge the good of the life characteristic of the activity? If we are engaged with a certain kind of life, we must make some contribution in order to judge that life to really be good. If this is true, we cannot be entirely under the authority of another, as MacIntyre seems to imply.

3.4: Embedding Practices

Similarly to Dreyfus' view that we do not make sense of what a thing is as an abstraction, and Korsgaard's account of how constitutive standards arise from not just the action itself, but from what the function of action is, MacIntyre argues that actions are only intelligible in a larger context. Practices form part of this context, but even practices are only intelligible as part of a history, and our engagement with the practice is only intelligible as part of *our* history. MacIntyre's conception of a tradition forms the background against which a current practice is set and provides them with a kind of telos subjecting them to a normative standard. A tradition is a certain relation between the past, present and future. This relation is of argumentative character: "when a tradition is in good order, it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose."¹¹¹ In what sense, then, do we engage in these arguments? We do so in an embodied way, which is to say through action. The argument will be explicit at least some of the time, as when Libertarians and Communitarians write books disagreeing on the function of government. But for most of us, we constitute ourselves within the tradition through action, taking a stand by standing somewhere. A teacher acting in her way, presenting a topic in the way she does, is taking a stand on what goods there are to be realized. Should the curriculum be as easy to understand as possible, or is mental agility and hard work virtues to be demanded? Perhaps the school ought to incentivize the reading of books by offering prizes to those who read the most books in a year, or maybe such external goods undermine the realization of the goods internal to the practice. Some such disagreements will be explicit, but many will not.

How are we to find a telos in this conception of a tradition if healthy traditions embody arguments and change? In the goods that make change possible. A tradition just is the argument it embodies, and the healthy tradition is that in which the argument can be had in the right way. MacIntyre emphasises what has sometimes been referred to as "the cardinal virtues" of courage, truthfulness and justice (in the sense of knowing what is owed and what one is owed). These are required if the embodied argument is to be had at all. Truthfulness is simply the

¹¹¹ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 257.

virtue of being able to stand in a certain relation to others: to be able to have the argument about what is good. Dishonesty is tempting because it may help me in some way, but as Kant noticed lying is imposing one's will onto another. As an action lying and deceiving (and coercing) is entirely different from, and contrary to, the practice of engaging in an open-ended argument seeking the good. Justice MacIntyre defends because the goods internal to a practice are impersonal. That is, the goods to be realized do not depend on some arbitrary standards. What is good, what we ought to go for, is normative for no one in particular. Responding to arbitrary features (he provides the example of giving someone a good grade because of their lovely eyes) is to not respond to the goods internal to the practice. Being sensitive to these goods is the nature of the just person. He is not arbitrary, but is acting from what is good.

Both the virtue of truthfulness and justice are defensible on the view I have presented in previous chapters. Courage, however, MacIntyre ties to care, arguing that taking care of someone (or something) well is to be willing to endanger oneself on their behalf. The coward is essentially someone who cannot take care well.¹¹² How must we understand this notion of courage on the Korsgaardian account? There is essentially no conflict here in the first instance. Courage, if a prerequisite for care, is a virtue that must figure into, say, friendships because if another's ends are truly your own you must be willing to make sacrifices for them as you would yourself. Courage is not merely a conditional virtue (in the sense Kant argues that sympathy is a conditional virtue), but an integral part of the relationship. On the view I defended in chapter two, courage is a way of responding to the world. One should not respond to the world without regard for one's own safety for we have duties to take care of ourselves as ends too. Courage is to see what a situation calls for and to act well even when what the situation calls for involves risks. The courageous person is not found in abstraction, but discovers and constitutes himself in disclosive coping – in the heat of action. Courage is a prerequisite for constituting yourself well as someone who takes others to be ends in themselves. In order to constitute ourselves as the sort of persons we ought to be, then, courage is required.

Thus, truthfulness, justice and courage are virtues any tradition and therefore practice must somehow embody. Otherwise they cannot function well and do the sort of thing they do: realizing certain goods. However, MacIntyre introduces a fourth virtue. In order to make intelligible the argument in which one is engaged and identify how we ought to bring about the goods internal to the argument, we require an adequate sense of tradition. This virtue functions as a

¹¹² MacIntyre, 2011, p. 224.

sort of practical wisdom in “knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.”¹¹³

What does this mean? MacIntyre takes care to point out that he is not presenting a kind of conservatism where what is good will be entirely determined by what was held to be good yesterday. The embodied argument is influenced by the past, but we are standing between unpredictability and telos, something inherited and something to be determined. We cannot predict what we will do in the future or what it holds.¹¹⁴ Yet we are guided by a shared notion of what we are doing, what goods there are to realize. I think MacIntyre is attempting to capture the practical wisdom involved in understanding why something is good. A sense of tradition is a sense of the goods internal to that tradition. MacIntyre takes today's moral discourse to be an argument about “incommensurable moral premises”.¹¹⁵ This removes a sense of tragedy, he argues. Why is a sense of tragedy good? Because in order to identify tragedy, one must take the goods we perceive in the world to be worth realizing, even when we cannot. Tragedy arises when “whatever I do, I shall have left undone what I ought to have done.”¹¹⁶ This conception of a tradition, therefore, presupposes a certain view of goods as being worth acting on even when we cannot.

Thus, practices are embedded in a tradition, an ongoing argument about the goods internal to the practice and how they ought to be realized. This subjects anyone partaking in them (which is to say everyone) to the normative standards found in the “cardinal virtues” and to the virtue identified as sensitivity to tradition. With his concept of a tradition, MacIntyre attempts to capture what is attractive about the Aristotelian account of normativity, namely that there really are normative standards for excellence and failure and that these arise against the background of what one is doing. By stepping back from the Aristotelian position, he is also able to resolve two problems with the Aristotelian account. He is able to argue that the background against which normativity arises is not grounded in unfounded metaphysical and biological assumptions because one is not committed to a certain view of biology if one grounds the normativity of action in practices and traditions. He also argues that conflict between virtues can arise from

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 259.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 250. MacIntyre says much of interest about unpredictability, particularly in his discussion of Karl Popper's thought experiment concerning concepts and inventions where it is argued that you cannot predict something not yet conceptualized, for in so doing one must conceptualize it, thereby inventing it. For my purposes, however, it is sufficient to focus on the unpredictability of our own action and of the world. It is a practical problem more than a theoretical one for knowing, say some sci-fi version of an fMRI, how I will act does not actually help me decide what to do when the choice is presented to me. For that I need reasons to act.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

mutually exclusive commitment to different practices or goods and not simply be evidence of some flaw of character.

3.5: Narratives as Background

I will now return to the problem presented at the end of 3.3 by presenting what I take to be our contribution to the normativity of the practice. The problem was how we can judge the kind of life found in engagement with a practice to be good if we must subject ourselves to the authority of another in order to engage with the practice in the first place. Our engagement with the practice is only intelligible against the background of *our* history just as practices are only intelligible against the background of a tradition. What MacIntyre needs is a conception of what we are doing when we engage in a practice. For this, he needs the notion of a narrative. The reason for this is that our intention only make sense in relation to longer-term intention. Writing a sentence only makes sense if one is writing a book, or a message, etc. Composing the message only makes sense if you are sending it to someone, which only makes sense if there is a prior history there and you have some intent toward that person. Thus, in order to act, we must always take ourselves to be writing a narrative, and what we take ourselves to be doing depends on what that narrative is: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹¹⁷ Taking a stand against some annoying bureaucracy, say, can only be taken to be worthwhile if one takes oneself to be involved in a sort of hero-narrative where one is fighting the power, not if one takes oneself to be involved in a narrative in which one is the annoying nag, a sort of obstacle for others.

On this, I think it is clear Korsgaard and MacIntyre agree. We always take part in a narrative and taking part in a narrative is to become a certain kind of person within that narrative. In order to say something substantial about what sort of person we should be, on MacIntyre’s account, is therefore to say something about the virtues to be realized within our narrative. Explaining this, in turn, presupposes a certain view about the nature and scope of our narratives, and the role we can play within them. Thus, it is to these questions we now turn.

What is the nature of our narratives? MacIntyre observes that there is always a tension between unpredictability and telos here.¹¹⁸ Telos, as he understands it, is more like the Aristotelian telos than the telos of perception we examined in chapter two. This telos is prior to the perceptual

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 250.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 250.

telos in that it is the observation that we are always doing something or on our way to doing something. It is in this “doing something” that we find a telos in MacIntyre’s sense. This telos, however, is not entirely determined by us. We never know what will happen next, and a telos can in this way be thrust upon us, although we play some active part in determining it. If I all of a sudden find myself in danger, it will become my project to escape this condition. That kind of telos of my activity is in a way imposed on me in the sense that I did not have total control over my circumstances. But I make a contribution to the activity in two ways: obviously I am the one who undertakes it, but the understanding of what is called for by my circumstance also springs from the sort of being I am. A rock cannot be in danger just because there is nothing for a rock to find itself in danger. Returning to the idea of perceived telos, I want to suggest that the way we determine the kind of circumstance we find ourselves in is by being the sort of beings who take ourselves to be in a certain kind of circumstance. This springs from us as perceiving beings. In what way can MacIntyre’s telos be prior to this perceived telos if our telos is built into the perception of beings like us? Because this nature is part of our telos, and if the perceptual telos springs from our nature, the telos of our nature is prior to the perceptual telos. But this is not the only way in which our telos is prior. We are not only beings with a nature, but also beings with a history. It is not only our own history, but the history of our practices and traditions. We act and perceive against a background, and this background is partially determined by the context in which we find ourselves. Again, this includes our intentions, but it also includes some conception of ourselves that we have inherited.

Inherited how exactly? Korsgaard points out that, contrary to Kant’s critics, her view does not presuppose some empty self. She does, however, insist that the normativity of our particular identities springs from some deeper normativity, namely that we understand ourselves as beings who must have particular ties to certain communities.¹¹⁹ She could certainly provide MacIntyre’s argument that we need such ties to make our actions intelligible to us as her defence of this thesis. What she neglects to acknowledge, however, is that we always identity ourselves in relation to these ties. She argues that these ties are conditional and that we can give them up.¹²⁰ On MacIntyre’s view, this is not exactly right. He points out that even disowning a community is to stand in some relation to it.¹²¹ It is not as if you can just stop being a mother and

¹¹⁹ Korsgaard, 1996, p. 120-121.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 201. Forceful though this argument is, I do not see any reason why Korsgaard should deny it. As I explain, it would be strange to think that giving up some tie to a community would be to return to some neutral identity.

thus return to some neutral identity. One would still stand in some relation to the identity of a mother.

We find this in Houellebecq's description of François' familial ties. The family is always there as a background, but in a strange way. François' parents only enter into the book as a source of conflict. His parents are divorced and never speak to each other and François never speaks to either parent if he can help it. François, upon hearing about his mother's death, reflects on how alone and miserable she must have been. His father fared somewhat better, undertaking a whole host of projects he never mentioned to François as well as remarrying. Although François concludes that his father's final years had been "nice", he cannot help but reflect on its banality. Having a few friends, a reasonably pleasant wife and going hunting every now and again, is this niceness what constitutes a meaningful life? Surely not. François' father was in this way just as naïve as François colleagues who fail to notice how trivial their existence is. In his relation to his family we find a description of how he relates to himself: there is a hopeless distance there with a fractured narrative, between what is aimed at and what is worth aiming at. François cannot resign himself to the niceness of ordinary life as being worthwhile. As I argue below, his relation to others influences how he relates to himself. In warring on all others, he must also be in conflict with himself, without hope of reconciliation. He cannot help this for his communal ties define him and the way in which he relates to himself. Creating narratives is not something we do on our own.

What do I mean by that? I mean to say that having an identity is not an entirely subjective phenomenon. It is intersubjective in the sense that you only have an identity if others can take you to be a particular kind of person. Your identity must in principle be available to others. If one's identity is public in this way, it is also subject to judgement by others. This is why we must take others' view of us to be normative. It is not just that I think I am this person and you think I am some other. There is in such a case a genuine disagreement about who I am. So when an action is presented to us as to be undertaken, it is not only something that is private. I am not entirely the source of my identity because who I am to others must be normative in some way. I always understand myself in relation to how others see me. I am the right sort of person relative to a background that includes who I am seen through the eyes of others, who they take me to be in the relevant narrative. Taking how others perceive us to be normative, is one way of taking them to be ends. And acting from this normativity is part of how we engage in disclosive coping. In seeing the look of disappointment or approval on a friend's face, we can instinctively react. We can see through his eyes that what we are doing is wrong and stop

without thinking. We can perceive who we ought to be in the world, of which narratives we are and ought to be part, and that is not something we do on our own, but also through the eyes of others. For, if who I am is intersubjective, their view of who I am has normative content. This in turn means that who I take others to be has normative content.

From this I can now argue in defence of a provisional account of why we can judge the life internal to a practice to be worth living or not and which I will expand on in the next section. There are (at least) two ways in which we do this. The first is judging whether the life internal to the practice coheres with or sustains our narrative. The narrative, the identity, of the loving father may not cohere well with the life of a traveller. He might therefore judge that the life of his kind is one that requires stability and that a life that does not, does not maintain his own good. The other is whether they realize or corrode the cardinal virtues. We might take it that the life of a certain kind of salesman is not sufficiently honest, say. How do we do that? Honesty is a virtue exercised in all healthy practices, meaning that most of us have learned how to exercise it at least some of the time. And we can notice when what makes up the life of a salesman is un conducive to its exercise. We can notice if its goods are primarily external to the practice. If those involved in the practice have as their ends the maximizing of monetary gains or high status at the cost of honesty, the practice is not healthy in MacIntyre's sense: it is not engaging in an argument about what is good internal to the practice because there are no goods internal to the practice. The practice is a mere means to some multiple realizable end. Even worse, if such external goods are at the root of the practice, if one must be willing to bring them about at the cost of virtue, it is corrupting. It is not only that the goods internal to the practice is alien to our narrative, it is corrupting of it. Being a successful, but corrupt salesman is corrosive to the virtues needed to sustain our narrative.

3.6: Finding the Good

We have thus seen that there is a sense in which what we ought to do cannot be relativistic. Our narratives are not entirely our own and no matter the content of our narrative, there is something that is normative for beings like us. On MacIntyre's view (and I see no reason why Korsgaard should deny this, even if she also has a wider notion of what sorts of beings we are) we are narrative beings, and what is good as such is therefore what is good for narrative beings

as such.¹²² As a narrative presupposes a concept of a unified self, the good will in some way be tied to what is good for a unified self. It is worth quoting MacIntyre in full on this point:

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common.¹²³

The sorts of narratives we live out in potential unity is that of a narrative quest, MacIntyre argues. A quest for what exactly? What is characteristic of a quest is that the goal is rarely if ever predetermined. The good is not out there just as something to be found as though we were truffle pigs sniffing out pieces of good laying about:

It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood.¹²⁴

The virtues, MacIntyre argues, are those dispositions which “not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good.”¹²⁵ But does this theory not contain a paradox? Dangers and distractions are determined in reference to the good as one cannot be distracted from something without having something one is aiming at. At the same time, however, we come to understand our quest and the good by dealing with these distractions and dangers. So what is going on here? How can one come to know to aim at the good without first aiming at the good? The answer is that aiming at something is not done from the perspective of someone not already aiming. We are perpetually aiming at something. Undertaking actions is to strive toward some end. This justifies MacIntyre’s (provisional) conclusion that “the good life for man is spent in seeking for the good life for man” just as to constitute yourself well is to continue perpetually constituting yourself well. And the virtues which we ought to realize are those that enable this quest, a quest we can carry out in better and worse ways.¹²⁶ These are the virtues of truthfulness, justice and courage.

¹²² The good is on both accounts always good for someone. This separates them from a certain brand of realists like G.E. Moore who insisted that the good-as-such is conceptually prior to good-for. Neither MacIntyre nor Korsgaard provide a particularly convincing account of why such realists are wrong (Korsgaard only argues that realists are wrong in general, not specifically that the good-as-such cannot be prior to good-for), or at least not one that does not presuppose the account of normativity provided in this thesis.

¹²³ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 253.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 254.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

But there is a weakness in MacIntyre's theory. He appears to think that narratives inherit their normativity from what unifies a life. This would explain why we can notice the morality or immorality of a practice, because taking part in a practice is to lead the life characteristic of that practice. If this life could not be unified with ours, we should not attempt to lead it. Yet it is unclear that this is a morality that can be inherited from such an analytical argument. It seems to run contrary to a critique sometimes levelled at Kantians, namely that it blurs the line between what is moral and what is rational. It seems counterintuitive to say that what was wrong about the Nazi working in a concentration camp, but who led an otherwise ordinary life, is that these lives had to be compartmentalized so as not to shatter the unity of the man's life. One would assume that it was the inherent wrongness of the Nazi way of life that inhibited this unification, rather than the conflict which made it wrong. As I will explain, I take it to be Korsgaard's position that it is indeed the case that the wrongness of the way of life is prior to the arising conflict, which is more intuitive than MacIntyre's view.¹²⁷

Recall once more François' distant familial ties. Korsgaard goes along with the Platonic description of inner conflict as warring on oneself.¹²⁸ In the state of war, there can be no unified will for something has subordinated other aspects of the will to do its bidding. The wanton is in a state of war for his desires are ruling over reason. In such a conflict there is no harmonious self that takes itself to be an end. In François' familial ties, there is only conflict. His divorced parents do not speak, and François is under the impression that they despise each other. There is no harmony here, only war. But François takes this to be how the world operates in general. There is no harmony to strive toward for there is no harmony. Not only can he not take others to be ends in themselves with whom he ought to be in unity, he cannot be in harmony with himself. A hope of a reconciliation of his will is nowhere to be found because reconciliation as such is hopeless. And so he cannot find anything that his whole being can strive toward. There are only impulses and warring aspects of the self. Sometimes reason wins out, sometimes it does not. And when it does not, what does it really matter? MacIntyre and Korsgaard both borrow this unification model from Plato and Aristotle, Korsgaard finding it in the will and MacIntyre in a life. I will argue below that they necessitate one another. If we think of the unified life as a unified narrative, MacIntyre is able to capture what it is we are doing when we

¹²⁷ One could counter my analysis of MacIntyre's account by pointing out that it would rather be the case that it is wrong if the virtuous person could not undertake the action, than that the disunity is what constitutes the action as wrong. This would not be a successful argument because the virtues are supposed to ensure a unified life. Indeed they are defined in reference to this end.

¹²⁸ See for example Korsgaard, 2009, p. 166; 170-172. There are other ways of being in conflict that she borrows from Plato, but for my purposes they are superfluous.

aim at something: we make something important to the whole narrative, not just for some aspect of our lives.

This in turn explains what is wrong about MacIntyre's view of the Nazi with an enjoyable home life. He ought to argue that when we say that his narrative is incoherent, we mean that his life is incoherent. It is not that he is a good father, but an evil man outside of his house. These are not distinct aspects of his life that can be compartmentalized. We find this in Korsgaard's Kantianism: it is not that the Nazi takes his child to be an end, but not the Jew. He is not following the categorical imperatives on some occasions and not on others. In order to truly take others to be ends, one must take all others to be ends. Otherwise one is treating the humanity of others (and therefore humanity in general) as to be disregarded under some circumstances. The good Nazi-self is incoherent.¹²⁹

3.7: Finding Joy

MacIntyre's theory does not, however, capture the joy of living in the right narrative. Such joy will always be conditional. Tragedy may always be lurking just around the corner after all. But there is an intuition I want to appeal to that captures a certain kind of joy of living in the right way. Let us return to David Foster Wallace's commencement speech discussed briefly in 2.1. When he argues that it is possible to change one's view of one's interactions with others, he argues from a conception of narratives. It is thinking of the woman screaming at her child as having "been up for three straight nights holding the hand of her husband who's dying of bone cancer" that changes our attitude towards her. The narrative of the woman changes fundamentally the moral character of her actions. Even though we might take this public shaming of a child to be abhorrent categorically, at least such a narrative makes the action intelligible, i.e. non-arbitrary. That matters because it changes the character of the action entirely. The background for the act has this moral significance because it forms part of its end. An action, we will recall, is the act done against a background that makes it intelligible as done for some end. What makes Wallace's argument collapse into relativism is that the narratives are not compelling. He has a sort of voluntarist approach to narratives in that the narrative will on his view be whatever we decide it to be. "Of course, none of this is likely," he says speaking about the imagined narratives, "but it's also not impossible." We are not aiming at the best narrative in

¹²⁹ This is in part what I mean when I argue that wrongful treatment of others is corrosive. We find this in both Kant and Aristotle: in Kant when he argues that we must act kindly towards animals or we might treat humans unkind; in Aristotle when he argues that there is only one virtue, but many vices.

any objective sense. Wallace simply wants the narrative that allows him to get through the day unburdened by frustration or anger.

What Wallace attempts to capture – and what Dreyfus & Kelly attempt to capture in our “shining” moments – is the joy of existing in the right kind of relationship to others and oneself. However, because of his voluntarist approach, the idea that willing it makes it so, Wallace fails to identify what is to be sought. “It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred”, he says. Here he appears to capture the joy of existing in the right kind of delusion. Dreyfus & Kelly are right that we cannot simply impose whatever meaning we want on the world, making every second infinitely meaningful.

But what about those times when the world really is meaningful, but we impose the wrong sort of narrative? What if the students one is tutoring are not disinterested, dim-witted boors, but honest people trying to do their best to realize the goods internal to their practice? What if your teacher is not an arrogant, power-hungry, old fool, but simply trying to do what is best for you even when you do not notice it? Wallace is noticing that certain narratives carry immense significance. He is wrong in his voluntarist approach, however. There are facts to be known here, and they are not dissimilar to the ones that will make Orwell’s socialist realize he is not really a champion of the poor. Realizing that we are not who we thought we were is to realize our narrative was wrong. We can fail to constitute ourselves as the sort of persons we think we ought to be and that really is painful. It can fill one with shame and self-loathing.

I think Korsgaard can explain this phenomenon, though only with the conception of disclosive coping that I have been defending. When we act to help a friend, we are taking him to be an end. We are standing in a certain kind of relation to him. Against a sort of abstract will that exists prior to action, she argues that interaction is a way of deliberating together.¹³⁰ She essentially claims that this is also what we do when we interact with ourselves, making reason and desires come together as one. When we endorse an impulse, we take the impulse to be something we should act on with our whole being. When we act with others, this is a unification of the same sort: we take something to be strived for in a shared effort as one. Treating others as mere means is to allow ourselves to be treated as such under the universal principle. This is why she claims at one point that treating others poorly allows us to treat ourselves poorly, and

¹³⁰ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 190.

that we be treated poorly by others.¹³¹ This sounds like the sort of abstract point Dreyfus & Kelly would fault as distancing us from the world. But consider how we experience shared projects. Working with others toward something as a unity can be exhilarating.¹³² Treating others as means, as being in our way or otherwise objects, stops us from sharing in common projects. Taking others to be ends is what we do when we strive towards something in cooperation with others. We constitute ourselves by acting on others as ends. And the reason why François is so miserable is precisely because he cannot do this. Other people are too stupid, trivial or hopelessly ignorant of their worthlessness. He therefore ends up treating himself in this way too. He cannot aim for something with his whole being, because all there is, is might against might, his reason and desires always in conflict and in each other's way in the same manner that other people are in his. There is no joy because there can only be conflict.

I argued above that there is a kind of suffering in living out the wrong narrative. Wallace's claim, and Dreyfus & Kelly's claim, is that there is joy to be found in living in the right way. In what sense can this be true? Dreyfus & Kelly tie this joy to being "wooshed up". Their main problem was that their theory was devoid of normativity (see 2.4). Aside from the Kantian sort of morality that I defended there, we can now see that there is something to their theory, but which they cannot acknowledge. They argue that there are no objective standards by which we can judge a life worth living, but there is. The "shining things" are the goods internal to our practices and the sharing in projects with others as ends. The "wooshing up", the being absorbed happily in an activity, is what can happen when we realize these goods and projects well. That is, when everything is going right, when we are engaged in coping in the right way, we are making ourselves into the right sort of person. And there is joy to be found in that.¹³³

3.8: Wesley Autrey and Background

I am now able to solve, at least in part, the problem left over from 2.6: what justifies and draws the action out of us in our virtuous moments. In 2.6 I briefly argued that the perception Autrey experienced and what the bystanders experienced is not different in kind. I can now say that when Autrey leaps onto the train lines in New York, he is responding to the helpless man on the tracks as an end in himself. Autrey is perceiving the man's reasons to be reasons, impersonal

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 188.

¹³² Dreyfus & Kelly finds this in Melville's description of shared menial tasks in *Moby Dick*.

¹³³ On Korsgaard's theory of emotions, I believe this joy will just be the perceiving of ourselves as doing what we ought to do well. The joy is the call to maintain excellence in constituting ourselves, we might say.

grounds for action. And this is what the bystanders experience as well. His reasons just are their reasons, and thus something must be done. Then why do they fail to act?

I take the state the bystanders are in to be one of conflict. They notice that something must be done but cannot see what. And so they fail to act. Acting in this case must in some sense involve pulling oneself together, resolving conflict and thereby constituting oneself well through action. On Korsgaard's view, this is essentially what we do when we endorse an action: we endorse an impulse that arises against a background that makes the act intelligible as done for some end. The background, which we may now say consists of the practice and tradition in which we find ourselves as well as our human nature and the categorical imperative that springs from it, is what (potentially) justifies the impulse thereby allowing us to endorse it and to undertake the action. In Autrey's case, the impulse to act in his specific way is not different in kind from an impulse to scream or to call on someone to help. It is his contribution to the circumstance. The action can be described or experienced as drawn out of him, but it is not entirely.

As we have seen, MacIntyre argues that courage is intimately tied to care. Bystanders experience this care as well in taking the fallen man to be an end, but they lack the courage to act.¹³⁴ Courage is not necessarily a reflective phenomenon, nor is it mere habituation. It is a way of responding to the care-related impulse. In responding in the way he does, Autrey's action is not different in kind from the action of the bystanders. It is just a better way of responding to his duties of care. To the extent that his experience was different to that of the bystanders, he was more sensitive to the experienced duty of care and competent enough to respond. But these are statements about him rather than the external background. Acting from duty is not to take up critical distance and reflecting on what one is obligated to do. It can also be to take oneself to be obligated and responding to someone as an end in himself. There may be something mysterious to being "wooshed up" in this way, but it is not to be found in the fundamental difference in experience between Autrey and the bystanders, as Dreyfus & Kelly claim. The difference is in the way people respond to this experience – the perceiving of reasons.

¹³⁴ Here I am only pointing to one factor that may determine whether people act. I speak of courage because courage is the virtue that best describes Autrey's action. There may be many reasons why people in fact refrain from acting – trauma of some sort, the bystander effect, proximal limitations, etc. – and it is not clear how these causes interact with the virtue of courage. Is the bystander effect fundamentally uncourageous, or is it just one way of failing to be alarmed because in noticing that no one else is doing anything, we might come to think there is nothing to be done? Courage, then, is not meant to fully explain the difference, but it is an important difference nonetheless and may be what separates those who freeze or flee from those who fight.

3.9: The tension between virtue and duty

Thus far I have pointed out during the course of laying out what I take MacIntyre's account where I think it is clear that he and Korsgaard agrees. But, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, there are at least three (potential) problems in unifying these theories. I will try to make sense of them one by one, pointing to where and how MacIntyre argues that his view is fundamentally anti-Kantian in a way that threatens Korsgaard's view.

3.9.1: Acting from virtue vs. acting from duty

MacIntyre claims that acting from duty is somehow fundamentally different from acting from virtue. Korsgaard, on the other hand, argues, in comparing Aristotle and Kant, that acting from duty and for the sake of the noble is really the same thing: it characterizes a certain kind of value that a whole action (an act done for some end) may have.¹³⁵ MacIntyre appears to concur that this is the Aristotelian view in describing his conception of the virtues, but denies that it could be Kant's. MacIntyre's argument that this could not be Kant's view rests, I believe, on a common misreading of a crucial section of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.¹³⁶ Contrary to MacIntyre's claim, Kant did not think (or, anyway, Kantians are not committed to think) that to act from duty is to act against inclination. As MacIntyre writes, the "educated moral agent must [...] know what he is doing when he judges or acts virtuously."¹³⁷ He acts, he continues, "because it is virtuous." Why MacIntyre includes the prefix "educated" here is obvious. It is widely accepted that Aristotle distinguished between those acting because of fear of punishment or out of a wish for some reward, those who act out of habit, and those who act in the right way because they know that and why it is the right way to act. This last class of person is the "educated moral agent". But what does MacIntyre suppose it would mean to act from duty if not to act in the right way because one knows that and why it is the right way to act? The good will is precisely the will that acts not just in accordance with the moral law, but from the moral law. He perceives himself as obligated under it.

However, there is another way in which acting from virtue and from duty might be distinguished. MacIntyre writes that "according to Aristotle then excellence of character and

¹³⁵ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 11-12.

¹³⁶ I have to say "I believe" because MacIntyre does not provide textual evidence to back up his claim. The relevant section I believe MacIntyre is referring to is under the heading "The motive of duty" on page 68 of *The Moral Law* as translated by H.J. Paton. Here Kant says of the moral person, it is supposed, that "he does good, not from inclination, but from duty". The prefix, that this is where the worth of character "begins to show", is often neglected.

¹³⁷ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 175.

intelligence cannot be separated.”¹³⁸ This is not so in Kant. The reason for this, MacIntyre argues, is because the goodness of the will is separate from knowing how to apply general rules to particular cases. In order for this to be an actual difference between the theories, Kantians and MacIntyre, following Aristotle, must disagree about the structure of practical reason. Let us remind ourselves of that structure as MacIntyre presents it. According to him, deciding to undertake an action has the following structure:

- 1) Wants and goals presupposed by the agent’s reasoning without which the reasoning would not have a context in which to take place.
- 2) A claim that having or seeking X is good for the sort of being I am.
- 3) Relying on a perceptual judgement, the agent asserts that this thing Y is an instance of X.
- 4) The conclusion: an action.¹³⁹

What aspect of this are we supposed to deny? I argued in 1.2.1 that deciding to undertake an action and performing it are the same thing, which corresponds to 4). The conclusion of practical reasoning is an action. In 1.2.3 and 1.2.4 I showed that Korsgaard has a concept of what sorts of beings we are, and that there are things that can be good for us, or anyway actions to be undertaken. That corresponds to 2). There really are things that are good and bad for us, namely constituting ourselves well or poorly. In 2.5.1-2.5.3 I argued in defence of a Korsgaardian theory of what it is to perceive some action as to be undertaken. That, I argued, necessarily involves perceptual judgements, which corresponds to 3). We perceive reasons to act and these reasons spring from who we are. Having an inclination is a sort of perceptual judgement that Y is the kind of thing worth going for (an instance of X). It must therefore be 1) that we must oppose if MacIntyre’s argument is to be right.

But must we deny goals that form the background of our reasoning? In acting, we must take something to be an end worth going for. We perceive ourselves and others to be ends, say. I have already stated that valence of this sort is essential to all sorts of human functions, including perception, action and thinking. We could not perceive, think or act if the way in which we did these things was not valenced. What does it mean to do something in a valenced way? It is to have some evaluative element built into our experience. How could we have evaluative experiences without some conception of wants and goods? To have a conception of one’s practical

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

¹³⁹ This description of practical reasoning is lifted more or less verbatim from MacIntyre, 2011, p. 188-189.

identity is presumably to have a conception of being someone for whom some things are good. Being a student, it would be strange for me to think an academic failure would be good for the sort of person I am. And, contrary to MacIntyre's argument against Kantians, I argued in 2.5.3 that one can be wrong about what sort of action one is undertaking. It would be strange for a Kantian to think that the good will does not include the ability to understand what sort of action I am undertaking and whether it is a good action, which a Kantian presumably must if there is to be a separation between a good will and intelligence of the sort MacIntyre invokes.

I therefore see no reason to accept MacIntyre's contrast between duty and virtue, other than the function they serve. Virtue enables us to do something, duty is to take yourself to be obligated in some way. Acting from duty and acting from virtue, however, boils down to the same thing. It is to take some action to be right and to act on the basis of its rightness. There is no reason in principle why one should exclude the other.

3.9.2: Unity of life vs unity of will

Korsgaard does not pay much attention to a life lived as a whole, but rather to the unity of a willing being. If MacIntyre's theory of a unified life as what is good for beings like us is to be accepted into the Korsgaardian model, there must be some relevant connection between the unified will and the unified (and good) life. What I want to suggest is that they necessitate one another.

In 1.2.4 I referenced Korsgaard's theory of the unified will, and noted how she relied on Plato and Aristotle in order to develop her theory. Let us return to that theory. As noted, in order to will an action (which we as acting beings must), we must have a unified will without which we could not will anything. If a being (see the example of Jeremy from 1.2.3) was only responding to impulses as they arise with nothing over and above them, this being would not will anything as an action to be undertaken. Two quotations from Korsgaard will suffice to make my point here. Firstly, she argues that "constituting your own agency is a matter of choosing only those reasons you can share with yourself."¹⁴⁰ Here she argues that the unified will is not only unified in undertaking an action, but that it stretches out temporally. To will an action is to stand in a certain relation to yourself as someone who, not only should undertake an action, but who should be the kind of person who undertakes an action. It is not only to perpetually constitute yourself in a particular moment (what would be the point of that?), but to constitute yourself as a person over time. It is not as though I am a student one minute and an entirely different

¹⁴⁰ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 202.

person the next. I am a whole being whose will has to extend across time. Otherwise, what would it be to will some principle as a law? It is as a willing being that I obligate myself, and I do not only obligate myself in each instance. I commit myself to be the sort of person I am (or ought to be) over time. Otherwise, I would not be a person at all. Another quote illustrates this point: “Without respect for the humanity in your own person, it is impossible [...] to make something of yourself, to be a person; and unless you make something of yourself, unless you constitute yourself as a person, it will be impossible for you to act at all.”¹⁴¹ Respecting your own humanity here means to perceive your reasons not only as yours in that particular moment, but as binding for your future self. This is why acting without regard for your future self is wrong: it is to not respect your own humanity, to not treat yourself as an end in yourself.

To stand in a particular relation to yourself is, I take it, essentially what MacIntyre refers to as a unified life. We can live out all sorts of narratives, he points out, but the unified life will be an overarching narrative that encompasses the rest almost like chapters in a book. On his view this would be what is lacking in Jeremy since he has nothing over and above his impulses that rule him. “Rule him” might be too strong a term here, but Jeremy certainly requires a background against which to judge his impulses, and it is that which is lacking, making him incapable of ruling at all. For this reason, I take the unified life and the unified will to be mutually informed by one another. To have a unified will there must be a background against which we can will principles as laws for ourselves. The unified life is (part of) this background. The unified life, in turn, requires that we act as a whole being, not being constantly in conflict with ourselves. Thus the unified will is required for us to live out a unified life.

Like Kant, Korsgaard thinks the virtues are to be defined in terms of how they enable us to will the categorical imperative. There are all sorts of ways in which we can fail to do that, but to fail to respect your own humanity is one. To act in such a way that we fragment the unified will, therefore, is to act contrary to the categorical imperative. If I am right then when I say that having a unified will and a unified life necessitate one another, the virtues will be those that enable us to have a unified will and to live a unified life. Because they necessitate one another, the virtues will be the same for both.

Thus, I take it that there is no conflict between the nature of the virtues or which virtues there are on Korsgaard’s and MacIntyre’s account. This is what allowed me in 3.6 to make the argument that the Nazi really is wrong, and not just because his life is fragmented. Because the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 204.

categorical imperative is part of determining ourselves well, acting against it fragments our will. Fragmenting our will is in turn to fragment our life. It is therefore true that engaging in a morally wrong act fragments our life, just as MacIntyre supposes, but the act is wrong because it goes against the categorical imperative (there is a contradiction in that we take ourselves to be ends and not others). The fragmentation of our will and lives is the result of morally wrong action rather than what makes the action morally wrong.

3.9.3: Universal rules vs. judgement

One may think I moved a little too quickly from the premise that the unified life and the unified will necessitate one another to the conclusion that there need not be a disagreement about virtues. In a sense that would be true. For it could still be the case that MacIntyre is right that there are no universal rules to be followed and therefore that the right judgement is the most foundational element of ethics. If that is true, the virtues would be playing a very different role in our moral lives than on the Korsgaardian view.

However, again I think MacIntyre misunderstands the Korsgaardian position, this time on what it means to will a law universally. MacIntyre would certainly not accept the opposite extreme, that we will particularistically. After all, it is one of the foundational ideas of Aristotelian ethics that one should treat like as like, and that to exercise judgement is to be able to recognize whether there are morally relevant differences between two actions or events. I think what Korsgaard has in mind is much the same thing.

In making her argument against particularist willing, Korsgaard defines three ways in which a principle can range over many different cases, taking provisionally universal principles to be what we will as laws for ourselves:

We treat a principle as *general* when we think it applies to a wide range of similar cases. We treat a principle as *universal* [...] when we think it applies to absolutely every case of a certain sort, but all the cases must be exactly of that sort. We treat a principle as *provisionally universal* when we think it applies to every case of a certain sort, unless there is some good reason why not.¹⁴²

Now, one may become nervous that Korsgaard is simply committing the same fallacy many believe rule-utilitarians to be committing. On the utilitarian view, it is sometimes argued, a rule can only appeal to the formulation of the sort “would tend to bring about more good than bad” if it is concrete. For every exception to the rule, it would become more concrete, eventually collapsing in standard utilitarianism. Something like this could be true of the provisionally

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 73.

universal principles: in order to in any sense be universal it must admit of more and more exceptions, eventually collapsing in particularist principles, which is to say no principles at all. Fortunately, this is not what Korsgaard is claiming. She is claiming that we may not always have the forethought to think of every exception to a rule, and might therefore have to reformulate, or discard the principle for some other. What differentiates this from particularist principles is that particularist principles need have no implications for further occasions. There is nothing that it is like to be wrong, and there are no reasons to keep or discard the principles. With provisionally universal principles, however, we are aiming at something, some normative truth, and reasons are taken to be reasons. If we hold the same provisional principle and I encounter a reason to change it, that is a reason for you to change it as well. What is a provisional principle, then, but treating like as like and responding to reasons why like is or is not like?

There is a final problem that MacIntyre could insist on, namely that on his view we do not act on principles. I can only reply to this by reiterating what I argued in past chapters: that we must act, and to do that we must endorse some action, some act done for some end. Endorsing some act done for some end is to act on a principle of action. How we do that is described by the categorical imperative, making it normative for us.

3.10: Conclusion:

So who are we to be? From the last chapter we concluded that to act and think is always to act and think against a particular background. It is in relation to this background that our actions are to be considered good and bad. Korsgaard argues that the categorical imperative is part of this background, indeed it is the way in which we determine ourselves and is therefore normative for us. We were left with the problem of finding more substantial normativity as Dreyfus & Kelly's theory of cultivation failed to explain why something could be more or less meaningful or more or less normative for us. I take it that MacIntyre's theory has provided the background that explains this. We always act as someone, in relation to a community, a practice and/or a tradition. These elements give rise to normativity because there are goods internal to practices that are determined by its history and setting. We have thus reaffirmed the conclusion from 1.2.2 that when we act in the world, there are constitutive standards for the activities in which we take part. Why should we take part at all? We no longer have to rely on Korsgaard's proclamation that acting beings must act, but can now provide the more substantial reason that acting, and especially acting in certain ways, makes our lives intelligible to ourselves, which in turn makes the action intelligible. We find ourselves in a narrative that is only partially our making, and we must necessarily play a role. What role ought we to play? That can only be

determined by the narrative in which we find ourselves. There is, however, normativity built into how we engage with our surroundings. It is not the case that we can just make up any story we would like, each being as normative as the next. Different narratives are normative or fail to be normative because they can be more or less true and make our lives and actions more or less intelligible. We find ourselves on a quest, a quest to understand the good for beings like us. The good can reveal itself through disclosive coping, in the heat of action when what we ought to do and who we ought to be becomes intelligible to us.

To live out the good life, I have also pointed out, is on MacIntyre's account to realize the virtues that enable us to function better rather than worse on our quest toward discovering and constituting the good. Because acting from virtue and acting from duty is essentially the same thing, this must partly consist in assuming responsibility in the Kantian sense. We stand in a tension between a telos and unpredictability, and it is in this tension that the narrative is forged. We must take ourselves to be living out a narrative for which we are partially responsible, and in which we are accountable to others. In our quest we must take ourselves and others to be ends.

Who, more specifically, ought we to be? That can only be answered in context. Taking part in a practice is to take part in the kind of life constitutive of that practice, and it must be up to the individual whether the goods internal to that practice is a manifestation of his own good. Whether they are can be revealed to us through disclosive coping. This is why we can notice that some activities really are or are not meaningful to us. They may or may not include our good. The athletic, sporty person may therefore find that he is not content with the life characteristic of a chess player or a run-of-the-mill office worker. The office worker, on his part, may notice that the busy life of a traveling salesman is not for him to lead. Why? Because we can know ourselves and know our goods. We can have a conception of the narrative in which we play our parts and decide that some undertaking is not in line with our character. Why is this pursuit of the good life normative, as it were, for "no one in particular" in the sense that it is possible to really make better or worse judgements? Because the good life is in part constituted by a unified life and therefore having a unified will. It really is bad for beings like us to live fragmented or otherwise not virtuous lives.

What does all this mean for the reflective nihilist? This is the question to which we finally turn once more.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

From my earlier reflections on François, we can take there to be three main obstacles to him perceiving his actions as worth carrying out. The first, as I pointed out in 1.4, is that he undermines his impulses. The world strikes him as mattering in some sense and he experiences impulses to act, but he soon dismisses them. He takes his desires to be arbitrary or otherwise not really worth acting on. The second is that François tends to view the world as one of conflict. Not only is conflict permeating his familial ties, as I pointed out in 3.5 and 3.6, but also his everyday interactions. His colleagues are naïve as they tend to view their academic work as valuable, but François insists that they are fooling themselves. The world consists of things and people to be hated, and if someone is failing to notice this, they are simply too innocent to see it clearly. Thirdly, François cannot perform a leap crucial to bringing value into his world. He fails to be engaged with the world in the right way, constantly taking up a critical distance and undermining any possible good.

Following the argument from 2.5.2 where I argued that Dreyfus & Kelly are right to say that we discover what matters, and indeed who we are, in our engagement with the world, we may conclude that the third is a subset of the first. It is in the heat of action that our practical identity shines up as it does when we perceive actions as drawn out of us. Making sense of these two obstacles therefore involves recounting how we perceive and respond to reasons. Dreyfus & Kelly insist that responding directly to the world involves a sort of skill as when a football player knows, without reflecting, where to be on the field. Being an expert is to be sensitive to what matters and responding to the world in the right way. Not all our actions are perceived in this way, and fewer still are always perceived as such. Even the expert may come to wonder if his activity is worth undertaking. Dreyfus & Kelly attempt to help us “discover” what matters by way of abstraction. For the coffee drinker, does the cup matter; or where he sits; or at what time? What is required for the activity to be worth engaging in? François’ failure to find any meaning in his activities may show the value of this test of abstraction, which Korsgaard might take to be one of endorsement: he takes his job as a teacher to not matter precisely because nothing changes. His students are all the same, even if some are more enthusiastic than others. In their enthusiasm, after all, they disclose a naivety. There are no improvements François can make, no skill to be developed, no way of succeeding or failing. It is all the same, with no goods to be realized, justifying the practice.

This test of endorsement is in line with Korsgaard's theory. In constituting ourselves, we perceive reasons to act and responding to those reasons is to turn yourself into a certain kind of person. However, if what is normative for us is to be found in our identities, they must in some way be there to motivate our action. One form of identity is always there: our identity as human beings. It is as that kind of being that we perceive some things as painful and others as pleasurable. We perceive the world as good or bad for the sort of beings we are, and experiencing pain just is to perceive something as bad for us; as to be avoided. Our perceiving of reasons to act is therefore built into our primitive identity as human beings. So it is with our other identities. Being a good teacher is to be sensitive to the reasons a teacher ought to respond to, and being able to respond in the way she should. A teacher ought, for example, to see when her students are confused and may experience this, without reflecting, as drawing a clarification out of her. She ought to be patient, not rushing her students when they are confused, and, in short, treat her students as ends.

This is where we find the normative element that was missing in Dreyfus & Kelly's account. Our identities are not merely a question of how we relate to ourselves, but how we relate to others. If we ought to respond to each other in certain ways, it must be because they matter to us. And if we are to respond adequately, we must somehow know how to act. Both are built into perception when we are "wooshed up", acting successfully on perceived reasons. In throwing himself on the train track, Wesley Autrey was not thinking. He was perceiving what he ought to do, and the action was drawn out of him by the man having to be helped. The fallen man's reasons was taken by Autrey to be his own reasons, springing from perceiving the man as an end in himself.

To say that acting is not essentially to act on private, entirely subjective reasons is a way of saying that we do not constitute ourselves in abstraction or on our own. It is also a way of saying that when we act right, we act from the categorical imperative. Sometimes this requires reflection, such as when how we ought to act is not obvious, or when we must take extra care. This is in part why Kant had to identify sympathy as a conditional duty: sympathy is one way of taking others to be ends, but not always the best way. The teacher ought not to play favourites: her identity as a teacher obligates her such that she cannot always respond to others via sympathy. She ought not grade her class on the basis of who has the worst home-life and need cheering up. That would be unjust, or arbitrary, which she cannot will as a universal law. But I will have to set that point aside for now.

Interaction with others is only one domain in which to find meaning, although an important one. Another is through interaction with oneself, taking one's personal projects to matter. Part of what is interesting about François is that he does not seem to have any projects. No hobbies, anyway. His only interests used to be literature and sex, and having lost his love of literature even before leaving the Sorbonne, he is left with only sex. Again Dreyfus & Kelly's diagnosis of the problem is rather fitting: he fails to create a ritual where the act matters for its own sake. This is obvious in some respects, such as when François takes to the internet, finding prostitutes who for one reason or another excites him. He almost insists on proving Kant's point that non-marital sex reduces both parties to objects. There can be no intimacy and nothing about the act matters other than accomplishing an erection (which François describes as a victory in its own right) and its use.

Literature, once a great joy for the academic, has also lost its magic. Here we find something of value in MacIntyre's description of a practice: François is failing to realize the goods internal to the practice in which he is engaged and failing (more or less) to recognize that there are goods to be realized at all. Having to publish regularly, even when he has nothing of worth to say, François is reduced to republishing old ideas as though they were new. The goods internal to the practice are set aside in favour of the external goal of keeping his job and esteem. The crucial leap for François, allowing him to convert to Islam and pursue his academic work once more, starts with regaining what is good about his academic work. Invited to the home of Robert Rediger, now head of the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne, he is forced to collide with his old work. *Joris Huysmans: Out of the Tunnel*, François' dissertation, is hailed by Rediger not to convince François of his greatness, but to remind him that there is work to be done. Rediger compares François to Nietzsche as someone whose work became more accessible and important over time. Rediger wants to bring him back into the fold and resume his role at the university. To ease François' qualms, Rediger promises that he would only have to teach easy classes to first- and second-year students. His teaching would still remain a chore more than a practice, but that way François can continue to write. He would be able to pursue what matters as a practice, developing himself toward something. He would have an aim and goods to realize, and a promise from Rediger that his work is important. François feels "desirable".¹⁴³ Unburdened by externalities (more or less), François could go back to work within what Rediger reminds him is a proud tradition of writers trying to capture, now borrowing from David Foster

¹⁴³ Houellebecq, 2015, p. 207.

Wallace, “what it is to be a fucking human being”.¹⁴⁴ There really is something to aim at and a tradition within which to aim. François would perhaps be able to reenchant the world through his work. At least he seems to think so, even while lamenting that his intellectual life may be over.

But François does have a reservation: Islam. Here it is Rediger who once more acts as François’ saviour. A lapsed Catholic who decided to go back to his roots, Rediger realized a decade earlier that Europe “had already committed suicide”.¹⁴⁵ Seeing the bar of the Hotel Métropole in Brussels close became his awakening to this fact. The fall of the Hotel Métropole, an architectural masterpiece which opened in 1895, was, in Rediger’s eyes, just a symptom of the corrosion of the West. Where there once were artistic ideals, respect for the moral law and beauty, there was now no art, beauty or morality. According to Rediger, this was obvious by the nihilism and misery of the First World War. François concurs with Rediger’s assessment, although Europe’s downfall is in his mind proved by the fall of “certain sexual practices” that were once found in European brothels but have faded from memory. Rediger concludes that “the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission”. Accepting the world “as such”, whole and submitting to this world. Rediger insists that submitting to the world is to submit to God’s masterpiece and follow his laws.

François finds this argument appealing but hesitates. In making his argument, Rediger makes appeal to design. Jumping from a submission to the world to a submission to God seems a curious leap. However, this is the first time the book, and François, finds beauty in things. The clusters of galaxies depicted in Rediger’s home, the notion of prose moving us to believe and act, the ideals in architecture and 19th century philosophy; it all hits home. François is moved to find a source of meaning in the world. This is what makes Rediger’s argument intelligible: the appeal to design works because Rediger moves François to recognize beauty and the world as something to submit to. The argument does not take right away, but something does. The next morning, François slowly returns to work, even if it is an aspect of his work he describes as “easy”, preparing to write rather than writing. His whole world changes: he visits the Sorbonne and joyfully greets the guard; he is “surprised by [his] own nostalgia”, even when aware that the university is rather ugly. He is not fully engaged with the world, remarking to himself that nostalgia is not tied to anything of worth, but just a side-effect of having lived somewhere.

¹⁴⁴ Max, D. T. (2009, March 9th). The Unfinished. *The New Yorker*. Sourced from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 213.

The past is always beautiful, he thinks, as is the future. “Only the present hurts, and we carry it around like an abscess of suffering, our companion between two infinities of happiness and peace.”¹⁴⁶ Perhaps more prose than argument, this line at least shows François’ willingness to return to, and endorse, the world as it is once more.

The practical element of the religious leap is ever-present, making it less of a leap in the traditional sense and more like the endorsement of Korsgaard. The question is not “can I believe it?”, but rather “can I will it?”. The rise of Islam is taken to be a reassertion of old European values that Christianity is too weak or too individualistic to champion. The European liberalism, in *Submission* essentially identified as individualism, does fine when it undermines societal institutions like corporations or tribal attitude. When it undermines the essential structure of the family, it is remarked, it has signed its own death sentence. As I have remarked, this is a point cleverly made in the context of irreconcilable conflict in François’ own family. In his conflict with his mother (at one point described as a “neurotic bitch”) and father, François becomes, as MacIntyre would say, “unscripted”.¹⁴⁷ In cutting himself off not only from his colleagues and his country, but his parents, François is attempting to denunciate his identities. But in so doing, he is not becoming no one, he is becoming a certain kind of person, for he must always stand in some relation to his communities. As Korsgaard might point out, he is constituting himself as the wrong kind of person, given over entirely to conflict, with no hope of reconciliation. And because he takes on this conflict-ridden narrative, he divides his will. He cannot aim for something with his whole being, for he is someone who cannot. He is a person divided against others and himself.

This nuance becomes particularly tangible towards the end of the book. François’ contempt (toward himself and otherwise) must spring from some ideal. Something can only fail to be worth acting on if there is such a thing as succeeding. In his conversations with Rediger, François is starting to find joy in the world, endorsing what is beautiful and good simply because they strike him as such, as when he marvels at Rediger’s astronomical pictures or greets the guard at the Sorbonne with a kind greeting. By contrast, there are always trivial and superficial elements present. François does not discover what is good in a vacuum (no one does), and the external goods of any context accompany what François finds good for its own sake. His discussion with Rediger, and his marvelling at Rediger’s pictures, is accompanied by fine wine and semi-exotic food served by one of Rediger’s wives. The life François comes in contact

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁴⁷ MacIntyre, 2011, p. 251.

with, and which he endorses in the end, is riddled with superficial pleasures and servitude. François does not find inherent worth in his discussion or in the art. It is in a whole way of life that François recognizes as good. François finally reveals that he cares about something. But then why is there still conflict within him?

Because the goods François begins to pay special attention to are not the sort of goods identified by MacIntyre, Dreyfus & Kelly, or Korsgaard. These are not goods internal to an activity, goods that sustain a life and the realization of which can woosh him up. *Submission* is not the story of a prodigal son. It is the story of someone who has lost touch with what is good, in a culture that has lost a sense of there being anything that is good of the sort MacIntyre identifies. François gives himself over to the all too worldly desires of a man who never saw the point in friendships or love and whose joy is to be found in microwave dinners and expensive wine. In fact, these goods are put on an equal footing as when François concludes that his religious experience in front of the Madonna-statue is prompted by hunger. There are only primal lusts and desires. There is nothing over and above his impulses that is worth acting on. Nothing justifies the world's valence other than primal desires.

This is why François fails to endorse himself as an end, or rather one way of failing to endorse oneself as an end. He stands in the same relation to others as to himself, and so when he silently berates his colleagues for being naïve, he is essentially levelling the same accusation at himself throughout the book when something strikes him as being of worth. “You are not really perceiving something to endorse”, he says to himself, “you are just hungry”. He undermines himself, not allowing himself, or willing himself, to give over to the moments that “shine up”. But why can't he? We might say, as good naturalists, that he ought not give himself over to the unbelievable, but that does not mean his experience is devoid of worth. Sitting before the Black Madonna of Rocamadour, he is perceiving something to matter, even if it is not Christianity. Precisely what is hard to say – he might be experiencing what is called by some authors the “sublime” or coming face-to-face with beauty and ideals as he does in conversation with Rüdiger. But why should such things not be endurable? As Korsgaard remarks,

Values are human creations, but they are not created *ex nihilo* with every action. When we create values, we invite others to share them, not just in the sense of helping us to promote them, but in the sense of interesting themselves in the valued objects too.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Korsgaard, 2009, p. 209.

Here she more or less echoes MacIntyre. But she gives the argument a typically Kantian twist in arguing that this value springs from, and can therefore be shared by, our common humanity. “And, because we share a nature, the invitation is often accepted, and then people begin to explore the possibilities, and a tradition begins to take hold.”¹⁴⁹ In so claiming, Korsgaard is essentially referring to what MacIntyre described as “practices” rather than “traditions”. We recognize the goods internal to the activity, and develop new ways of bettering their realization. These goods, described by Korsgaard later as “standards” within the practice, are not arbitrary, but “either come from our nature, as in the aesthetic and gustatory cases, or from the nature of the valued activity itself”, i.e. the telos of the activity. However, she would also accept that we stand within traditions in MacIntyre’s sense of the term in that we must stand in some relation to each other. The cardinal virtues of truthfulness, justice and courage are manifestations of the categorical imperative, categorical precisely because, as MacIntyre argues, we must always stand in this relation to each other. We ought not impose our will on others, nor be arbitrary in our judgements. Courage, which MacIntyre ties to care, is the virtue of being willing to take risks for another, treating them as ends in the same way we take ourselves to be ends. Realizing the cardinal virtues, then, is just to act from the categorical imperative and endorsing our practices is what it is to treat ourselves as ends: to take our interests to be worthwhile because they are ours. Not warring on ourselves but reconciling our will by aiming at something with our whole being. The unified will is not something that exists prior to action, enabling us to aim at something with our whole being. Unifying our will is what we do when we go for something with our whole being, an act of constituting ourselves as a certain kind of person.

The moral dimension of this view springs from our obligation to take others to be ends in themselves. In doing so, we perceive their view of us to be normative, forcing us to unify our narratives by way of justifying or modifying them. This is what happens when Orwell’s socialist is forced to step back and think, noticing that his narrative as a champion of the poor collides with his undertakings in the world. A perhaps more accessible example is that of a break-up, when both sides insist that the other was at fault. Seeing ourselves through another, taking their view to be normative in the sense of having to be justified, does not force us to abandon our view of our narrative, but it does force us to examine it. The other party may have a point, obvious if his/her narrative is at least intelligible. In discussing obligation, Korsgaard makes the point that obligation manifests itself in how we force each other’s to think, not only how

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Here she is rehearsing an argument also made in *The Sources of Normativity* where she argues that reasons are by their nature public.

we force each other to act. Understanding a language, we hear words as words, not just as sounds. We hear them as something we must take an attitude towards. She uses Thomas Nagel's example of strangers tormenting someone.¹⁵⁰ Upon hearing the word "Stop", they cannot go on as before. "Oh you can proceed all right, but not as you did before. For I have obligated you to stop."

We therefore necessarily perceive each other as ends obligating each other. The categorical imperative merely demands that we follow through on our obligations and stop tormenting another. Our moral emotions are perceptions of reasons: it is a rejection or endorsement of our own actions. "Guilt is aversive emotion that results directly from viewing one's own action as bad or hurtful", Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman writes.¹⁵¹ To say that an action is bad is to say that it is in need of justification. Failing to justify the action is, as they write, to "devalue" it. Responding to our emotions, and endorsing or devaluing our actions afterwards, is to respond to reasons. And treating them as reasons is built into our perception. It is to treat others as ends.

But it is not guilt that is burdening François throughout *Submission*. It is rather what Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman describes as shame: "a global devaluation of the entire self".¹⁵² This is why failing to treat oneself as an end is painful: it is experiencing oneself as having to justify oneself (or one's self) and finding no such justification, thereby perpetuating it. Failing to constitute oneself, failing to take one's perceived reasons as worth acting on, really is painful. Its opposite, experiencing the "shining" or "wooshing up" of Dreyfus & Kelly, is joyful. It is to respond to perceived reasons. These reasons are not without "objective" justification as Dreyfus & Kelly describe our practices. There either are reasons or there are not; there are goods to be realized or not. Our contribution to the action is to take these goods to be our own good, something we can aim at with our whole being, unifying our will in the action, and our life over time. How can we know whether the practice is of this kind? Interacting with a practice is to interact with a certain kind of life, and it "shines up" when it is. There is joy to be found in constituting oneself as the right sort of being, unifying one's will and life.

But where is the "objective" in that? If the good must be identified as *ours*, is it not up to us to identify what is our good? Yes and no. To an extent, but being obligated by the categorical

¹⁵⁰ Korsgaard, 1996, p. 142-143. She cites *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970) as the source of this example.

¹⁵¹ Sommer, K. L., Baumeister, R. F. & Stillman, T. F. (2012). The Construction of Meaning From Life Events – Empirical Studies of Personal Narratives. From T. P. Wong (Editor), *The Human Quest for Meaning* (2nd edition, p. 297-313). New York, NY: Routledge. P. 307.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 309.

imperative, there are right and wrong ways to engage with a practice, captured by MacIntyre's cardinal virtues. We must stand in a certain relation to others and ourselves. This springs from our shared humanity, but we also obligate each other more personally, as when we submit ourselves to the authority of others when we engage in a practice. Our standards are not merely ours. They are shared, demanding justification. It is this justification that François begins to detect toward the end of the book, noticing the demands beauty and others have on him. The being "wooshed up" can no longer be found in the European tradition, but Rediger tries to convince him that they can be found within Islam.

Sitting in a restaurant in Brussels attempting to find inspiration for a preface to a book on Huysmans on which a colleague asked him to serve as editor, François has a breakthrough. Huysmans has been misunderstood by himself and everyone else. François claims the French decadent's "true subject had been bourgeois happiness, a happiness painfully out of reach for the bachelor, and not the happiness of the haute bourgeoisie".¹⁵³ For Huysmans, pleasure was to be found in being surrounded by his artistic friends with a nice meal and fine wine, François informs us. These simple pleasures were denied him by illness and circumstance. Precisely what Houellebecq means by appealing to "bourgeois" happiness is unclear and never really explained. However, the allusion to Huysmans simple pleasure, the allusion to Huysmans being a bachelor, in addition to the following events provide an indication. François emerges from his home in Paris two weeks later, having written the preface and is soon after invited to a party in honor of a former colleague who has "taken the plunge" by converting to Islam, returning to the university and getting married. Marriage is summed up as "strange, but awfully nice".¹⁵⁴ The pleasures of a common life centred around work and family begins to reveal itself to François.

The practical leap comes soon thereafter. Having written his preface, François realizes (or imagines anyway) that his intellectual life is over. He has finished his finest work, the best work on Huysmans ever. It is then that Rediger resumes his conversation with François. He has to find something new to sustain him. MacIntyre finds this in the narrative quest and the virtues that sustain it. François finds it in family and work. His enquiries are all practical in nature: how many wives will he receive; what salary; what will he do once he returns to the university? Rediger informs him that he will have high status and be well compensated, allowing him to

¹⁵³ Houellebecq, 2015, p. 235.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

take up to three wives without a problem. In the final paragraphs of the book, François reflects on his conversion-to-come and remarks about his students:

Each of these girls, no matter how pretty, would be happy and proud if I chose her, and feel honoured to share my bed. They would be worthy of love; and I, for my part, would come to love them.¹⁵⁵

He would have a “chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one”. He would, he says finally, “have nothing to mourn”.

Would he have nothing to mourn? François claims to seek love and community, but his conception of these goods are unlike MacIntyre’s goods to be realized for their own sake. He is not looking forward to the joy of loving someone, but rather of being loved. He models his picture of his future family, no doubt, on Rediger’s. His wives are servants, unequal to their husband. François claims that his wives will be worthy of love and that he would come to love them, but what is he talking about? What sort of love? The love a master feels toward his servants is hardly the ideal love of a marriage. In this, MacIntyre’s cardinal virtues become relevant. A practice, or a way of engaging in a practice can be corrosive, and François appears to be dangerously close to the edge here. Taking others to be mere means corrodes the good life, inhibiting us from engaging with the world, one another and ourselves in the right way. François finds the good, despite his close calls with the sublime and goods internal to practices, in externalities, in the simple, primal pleasure he thinks Huysmans was really pursuing. He submits not to what is truly good, but to what is practical. He finally submits to a version of Islam that demands obedience rather than cultivation. He treats himself as a mere means, a sort of pleasure maximizer, because he fails to cultivate himself as an end by pursuing what is good for its own sake, to endorse an action as worth undertaking even in the rare moments when he perceives reasons to do so. He is not engaged with the world in the right way, cultivating what is truly good just because they are his own good.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 249-250.

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