

## Korsgaard and the Reality of Pain

In the final lecture of *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard notes that pain presents a serious challenge to the constructivist account of value she has developed. Korsgaard contrasts her constructivism or “procedural realism” with the “substantive realism” of Moore, Prichard, and Nagel. Substantive realism holds that some concerns are worth caring about or acting on just because of their intrinsic qualities. For the substantive realist, there can be no non-question-begging arguments that might properly convince someone that a supposed value is really worth caring about. Ultimately the most the realist can do is to ask the skeptic to reconsider that putative value in a more careful and clear-eyed way.<sup>1</sup> The realist asks this in the hope, with full attention and imaginative engagement, the skeptic will come to see the importance of what is at stake. In contrast, Korsgaard argues that some fact can become a normative reason for someone to act only through that person’s “reflective endorsement” or willingness to accept that fact as such a reason. For her, the normative force of practical reasons must be grounded in our commitment to them, rather than being a prior fact that might serve to explain and justify our making such commitments.

Substantive realism is often attacked for invoking obscure non-natural properties in a way that makes a mystery of how we could come to know about these aspects of reality or why we should be concerned with them. Yet when it comes to physical pain, substantive realism seems to get things exactly right. Pain appears to be bad just because

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, pp.156-162.

of what it is, so that the only way to appreciate its badness is to experience pain first-hand and carefully attend to its character. The way we respond to pain seems make perfect sense in light of just what pain is, a connection we know in such a clear and immediate way that no real doubt is possible. The disvalue of pain appears to be independent of any choice or endorsement we might make, and is notoriously impervious to our attempts to revoke or change its importance by adopting or abandoning some practical commitment. In what follows, I argue that Korsgaard ultimately fails to make sense of why pain is so relentlessly awful. Her constructivism ultimately commits her to the bizarre position that, when physical pain is independent of any disease or injury, we have no reason to take it seriously. As a result, it is tempting to conclude that critics of substantive realism have managed to make the view seem incredible only by attributing the wrong content to it.

1. Korsgaard rejects substantive realism because it is unable to answer “the normative question.” Supposedly, such realism cannot hope to gain dialectical purchase on a person who is in serious doubt about whether some supposed value really is important. To the person who has become truly alienated or disaffected from the claim that, say, nature is inherently worth preserving, the realist can only insist in various ways that it is, and then ask the doubter to reconsider his doubt, perhaps from a broader or imaginatively robust point of view. But even if the doubter does eventually come around, there is nothing that the realist can point to in his change of mind that would show that it really is a exercise of improved reasoning and reflection, rather than just a non-rational effect of psychological pressure. For Korsgaard, a good account of practical reasons should be able to explain why we should have confidence in something’s importance in a way that does not already

presuppose such confidence in one form or another. Such an account should be able to show us how, in general, we might move from disaffection to confidence in a way that can be recognized as rational without having to presuppose the correctness of the conclusions at which it arrives.

Against substantive realism, Korsgaard argues that a consideration is a normative reason for a person just because she takes it to be one; that is, because she “reflectively endorses” that consideration as one from which she will deliberate and act, and relative to which she will value and evaluate herself as an agent. When I am wondering whether I should really take something to be important, I shouldn’t approach this question as if I were trying to suss out some impersonal fact about the normative aspects of reality, a fact that would be whatever it is independent of how I am approaching the question. For Korsgaard, such questions involve the much more personal task of deciding whether I really want to assign this consideration the role of a reason in my life. Here, I should approach my decision in the same way I should approach the taking on of any other commitment: I must consider whether this new commitment would fit in with other ones I already have, and whether I would be willing to make whatever adjustments would be necessary to coherently accommodate it. I must consider what kind of stance toward the world and to other people that such a set of commitments would embody, what kind of person it would make of me, and whether I am willing to be that kind of person and approach other people from that point of view.

For Korsgaard, this sort of reflection is a process of developing and maintaining a “practical identity.” A practical identity is a normative self-conception that defines the fundamental terms and standards relative to which a person evaluates herself as an agent.

Such an identity defines how and to whom we hold ourselves accountable, what sorts of inter-personal relations and reactive attitudes are open to us, and what sorts of challenges we must answer and what ones we take ourselves to be entitled to put to others. Of course, such an identity cannot be constructed *ex nihilo* by some arbitrary act of will. By the time we are able to confront practical questions, we are already partially and unreflectively identified with various kinds of concerns, relationships, and structures of moral sentiments. The basic task of practical reasoning, then, is not to discern more clearly and dispassionately some independent aspects of the world that might impersonally justify these concerns and sentiments. What makes practical reasoning truly *practical* is that it is conducted with an eye to what one can be and is willing to be, in a way that can bear reflective scrutiny without resorting to self-deception or fantasy. What Korsgaard has in mind here is no simple test of the coherence of our attitudes, but rather a kind of deeply personal confrontation with what one is willing to take responsibility for being.

Constructivism supposedly succeeds where both substantive realism and naturalistic projectivism fail because it alone can address the inherently first-personal question “What should I care about?” in the spirit in which it is being asked: in the first (and second) person. When Korsgaard invokes my practical identity, she is appealing to my commitments insofar as I continue to actively sustain them. She does not appeal to these commitments as psychological facts that would be what they are independently of whether I am ready to stand by them. This sort of practical deliberation requires me to consider the overall structure of my commitments, what really follows from them, and then *asks* me what I am willing to accept, revise, or reject. This is not a piece of

theoretical reasoning: the premises here (unlike metaphysical value-facts or psychological claims) do not, by themselves, support any conclusion in a determinate way. Instead, whatever connection there is to be between the premises and the conclusions are something that *I* must make, in the sense being willing to hold myself to these connections in my thought, action, and self-evaluation. Apart from *my* willingness to decide in one way rather than another, no normative conclusions can be drawn one way or another.

The great advantage of this kind of constructivism is that it readily solves the metaphysical, epistemic, and motivational problems that afflicted substantive realism. When I decide to sustain or extend my commitments in some way, there is no deep mystery about what such a decision is, how I might know about it, or why I am rationally bound to take it seriously. My immediate knowledge of my decisions is just an aspect of making them, as a kind of avowal of what I will hold myself accountable to. Similarly, we need not be puzzled about why we should care about our own commitments, or why some ways of reasoning from them to particular intentions should count as rationally appropriate and binding.

2. Pain does not fit comfortably into constructivism. For Korsgaard, the awfulness of physical pain has to be based in our endorsement of the importance of avoiding and getting rid of certain kinds of sensations. Korsgaard must say that pain is bad because we hate it, rather than it being the case that we hate pain because we appreciate just how bad it really is. In contrast, the substantive realist seems able to say the common-sense thing

here: pain has an intrinsic quality that we not only hate, but which makes this hatred inherently appropriate to its object. Here it's important to note that the realist is not committed to the implausible claim that all pains must hurt in the same way. He need only say that, for some sensation to be painful, it must have some intrinsic, hate-worthy character, a character that we can know only through direct acquaintance. There may be any number of different ways for a sensation to manifest these qualities. The realist need not say treat pain as one objectively bad thing, but can instead construe it as the formal designation of a distinctive category of bad things, which may have indefinitely many members that are alike only in that their badness is immediately apparent in the way they feel.

The intuitionistic epistemology of substantive realism, so frequently mocked, seems to be precisely what pain calls for. The way we know that a painful sensation is bad is not through reflection on our commitments or identities, but simply by attending closely to the character of that sensation. The way to answer skepticism about the awfulness of pain, like Johnson's famous "refutation" of Berkeley, is by kicking a stone, preferably a big one. Here it seems entirely plausible that if anyone can seriously doubt the badness of pain that they must either be in the grip some philosophical confusion or they must not know what they are talking about. The realist's inability to say anything interesting about how we know that pain is bad, or why we should care about this, does not here seem to be any sort of liability. What could we know *better* than what pain is like? To what firmer considerations could we appeal to call the badness of pain into doubt, or to answer such doubts if they actually managed to arise? It may indeed be the case that the

substantive realist cannot helpfully answer the normative question: but at least in the case of pain, it does not seem that the normative question can arise in the first place.

3. Korsgaard argues that her constructivism can make sense of pain without having to make reference to any irreducible normative facts or any sort of rational intuition of them. She contends that pain should be understood as the most basic and primitive form of the experience of obligation. For Korsgaard, our obligations (the things we *must* do or avoid) are not just any reason that might be grounded in our practical identities. Our obligations are only those special concerns that lie at the foundation of some such identity. To ignore or violate an obligation is not just to make a mistake, but to betray oneself in a way that calls one's commitment to an identity fundamentally into question. The point here is not that the violation or neglect of an obligation logically entails the abandonment of a practical identity. However, such violations do require some special restorative work in order to remain in the identity in good faith: at least a kind of reflection and recommitment, and often the further work of penance, apology, and restitution. An agent who did not recognize these concerns as having a special kind of authority could not be said to have truly taken on the relevant practical identity at all.

For Korsgaard, physical pain is our experience of the most primitive kind of obligation we recognize as part of our basic identity as living, sentient creatures. For Korsgaard, life is the archetype of all practical identities. A practical identity is really just the way that the conceptual form of life in general may be further specified so as to make it appropriate for self-conscious creatures, creatures who do not merely inhabit

some form of life, but who reflectively understands themselves in terms of such a conception and can deliberate from it. Korsgaard holds that we can inhabit many different identities simultaneously, which may be arranged into various relations of authority and subordination. But despite our other options, we have to identify with a conception of ourselves as animals, as living things that must strive to satisfy certain needs if they are to keep being the kind of thing they take themselves to be.

Pain, Korsgaard claims, is the “perception of a reason”: in particular, pain is an immediate awareness that some commitment that is partially constitutive of our most basic identity as animals is in jeopardy. For Korsgaard, perceiving such an obligating reason is importantly different from recognizing some other sort of fact. To perceive that I must change my condition is, in part, to already be deciding to do so. Here there is no sharp distinction between cognition and motivation, between grasping what is so and beginning to respond to it appropriately. To appreciate that it is vitally important for me to do something is, absent some opposing or defeating reasons, to start doing that thing (or at least to become ready to do it). To feel pain is not to recognize the intrinsic badness of some sensation that one is having. Instead, it is to be immediately aware that something about one’s body calls for guarding or nursing, such that in this awareness one has already begun to respond to the reason being presented.

Here it is tempting to think that if we are not at liberty to revoke the significance of pain by withdrawing our endorsement, then such significance could not depend on our endorsement in the first place. A realist might object that the idea of establishing some value through reflective endorsement only differs from appreciating a prior normative truth if we can conceive of endorsement as something that might be withheld or



modified, such that there would then be a consequent change in the significance of value that supposedly depends on it. Perhaps the reason why we cannot imagine effectively withholding endorsement of the disvalue of pain is just because we appreciate just how intrinsically bad pain is, prior to our endorsement. If so, then Korsgaard's appeal to inescapable practical identities here may only be a way of cloaking what are really realist positions in constructivist garb.

Korsgaard seems to be sensitive to this worry. In *Sources*, she suggests that we might indeed be able to revoke or at least modify the badness of pain by refusing to take it seriously, by no longer treating pain as something to be fought or resisted. She writes:

Pain is really less horrible if you can curb your inclination to fight it. This is why it helps, when dealing with pain, to take a tranquilizer or lie down. Ask yourself how, if the painfulness of the pain rested in the character of the sensations, it could help to lie down? The sensations do not change. Pain wouldn't hurt if you could just relax and enjoy it. (147)

Of course, the realist will agree that pain wouldn't hurt if you could relax and enjoy it; the problem is that it is impossible to relax and enjoy pain precisely because it hurts. Here it is not clear why Korsgaard is so sure that, when we take a tranquilizer or lie down, the character of our painful sensations does not change. After all, tranquilizers and lying down can effect significant physiological changes in us, changes that might well alter the felt character of our pains. Lying down and relaxing may be a sensible response to the pain of a headache, for example, but only because stress and tension can cause and aggravate headaches. In any event, the realist can accept that the sorts of distress that pain provokes involves further unpleasant feelings that aggravate our condition. The realist can allow that a tranquilizer might lessen our overall suffering by easing these

additional emotional responses that tend to make things even worse for us. The realist only has to deny that, by assuaging our feelings of alarm and distress, a tranquilizer could go so far as to nullify the physical pain that was the occasion for these responses in the first place.

It is not generally the case that we can alleviate our pain by lying down and relaxing: for instance, doing so wouldn't ease the pain of a burn. Instead, in lying down we would only allow ourselves to concentrate our attention on the burn, making it feel even worse. In this case it would make more sense to yell and flail about: that is, to immerse ourselves in activities that, while not actually improving anything, manage to distract us to some degree. When in pain it often helps to take on some sort of more absorbing practical task. Soldiers and athletes manage to ignore significant injuries so long as they are actively engaged with combat or competition. On the realist view, this is hardly surprising. For the realist, the way to appreciate the real value of something is to attend closely to it; in turning our attention to something else, we should expect to lose our sense of pain's awfulness.

4. The really hard case for Korsgaard is pain that is not based in any injury or disease, what I'll call "specious pain." Korsgaard holds that pain is a kind of normative self-awareness. This suggests that the importance of pain derives from the importance of what it represents: the fact that something is wrong with one's body. In the case where I know on other grounds that there really is nothing wrong with me, it would seem that I should dismiss my pain as merely a misperception of my physical condition. Such pain

should have no more practical import for me than optical illusions, once exposed, have any sort of epistemic significance.

Korsgaard claims that her constructivism can avoid the implausible conclusion that specious pain should not matter to us. She notes that even when we know pain to be groundless, it still has the ability to distract us and interfere with our thought and action, just as an optical illusion can distract and confuse even after it has been recognized as illusory. Although this certainly seems to be true, it seems to fall short of accounting for the full badness of groundless pain. The realist will object the power of pain to distract already presupposes our sense of it as being an intrinsically bad thing. If we did not find the sensation to be awful in itself, why would it be able to command our attention so insistently in the first place? A faulty indicator light that simply lit up would be far more easy to ignore than one accompanied with an annoying alarm.<sup>2</sup>

Korsgaard's main response to the problem of specious pain is to appeal to what she calls the "recursive nature" of human consciousness. In its most basic form, pain involves an immediate awareness that there is something physically wrong with us, an awareness that also involves some incipient protest or objection to that condition.

Korsgaard notes that we can take up this attitude not only toward the condition of our bodies, but toward such a perception/protest itself. In cases of specious pain, I might

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<sup>2</sup> More important, pain does not seem to be the only distracting sort of feeling. I might be beset by various kinds of sexual feelings that, while quite pleasant, nevertheless make it very difficult for me to effectively concentrate or get anything done. These feelings might well be far more distracting than some chronic but not very intense pain I suffer. Even so, it would seem these pains are a worse thing, and something I have better reason to get rid of, than the much more distracting sexual impulses.

realize that my perception is faulty, and my protest unjustified, even though this misperception will persist despite such knowledge, just as ordinary optical illusions do. At this point, I might still find something in my condition to protest. Despite my acknowledged lack of injury, I can still object to my persistent sense that there is something about my condition to object to. In hating pain independently of any underlying injury, I am rebelling against my own incipient rebellion, even as I am engaging in it.

Yet again the realist can ask *why* we would rebel against our own rebellion this way? All Korsgaard seems to have shown is that we *might* object to the state of being in pain, even when such pain is recognized as being specious. But it seems that there is something about the state of being in even specious pain that makes such protest not only possible, but inherently appropriate. Specious pain is not just something we might happen to hate, as we might the flavor of licorice or the texture of vinyl. If it is not the very feel of specious pains that justify our objecting to them, why does such higher-order protest seem so necessary?

Korsgaard initially explained our rejection of painful sensations as a defense of our most basic practical identity, which our pain represents as being threatened in some way. On this model, our rejection of admittedly specious pain would seem to presuppose that we subscribe to some higher, equally necessary identity that is in turn endangered by the empty threats represented in specious pain. Unfortunately, Korsgaard gives no suggestion as to what this identity might be, or why it would seem to be as inescapable as our basic animal one.

It is not normally the case that we object to false but unpleasant experience of other kinds. Fear, grief, and anger are all intensely unpleasant emotions that all seem to involve some sense of threat or loss to ourselves. Yet there seems to be nothing wrong with enjoying the specious fear of a roller-coaster ride or a haunted house, or the ungrounded grief of a sentimental tear-jerker, or the mock-anger of a professional wrestling match. In these cases, what we would desperately rebel against in a real situation can become absorbing and enjoyable so long as we know that these feelings are groundless, despite continuing appearances to the contrary. So it would seem that in general, the higher-order practical identities we inhabit are able to allow for all sorts of persistent normative misperception that, were it taken to be accurate, would be desperately resisted. Yet pain is an exception to this general pattern. We cannot enjoy specious pain the way we might enjoy the fear or grief occasioned by a work of art, even when these feelings are just as inescapable. Whether specious or veridical, painful sensations seem to be bad for the same reason: because of the way they feel.

When Korsgaard confronts the question of why we would fight pains if they were not intrinsically bad, she answers:

In some cases we are biologically wired this way; pain could not do its biological job if we are not inclined to fight it. 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. (p. 147).

Here Korsgaard evades the realist's challenge only by embracing a kind of psychologistic projectivism. The question was not why we are disposed to respond aversely to certain kinds of feelings. The realist is not asking for a causal explanation of why we are in fact inclined to fight pain, but for a normative account that would show how we have good

reason to do so, why such resistance would be not just an explainable response to such feelings but an inherently appropriate one. An appeal to essentially third-personal biological facts could not answer *this* question, but would only change the subject. The realist can agree with Korsgaard that “it is a pain to be in pain” (p.154). But unlike Korsgaard, the realist can say why this is so, because pain *hurts*. Perhaps this is still only an expression of confidence, but at least in this case it is hard to see how such confidence could ever be shaken.