

Katrien Schaubroeck 'Interview with Christine Korsgaard, holder of the Cardinal Mercier Chair 2009', *The Leuven Philosophy Newsletter*, volume 17, 2008-2009/2009-2010, pp. 51-56.

Professor Christine Korsgaard is at present Arthur Kingsley Porter professor of philosophy at Harvard University. She works on moral philosophy and its history, practical reason, agency, personal identity, and human/animal relations. She is the author of four books. *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge 1996), an expanded version of her 1992 Tanner Lectures, examines the history of ideas about the foundations of obligation in modern moral philosophy and presents an account of her own. *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge 1996) is a collection of her essays on Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics. *The Constitution of Agency* (Oxford 2008), is a collection of her recent papers on practical reason and moral psychology. And *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, (Oxford 2009) is a book about the foundation of morality in the nature of agency. She is also one of the editors of *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (Cambridge 1997).

On the 23th of April 2009 she delivered the Cardinal Mercier Lecture entitled 'The Activity of Reason', and she gave two seminars on animal rights entitled 'Animal Nature and the Good' and 'Human Beings and the Other Animals'. During her time in Leuven as holder of the Mercier Chair 2008-2009, she took the time to speak with Katrien Schaubroeck and their conversation is recorded below.

*Professor Korsgaard, how did you get interested in philosophy in general and in kantian philosophy more specifically?*

I think I was born interested in philosophy, because I was doing philosophy before I knew what it was. I am a first generation college student, so I hadn't the vaguest idea that philosophy was an academic field. I was concerned as a teenager about issues about objectivity in ethics. I stumbled on Nietzsche and Plato and I discovered that the thing I was doing had a name! The interest in Kant and in Aristotle - those have always been two interests of mine - sprang from the early concern with the question how ethics could be objective or how the answers to ethical questions could be determinate. The idea of practical reason struck me as a way in which ethics could be determinate without raising any problems about facts and values. I was also attracted to Kant and Aristotle because I really like systematic philosophy. I like it when everything has to do with everything else.

*You did your PhD under John Rawls' supervision. What was your dissertation about?*

I did my PhD with Rawls indeed. The first drafts of my dissertation were about Kant and Aristotle. Rawls told me to pick one of them, so I picked Kant and my doctoral dissertation became a search for the basis of the claim that the categorical imperative is a principle of reason. At that point a lot of people just took it for granted that that claim was supported by the fact that the universal law formulation was a formal principle. I wrote about the other two formulas as well, the formula of humanity and the formula of autonomy. I worked through the formulas, and used them each to show a way in which the categorical imperative is a principle of reason.

*So Aristotle was there from in the beginning, along with Kant? This combination isn't very common, and many people think it is strange that you combine those two philosophers. Do you understand why they think so?*

It is less uncommon now – I hope partly because of me. But it is true that when I started doing this, people found it very strange. But I have always believed that these two philosophers are perfectly compatible. Kant is more focused on the question what the principle of reason is and how to establish it. And Aristotle is more focused on the question of how human beings become susceptible to the influence of reason and how they become good at moral judgment and that requires a story about the virtues. So the emphases are different, but I don't think the two stories are incompatible. When I was growing up philosophically people said that Kant believes in universal principles while Aristotle says there are only general principles; that Aristotle says that you have to enjoy doing the virtuous thing in order to be virtuous whereas Kant says that you are most virtuous when you do the right thing in spite of your reluctance, and so on. I have written about those differences in paper 'From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action.' I think that those difference can be traced back to differences in their theories about what the emotions are rather than differences in their ethical outlooks.

*Aristotelian insights are not the only insights with which you enrich your basically Kantian approach to ethics. In The Sources of Normativity you combine a Kantian approach with an existentialist outlook. How does this combination work?*

As Kant sees it, values are there because we value things, it is not the other way around. It is we, as rational agents, who confer value on things. Some people interpret Kant as saying that we confer value on everything else but ourselves; we just have intrinsic value. But in my view we also confer value on ourselves. We do this because we need reasons and we cannot have reasons unless we value ourselves. But of course I cannot say that that is a reason for conferring value on ourselves; that would be inconsistent. So my theory needs an existential moment when we bring value into the world, namely the moment when we decide to value ourselves. The other thing that is existential about the resulting view is that I have to bite this bullet: I have to accept the claim that if we failed, universally, to value ourselves then nothing would be valuable.

*When you say that all value depends on the existence of valuing beings, that does not immediately sound like something that Kant would say, because he explicitly opposes the idea that something would be valuable just because I happen to like it. Isn't that also true?*

It is not desire, or liking, that confers value on the object. Conferring value on the object is something that you do by making a choice – where it is essential in Kant that making a choice is in fact making a law. Your law is an enactment of the value of the thing. You cannot do that just because you like it, because that would be not checking whether the maxim of pursuing this thing for this reason would serve as a universal law. The way I like to think of, “value creation” in Kant, is in terms of form and matter. The matter is psychological stuff: our likings, interests, capacities for enjoying. The form is the form of law: you impose that form on that matter and then you get things that are valuable.

*In The Sources of Normativity you argue that we are all under a moral obligation because we are reflective beings. Being reflective we have the capacity to ask whether we should act in the way we happen to desire. That is why we need reasons that tell us what to do. In your view those reasons are based on our practical identities, our identities as a sister or a friend or a teacher... And because we have to value those identities in order to be able to act at all, we also have to value the basic human identity that underlies these identities and which we all share. That is how morality comes into our lives. Now, the obvious question is why there are so many people doing immoral things if the moral law is unavoidable in the way you describe it. What is wrong with, for instance, the mafioso, someone who acts in accordance with his*

*practical identity as a member of the mafia, but who does not draw the conclusion that he is therefore under a moral obligation. Would you say that that makes him irrational?*

It is certainly a failure of reason. The trouble with the word 'irrational' is that it sounds like the problem is a contradiction. And there is a problem of contradiction, but it is produced by something more important which is lack of reflective depth. The mafioso hasn't thought through the meaning of his commitments, all the way down, whether he could really follow his principles in every possible situation. So what is wrong with him is a sort of lack of reflective depth and the resulting lack of moral imagination. Of course if you do the reasoning all the way down what you find is a contradiction - and that makes his state irrational but not in the sense that he already does contradict himself, only in the sense that if he reflected deeply enough he would discover a contradiction.

*Returning to the Aristotelian language you use in your more recent work and also in the seminars you gave at the institute today, would you say that the mafioso is not only irrational, but also not well-functioning?*

Yes, I would say that an immoral being is not well-functioning, although in a somewhat theoretical or distant sense. This has to do with the arguments from *Self-Constitution*: he is not well-functioning in the sense he is not acting on a principle that holds his agency together in every possible situation, that would constitute him as an agent in every possible situation. Of course it is possible, even probable, that he will never get into the kind of situation in which this would be a troublesome fact to him. So he is not well functioning, but in a somewhat theoretical sense.

*It is a common criticism of your approach to morality, advocated by Thomas Nagel among others, that it misrepresents what morality is about. It seems as if you are saying that one should be moral in order to be true to oneself, and to what one values about oneself. Morality, however, is not about yourself but about the value of other beings.*

It is true that my account is like the Greek account of ethics, in the sense that I take it that the story to be told is the story about how to be a well-integrated, autonomous, well-functioning human being, and I see morality as sort of being the outer expression of that. What is wrong with the way in which the criticism you just mentioned is formulated, is that one isn't moral

*in order to* anything. It is not that you are moral in order to get integrity for yourself, rather than to do nice things for other people. Being just and honest and fair to other people is essential to being a well-integrated person, but it is not an alternative *purpose* that is at stake here. It is an alternative *grounding* of principles but this reflects nothing about your purposes. Morality assigns us purposes, it is our moral duty to help those in need for its own sake – not to help those in need for something else. We are creatures who adopt our purposes – they are not given to us by our desires, and that means we need principles to guide their adoption. Those principles have to be grounded. I believe that they are constitutive principles of action, and so they are not themselves adopted, not something you have for a purpose. You are already committed to them. You need to make an integrated agent of yourself and those are the principles that tell you how to do it.

*The topic of your seminars today and tomorrow is about animals and how we should treat them in a morally proper way. Kant does not appear as an attractive starting point if you want to talk about animal rights. Nevertheless you seem to be able to do that, to bring animals into the kingdom of ends, that is, the moral realm as Kant conceives it. How do you do this?*

I got started on this whole project because I have been a vegetarian for my entire adult life. And I am a Kantian and a lot of people have asked me how I combine those two things. When I was asked to give the Tanner lecture at Michigan, I decided to take up the question and work out a view. There is a simple argument and a more complicated one. The simple argument is basically that when we legislate that certain things should be counted as reasons or values, although it is only rational agents that can do the legislating, we do not always represent our rational nature when we do the legislating. We sometimes represent, or speak for, our animal nature: the thing in us that is capable of pain and suffering for instance, the thing in us that likes to live, likes to move around, likes to play. If you legislate on behalf of your animal nature, you are, by the criterion of universality, legislating on behalf of animal nature in general, just as nothing counts as legislating on behalf of my own humanity that isn't legislating on behalf of humanity in general. So that's the simple claim: it's just a mistake to think that because only we can legislate, only we are represented by our legislating.

The more complicated argument is something like this: there is a way in which every animal pursues its own good. I believe that's a kind of tautology, since that's what an animal is: something that pursues its own good. Legislating the moral law is just the human way of

doing that. We demand respect and recognition from each other, that's our way of pursuing our own good. We say to each other 'I matter'. So legislating the moral law is a natural way of being an animal.

*But animals don't say 'I matter'*

But everything about them says 'I matter', and as I said, I think that's almost a tautology. I mean that's what they are – substances that matter to themselves.

*Would it be problematic for your view to take into account other parts of nature, like trees and oceans?*

I feel two different ways on this question. A part of me wants to say that only a conscious being has a final good, only a conscious being therefore is owed a certain kind of treatment. There is in the Tanner lecture 'Fellow Creatures' a footnote towards the end where I explore the idea that instead of thinking of moral standing as something that some things have and some things don't, maybe there are ways in which we should treat everything in accordance with its nature. We share an animal nature with animals, but we share an organic nature with plants, and we even share a nature with substances. Maybe that could ground certain ways of treating trees and oceans that, if not exactly duties that are owed to them, seem appropriate or suitable. So I come very close in that footnote to saying that we have duties to everything.

*I would like to ask you a question of a wholly different kind. As you may have noticed there are very few women among the staff here at the institute. Partly that is because of the particular history of this institute. But the underrepresentation of women seems to be a problem at other philosophy departments too. I heard that also in the USA philosophy departments are special in that there aren't as many women as there should be or as you could expect there to be. Have you any thoughts about this gender issue that you want to share? Do you think the situation should change? And will it change by itself, or should we do something about it?*

This is a very vexed problem for people of my generation. I came of age during the feminist revolution. And when I was in graduate school I would have been willing to bet that by the time I was the age I am now there would be many more women in philosophy. Everything

looked like it was going to open up. What in fact happened, is still interesting but it isn't that. There are not many many more women in philosophy. I think it is not even documentable that there are more at all, women still make up only about a quarter of professional philosophers in the US. What has happened is that women are much more centrally located and powerful. It has been in my generation that you had the first women chairs in major departments. I was the first woman ever to be the chair of Harvard's philosophy department; and lots of departments around the same time had their first woman chairs. And what also changed is that women are more widely read, not just by specialized audiences or other women. So women have become much more central regular players in the game. But there still are not very many of us. There was a theory when I was young that it had to do with the lack of role models, that once there was one woman in the upper ranks there would come more. But now at Harvard we have more senior women than any other good department in the English speaking world: Frances Kamm, Gisela Striker, Susanne Siegel, Alison Simmons ...and it has no effect at all on undergraduate enrolment. So this has been a very great surprise also. Another argument that people used to make that I think has some validity is that there is an aggressive side to philosophy, a debate side, and that women find this off-putting or find themselves unable to participate in it. It is true that philosophical manners have improved since women have been more centrally located but the debate aspect of the subject is still there of course

*And do you think the current situation should change?*

Oh, I *absolutely* think it should change. After all, we tell ourselves 'these are the most fundamental questions of human life'. Why should the most fundamental questions of human life be most interesting to male white people? That doesn't make any sense at all.

*Another feature of this institute is that only few people work in analytic philosophy. The distinction between continental and analytic philosophy is, however, not always easy to make. Do you think there is a distinction and how would you describe it?*

I think that it is largely sociological really. It has to do with particular traditions developing and people clinging to them. My first year of teaching was at Yale, which was a divisive department having a fight about this issue in those days (back in '79-'80). Basically the analytic philosophers pretended to think that the continental philosophers had no logical facility whatever, and the continental philosophers pretended to think that analytic

philosophers could only deal with trivia and never deal with big questions. This was obviously ridiculous, polemical stuff on both sides. But of course, when traditions go on for a while, people can become unintelligible to each other because it is easier to understand work within your own tradition of study. That creates barriers between the two schools of thought. And it is also true that in some cases, and I am afraid that at least in the universities that I know this happens more in the case of continental philosophers, people can get attached to their identity as a special kind of philosopher and then they have a motive for wanting the distinction to continue because they don't have a way of self-identifying when the distinction disappears. Certainly analytic philosophy is a much less narrow affair than it was when I was growing up. It can no longer be said that analytic philosophers are not dealing with big questions.

*Of which your philosophical work is an excellent proof.*

*Thank you very much for your time, professor Korsgaard.*