

# An Unsung Duet: Frankfurt on Self-Love and Korsgaard on Self-Constitution

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## Abstract

Harry Frankfurt and Christine Korsgaard write independently on related issues concerning personhood. My aim here is to explore this area of overlap in the later thinking of Frankfurt and Korsgaard. The “duet” I find in their work occurs primarily in Frankfurt’s *The Reasons of Love* and in Korsgaard’s views on identity and personhood in *Self Constitution*. The specific thesis that falls out of their respective projects is that to successfully constitute yourself as a person on Korsgaard’s view is also to love yourself on Frankfurt’s view.

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## Normativity

Korsgaard and Frankfurt share an expansive appreciation of normativity. Ethics and epistemology tend to dominate philosopher's concern with normativity. But we are guided by reasons well beyond what is right or true, good or rational. Here I would screen out motivations based merely on desire, instinct or impulse. There is nothing normative about the unfettered urge to scratch an itch or take a bite of chocolate. But we often act on action guiding reasons out of love, or in accordance to the standards of our projects or communities, and these are normative. A mother's love for her infant gives her a reason to tend to its needs even when she is not so inclined. A teacher recognizes a reason to grade student work in a timely fashion, though few of us enjoy an accompanying inclination to do so. So, there is normativity beyond the scope of morally good action and rational belief. These further realms of normativity help us understand things like love, our assorted practical identities, and meaning in life. These three are closely related, since they are based on our own commitments. As long as I identify as a teacher, I will recognize an action guiding norm to give my students timely feedback. But while this norm places demands on me, and is necessitating in that sense, it remains contingent on my continuing to identify as a teacher.

Korsgaard takes normativity to be grounded in our practical identities (Korsgaard 2009, 22). Morality is the variety of normativity that is constitutive of us as persons. But then being a teacher or a parent likewise carries normative standards that constitute these roles. For Frankfurt, caring about

things introduces normativity that is relevant to questions about how we should live beyond the realm of morality (Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* 2004, 11). We will see these views converge when we attend to the ways our practical identities and concerns unify us as the particular people we are.

## Korsgaard on Self-Constitution

Korsgaard makes accounting for normativity the central kernel of her work. Her understanding of how normativity guides us is elaborated in terms of a broader teleological account of action and agency. Action, for Korsgaard, is essentially ends oriented, our purpose is internal to our action. This contrasts with conceptions of actions as, say, voluntary bodily movements. Mere acts can be identified with bodily movements. But actions, for Korsgaard, include our ends. When I call my father, for instance, my action is not merely the bodily movement involved in placing a call. My action is to do that act as a means to my end of communicating with my father. The action is not given in the “I will do X” part of a maxim. The action is described by my maxim as a whole. My action is “to do X for the purpose of end E”.

On this view, importantly, the reason for an action is not something outside of or behind or separate from the action at all, for explicating the action, and explicating the reason, are the same thing. Rather, an action is an essentially intelligible object that embodies a reason, the way a sentence is an essentially intelligible object that embodies a thought. (Korsgaard 2009, 14)

Understanding actions as ends oriented in this way invokes a teleological conception of agency. Our reasons are not causes standing outside and prior our actions. Rather, actions with ends as integral elements are essentially teleological. Talk of the teleological has been disreputable for a good while. Korsgaard takes teleological thinking to be unavoidable for creatures like us. As self-conscious beings that deliberate and make choices among ends oriented actions, we have no alternative to conceptualizing each other and various aspects of our world in teleological terms. Doing so, however, does not contravene the causal understanding of the world as revealed by science. Talk of the teleological is grounded in how we conceptualize the world, not necessarily how the world is (Korsgaard 2009, 38). We conceptualize the world in terms of what is useful or obstructing to our ends. Normativity

is to be understood in terms of how we conceptualize the world teleologically, in terms of ends oriented practical reason.

The scientific causal picture and the teleological conception are separate ways of understanding the world. The recent success of the scientific world view doesn't delegitimize the teleological since it renders the teleological no less inexorable to the project of leading a human life. When we act for a reason, we conceive of ourselves as a cause of the end we will. Of course, we aren't the causes of our ends on the scientific causal conception of the world. Strictly speaking our bodily movements only contribute to broader events giving rise to the results of our activity. The charge of my car's battery is as much a part of the cause of it's rolling to the grocery store as my activity of driving. So, perhaps we deceive ourselves when we conceive of ourselves as the causes of the ends we will. But the operative element in so conceiving is the *conceiving of ourselves*, our being as a whole person, as the cause of our ends. We remain faced with the inexorable necessity of choosing one course of action over another. Whether we as agents cause our ends or not, the result of our action is to *constitute ourselves* as beings that find the action we choose worthwhile.

Through conceiving our ourselves as the causes of our ends, we constitute ourselves. We constitute our various identities and make ourselves the particular people that we are through our ends-oriented actions. And this brings us to the role of normativity broadly conceived. We recognize certain actions as necessary or impossible, required or prohibited, due to the roles they play in constituting our practical identities. Normativity is grounded in our practical identities. A practical identity is a "role with a point," one that embodies normative standards.

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.... Such identities are the sources of our reasons, but of course the idea is not just that we decide which ones we want and conform to them. We have many

particular practical identities and so we also face the task of uniting them into a coherent whole (Korsgaard 2009, 22).

A practical identity, on Korsgaard's view, is a role with a point. Our practical identities embody packages of norms. To be an educator is to endorse and adopt the norms that guides us as educators. To be a chess player is to endorse and act in accordance with the standards of the game, its rules and strategies. All of our practical identities are contingent in that they depend our subscribing to them. Once we commit to a practical identity, the associated norms become necessitating and action guiding.

The requirements of morality, specifically the categorical imperative, are necessary for constituting ourselves as persons. Even this universally shared normative standard remains contingent in that we might degrade or destroy our own humanity through violating it. Other varieties of normativity are grounded in more specific contingent practical identities. I may not feel like reading student papers, but I do so anyway as it is part of constituting myself as an educator. This, on Korsgaard's view, is how norms guide our action, how they motivate us.

As an aside, we should pause to consider identities we are born into. I may be born into a religious tradition or into a family. These identities remain contingent since I can renounce my faith or disown my family. But it is not so clear that all of our practical identities are contingent in the way Korsgaard suggests. How about race or ethnicity? An African American can't exactly get out of being a black by simply abandoning her race. We are stuck with the color of our skin. However, we are not similarly stuck with the norms and standards that constitute race as a social phenomenon. Here, I'd like to suggest, as a hypothesis worth exploring, that the deep roots of racial oppression consist in denying the members of a racial group the freedom and agency to shape the norms and roles that define their racial identity for themselves. The suggestion here is that racism, at its core, consists in foisting unwanted normative roles and standards onto the members of racial defined groups.

So, we constitute ourselves by committing to the normative standards that constitute our various practical identities. At the same time we integrate our various practical identities into a coherent whole, ourselves as particular people. The project of leading a human life, of being a person, is to exercise our agency in a way that brings psychic unity to our lives. Normativity is not about causing some ideal state as the consequentialist might have it, but about unifying and sustaining our integrity as the people we are, as the kinds of people we constitute ourselves to be. Unification and integrity play a similar role in Frankfurt's view of what it is to love ourselves. Ultimately, I think we will see that if these two philosophers are on the right track, then to successfully constitute yourself is also to love yourself.

## Frankfurt on Self Love

According to Frankfurt, to love yourself is simply to love what you love (Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* 2004). Frankfurt arrives at this formula by applying the idea that to love someone is to adopt the good of that person as a good of your own to one's own self. When we apply this notion to the self, we get the idea that to love yourself is to adopt the good of you as a good of your own. We should worry already that this sounds vaguely tautological. Frankfurt won't neglect this. But first, what is the good of you? Frankfurt takes the good of a person to be a function of what they love. That is, what is good for you is for things to go well for things you care about. Understanding the good of you in terms of what you love or care about gets us to his formula that to love yourself is to love what you love.

But, how could you fail to love what you love. Frankfurt's formula appears to render the notion of self-love trivial. If you love something then you love it. This much is tautological. If self-love is just to love what you love, the notion is rendered contentless. In reply, Frankfurt suggests that we can fail to love what we love as a result of being half-hearted, ambivalent, or internally conflicted. We can make sense of this in terms of Frankfurt's familiar levels of desire. As a compatibilist on free will, Frankfurt argues that we act freely when our higher order desires, our desires about our desires, are in accordance

with our lower-level desires. My action is freely performed when I want to want to do what I do, when my higher order desires about what I want to want are in alignment with my first order desire to perform an action. We can thus explain how the drug addict suffers from compromised free will when his desire for a fix remains operative in spite of his desire that he not have a desire for a fix.

Frankfurt marks the difference between merely wanting something and caring about it in terms of this hierarchy of desires (Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* 1988). To care about something isn't merely to desire it, but to desire that you desire it. This may mean being additionally motivated to sustain your first order desires, for instance. So, the lover not only desires the beloved, but actively endorses, nurtures and sustains this feeling. Alignment in the hierarchy of our first and higher order desires explains the difference between wanting and caring. Misalignment of first and higher-order desires can account for compromised will. And when this amounts to ambivalence about what we care about, misalignment comes at the expense of self-love. To take a commonplace sort of example, I love chocolate almond croissant. But then I don't entirely love that I love chocolate almond croissant (and neither does my doctor). On the matter of chocolate almond croissant, my loves are internally conflicted. This could be a slight ding to my self-esteem on Frankfurt's account. To mitigate against this less-than-ideal way of standing to myself, I must seek strategies for reconciling my conflicting loves for chocolate almond croissant and for good health. This is an ongoing project.

Of course, the stakes are much higher when ambivalence and internal conflict takes root in our more significant relationships and projects. It will be hard to feel good about myself or my life if I hate my job. The internal conflict between caring about my paycheck and antipathy for my boss carries a price for my self-esteem on Frankfurt's account (not to worry, I quite like my boss). Being in relationship with an abusive partner engenders internal conflicts that undermine self-love. I'd emphasize that this is not a matter of blaming the abused partner for failing to love themselves. Rather, the damage to self-love

might be better understood as among the more significant aspects of the tragedy of the abusive relationship.

## The Duet

Our practical identities are manifold. I am my father's son, my son's father, my wife's husband, an educator, a philosopher, a gardener, a cyclist and a great many other things (a lover of chocolate almond croissant, for instance). Korsgaard doesn't engage in any detailed discussion of how many practical identities are constitutive of our personal identity. Nor is it entirely clear that our personal identity consists entirely of so many practical identities. But we can understand personal integrity, the degree to which we succeed in constituting ourselves as particular persons, as a function of the coherence of our many practical identities. What undermines the personal integrity of the cat burglar is just that the normative standards of his identity as a robber are in conflict with the moral obligations constitutive of being a person. To this degree, the cat burglar is not a unified person, but a disorganized heap of internally conflicting reasons for action. For Frankfurt, this internal conflict undermines his ability to love himself. Remember self-love is not directly identified with how we feel about ourselves. The bank robber might well ignore his internal conflicts and feel quite pleased with himself. His capacity for self-love understood as whole-heartedly loving what he loves is never-the-less undermined. Were the bank robber to thoughtfully reflect on the maxim of his robbing action and how it bears on beings that share his identity as a person, his high opinion of himself would be brought low. Self-love can manifest in feeling good about ourselves. So can other things, like willful blindness.

The project of constituting ourselves as particular people is unavoidable for creatures like us. We must act. Even if we do nothing, this is an action so long as it is done self-consciously and by choice. So, we cannot avoid the project of constituting ourselves as particular persons. We do so by taking on various practical identities, "roles with a point," that carry an array of normative standards, standards

that guide our actions if we are to retain our practical identities. The way to build and sustain ourselves as the particular people we are is to cultivate practical identities that cohere well with each other including our shared identity as persons. This is Korgaard's account.

We forge the connection to caring, or loving, when we note the contingency of our practical identities. When I take on a practical identity, I commit myself to the normative standards embodied by it. Caring about providing my students with timely feedback comes along with identifying myself as an educator. Of course, I care about many other things. I have other practical identities. The degree to which I love myself, on Frankfurt's view, will just be the degree to which I can whole heartedly love what I love. This will require coherence among the things I care about. Self-love is under threat with my various concerns become sufficiently disruptive to each other, resulting in ambivalence. This is Frankfurt's view.

So caring is integral to having a practical identity. To stop caring in accordance with the normative standards embodied by a practical identity is to relinquish that identity. We sometimes might not feel that great about living up to the norms we subscribe to under a practical identity. The mother that loves her child needn't feel great about the diaper change or getting up for the midnight feeding. But recall that for Frankfurt, love or caring is not a feeling. Caring about someone can manifest in positive feelings of joy, if things go well for our beloved, or it can manifest in frustration or grief when things don't go so well. Our caring isn't defined by an affect, but by our motivation to advance the good of the beloved. Provided there are no greater obstacles than momentary feelings to understanding our practical identities in terms of the things we care about, then Frankfurt's view of self-love coincides nicely with Korsgaard's understanding of what it is to succeed at constituting one's self as a person. To care about yourself, to love what you love, is just to hold your various practical identities together in a coherent unified way. In other words, to love yourself is to constitute yourself as a particular person.

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