

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

SEEING THE GOOD: REHUMANIZING MORAL CONFLICT IN A  
DEHUMANIZING AGE

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*For my parents, without whom I would have had neither the connective  
creativity, nor the methodical discipline to finish this project.*

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# Abstract

This dissertation integrates insights from metaethical constructivism and enactive cognitive science to rehumanize both “religiously” and “secularly” grounded moral conflict and its dehumanizing side effects. Specifically, my motivating problem centers around the way in which moral conflict can be used to “justify” dehumanization in the form of what I term *moral exclusion-qua-subject*; exclusion from collective moral deliberation for one reason or another. Moral exclusion-qua-subject can in turn enable a slide into what we more typically think of as the dangers of dehumanization, and what I circumscribe as *moral exclusion-qua-object*: traditional human rights violations up to and including violence and death. At stake in this project is thus both the relative health and cohesion of our moral communities as well as the possibility of avoiding the darker threats of violence on an individual or mass scale. My critical diagnosis is that by overcoming what I refer to as the *metaethical divide* (dealt with in Chapters 2 and 3)—and even more importantly, by reconceptualizing our understandings of perception, rationality, objectivity, and identity (Chapters 4 and 5)—we can disrupt the pathway from existence-of-moral-conflict → the dehumanizing belief that the person with whom we disagree “must” be either *unable* or *unwilling* to engage in proper moral deliberation (and thus is unworthy of inclusion in collective moral deliberation). My constructive proposal makes both an explanatory (metaethical and moral epistemic) contribution (Chapter 6) in the form of what I term *enactive constructivism*, as well as a practical, action-guiding one (Chapter 7) by advocating for the cultivation of specific rehumanizing epistemic virtues.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1 | PROLOGUE

On November 8, 2016 I was visiting graduate programs on the east coast with a dear friend and future colleague, making my pitch to religious ethics programs to study and hopefully come up with better ways of “grappling with” moral disagreement. While at Princeton, an old friend of mine, and current student, kindly invited us to an election watch party at his supper club. There, among the sticky ping pong tables and old couches we proceeded, in an increasingly silent and horror-struck room, to watch the New York Times presidential forecast needle swing from smugly blue to incredulously red on the haphazardly slung up projection screen née bedsheet. The consternation in the room was palpable, but paled in comparison to the dull shock that drenched the air as we got off the train in our next stop of Washington D.C. the next evening. The city seemed to be in the midst of some sort of stunned-silent step in the mourning process; denial, not yet rage. The streets even seemed oddly abandoned apart from one memorable trump-shirt toting young bloke, who was whooping around in our general vicinity. He wanted to party with us, we declined. It was a surreal night. Driving out to Charlottesville the next morning, with the homemade Trump billboards increasing in surface area as we put increasing mileage between our car and the nation’s capitol, we developed our version of the punch buggy game, MAGA edition. “Maybe our friend lives there” we would say each time the red and white rectangles loomed along the roadside. “Wait, no, maybe our friend lives there!”

## 2 | POLARIZATION AND MORAL CONFLICT

Since that memorable night (and well before), many in the United States<sup>1</sup> cannot seem to shake the sense that we are living in unprecedentedly polarized times. While to some extent this response might be overwrought—a classic case of people feeling as though *their* generation is witnessing the end of civilization, that is ironically felt during many if not most points in history—it is certainly fair to say that we are deeply *aware* of our divides in this moment. We should like, moreover, if possible, to avoid the undesirable side effects that too often come with this division that is commonly referred to in technical terms as *moral conflict*.

Moral conflict occurs in disputes when individuals or groups have differences in deeply held moral orders that do not permit direct translation or comparison to one another. Moral orders include the knowledge, beliefs, and values people use to make judgements about the experiences and perspectives of others. Moral orders form grammars of action, where meaning, assumptions, and ways of thinking construct worldviews that are reflected through behaviour and communication. Differing grammars are incommensurate and therefore preclude conflicting parties from being able to engage each other in a common frame of reference or from being able to consider each other's perspectives. This means that disputants often find themselves in forceful, bitter, and sometimes even violent patterns of communication.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is not just the polarized disagreement or inter-group moral conflict, but its harmful, sometimes *violent*, byproducts<sup>3</sup> that represent some of the most pressing causes for concern. But this is not to say that all disagreement is problematic, I would even go so far as to argue that many kinds of disagreements can actually be helpful; generating friction that can provide helpful traction and constructive tension to better think through and meet

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<sup>1</sup> I often use the United States as a point of reference, however my critiques and interventions are applicable elsewhere as well.

<sup>2</sup> Kristine, Cole. "Moral Conflict." Center for Intercultural Dialogue, 2014. <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/key-concept-moral-conflict.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> One can think of the deadly protests that rocked Charlottesville less than a year after my own visit.

challenges that inevitably arise. Nevertheless, when moral or political disagreement becomes too extreme, persistent, or intractable, serious harms can occur. When I speak of polarization or moral conflict as a motivating problem for this project, therefore, I am speaking in particular of evaluative differences that not only exist across great *chasms* of difference but which also prove so doggedly *persistent* and *intractable* that the moral conflict results in *dehumanization*<sup>4</sup> of those with whom we disagree. As Michelle Maiese notes,

Protracted conflict strains relationships and makes it difficult for parties to recognize that they are part of a shared human community. Such conditions often lead to feelings of intense hatred and alienation among conflicting parties. The more severe the conflict, the more the psychological distance between groups will widen. Eventually, this can result in moral exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

Dehumanizing belief states can ‘make themselves known’ in diverse ways. The specific manifestation of dehumanization I am concerned with in this dissertation is this last concept of *moral exclusion*. While this is often a concept used in the context of genocide, there are many forms of moral exclusion that can occur long before we reach such deadly levels. It is my hope that if we are able to root out these less severe manifestations, we can avoid some such tragic chapters in the future. In particular, I will be offering both explanatory and practical interventions which I believe can rehumanize moral conflict, more on the specifics of this below. I turn now to articulate the precise form of dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion with which I will be concerned.

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<sup>4</sup> I unpack this term below.

<sup>5</sup> Maiese, Michelle. "Dehumanization." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003  
<<https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/dehumanization>>.

### 3 | DEHUMANIZATION AS MORAL EXCLUSION

As Susan Opotow explains the concept, acts of aggression, violence, or other human rights violations are not exclusively the result of underdeveloped norms or norm avoidance, that is, failing to understand or follow moral norms against harming other individuals. Such actions also stem from simply “failing to view others as included within our scope of justice,”<sup>6</sup> i.e. failing to understand one’s victims as the sorts of beings to whom those otherwise accepted norms apply. In other words, moral exclusion names the harmful phenomenon which occurs

when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just.”<sup>7</sup>

Opotow contrasts moral exclusion with moral *inclusion* which she describes as the general perspective that others are entitled to the same rules of justice and fairness as we ourselves are; “they are entitled to a share of community resources, and they are helped, when appropriate, even at considerable cost to oneself.”<sup>8</sup> Moral exclusion rejects or ignores these norms, and “views those excluded as outside the community in which norms apply, and therefore as expendable, undeserving, and eligible targets of exploitation, aggression, and violence.”<sup>9</sup> This does not, however, mean that victims of moral exclusion, especially what I will refer to below as *weak* moral exclusion will be the objects of *hatred*. Indeed, as Opotow notes, “those excluded can be viewed as benign or helpful, but nevertheless inferior,

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<sup>6</sup> Opotow, Susan. "Aggression and Violence," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, eds. M. Deutsch and P.T. Coleman. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 417.

<sup>7</sup> Opotow, Susan. 1990. "Moral Exclusion and Injustice: An Introduction." *Journal of Social Issues* 46 (1): 1–20. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ415956&site=eds-live&scope=site>. p.1

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

undeserving, or simply as property (as children, slaves, and women have been over time).”<sup>10</sup> There are however many cases in which those who are excluded are seen as *threats* to be fought and feared because they are evil, criminal, or heretical. This extreme level of dehumanizing moral exclusion is especially dangerous and difficult to uproot, because of the “severe” (see table below) actions it can be thought to justify (torture, imprisonment, genocide among others). Moreover, because *moral* exclusion is intrinsically seen as *morally* justified; it can accordingly “be seen as deserved, fair, and furthering the greater good.”<sup>11</sup>

It is frequently asserted that one thing almost all genocides have in common is highly effective efforts at dehumanizing “the other.” While it should be noted that scholars are currently complicating this picture—both in terms of what makes dehumanization possible, and the extent to which dehumanization is directly to blame for, or an essential ingredient in the violence associated with periods of genocidal activity and mass atrocity—“dehumanization” is still generally accepted as the “fourth stage” of genocide according to human rights and genocide organizations:

One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group. The majority group is taught to regard the other group as less than human, and even alien to their society. They are indoctrinated to believe that “We are better off without them.”<sup>12</sup>

There are two important points to be made here. First, dehumanization can occur without any instances of animalization, objectification, or hatred. And while it is true that animalization has occurred in many if not most cases of genocide, it is at most an *active*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Stanton Gregory. “The 8 Stages of Genocide.” Genocide Watch, 2003. <http://genocidewatch.net/genocide-2/8-stages-of-genocide/>

ingredient, not a *necessary* one. Indeed, when it comes to moral exclusionary forms of dehumanization in particular, phenomena like animalization are even less necessary for cultivating the belief that “We are better off without them.”

After all, the dehumanization of moral exclusion is not always understood first and foremost as a means for becoming capable of achieving the pre-existing desired end of (genocidal) violence or other harms. Rather, perpetrators understand themselves to be dehumanizing their victims because they deem *them* potentially capable of such atrocity (or some lesser but still horrifying act). Put less hyperbolically, the idea that “we would be better off without them” is *internal* to moral conflict and exclusion; it does not require any extra steps to convince people that a society is “better off without” evil people or criminals. As Michelle Maiese emphasizes,

Those excluded from the scope of morality are typically perceived as...deserving of treatment that would not be acceptable for those included in one's moral community....Moral exclusion reduces restraints against harming or exploiting certain groups of people. In severe cases, dehumanization makes the violation of generally-accepted norms of behavior regarding one's fellow man seem reasonable, or even necessary.<sup>13</sup>

In order to home in on the specific form of dehumanization which I address in this project, I need to first complicate this traditional idea of dehumanization as moral exclusion. Most importantly, I will draw out a distinction between what I would term moral exclusion qua *object*, which is what most scholars focus on, and moral exclusion qua *subject*, which is the issue with which I will be most centrally concerned.

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<sup>13</sup> Maiese, "Dehumanization."

I elaborate this distinction in the table below. However, in order to make sense of this table it is necessary to first elaborate a distinction, which I borrow from Robin Jeshion, concerning weak versus strong dehumanization.

On the weak psychological notion, dehumanizing thought involves regarding others as having lesser standing along a moral dimension, as being unworthy of equal standing or full respect as persons. On the strong psychological notion, the dehumanizing form of thinking involves conceiving of others as creatures that are not human at all, often as creatures that are evil or a contaminating threat, and that need to be wiped out.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that such dehumanization is “weaker” however, by no means indicates that it is *harmless*. There is serious risk of slippery slopes here—“thinking of others as lesser humans slides far too naturally into thinking of them as subhuman”<sup>15</sup>—as well as many other symptoms prior or in addition to mass atrocity that need not reach such horrific heights to pose serious threats. History would also seem to indicate that perpetrators do not even need to think of their victims as fully *subhuman* in order to carry out their projects. Moreover, weak dehumanization is not only a concern insofar as it is “slippery.” Even when weak dehumanization progresses no farther—never devolves into strong dehumanization nor erupts in violence—it still represents a serious threat to individual and societal flourishing.

This distinction between weak and strong senses of dehumanization should itself be differentiated from another set of terms:<sup>16</sup> *mild* and *severe* manifestations of dehumanization.<sup>17</sup> Weak-strong dehumanization, recall, delineates whether it is a case of *dehumanization* (target is considered “merely” as a worse or lesser human, but still human)

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<sup>14</sup> Robin B. Jeshion, “Slurs, Dehumanization, and the Expression of Contempt,” in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Borrowed from Susan Opotow.

<sup>17</sup> Opotow, “Moral Exclusion.”

or what I might refer to as *unhumanization* (target is seen as fundamentally *subhuman*, i.e. not a human in the relevant moral sense). In other words, *weak-strong* articulates a *descriptive assessment* about the victim of dehumanization. *Mild-severe*, by contrast names the extremity of *action* or *treatment* that is justified by those descriptive assessments: i.e. a *normative conclusion* about how the individual in question—the *object* of the dehumanization—can justifiably be treated. I will be complicating these helpful distinctions by defending a third: (dehumanizing) moral exclusion-qua-*subject* versus (dehumanizing) moral exclusion-qua-*object*—which I layout in Table 1 (see below). When I allude in later chapters to “polarization and its dehumanizing effects,” or the “dehumanizing effects of moral conflict” I am referring, shorthand, to the contents of this table broadly speaking, though the project itself will be focused on only parts of it.

I organize my differentiation of dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion-qua-subject from dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion-qua-object across the following categories, which can best be framed as questions. First, what is the specific “Normative Question”<sup>18</sup> for which dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion is the answer; and second, what is the “Descriptive Question” undergirding how one answers that normative question? Third, what is the range (*weak*→*strong*)<sup>19</sup> of available negative, i.e. dehumanizing descriptive assessments available to answer the Descriptive Question; and fourth, what is the range (*mild*→*severe*)<sup>20</sup> of normative conclusions that can be reached on the basis of the descriptive assessment? Finally, I differentiate these two forms of dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion along the

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<sup>18</sup> Thus it is an evaluative question about how one ought to act as opposed to descriptive questions about what is the case. This sense of normative question is separate from what Korsgaard describes as the normative question (see Chapter 3).

<sup>19</sup> Borrowed from Robin Jeshion.

<sup>20</sup> Borrowed from Susan Opatow.

question of what kind of evidence is appealed to as justification in making these Descriptive Assessments (and accordingly reaching the Normative Conclusions); *identity-based* justifications or *moral outrage-based* justifications.

Often, when we think about and condemn dehumanization, we think about it in terms of *identity* justifications, and so the solutions focus on “increasing tolerance” and “overcoming hatred.” We can often, however, ignore dehumanization that is grounded (much more “justifiably”) in moral conflict or outrage. After all, why should we try or even want to overcome moral outrage? Burying, overcoming, or silencing our moral indignations is not virtue, some might reasonably argue, it is moral cowardice or *akrasia*! For this reason, I also highlight the general motives which tend to be associated with each category (e.g. hatred and bigotry, or moral conflict and outrage). As I will lay out below, I am most concerned with the moral conflict/outrage category of dehumanizing moral exclusion qua subject, however it is worth noting that it tends to share many features with the dehumanization of moral exclusion-qua-object. This means that at stake in my own more theoretical philosophical concern with inclusion and exclusion in the phronetic community of moral deliberators<sup>21</sup> is the concrete manifestation of violation, violence, and death. I say this, not to fear monger hyperbolically, but simply as an honest expression of why I take this issue so seriously, and consider it so vitally important.

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<sup>21</sup> By “phronetic community of moral deliberators” I mean both organized and concrete communities like (democratic) political societies but also basic human to human discourse on the nature of the good, values, actions, and interpersonal phronesis in the Aristotelian sense.

## Table 1 | Dehumanization As Moral Exclusion

### MORAL EXCLUSION QUA SUBJECT

- **The Normative Question**
  - How should I treat your moral perspective/beliefs/values? To what extent can you be legitimately included/excluded from individual or collective phronetic practice and/or moral deliberation?
- **The Descriptive Question**
  - What kind of moral deliberation are you willing and/or able to engage in→what treatment do you/your ideas deserve?
- **The Range of Dehumanizing Descriptive Assessments**
  - **Weak:** You are an akratic, or oft-failing, or misguided moral agent; too often mistaken but a good-faith actor.
  - **Strong:** you are fundamentally incapable or even unwilling to engage in good faith moral deliberation; you are a malicious and/or dangerous bad faith actor (not a moral agent in the relevant sense).
- **The Range of Dehumanizing Normative Conclusions**
  - **Mild:** “I can learn nothing from you; I am justified in treating your perspective with contempt, disregard and derision.”
  - **Severe:** “I should actively exclude you from collective phronesis and seek to bar you/your ideas from infiltrating broader society.”
- **Evidence/Justifications**
  - **Identity based:** “you are mistaken/misguided/unable/unwilling to engage in proper phronesis because of an identity which I/you/society has ascribed to you.” → you deserve exclusion.
    - i. **Motives:** Hatred, revulsion, condescension/superiority
    - ii. **Targets/victims:**
      - **Weak:** Women, children, slaves
      - **Strong:** religious or political identity
  - **Moral Conflict:** Your values, or beliefs (maybe actions) demonstrate that you are incapable or unwilling to engage in moral deliberation → you are unfit for inclusion in collective moral deliberation.
    - i. **Type of Outrage:** axio-doxastic (maybe crimes)
    - ii. **Motives:** Moral outrage, fear, justice, deterrence or protection
    - iii. **Sample Targets/victims:**
      - **Weak:** Republican voters under Bush/Obama
      - **Strong:** Republican voters under Trump

### MORAL EXCLUSION QUA OBJECT

- **The Normative Question**
  - How should this person be treated; What can be justifiably be done to them?
- **The Descriptive Question**
  - What are they capable of feeling/suffering→what do they deserve (to feel/suffer)?
- **The Range of Dehumanizing Descriptive Assessments**
  - **Weak:** They are a worse/lesser human being.
  - **Strong:** They are not a human being (in whatever relevant sense).
- **The Range of Dehumanizing Normative Conclusions**
  - **Mild:** I will allow/am justified in allowing, disregarding or failing to notice certain things being done to them.
  - **Severe:** I can do things to them that I cannot do to (other) human beings, up to and including torture and execution.
- **Evidence/Justifications**
  - **Identity based:** The individual(s) is undeserving of certain standards of treatment/human rights because of an identity which I/the individual/society has ascribed to them.
    - i. **Motives:** Hatred, revulsion, condescension/superiority
    - ii. **Targets/victims:**
      - **Weak:** Slave-status, Race, or Gender
      - **Strong:** Slave-status, Race, or Gender
  - **Moral Conflict:** Your actions/”crimes” (maybe beliefs/values) make you a worse/not human → you are undeserving of human rights protection/human treatment.
    - i. **Type of Outrage:** actions/crimes (maybe axio-doxastic)
    - ii. **Motives:** Moral outrage, fear, justice, deterrence
    - iii. **Sample Targets/victims:**
      - **Weak:** less extreme moral/legal criminals, collateral damage (e.g. Palestinians per Israel)
      - **Strong:** enemies, terrorists, egregious moral/legal criminals (e.g. Hamas per Israel)

## 4 | ELABORATION OF THE TABLE

As I alluded to above, dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion (qua object) tends to focus on the normative question of what treatment of a person (or group) is justified, and thus descriptive claims about what the individual is capable of feeling and suffering, as well as what such an individual deserves (to suffer). By contrast, the moral-exclusion-qua-subject that I am primarily concerned with asks a more specific normative question of how one ought to treat the moral beliefs and values of an individual (or group) and how included or excluded they (accordingly) deserve<sup>22</sup> to be with regard to collective moral deliberation (at any scale from two individuals, to the country, or even the world). The descriptive question which must be answered first, is accordingly a question specifically about what quality or level of practical reason the individual is capable of, and willing to engage in.

As mentioned earlier, Robin Jeshion's weak-strong distinction which I borrowed for charting the scope of my own concept of 'possible descriptive assessments' typically ranges from the weak assessment that you are a lesser or worse (but still human) human being to the strong claim that you are *not* in fact a human being (what I distinguish as *unhumanization*, rather than "mere" *dehumanization*). We might think of women as classic victims of weak dehumanization and slaves for the second, strong category, however, these could of course both reasonably be disputed. When it comes to moral outrage dehumanization, it is conceivable that there could be potentially justifiable reasons for assigning an individual to either category. For instance one *might* conceivably argue that date-rapists ought to go in the weak category and genocidal maniacs in the strong. I will not

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<sup>22</sup> "Desert" is admittedly a bit of a straddler between normative and descriptive. It is in some sense a description with normative import. For this situation, however, it belongs in the descriptive category because it is a question that must be determined before we can answer the normative question.

be weighing in on these specifics here, it is simply worth noting that none of these categories are necessarily unacceptable tout court,<sup>23</sup> the concern lies in mistaken ascriptions of each assessment (see earlier point about women and slaves). Relatedly, the weak and strong assessments on the qua-subject side could also have their justifiable designees (think of toddlers for weak and incorrigible trolls for strong). However, it is a main contention of this project that we are currently relegating far too many individuals into the strong compartment because of how we think about perception, moral reason, and objectivity. More on that in a moment. As far as *unacceptable* real-life examples go, we might think of women in the weak category (especially pre-suffrage) and Jews, protestants or other heretics in the strong category.

The range of dehumanizing normative conclusions from mild to severe should be more or less intuitive. While I have applied the concept to my own idea of a ‘normative conclusion’, Susan Opatow originally applied it to moral exclusion broadly construed:

Moral exclusion can be mild or severe. Severe instances include violations of human rights, political repression, religious inquisitions, slavery, and genocide. The person or group excluded (“the other”) is perceived as a plague or threat, and harm doing can take such extreme forms as torture and death. Milder instances of moral exclusion occur when we fail to recognize and deal with undeserved suffering and deprivation.<sup>24</sup>

There is accordingly a loose connection with activity and passivity when it comes to this mild to severe spectrum—on Opatow’s moral-exclusion-qua-object version of the spectrum—which does not quite map onto my own version of the spectrum for moral-exclusion-qua-subject. On this left side, I chart the progression from mild to severe in terms of a distinction between the view that “I can learn nothing from you; I am justified in treating your perspect

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<sup>23</sup> This will become important when we think about avoiding relativism later on.

<sup>24</sup> Opatow, “Moral Exclusion.”

with contempt, disregard and derision” (mild and in some sense a failure of recognition) versus the more severe view that “I should actively exclude you from collective phronesis and seek to bar you/your ideas from infiltrating broader society.” There is still an important passive-active correlation here, but the passive version involves a different kind of inaction which is not directly connected with undeserved suffering.

Finally, I differentiate moral-exclusion-qua-object from moral-exclusion-qua-subject in terms of the *justificatory evidence* that is thought to support or justify the dehumanization in question. In particular, I distinguish identity-based justifications from moral conflict or outrage justifications. In terms of *identity based* justifications for moral-exclusion-qua-object we can think of Jews being slaughtered for being Jews or Tutsi being slaughtered for being Tutsi (both strong and severe examples) or the treatment of African Americans in the Jim Crow south (varying across *weaker to stronger* and mild to severe). The moral outrage justification category, by contrast, appeals to descriptions of what the person believes, values, or has done as justification for moral exclusion (qua-object); think of parolees being forced to wear ankle monitors (*weaker and more mild*); or terrorists being tortured and executed (*stronger and more severe*); or again Jews slaughtered as a response to blood libel charges. This last example raises a point worth noting: a single genocidal context can rather easily accommodate both identity-based and moral conflict/outrage-based moral exclusion. In fact, because of the relative superiority of moral outrage in terms of justificatory effectiveness, perpetrators who wish to recruit assistance and support will often seek to pass off what is identity/hate based exclusion as in fact moral conflict/outrage exclusion, as was at least often the case with the Nazis. Thus these distinctions are not intended to be perfectly circumscribed and airtight. As another example, sometimes individual members of a group

are targeted because some other individual(s) “in” that group did indeed commit a heinous act, as was not the case with blood libels. As just one example, one can think of the retributive massacres perpetrated against often unassociated native American tribes in Gold-rush era California, and elsewhere, when a white woman was raped or a white man murdered.<sup>25</sup> In such cases the line between identity and moral conflict based exclusion is again blurred.

It is also not the case that weak/strong dehumanization always aligns with mild/severe normative conclusions respectively. However, disagreement as to the acceptability of severe mistreatment does tend to indicate a divergence of weaker/stronger descriptive assessment as well. One can think, for instance, of undocumented immigrants and various possibilities of slapping an ankle monitor on them while they await due process, throwing them in jail, and installing lethal razor barriers in the border river. The first two options indeed rely on a weak (but still present) dehumanization, however, support of the last option would seem to indicate strong dehumanization (perhaps veritable *unhumanization*) of the immigrants in question. In both cases, however, the actions are “justified” by some varying level of moral indignation or outrage; the individual’s actions (crossing the border illegally) make them deserving of dehumanizing treatment. However, one could also argue, and it may be the case, that identity can inflect the type and quantity of moral outrage at something like illegal immigration or suffering in war. Just think about the different media treatments (and immigration policies) toward, say, Ukrainians in the wake of Putin’s invasion versus Syrians during their civil war or the Yemeni during theirs.

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<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Madley, Benjamin. *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

The previous examples have all been on the (right hand) side of more traditional moral-exclusion-qua-object. However, analogous distinctions can be made in terms of moral-exclusion-qua-subject. Here too, there can be identity-based justifications for moral exclusion (from the community of moral deliberators). Children, or women, or religious minorities being denied the right to vote or serve in the government could be legally-enshrined versions of such exclusion on the basis of identity that could be considered to fall across the weak→strong, and mild→ severe spectrums. Finding out that someone “is a scientologist” and then assuming the right to ignore and mock anything they might have to say about anything else could be another identity-based form of weak and mild identity justified exclusion-qua-subject. Here, again, however, the identity basis of this “justification” is not hermetically sealed. Presumably it is specific *beliefs* that we associate with scientologists that lead us to exclude them mildly (and based on weak dehumanization), rather than just general distaste for scientologists as such.

Another way in which dehumanizing moral exclusion-qua-subject differs from dehumanizing moral exclusion-qua-object is the way in which the moral conflict/outrage category on this side tends to focus on axio-doxastic<sup>26</sup> malfeasance rather than actions or crimes committed. That is, someone’s values and beliefs are what tend to ground the moral outrage and accordingly determine what they “deserve.” Here again, however, the lines are not so sharp because the repugnant belief can be manifest in *actions* or speech *acts*, like advocating for something or voting for someone. The archetype of the (enthusiastic) Trump voter, with whom I began this chapter, members of the MAGA faithful are a recent and especially obvious example of such targets, however so-called “antivaxxers” are another

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<sup>26</sup> Relating to values and beliefs.

recently emerging target for dehumanizing moral exclusion-qua-subject wherein axio-doxastic (not criminal) features of an individual have motivated and been thought by many to justify such dehumanization. In both cases there is a blurred line between (MAGA/anti-vaxx) belief and action (in the form of voting or refusing to be vaccinated).<sup>27</sup>

Whereas for moral exclusion-qua-*object* the dehumanizing treatment motivated by moral outrage is often framed in terms of crime and punishment (or deterring crime), for axio-doxastic outrage-motivated exclusion-qua-*subject* it is somewhat less direct of a connection. Here, repugnant beliefs, when they are persistent, are understood to indicate that the individual “must be” wholly *unable or unwilling* to engage in proper practical reason and collective human moral deliberation; that the agent “must” be phronetically incompetent (unable to perceive or deliberate well), a bad faith troll, or some combination thereof. While the table as a whole can be understood as the project’s motivational stakes, it is this “logical” leap—from “existence of moral conflict” to moral exclusion-qua-subject on the justificatory basis of these “must be” assumptions concerning the “descriptive assessments” category—that constitutes my project’s central target for intervention, and necessitates the epistemic emphasis of those interventions.

For while it may at first appear to be a rather small leap to worry about, it is this overlooked move from disagreement (moral conflict) → defect (dehumanizing *descriptive assessment*) → moral exclusion-qua-subject (dehumanizing *normative conclusion*) which renders our moral polarization so caustic (because dehumanizing-qua subject) and

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<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 5 I will highlight how there is already evidence that the moral exclusion of anti-vaxxers has not been limited to exclusion-qua-subject but has already trickled down in admittedly isolated instances into a surprising (because rarer) strong-mild dehumanization. See bug zapper meme which combines strong dehumanization assessment (in the form of animalization) with a passive rather than active normative conclusion.

dangerous (insofar as it enables moral exclusion qua-*object*. The next section will unpack this emphasis and why it calls for a specifically epistemic approach: the main thesis of this dissertation is that there are interventions to be made in how we understand perception, practical rationality, and objectivity that can better enable us to avoid more of these problematically dehumanizing “leaps” that lead to moral exclusion-qua-subject. By complicating our understanding of perception, rationality, and objectivity, I will argue, we can de-automate the jump from disagreement (moral conflict) to dehumanization (moral exclusion), and thereby *rehumanize* our moral conflicts and their effects, *without* undermining justifiable moral outrage when called for.<sup>28</sup>

## 5 | THE FOCUS FOR THIS PROJECT

Throughout the rest of this dissertation I refer to the ideas represented by this table in its entirety as “polarization and its dehumanizing effects,” or “the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict.” However, the genre of dehumanization that I am particularly focused on in this project is that of axio-doxastically justified moral exclusion qua subject that in turn is used to justify (at least somewhat) strong descriptive dehumanization and mild to severe normative conclusions. In cases such as these, the existence of the disagreement itself engenders its own dehumanization because we take the other to be external to—a non-member of—the community of capable and good faith (able and willing) moral deliberators. This particular axio-doxastically motivated genre of dehumanizing impulses are particularly immune to the “tolerance” and “overcoming hatred” approaches described above, because

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<sup>28</sup> I.e. without relenting to relativism: I want to challenge the leap from moral outrage to dehumanization, not the legitimacy moral outrage itself.

tolerance of what we take to be moral evil, understandably feels like moral failure or cowardice. We therefore need an alternative approach to this specific breed of dehumanization: one that targets the causal or justificatory link between the *mere existence of moral conflict and outrage* and the *strong descriptive assessment*.<sup>29</sup> I will sometimes refer to this issue as the link or slide between disagreement and defect which I am aiming to disrupt.

This emphasis on the left-hand side of the table, however, is not meant to imply that I am unconcerned with the right-hand side. Indeed, one of the reasons I am so concerned with moral exclusion-qua-subject is that I see it as an underappreciated and overlooked precursor and slippery slope into the right-hand side. It should go without saying that moral exclusion-qua-subject and moral-exclusion-qua-object are phenomena that too frequently go hand in hand. Even if we want to reject slippery slope arguments about what this sort of axio-doxastically justified moral exclusion-qua-subject can lead to, however, we should still be worried about its potential effects insofar as well-functioning societies rely on human beings trusting, caring about, and valuing one another, and thereby identifying with one another as collaborators in a shared moral-political project. Indeed, given how extensively and frequently the mere existence of other human beings can interfere with our own self-oriented flourishing, well-functioning societies require a rather high bar of fellow feeling. In asking why moral-exclusion-qua-subject should matter, I am not exclusively concerned with the type of dehumanization which can motivate mass atrocity and violence. I am also

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<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that the issue of identity will still play a central role throughout, however, I will be concerned with practical identity, i.e. identity that shapes axio-doxastic profiles and thus generates specifically moral conflict (as opposed to straightforward bigotry and xenophobia). So while I am focusing on the axio-doxastic outrage sub-category I am not ignoring identity and its role.

concerned with the more garden-variety dehumanization that simply nibbles away at the corners of ideal social collaboration of this kind. As I emphasized earlier, moral conflict is not just a problem insofar as we disagree about what is true or good, it has to do with what that disagreement represents and implies to us about the other person. In other words, moral conflict is not just damaging because we disagree about moral truths and policy questions. It is damaging because the existence of this level of disagreement would seem to imply that “the other” is beyond the reach of purposeful discourse; that conversational engagement is futile.

For this reason, I do emphasize the “strong” version of the Descriptive Assessment because of its implicit claim that the “other” must either be more or less fully *unable* or *unwilling* to “see the good” that we see; that is, to look at the world and phronetically<sup>30</sup> make their way to our (“correct”) moral view. This will be an important tension that I return to throughout the following chapters. If the individual is *unwilling* to reach our normative conclusion, they “must be” in some way malicious and (therefore) undeserving of inclusion in our moral community. If they are by contrast, simply *unable* to reason their way to our conclusions, this too has dehumanizing implications (as the table indicates): such individuals are still beyond “saving,” beyond the reach of dialogue, and potentially, also not fit for equal footing or inclusion in the community as full moral subjects. Under such circumstances, the supposed virtues of “tolerance” and “overcoming hatred” understandably come to be seen as either irrelevant or as akratic cases of moral cowardice. Instead of these approaches—and in order to target the causal or justificatory link between the *mere existence of moral conflict and outrage* and the *strong descriptive assessment*—I will be proposing what I take to be an

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<sup>30</sup> I.e. “practically reason” their way.

overlooked, as of yet untapped intervention, one which takes a decidedly epistemic approach concerning our understandings of perception, rationality, objectivity, and truth, rather than one of “tolerance” and “overcoming hatred”. In order to lay the groundwork for why and how an *epistemic* intervention could be helpful with an issue like moral exclusion qua subject, I need to first turn to an underlying *metaethical* challenge raised by moral conflict, which “encourages” dehumanization in multiple ways. This metaethical challenge is central to my proposed interventions for disrupting the slide from existence-of-moral-conflict/disagreement → dehumanization and why this intervention will be fundamentally epistemological in orientation.

## 6 | THE METAETHICAL CHALLENGE

Traditionally, the metaethical options for accounting for moral disagreements (and for explaining the normativity of moral values generally) have taken one of two main categories of approach. The first, what I will refer to as the “dogmatic” category, involves some version of assuming, as a matter of course, that “I” or “my group” is “correct” and that those who disagree are simply “wrong.” We see this often with “religious” approaches, however, it is not by any means limited to them. A plethora of contemporary “secular”, and even self-described “liberal” arguments, are often guilty of the same.<sup>31</sup> There are many forms of this first family of approaches, including everything from Daniel Dennett style new-atheists, to fundamentalist religious sects, and everything in between. The main commonality for members of this first group, is their tendency to rely, though often unconsciously, on some

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<sup>31</sup> By “self-described” liberal positions I am referring to those of the sort that argue for tolerance, freedom, and self expression while simultaneously barring concrete instances of free self expression that they disagree with. A great example of this is the debate around women wearing head coverings and/or the burka on public beaches in France.

kind of (correspondence) realist epistemology concerning moral truth wherein the existence of *disagreement* necessarily signifies the existence of *error*.<sup>32</sup> This error then needs its own explanation, and if the disagreement persists, that is, if the dogmatic realist in question is unable to (quickly) convince the erring party of their mistake, there are not many courses of action remaining for them except to assume that this erring individual is either *unwilling* or *unable* (recall from the table above) to properly engage in this very important human task of discerning right from wrong. I will be intervening on this progression in the chapters which follow. However, we need *not* refer all the way back to my previous table to understand how and why this conclusion of “unwilling or unable” might motivate or justify all manner of dehumanizing attitudes or even treatments. Nevertheless such experiences certainly have the capacity to fuel in the dogmatic realist exactly the kind of moral outrage which I highlighted therein.

If the first category could be termed the dogmatic (and realist) metaethical stance, the other family of approaches could be categorized as relativist with correspondingly less-realist or even anti-realist moral epistemologies. It is important to note, however, that this cluster includes not only mild and radical forms of philosophical skepticism, but also more nuanced, though similarly unsatisfactory approaches like emotivism<sup>33</sup>, non-cognitivism<sup>34</sup>, subjectivism<sup>35</sup>, expressivism<sup>36</sup>, etc. Unlike the first category, these frameworks do not necessarily view the existence of disagreement as proof of defect or *error*, but they accomplish this by either renegotiating what it even means for a moral claim to count as true

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<sup>32</sup> More on this in Chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding ethical and value judgments as merely expressions of attitudes/feelings, not truth claims.

<sup>34</sup> The view that moral claims have no truth conditions.

<sup>35</sup> The position that moral claims do express truth claims but that the truth or falsity depends on none other than the attitudes of persons.

<sup>36</sup> The stance that moral judgments express evaluative attitudes, not matters of fact.

(and often sneaking some moral realism in the back door as I will show in Chapter 2), or by giving up on such an epistemic feature altogether. This is what renders these projects unsatisfactory, but also, potentially, dehumanizing. Though many have tried—indeed I will explore two of the most promising attempts in the following chapter—these frameworks are unable to satisfactorily fend off *radically dehumanizing* revaluations of value. In other words, while they can avoid the “unable or unwilling” flavors of dehumanization associated with the dogmatists, they cannot ensure that their own metaethical frameworks would not enable and even justify truly horrific dehumanizing actions. Put differently, while the skeptical/relativist family of metaethical frameworks can pride themselves on avoiding the paternalistic dehumanizing impulses of the dogmatists, they accomplish this by simply undermining the possibility for *legitimate* moral outrage and with it the ability to satisfactorily condemn any axio-doxastic positions or the various dehumanizing *actions* associated with each side of the table.

If moral claims are just opinions or feelings then what acts—no matter how dehumanizing—would actually be forbidden or indefensible? I will be engaging, in depth, with three attempts to bridge this metaethical divide in the following two chapters where I will demonstrate how the otherwise promising projects of Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout still fail, despite the best of intentions, to preserve a kind of moral realism (such that heinous acts cannot be redescribed) while at the same time avoiding the dehumanizing paternalism and moral outrage of the dogmatists. I will then be arguing (in Chapter 3) that Christine Korsgaard’s metaethical framework can succeed in some important areas where the first two fail. Nevertheless, a few remaining concerns which I raise against her system will serve as a springboard into the moral epistemic contributions of this project.

My central, overarching thesis consists in the contention that a key reason why the existence of moral conflict and outrage can so easily be used to justify the dehumanizing assessments of the other as unable or unwilling is because we are working with a reductive understanding of perception, a mechanistic understanding of rationality, and an aperspectival understanding of objectivity. Specifically, these reductive conceptions encourage the slide from “existence of moral conflict” to the dehumanizing Descriptive Assessments and Normative Conclusions on the left side of the table. I will be working out and critiquing each of these phenomena in depth over the next few chapters, but for now it suffices to name them as my culprits. Ultimately, I will argue that by reconceiving how we think about these concepts (perception, rationality, objectivity, and also identity) we can rehumanize our moral conflicts by disrupting the tempting fast track from moral outrage to moral exclusion—without *sacrificing* the possibility of legitimate moral outrage in the process. Before diving into a full chapter-by-chapter roadmap for the project as a whole, however, I want to make a brief note about the particularly religious nature of this religious ethics problem and project.

## **7 | THE OFT-FAVORED SCAPEGOAT**

There are a few central reasons why religions and ‘the religious’ are often accused of being centrally to blame for the harms of moral conflict. As I mentioned above, religious moral systems traditionally tend to take some version of the dogmatic approach, and as a result, they also tend to be blamed for much of the dehumanizing and harmful effects of disagreement. This can play out in a number of ways. For example, religions are often fairly or unfairly said to view non-followers as unsaved, less-than-humans or insofar as the non-religious see the religious as the exclusive culprits of especially zealous and/or excessive

moral outrage and an inability to “live and let live.” Additionally, in terms of the concepts from my original table, critics of religion and religious persons will often refer in one way or another to the ways in which “the religious” seem to combine the “identity” motives with the “moral outrage” motives; thereby implicitly endorsing a particularly caustic potential for dehumanization in its adherents. That is, they may see a heretical faith identity itself as cause for moral outrage, as opposed to limiting their outrage to specific moral beliefs they may also find repugnant. While the “magnitude” of dehumanization in such cases may not exactly be doubled, the fact that “the religious” are claimed to (at least sometimes) have such explicit identitarian understandings of their moral outrage in turn brands them as particularly likely to engage in moral exclusion qua *object and subject*.

The harmful potential of this bivalent dehumanization indeed constitutes a fearsome specter. However, it should go without saying that many of the historical instances wherein such identity-moral outrage connections have erupted into genocidal action, the perpetrators did not often understand themselves to be operating as a religious group or on the basis of religious identity. Class, ethnicity, or political affiliation are these days far more often the critical identity markers that call for genocidal solutions; think of Rwanda, Cambodia, Stalin’s *Holodomor* or *the Great Terror*. In cases when the targets were a religious minority (think of Christians in Armenia or Jews in the Shoah) the perpetrators’ leadership arguably did not generally understand themselves to be engaged in a religiously motivated “war” even if they did make use of such ideas in their foot soldiers. In any case, while the moral outrage-identity combination is often a lethal one, especially insofar as it can “justify” mass destruction rather than case by case adjudication, it is not exclusively a temptation or risk for “the religious.” Indeed, in the post-Trump era here in the United States, political

affiliation has gained new potential for exactly this dangerous combination of identity and moral outrage that simultaneously makes the unjustifiable move of lumping millions of individuals under the same dehumanizing identity umbrella, while simultaneously “justifying” such moves on the solid high ground of moral outrage.

This political dehumanization occurs on both sides of the red-blue color line. As Aaron Blake noted in an article for the Washington Post in May of 2020, after the Minneapolis police killed George Floyd and violent protests broke out, Trump Tweeted "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," and "The only good Democrat is a dead Democrat."<sup>37</sup> Note how moral outrage combines with identity language here (eliding the two Evidence/Justifications subcategories from my table. But democrats are not innocent on this front either). As Alexander Theodoridis and James Martherus demonstrate in an earlier article for the Washington Post, "Trump is not the only one who calls opponents ‘animals.’ Democrats and Republicans do it to each other":

When James Hodgkinson opened fire on congressional Republicans while they practiced for the Congressional Baseball Game for Charity, injuring four people before Capitol Police shot and killed him. Hodgkinson had previously posted a series of quotes critical of President Trump along with the caption, "Trump is a selfish inhuman with delusions of grandeur."<sup>38</sup>

Lest you count Hodgkinson off as an exception, Theodoridis and Martherus share findings from their own research where participants were asked to rate members of the opposing

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<sup>37</sup> Aaron Blake. "'The only good Democrat is a dead Democrat.' 'When the looting starts, the shooting starts.' Twice in 25 hours, Trump tweets conspicuous allusions to violence." The Washington Post. May 29, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/28/trump-retweets-video-saying-only-good-democrat-is-dead-democrat/> Accessed March 20, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Theodoridis and James Martherus. "Trump is not the only one who calls opponents ‘animals.’ Democrats and Republicans do it to each other." The Washington Post. May 21, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/21/trump-isnt-the-only-one-who-calls-opponents-animals-democrats-and-republicans-do-it-to-each-other/>. Accessed June 29, 2020.

party on a scale from 0-100, wherein 0 had an image of an ape and 100 had a modern human with various neanderthal specimens along the spectrum, “Seventy-seven percent of our respondents rated their political opponents as less evolved...Respondents who considered themselves strong partisans were more likely to dehumanize opposing partisans, and Republicans and Democrats were equally likely to dehumanize their opponents.”<sup>39</sup>

An additional reason why it often appears intuitive to blame religions and the religious for the problems of intolerance and dehumanization is because of their association with particularly non-interrogable moral epistemologies<sup>40</sup> and uninterrogable epistemic malpractice.<sup>41</sup> Anyone who does not endorse their “arbitrary” epistemic norms, so the accusation goes, is an unwelcome and unequal interlocutor (moral exclusion qua subject). In the terminology of my dehumanization table, they will inevitably make weak or strong dehumanizing assessments of individuals outside their tradition and therefore reach mild or severe dehumanizing normative conclusions as to how to treat those individuals.

The irony, of course, is that “the religious” are, as a result of their so-called arbitrary epistemologies, *also* often morally excluded-qua-*subject* from legitimate standing in communal moral deliberation because they are considered to be uniquely *unwilling* and perhaps even *unable* to engage in epistemically virtuous moral deliberation (descriptive dehumanization). This in turn can justify all sorts of manifestations of moral-exclusion-qua-subject against the religious. In other words, as with democrats and republicans, the dehumanization goes both ways. Insofar as they may be uniquely prone *to dehumanize*, they may be uniquely situated to *be dehumanized*. Thus across the board there is a dangerous

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<sup>39</sup> Theodoridis and Martherus. “Trump is not the only one”

<sup>40</sup> For example the caricature that (a thing is good because God, or this book says so).

<sup>41</sup> Ignoring “evidence”, relying on (blind) faith etc.

feedback loop wherein (epistemic) dehumanization begets epistemic dehumanization. Pushing back against this blame game is one of the central, albeit often implicit rather than explicit, aims of this dissertation. While the religious implications of my moral-epistemic interventions by necessity move to the background as I dig into the philosophical weeds, they constitute a central motivation for this project as a whole. While many of my interlocutors are not religious ethicists, my constructive proposals have important implications for religious practice and identity which I return to in Chapter 7. The argument as a whole will proceed as follows.

## 8 | ROAD MAP

To synthesize the dense content of this first Chapter, allow me to reiterate the core building blocks of this dissertation as follows. The **motivating problem** for my project consists in the way in which moral conflict i.e. polarized moral disagreement can lead to or even be used to “justify” varying levels of dehumanization-qua-subject. Because dehumanization-qua-subject can in turn enable a slide into dehumanization qua object, at **stake** in this project is thus the relative health and cohesion of our moral communities as well as the possibility of avoiding the darker threats of violence on an individual or mass scale (the right side of the table). My **critical diagnosis** is that by overcoming what I refer to as the metaethical divide (see Chapter 2 and 3) and even more importantly, by reconceptualizing our understandings of perception, rationality, objectivity, and identity (see Chapters 4 and 5) we can disrupt the pathway from existence-of-moral-conflict → the dehumanizing belief that the person with whom we disagree “must” be either unable or unwilling to properly morally deliberate (and thus unworthy of inclusion in collective moral deliberation). My **constructive proposal**

makes both an explanatory (metaethical and moral epistemic) contribution (Chapter 6) as well as a practical, action-guiding one (Chapter 7).

I begin Chapter 2 with an exploration of two very promising but ultimately failed attempts to bridge the aforementioned metaethical divide: Richard Rorty's *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity* and Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. With this further understanding of the challenge in hand, I turn to an exploration (and advocacy) of metaethical constructivism generally and Christine Korsgaard's constructivism specifically, as a promising third option. After discussing both her Kantian and Aristotelian influences, I lay out the central features of her constructivist framework including the grounding "normative question," reflective self-consciousness, scrutiny and endorsement, her particular concept of identity and practical identities, humanity, and agency. I then conclude with a reconstruction of her so-called "constitutional model" before turning to an analysis of her framework's strengths and, importantly, the weaknesses which my later interventions can help to overcome.

In Chapter 3, I begin with the impulse in ethics toward what Quill Kukla describes as "impersonalist" approaches which try to "solve" the problem of moral conflict, and moral deliberation generally, by removing "the self" as far away from those processes of moral reflection and deliberation as possible. These impulses are, I argue, at least in part, symptoms of a pervasive but problematically reductive, not to mention historically contingent, understanding of objectivity; what intellectual historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison helpfully describe as *aperspectival* objectivity, and its relationship to Truth. Such impulses are also in an interesting way dehumanizing, insofar as they seek to remove the human as much as possible from human knowledge practice and moral deliberation. The work of

Daston and Galison serves to complicate our understanding of objectivity by first showing how many different types of objectivity and epistemic teloi there have been generally throughout even recent history—in even the “hardest” of the sciences—as well as how certain more reductive understandings of perception, objectivity, and rationality have come to somewhat blot out the others. It is this *aperspectival* understanding of objectivity and the reductively *mechanical* picture of perception and rationality that goes with it, which I argue are at least in part to blame for Korsgaard’s challenges, and lie at the heart of the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict generally (the slide from existence of disagreement→assumed defect).

My interventions on both Korsgaardian metaethics (Chapter 3) and the reductive, mechanistic epistemology of our social imaginary (Chapter 4) centers around autopoietic and dynamically co-enactive understandings of perception, rationality, identity, and objectivity. In Chapter 5, I therefore begin the work of explaining what this means by laying out the key tenets of enactive cognitive science, including autopoiesis, the dynamic co-emergence of self and world, adaptivity, and sensemaking as laid out by Evan Thompson. I then turn to the ideas of enactive agency and perception as well as the necessarily embodied and embedded nature of our (moral) epistemic practice. With these epistemological interventions in hand, Chapters 6 and 7 put forward my own constructive proposals (explanatory and action-guiding, respectively).

In Chapter 6, I argue that the enactive approach to cognition provides key epistemological resources for improving upon Korsgaard's framework, whereby it can overcome the critiques of Chapter 3 and serve as a metaethical system (and complementing moral epistemology) that can accommodate moral outrage without equal parts

(dehumanizing) moral exclusion. After highlighting some key ways in which Korsgaard's philosophical impulses are in fact already substantively *supported* by the central tenets of enactive cognitive science, I then highlight key ways in which enactive insights provide helpful pushback to the mechanical, aperspectival, and impersonalist impulses I took on in Chapter 4. I turn finally to the specific enactivist epistemic interventions I propose to integrate with Korsgaard's metaethics. This work culminates with my introduction of the twin concepts of "phronetic fingerprint" and "endaptive umwelt," before articulating a full elaboration of how all of these pieces work together to constitute what I am terming *Enactive Constructivism*. I conclude the chapter with an assessment of the extent to which *Enactive Constructivism* can overcome the shortcomings in Korsgaard's constructivism, which I highlighted back in Chapter 3.

Having finally elaborated the conceptual contribution of *Enactive Constructivism* in Chapter 6, I turn in my final Chapter 7 to a practical (action-guiding) contribution: the particular moral-epistemic virtues which I propose as antidotes to the concerns around disagreement and dehumanization that motivate this project as a whole. I refer to these as virtues in the Aristotelian sense of purposive dispositions: cultivable orientations to the world that take effort but which also enable us to maximize human flourishing (of ourselves and others). To reiterate, the scholarly contributions of this dissertation can thus be understood as both *explanatory* or *conceptual*, (the epistemic piece of the project) as well as action-guiding or practical (the concrete, virtue aspect of the project). Both pieces, however, can be understood as *rehumanizing* the phenomenon of moral conflict. I now turn to the metaethical legwork required for this project.

# Chapter 2: Attempting to Bridge the Metaethical Divide

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

As explained in the introductory chapter, I aim in this dissertation to put forward a moral epistemology that I hope can help to counteract some of the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict and exclusion. Too often I see contemporary theorists of moral epistemology and disagreement putting forward appealing but ultimately structurally precarious solutions because they do not want to deal with the messiness of metaethics. However, this more metaphysical side of moral theory is as necessary as it is difficult. This chapter, accordingly, has a double purpose: (1) to situate my own work within the religious ethics discipline, and (2) to lay the necessary groundwork for my endorsement of Christine Korsgaard's metaethical constructivism as a third way out of the dissatisfactory and dehumanizing metaethical dichotomy of dogmatists and relativists in Chapter 3. This chapter will first seek to provide a disciplinary lay of the land concerning how ethicists have tried and failed in various informative ways to articulate a metaethical system that does not lean on various self-defeating forms of correspondence/substance<sup>1</sup> realism. This foundational legwork will also enable me to zero in on what a (more) desirable framework would achieve.

What, then, is this issue of correspondence realism? One of the most slippery

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<sup>1</sup> Stout and Rorty are seeking to avoid correspondence realism, Korsgaard explicitly describes her foil as substance realism. The two foils are similar enough to justify cross-comparison of these thinkers.

problems in meta-ethics is the question of how to ground moral norms without relying upon epistemic correspondence-type theories regarding what it means to assert that something is true. With empirical claims such as “it is raining,” it is relatively straightforward to think about how to verify or falsify a given statement. There is an empirical state of affairs to which the statement either does or does not “match up.” With axiological claims—that is normative claims, or claims of (moral) value—there is no agreed upon analogue for “verification.” To what empirical state of affairs could such claims correspond, or fail to correspond?<sup>2</sup> Religion and her God(s) have historically served as a crucial grounding for such value claims by providing a metaphysical picture of the universe or reality as *already* imbued with normative significance. With the spiritual agnosticism that now seems to drench our psyches and the religious polyphonies that pervade our societies, such solutions are no longer philosophically satisfying or pragmatically sufficient for confronting the epistemic and ethical challenges of the moment. I will use the work of two philosophers on this problem—Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*<sup>3</sup>, and Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*<sup>4</sup>—to elaborate the deep challenges posed by this problem, as well as why Christine Korsgaard’s solution should be understood as a particularly promising approach to dealing with the various challenges discussed in Chapter 1.

While many authors and texts engage with this problem, I have chosen Stout and Rorty as my foils for a few reasons. For one, they share enough substantive common ground in their central ethico-epistemic concerns and distinctly pragmatic approaches<sup>5</sup> to make

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<sup>2</sup> The verification and falsification debates in theology deal with this question as well.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Stout. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that while I share some common ground and concerns with pragmatists, I would not go so far as to say that the position I will ultimately be defending is itself a form of pragmatism.

comparison possible and justified, while still being dissimilar enough to make that conversation productive. For example, while they both see pluralism, in some form, as highlighting the urgency of this question; Rorty emphasizes the contextual, contingent nature of our moral disagreements *across* time and place, while Stout focuses on the *contemporaneous disagreements* which coexist within individual democratic societies, threatening their deliberative cohesion and structural integrity. These different foci enable me to deal with the challenge more completely by addressing the problem of pluralism on *both* of these axes. Additionally, while Stout is dealing directly with conflicts between the religious and “secular” Rorty is simply dealing with relativism on the whole. This enables me to round out my argument which is concerned with the dehumanizing moral exclusion which occurs in the contexts of both religious and non-religious conflicts. Finally, because their respective shortcomings also do not significantly overlap, they are consequently able to serve as uniquely productive foils to Christine Korsgaard.

## 2 | JEFFREY STOUT

### 2.i | Stout’s “Ethics Without Metaphysics”

I turn first to Jeffrey Stout’s attempt at bridging the meta-ethical divide in *Democracy and Tradition*. In broadest strokes, his argument in the text as a whole explores the role that religion and religious language can and should play in how modern democratic citizens reason with one another in the public sphere. He advocates for a middle path between those who would have all god-talk and religion banished from democratic dialogue and those who see such secularizing attempts as the surefire path to utter moral bankruptcy as a society. Part 1 contextualizes the rest of the conversation, looking at the role of piety, hope, and

generosity in the modern American psyche. Part 2 shifts in focus to deal with the democratic conflict between *secularist* and *traditionalist* agendas for democratic culture in the United States, just alluded to above. Additionally, he deals with the perpetual challenge and implications of deep religious pluralism, arguing that it is unreasonable to demand that an individual's religious commitments play no role in their democratic decision making and participation in debate because one of the central functions belonging to religious tradition "is to confer order on highly important values and concerns, some of which obviously have political relevance."<sup>6</sup> In other words, he argues, we cannot simply leave these commitments at the door without also leaving behind the very ability to make evaluative judgments in the first place.

Stout acknowledges that there exists a formidable coterie of political theorists and philosophers who see the use of religious reasoning in public political discourse as epistemically untenable, or at least, irresponsible and unproductive. He does not, however, empathize with their concerns: democratic citizens should be able not only to express whatever claims they take to be *true*, but also whatever premises in fact serve as reasons for those claims.<sup>7</sup> In Stout's view, it makes no sense to speak of one without the other. Stout's constructive proposal, is therefore an alternative understanding of public reasoning, which he refers to as a reflexively virtuous form of conversation. Through this ideal dialectic, the participants exchange premises and claims "in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish,"<sup>8</sup> balancing this expressive act with a good faith effort to understand the

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<sup>6</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 10-11.

other's position while both parties open up their own commitments to respectful, constructive criticism.

In Part 3, Stout explores how moral principles are appealed to, implicitly or explicitly in democratic society and he puts forward his own pragmatic public philosophy of so-called *expressive rationality* which he believes can overcome the tensions and distrust that currently fester between secular liberals and new traditionalists. Implicit in these arguments is the reframing of democracy as a culture in its own right, with its own ethical life and traditions. In other words, Stout's pragmatic public philosophy represents an attempt to synthesize *religious* traditions with what he considers to be the equally robust and pragmatic tradition of democratic deliberation. Pragmatism, he claims, "is democratic traditionalism...pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both."<sup>9</sup> Throughout these chapters he endeavors with varying success to walk a fine line; acknowledging the necessarily contextual nature of justification, while nevertheless maintaining that truth is not "an essentially relative concept."<sup>10</sup> Moral knowledge must be *true*, not merely *justified*. At this juncture, arises one of the most central and challenging questions of *Democracy and Tradition*; the possibility of a real, undeniable ethics which can make claims to actual *truth* (not mere justification) without explaining or grounding that truth in some metaphysical correspondence theory. I turn now to Stout's explicit case against correspondence realism.

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<sup>9</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 14.

## 2.ii | Stout's Case Against Correspondence Realism

In order to defend his constructive proposal of pragmatic, expressivist discourse, where moral claims can be true and not merely justified, Stout turns, in “Chapter 11: Ethics without Metaphysics”, to the task of outlining a picture of ethics that neither relies on realist notions of moral truth nor succumbs to moral relativism. Although he hedges, admitting to still be some form of a realist,<sup>11</sup> he claims to offer a conception of truth that is neither weakly relativistic nor reliant on the concept of correspondence. I will accordingly first explore Stout's argument against the ‘thicker’ concept of correspondence realism in order to make clear the motives behind his supposedly minimalist project of *modest pragmatism*. I will then present three main instances within Stout's defense of modest pragmatism where he appears to be letting correspondence epistemology in at the “back door”.

Stout sets out in Chapter 11 to argue that correspondence realist accounts of ethics not only have “no explanatory value,”<sup>12</sup> but that they in fact makes things *less* clear; “the harder realists work at trying to elucidate what it is for a proposition to correspond to reality, the murkier things get.”<sup>13</sup> One of the foremost causes of this “murkiness,” is that in order for correspondence to make sense, reality writ large would have to be structured in such a way that it could be separated into the sort of units that could in fact “*correspond*” to ethical truth claims in the direct and automatic way desired. There would have to be a unit of reality in the “shape” of “courage is good” and another unit of reality for “beating up helpless children

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<sup>11</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 253. Moral realism is an umbrella term for various metaphysical and moral systems that may only agree that their moral claims can in fact be true or false and some are true. Correspondence realism, as a subcategory has specific metaphysical commitments as to how a moral statement can be true (it corresponds to something in the fabric of ultimate reality). It is this distinction which enables Stout to be “some form of realist” while still arguing against correspondence realism specifically.

<sup>12</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 248.

<sup>13</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 249.

is bad,"<sup>14</sup> and so on ad infinitum. Introducing such "units" into our ethical framework, Stout argues, would prove harmful insofar as it requires a fatal equivocation in our description of reality. What he means by this is that for a correspondence vision of truth to be successful, the notion of reality with which we took truth to correspond would have to mean simply "the world in itself." This conception is unsatisfactory to Stout, however, because it would thoroughly fail to explain what *actual property* one is attributing to a claim in calling it true.<sup>15</sup> Reality would have to be understood as made up of propositions, however, the very act of dividing reality into such units would involve placing reality *under a specific description*, sacrificing the independence of the world in that process.<sup>16</sup> As soon as we divide reality up into the sorts of chunks that could correspond to our moral claims, we are already putting *our* normative mark on what was supposed to be an independent, pre-existing phenomenon against which to adjudicate such normative claims.

Stout thinks that the metaphysical approach therefore seems to be caught in a kind of antinomy between two conceptions of reality, "one of which is designed to capture the absoluteness of truth in a theory of the independence of the world, the other of which is designed to find units of a kind to which propositions could correspond."<sup>17</sup> The latter is necessary to the project of explaining what it actually means to describe something as true, but the former is necessary to avoid mutating truth's realism into the antirealism of mere

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<sup>14</sup> To argue this way seems to belligerently demand a certain very physical notion of reality. There is a great deal of precedence in wisdom and faith traditions throughout the world that have no trouble incorporating a more transcendent conception of reality that can be omnipresent and inherent in unitary, individual things. One could argue that such individual, non-universal traditions do not offer a rigorous enough grounding for the purposes of Stout's argument. Given his profession of seeing the ontological status of truth, whatever it is, as not present in the "furniture of the universe", one would think he would be less off-put by this avenue of thought. Therefore, his question "what could these units be?" seems insincere and in its concern.

<sup>15</sup> This is the "lack of explanatory power" mentioned above.

<sup>16</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 250.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

coherence or acceptance notions of truth.<sup>18</sup> Stout is not willing to give up on his personal brand of realism in favor of one of these alternatives, because in trying to get by without the independent view of reality we undermine “the cautionary use of true,”<sup>19</sup> thereby collapsing truth into some form of justification. Stout’s proposed response to these challenges pursues a vision of realism which he claims allows truth and justification to be related without dissolving into one another. Stout is interested in a view of truth à la Hilary Putnam who argued that truth consists neither in plain, perhaps widespread acceptance or consensus, nor in contextually justified acceptance, but rather in “idealized rational acceptance.”<sup>20</sup> This move, Stout argues, “allowed truth and justification to be related—in that rational acceptance is a near synonym of justified belief—without the two concepts being identical.”<sup>21</sup> This pragmatic approach to a non-metaphysical view of truth realism plays an important role in how Stout tries to have an ethics without metaphysics. While Stout’s critique of both realism and anti-realism is strong, I will demonstrate shortly that in trying to keep truth from collapsing into justification, Stout ultimately fails to show how his minimalist realism avoids the other pitfalls of realism which he so aptly points out. In fact, I will argue, he appears to unwittingly *rely* on a metaphysical correspondence concept of truth in the very midst of the arguments he makes for ethics’ necessary independence from the same.

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<sup>18</sup> Coherence notions would allow something to be true so long as it does not conflict with other truth claims, while acceptance frameworks ground moral truth in some majoritarian level of agreement in public opinion.

<sup>19</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

### 2.iii | Stout's Minimalist Project of "Modest Pragmatism"

In light of the concerns mentioned in the previous section, Stout declares that his goal is to provide a conception of truth that is dependent on neither "the metaphysical realism of correspondence theory nor the truth-relativism of the familiar pragmatic theories."<sup>22</sup> His constructive proposal for navigating between this Scylla and Charybdis is a conception of truth he describes as *minimalist and pragmatic*. This concept of *modest* pragmatism "rejects any form of pragmatism that proposes, immodestly and unwisely, to reduce truth to some form of coherence, acceptance, or utility."<sup>23</sup> Stout is willing to call himself a realist insofar as he wants to be able to use the term "true" in a non-coherentist sense, and believes that this truth can transcend or exist outside of any attempt to understand it. There can be truth, in other words, that we are incapable of knowing, not merely because of our non-ideal epistemic situation, but *absolutely* and *inherently*. In addition, he is happy to acknowledge that "whether a belief is true or false depends in part on the objects, events, properties, relations, values, and proprieties to which reference is made."<sup>24</sup> Thus, while he is a realist to the extent that he sees truth as a *meaningful* property, he is not willing to view it as a *naturalistic* property as do the correspondence theorists who believe that truth belongs to the "furniture of the natural world." Stout's minimalist pragmatism argues that truth is normative, and that, as such, it is a product of the inferential practices through which we determine which claims or beliefs can claim it as a status.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 248. I.e. he is trying to find a way out of the metaethical divide I elaborated in Chapter 1.

<sup>23</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 250.

<sup>24</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 253.

<sup>25</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 254.

Stout then goes on to claim, however, that this truth status neither involves any relation to *evidence*, nor, consequently, is it relative to epistemic context. In other words, Stout is drawing a line around truth such that it can pertain only to “conceptual content” of the claim itself, rather than any evaluation as to the epistemic responsibility of the claimant. Thus truth is neither a question of *justification* nor *consensus*.

We attribute this status willy nilly to the beliefs we currently accept, in accordance with the acceptance use of ‘true.’ But whether our beliefs and claims actually enjoy the status of being true is not up to us. Believing that someone has a particular obligation, right, or virtue does not make it so.<sup>26</sup>

With the full argument now in view, I turn to my critique. In particular, I will argue that Stout unwittingly relies on “backdoor” correspondence epistemology in the very midst of the arguments he makes to the contrary.

## **2.iv | Critique of Stout’s “Modest Pragmatism”**

The first instance of Stout unwittingly relying on a metaphysical correspondence theory of truth arises in the context of his argument for the separation of truth and justification. This is a favorite distinction of Stout’s and one which would appear to have great potential for sorting out the epistemological significance of moral disagreement generally. Unfortunately, however, while demonstrating the validity of the distinction, he reintroduces a metaphysical correspondence conception of truth in order to distinguish it from what he sees as the context-dependent nature of justification. He appeals to the logical principle of non-contradiction to claim that

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<sup>26</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 255.

It is not possible for a claim and its negation to be true simultaneously, in ethics or anywhere else. But when Spina believes the claim, and the peasants believe its negative, they can both be justified. Similarly Spina can be justified in believing a moral claim at one point in his life and justified in rejecting precisely the same claim at a later point, whereas the truth-value of the claim has remained the same all along.<sup>27</sup>

If the truth values of a claim and its opposite remain constant and opposite while the justification-values of those same two claims remain equivalent, what property is the truth value then describing? If it is neither describing the alignment of the claim to other premises (inferential), rational justification (cautionary use of true), utility, widespread consensus, or ultimate reality (correspondence), what does the label of true or false in fact *tell* us? It is helpful to point out the difficulties in adopting the correspondence paradigm, and his concern about flattening truth into justification is understandable. Nothing has been accomplished, however, in the way of offering an alternative solution. In other words, it is fine to allow truth to swing free from justification, or correspondence, but he failed to provide the requisite alternative explanation for what “true” is then describing; it is entirely unclear in the end what the adjective “true” actually indicates. If Stout is not relying on any of those above-mentioned properties when saying that the truth-value of the claim has remained the same, he would need to explain what in fact he *does* mean. He could have perhaps avoided the issue if he had made the case for *varying degrees of* justification or a qualified justification constrained by factors of context such that there is something substantive going on in the “truth value” descriptor. He does not, however, do this.

The second problem occurs when Stout introduces a concept of “improvability”. One of the necessary premises for the vision of democratic discourse for which he is advocating

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<sup>27</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 240.

throughout *Democracy and Tradition* is the idea that “progress” is possible; that we have some ability to get “better” at holding “true” beliefs.

To say that some of the moral propositions we are justified in believing might not be true is to remind ourselves that no matter how well we now think and talk about moral topics, it remains possible, so far as we can tell, to do better. To strive for moral truth as finite beings conscious of our finitude is to keep that possibility in view, to keep alive the struggle for this-worldly betterment of our commitments, not to wish for a final revelatory moment, a moral philosopher’s eschaton.<sup>28</sup>

If Stout were merely claiming that we were getting better at only holding beliefs that we were justified in holding there would be no problem, but here and elsewhere<sup>29</sup> he appears to be claiming that we can get better at holding *True* beliefs. He reiterates on multiple occasions that we can be *fully* justified in the belief of an untrue claim, so the “betterment” must come from the truth value, not merely the justification. Again, the reader must ask what it means for a given belief to be more true or less true. He needs to explain how this assertion can make sense without some metaphysical concept of correspondence if he wishes to speak in terms of improvement. He seems to take the fact that individuals and populations have *changed their minds* about the status of certain truth claims to be proof that humanity is somehow *progressing* in this practice; that *change* is indicative of *improvement*. This is the mistake of taking the oscillation of the pendulum for the backtracking of a mouse stuck in a maze’s dead end.<sup>30</sup> The supposition of improvement is a logically necessary component in defending any change in belief—one does not change one’s beliefs unless one thinks that the new beliefs are superior, in some sense, to the old. This perceived or believed improvement

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<sup>28</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> For example, on Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 234.

<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that Rorty, who will be discussed below, is a prime example of the opposing view. For Rorty, the fact that our moral beliefs have changed over time and place is simply one side effect of how messy and slippery the concept of moral truth really is, not proof that we are making objective progress.

is not necessarily proof, however, that we are actually getting closer to, or farther from, a “capital T” truth unless you have some account of what it means to label something as true (see my previous concern above).

Stout, for good reason, then, seems attracted, in spite of himself, to the idea of a metaphysically grounded moral law; “an infinitely large set consisting of all the true moral claims but not a single falsehood or contradiction.”<sup>31</sup> This is what his arguments have implicitly been relying on throughout—even in the midst of arguing against the use of exactly such a metaphysical view. Stout claims that “there is no harm in granting that there is a set of truths like this, provided that we rigorously avoid treating it as something we could conceivably know and apply.”<sup>32</sup> His third mistake, therefore, is failing to recognize that this kind of metaphysical assumption is *precisely* the suspicion that threatens the democratic tradition of discourse he is trying to promote. In other words, the assumption that there is *one* such set of truths (à la dogmatists) but no way to agree upon what it is or how to apply it in our communities is the same doubt that leads to the existential crisis around (moral) truth<sup>33</sup> which he is worried about but also claims is unnecessary.

His entire project in this book is to paint a picture of virtuous Democratic debate as a means for at least approaching this truth, if not achieving it. He does not, however, give us any clue for how we will evaluate our own success. Even widespread agreement, according to his own criteria, cannot be seen as a definitive improvement because he vehemently rejects consensus definitions of truth. At each turn then, by failing to put forward a functional alternative, the reader is forced to assume that in his “silence,” Stout is in fact relying on a

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<sup>31</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 240.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Recall the metaethical divide conversation from Chapter 1.

kind of “backdoor” correspondence realism. He presents a strong argument for why we should be skeptical of such theories, but then appears to let some version of them sneak back in, in his effort to avoid radical relativism or pragmatic contextualism.

### 3 | RICHARD RORTY

#### 3.i | Contingency in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,<sup>34</sup> Richard Rorty explores the metaethical challenge presented to us by the radical contingency of human beliefs and vocabularies over space and time. Rorty aims to offer a sustained critique of the foundationalist, metaphysical aspirations of (western) philosophy and puts forward his own proposal for moving forward. Like Stout, he is grappling with the question of whether it is possible to have realist ethics without correspondence metaphysics, albeit with different emphases and different solutions. Whereas Stout focused, primarily, on co-existent diversity *within* a given spatio-temporal context, Rorty centers his concern on the epistemic challenge which the radical contingency of our beliefs (across multiple space-times) poses to human experience and interpretation of that experience. Not only are we aware that our core beliefs and values are by-products of our socio-historical situation, but the very language and vocabularies we use to *articulate* and *defend* those beliefs are similarly contingent. Specifically, he is exploring the implications of acknowledging this contingency when it comes to questions of truth and the possibility of having a compelling ethical framework without metaphysical grounding.

What Rorty takes issue with in particular, is the tendency to conflate the idea that there is a *world* “out there,” independent of human mental states, with the idea of *Truth* being

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

“out there” in an analogous sense. Truth, for Rorty, can only be ascribed to sentences and descriptions, which are themselves *necessarily* human creations. Human languages are human creations, therefore, Rorty argues, so is Truth. Like Stout, Rorty attributes much of the confusion on this front to a conflation of *<justification for believing x>* with *<x = Truth>*. In other words, while pieces of the world might justify us in believing a certain sentence to be true, Rorty would side with Stout in arguing that it cannot be claimed on those grounds that “the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called ‘facts.’”<sup>35</sup> The contingency of truth and language is crucial for understanding Rorty’s central project because for him it signifies the contingency of *conscience*. What epistemic weight can moral values lay claim to when we are acutely aware of how much they have changed over time and place? How can we hope to ground our values, those ultimate concerns, in anything more firm than personal, subjective opinion, or justified belief? As you can see, his concern is very much in line with Stout’s, the solution he offers, however, is quite different.

### 3.ii | Irony: Rorty’s Response to Contingency

Rorty’s proposed solution is really an attitude embodied by a new ideal type of epistemic agent, whom he refers to as a “liberal ironist.” To qualify as such, the ironist must fulfill three main criteria. First, she must maintain a radical level of doubt regarding the finality of the vocabulary she herself uses. That is, she must “have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance,” for the realization that nothing has an intrinsic nature or *real essence*.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, she must acknowledge that no argument phrased in said vocabulary can do anything to undermine or

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<sup>35</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

overcome these doubts because only new, more pragmatically effective vocabularies can provide that external critique. Finally, she will not privilege her own vocabulary over anyone else's. In other words she will use metaphors of *making* meaning rather than *finding it*, of diversification and novelty rather than *correspondence* with the antecedently present.

Rorty explains that he calls his new ideal type an *ironist* because she understands that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and that any belief must therefore be held with a certain cautious reserve; embraced, but only for the moment, and, at a responsible emotional distance. Ironists exist in a position of "Sartrean meta-stability" because they have renounced the goal of evaluating or choosing between final vocabularies and are, as a consequence, "never quite able to take themselves seriously because (they are) always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."<sup>37</sup> By embracing redescription as a pragmatic tool—employed in response to new information, contexts, or needs—rather than claiming to have uncovered true essence, the ironist is able to face up to her own contingency, able to entertain multiple descriptions of any given event without needing to ask which is 'right.' We must, in Rorty's words, "de-universalize the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet's inventions."<sup>38</sup> In doing so, the ironist will come to see the moral consciousness "as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political or aesthetic consciousness."<sup>39</sup> In spite of these appearances to the contrary, however, Rorty is not ready to condone a full blown moral relativism. He is still a liberal, and as such is unable to regard as contingent the claim that "cruelty is the worst thing

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<sup>37</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 73-4.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 30.

we do.”<sup>40</sup> He still wants to protect liberalism, at least its core tenets, from the ironic disbelief of his ironist.

### 3.iii | Solidarity

In order to avoid moral relativism, Rorty constrains this irony with a specific form of what he terms *solidarity*. Given what he has already argued, this solidarity cannot resemble typical, philosophical definitions that presuppose the existence of some unifying human essence<sup>41</sup> that generates its own laws of respect or empathy, and which only needs to be acknowledged for its power to be felt. Rorty instead wants his reader and his ironist to think of solidarity not as a *fact* to be *discovered* and then followed, but as a goal to be *created* and *achieved*, “achieved not by inquiry, but imagination, through the ability to see strange creatures as fellow sufferers.”<sup>42</sup> One must resensitize oneself to the “particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.”<sup>43</sup> How, then, does one resensitize the self, and, one might ask, why would or should we?

According to Rorty, we must turn away from reason and *theory* and toward imagination and *narrative*. It is through novels, ethnographies, and docudramas, which specialize in thick descriptions of the private and idiosyncratic, he argues, that we can learn to appreciate the pain of those who do not speak our language. Instead of trying to *discover* a common human nature, an ur-language which all of us could recognize—a phenomenon already out there, waiting—solidarity must be *imaginatively constructed*. Rorty is contrasting imagination with philosophical reasoning here in an interesting but

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<sup>40</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

<sup>41</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 189.

<sup>42</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

underdeveloped way. If we are to engage with imagination as an epistemic category in its own right, this raises further questions which Rorty fails to answer. Specifically, can imagination operate independently of liberal commitments? Can a non-liberal person have an imagination in the sense he is describing or is imagination necessarily an already-liberal attitude toward the other? Rorty leaves these crucial questions unanswered.

Before delving deeper into the critical portion of this section, let me make one further point regarding the type of *community* Rorty envisions for these ironists. He describes it as a “liberal utopia” inhabited by “people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community...people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment.”<sup>44</sup> This “utopia” would be historicist and nominalist and would therefore be content “to call “true” (or “right” or “just”) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication<sup>45</sup> happens to be, whatever view wins in a free open encounter,”<sup>46</sup> thereby dropping the traditional epistemological-metaphysical problematic, or so he claims.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, this society would see itself, not as the final stage, converging toward an already existing true ideal, but as the humble incubator for an endless proliferation of such societies.

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<sup>44</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that Rorty gives no substantive account of what “undistorted communication” looks like nor how it could be possible given our non-ideal epistemic circumstances; incredibly limiting conditions of finitude, and systemically embedded power structures, nevermind the robust network of perfect liberal institutions that would presumably be needed for such discourse, name a few.

<sup>46</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 67.

<sup>47</sup> It is worth recalling Stout’s similar hopes for the capacity of democratic discourse, but also that such free and open encounter relies upon a robust, pre-existing network of liberal institutions. We will discuss this in greater detail below.

A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to the touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that all touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.<sup>48</sup>

Even Rorty is willing to admit that such a bundle of paradoxes begs the question whether ironism is in fact compatible with a commitment to imaginative human solidarity.<sup>49</sup> What does ironic, i.e. non-committed commitment look like? And, further, what kinds of public, liberal institutions would be needed as a precondition for Rorty's ideal society to even make sense as a possibility? I turn now to these questions.

### 3.iv | Critique

As we saw above, Rorty is trying to hold two ultimately oppositional concepts in tension; a radically ironic perspective tempered by an imaginative and consuming liberal sense of solidarity with others. The question which remains is to what extent the legitimacy and power of his solidarity can be immunized against (excluded or protected from) the irony for which he advocates, without undermining that ironic disposition which is his primary contribution. Of central concern here is the concept of *commitment*, as well as the serious practical demands required for this picture to be successful. This section will work through how Rorty attempts to describe and defend solidarity without the sort of appeals to a common human nature, which he explicitly objects to, and for which he criticized "Western philosophy." Second, I will evaluate his success in attempting to immunize solidarity against

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<sup>48</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 87.

the threats of his own proposed contingency and irony, without undermining that entire project.

Rorty's first challenge is to prove that solidarity can account for itself without violating his own anti-metaphysical, anti-human-essence agenda. For this reason he argues that solidarity is not grounded in a common possession or a shared power, but rather on an awareness of a common *danger*. Most would probably argue that a shared sense of common danger is *by definition* a common possession or a shared (lack of) power, but Rorty doubles down, explaining that "human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world—the little things which one has woven into one's final vocabulary—will not be destroyed."<sup>50</sup> It should go without saying that this rhetorical move—of defending his argument against the accusation of essentialism by claiming that a common danger is different from a common possession and that a common hope is not a common goal—is *highly questionable*. These are not, however, merely tangential, and therefore pardonable remarks. On the topic of final vocabularies Rorty claims *both* that what unites his ironist with the rest of her species or community "is not a common language but just susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation," *and* that there must nevertheless be "enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies."<sup>51</sup> The burden of proof is on Rorty to show how this overlap is distinct from one of those common ur languages he warns against.

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<sup>50</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Rorty tries to fend off the *metaphysical* realist critique by claiming that solidarity is compatible with the contingency requirements he laid out earlier. "My position entails that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary."<sup>52</sup> This attempt to repaint solidarity as a flexible, shifting category of human interaction devoid of content, metaphysical or otherwise, might have been helpful had he not *already* defined the *content* of solidarity as pain and humiliation. He simply cannot have it both ways at once. He cannot in good faith define solidarity in terms of universal concepts of pain and humiliation when he is trying to protect his liberalism from irony, and then turn around and claim that it represents a contentless, amorphous category.

Lest one dismiss these inconsistencies as aberrations, allow me to conclude with one more example. Rorty claims that the glue which would hold together his ideal liberal society would be

A consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard "bourgeois freedoms." This conviction would not be based on a view about universally shared human ends, human rights, the nature of rationality, the Good for Man, nor anything else.<sup>53</sup>

Ignoring the fact that self-creation, peace, wealth, and bourgeois freedoms are *all* products of a particular view about the existence of shared human rights and ends, he goes on to say that this conviction would be based on:

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<sup>52</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.

<sup>53</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 84.

Nothing more profound than the historical facts which suggest that without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will be less able to work out their private salvations, create their private self-images, re-weave their webs of belief and desire.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, we not only need the liberal perspective of solidarity in order to reserve space for ironists to perform their self-creating acts of redescription, we need a complex network of flourishing bourgeois democratic institutions as well.

Rorty began by framing the problem of how to have an ethics without metaphysics by highlighting the challenges we face as a result of our awareness of how contingent our commitments really are. His defense then relies on a robust set of democratic liberal bourgeois institutions which represent *exactly* the sort of contingent beliefs he claims we need to view with ironic suspicion. For his project to be successful, his constructive proposal cannot be defended by the arbitrary immunization of radically contingent social constructs like liberal political institutions, against the ironic disposition. Yet that seems to be exactly what he is demanding:

The compromise advocated in this book amounts to saying: privatize the Nietzschean- Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, the core tenets of liberalism are, or must be considered, immune to the ironist's redescription. Is this an allowable compromise, or is he in fact just painting over his entire project of poetic irony?

The conflicting claims I have been tracing make it difficult to discern the corners of Rorty's argument. Is he *in fact advocating* for irony? Or does he merely pay lip service to this

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 65.

need and then pave it over with a more or less generic form of traditional liberalism? He claims to encourage a nietzschean spirit, but only until the moment it turns its ironic gaze on the values *he* holds dear, and threatens *his* beliefs with redescription. If he wants to present the liberal democratic ideals of solidarity as a goal worthy of pursuit, *given his currently situated and contingent evaluating self*, that would be fine. That claim would be consistent with the picture of commitment he seems to espouse. What he cannot do, without hypocrisy or contradiction, is claim that *his personal, contingent, liberal* values must somehow *ontologically, intrinsically, universally* be considered immune to the ironist's redescription. It appears, from the above analysis and critique, that if Rorty's argument is to be interpreted as coherent and self-consistent, we are left with two possible conclusions. Either he has not done enough to protect his liberalism from ironic irony and redescription without the dissatisfyingly artificial and arbitrary reliance on liberal institutions, or he has not done enough to protect his irony from being shackled by the prioritization of traditional liberal values.<sup>56</sup> In which latter case, what he frames as a radical constructive proposal, is in fact nothing new, nothing more than the traditional, institutional liberalism he is ostensibly transcending.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

In fairness to both Stout and Rorty, it seems only fair to remember how much easier it is to make objections and critiques than it is to put forward some possible solution. I do not fail to appreciate the thoughtful work which both have invested in these immensely challenging

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<sup>56</sup> Rorty might try to respond that he is doing his ironic due diligence, and merely redescrbing said liberal values. The problem is that he redescrbes them in such a way as to negate the ironic right to redescription in the first place. Some sort of catch-22 results.

questions, nor the helpful role they now play as foil in my present project. I will now therefore, by way of recapitulation, take stock of the helpful critiques they make; both for the sake of reiterating the strengths of their arguments and setting down explicitly what Korsgaard's system will need to provide in order to constitute a definitively more desirable alternative. In other words, I will conclude by laying out the numerous concerns which will need to be accounted for, as well as the constraints within which they need to be addressed.

As we have seen, Stout was looking for a framework in which religion could play a legitimate role in public discourse, claiming that it was unreasonable for an individual's religious belief to be allowed no part in their democratic decision-making. We should instead, he argues, engage in a minimalist pragmatic and expressive rationality to overcome tensions and distrust. Perhaps most importantly, he wanted to acknowledge the necessarily contextual nature of justification without allowing truth to be a merely relative concept. But he wanted to accomplish this without relying on a metaphysical correspondence moral epistemology. Truth and justification must be related but distinct. As I demonstrated above, however, in trying to keep truth from collapsing into justification, he repeatedly relies, albeit implicitly, on exactly such an epistemology, in the very midst of his constructive proposal. A better metaethical system must therefore be able to offer a framework wherein moral truth can be distinguished from mere epistemic, contextual justification; an understanding of moral truth that is not merely up to our personal whims. Additionally, it would ideally be able to account for *improvability*, while also reserving space, if possible, for religious reasons to play a legitimate role in public discourse. Most importantly, however, it would avoid his blunder of letting correspondence realism in the back door while trying to achieve these criteria.

Rorty, by contrast, was searching for a way to confront the radical contingency of human beliefs across space and time without falling into radical relativism, subjectivism, or the like. In the same vein as Stout, he is pursuing a solution that is both non-foundationalist and non-metaphysical, and that draws a substantive distinction between the idea of a world “out there” with the idea of “truth out there.” A better system must thus accommodate the idea that features of the world can justify us in believing certain (moral claims) sentences to be true, without implying that reality splits itself up into little chunks called moral facts. Ideally it would also be able to provide some new vision of “solidarity” that can protect against radical, cruel, relativism without running into the contradictions I outlined above.

All this would need to be accomplished without metaphysical, correspondence language, and without “privileging one’s own vocabulary over anyone else’s,” which Rorty became guilty of while trying to immunize his personal liberal beliefs against irony. If a metaethical system could accomplish all this without relying on a robust set of contingent, liberal, democratic, social institutions, we could claim to have at least made a step in the right direction. The following chapter will lay out one possibility for such a proposal through the lens of Christine Korsgaard’s specific brand of metaethical constructivism. Although Korsgaard will get us quite a bit farther in overcoming these critiques of Rorty and Stout, I will nevertheless have three significant critiques of her framework. These critiques will in turn necessitate the epistemological interventions proposed over the course of the following chapters.

# Chapter 3: Christine Korsgaard

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter laid out two efforts to bridge the metaethical divide—to have pluralism without relativism—and how each of these promising proposals ultimately fell short. I used these thinkers not only as a helpful way to situate my own project within the field of religious ethics, but also as illuminating foils to articulate exactly what is needed in a framework if we are to satisfactorily navigate a safe passage through the scylla and charybdis of dogmatic moral realism and radical moral relativism. Against this background, I turn in the present chapter, to the work of Christine Korsgaard, whose metaethical constructivism offers the most promising path forward. Here too, however, there are some critical shortcomings, especially when it comes to my own project’s motivating concerns regarding the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict and exclusion. This chapter will begin with a very brief and general overview of constructivist metaethics generally before diving into Korsgaard’s particular version. After noting both her Kantian and Aristotelian influences, I will then lay out the central features of her framework including the grounding “normative question,” reflective self-consciousness, scrutiny and endorsement, her particular concept of identity and practical identities, humanity, and agency. I will then conclude with a reconstruction of her so-called “constitutional model” before turning to an analysis of her framework’s strengths and weaknesses.

While her metaethical system has much to recommend it, and overcomes Stout’s and Rorty’s weaknesses in key ways, I will nevertheless have three central critiques. First, her

Aristo-Kantian constructivism can only account for moral conflict insofar as it is the result of diverse practical identities, and this is insufficient to account for the diverse forms of disagreement which we experience on a regular basis, not to mention the intractable issues around polarization and its dehumanizing effects. Second, she is operating with an overly uniform, under-developed, i.e. reductive understanding of rationality (and perception and objectivity) itself, which is substantially to blame for the first problem. Third, and relatedly, her constitutional model risks reinforcing exactly the sort of dehumanizing effects of disagreement that are motivating this entire project. The following chapters, therefore, tackle the epistemic side of the issue as a way to reimagine a Korsgaardian style of constructivism with a moral epistemology which can *rehumanize* our moral conflicts. Put in laughably concise terms, this epistemology will describe a more autopoietic and dynamically co-enactive understanding of perception, (practical) rationality, (practical) identity, and objectivity. These ideas will not become clear until the following chapters. The first step is to understand Korsgaard in her original form, which in turn requires me to unpack how she understands her conceptual foil of *substance realism*.

## 2 | SUBSTANCE REALISM

Korsgaard describes “substance realism”<sup>1</sup> as the view that “there are correct procedures for answering moral questions because there are moral truths or facts, which exist independently of those procedures, and which those procedures track.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to

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<sup>1</sup> The analogue to the correspondence realism to which Stout and Rorty were responding.

<sup>2</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M., Onora O’Neill --, Christine Korsgaard --, G. A. Cohen --, Raymond Geuss --, Thomas Nagel --, Bernard Williams --, Christine Korsgaard, and Onora O’Neill. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 36-37.

note here that substance realism does not describe just any view claiming that moral propositions can have a *truth value*. Constructivism, as this chapter will show, makes a version of such a claim. The central problem with substance realist accounts, according to Korsgaard, is their explanation for *why* moral propositions can have truth values. As she explains it, substance realism is problematic insofar as it assumes that a moral proposition will have a truth value *only* to the extent that it refers to some normative entity or fact that has a distinct ontological status against which we can “verify” the normative claim. Common to most versions of this view is the belief that *if* there are no such ontologically separate “metaphysical chunks” that our moral claims can be describing, then the only other option is some form of radical anti-realist relativism. Korsgaard sees this binary thinking as both flawed and dangerous insofar as it makes ethics “seem hopeless.”<sup>3</sup>

As I will lay out in the rest of this chapter, Korsgaard’s metaethical system seeks to overcome this dichotomy by shifting the objective criteria away from the problematic truth “chunks” out in the furniture of the universe to the processes of practical reasoning itself. Her substance-realist foils claim there is a correct procedure because only certain procedures will be able to successfully *discover* the proper moral facts out there in some normative part of the world. Korsgaardian constructivism, by contrast, situates the source of moral value normativity in a robust understanding of agency itself, which, she argues, is undeniable and necessitates us, insofar as our nature demands that we act *for reasons*. In so doing, she puts forward what I will argue is a more productive framework than Rorty’s or Stout’s within which to evaluate questions of moral “truth” and justification. It is a system

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<sup>3</sup> Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 308-309.

which, while sensitive to experiential facts from “the world out there”, is yet free from the need to “discover” the normative valence of said information in that sphere. Instead, as the following sections will explain, value is *constructed*, but in a crucially necessary, that is, in an undeniable, *non-relativistic* way, by our inescapably self-reflective consciousness and the processes of practical rationality which that faculty both requires and generates. As a consequence, her framework is self-contained, yet firmly grounded in the guardrails of our own cognitive capacities. Moral truths are not “out there” to be discovered or missed. Rather, they exist as the necessary, and rationally constrained product of our inescapably reflective nature. Similarly, it is the *process* which determines the correctness of the *outcome*, not vice versa. In this way, as I will aim to demonstrate, Korsgaard is able to avoid some of the pitfalls of dogmatic substance realism without giving into the shoulder-shrugging agnosticism of relativist approaches. Rorty and Stout, for instance, could have avoided some of their own shortcomings, had they taken a more Korsgaardian-constructivist approach. Before we can appreciate the contributions of Korsgaard’s constructivism in particular, however, it will be helpful to have some working familiarity with the broader category of which her framework represents one key genre. I therefore turn now to constructivist metaethics generally, before articulating Korsgaard’s unique approach.

### **3 | CONSTRUCTIVIST METAETHICS**

Philosophical “constructivism” represents a family of metaethical theories that strive to walk the line between moral realism and anti-realism by shifting the focus of inquiry away from either the “ultimate fabric of reality” or “mere personal preferences,” and usually toward the more “logical consistency” demands of idealized human rationality, and sometimes,

consensus. While sub-genres have proliferated to include Humean, Wittgensteinian, Spinozian, Smithian, Hegelian, and Nietzschean versions, I will be focusing on Christine Korsgaard's specific form of (Aristo-)Kantian constructivism. Kantian constructivism is so-called because of its emphasis on the (very Kantian) idea that the "truths" about what we have reason to do are intrinsic to, i.e. *necessitated by* the operations of practical reason. Epistemically speaking, *moral* claims about how we should act are "true or false" based on their capacity for logically consistent, non-hypocritical universalization for all rational beings as such (think of Kant's categorical imperative). What Korsgaard adds to the broader umbrella of Kantian constructivism is an emphasis on the human and humanity, reimagining Kant's concept of respect in his second formulation of the categorical imperative to serve as a rationally necessary defense against (relativistic) solipsism.

While Korsgaard considers herself a Kantian constructivist, her Aristotelian influences become apparent insofar as she emphasizes the need for a *self*, not just rational capacity, and further argues that the selves which are doing the reasoning are themselves constituted through our exercise of practical reason in the form of what she terms "practical identities" (more on this later on). As a consequence, failing to have your will determined by the categorical imperative's autonomous laws, she will argue, constitutes a loss of *agency*, and a disintegration of oneself. Mark LeBar describes the term Aristotelian constructivism in his article by the same name,<sup>4</sup> as a counter to what is often described as the overly formal and excessively—or even reductively—proceduralistic impulses of their Kantian counterparts. Aristotelian constructivism, like its Kantian sister, frames the "reality" of moral

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<sup>4</sup> LeBar, Mark, 2008, "Aristotelian Constructivism", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 25(1): 182–213. doi:10.1017/S0265052508080072.

truth, not in terms of metaphysical structures, but rather in terms of the constitutive features of practical reasoning. Similarly, the truths of moral reasoning are *constructed*, rather than *discovered* because they are the necessary product of activities in accordance with the norms and principles of practical rationality. Both Kantian and Aristotelian constructivism have at their heart “the denial that the truth about how to live and act is *out there* somehow, waiting for us to recognize and act on it, even in the substantive judgments that are incorporated as part of the enterprise of construction.”<sup>5</sup> Thus they are both determined to counter the correspondence realist foils of the likes of Rorty and Stout.

Aristotelian constructivism does, however, have two particularly distinctive emphases; on *eudaimonism* and *training*, or *habituation*. Many Aristotelian constructivists avoid the accusations often leveled at their Kantian counterparts—of bland proceduralism, empty formalism, or blunt universalism—by grounding the phronetic<sup>6</sup> process in substantive accounts of eudaimonia. In this way, they are able to supplement the purely procedural (Kantian) “sieve” with a more substantive concept of human flourishing.<sup>7</sup> Unlike their strictly Kantian counterpart(s), moreover, Aristotelian versions of constructivism tend to place greater emphasis on the connections between our “rational” and “animal” natures.<sup>8</sup> In this way, they focus not merely on the *products* of practical reason, but on its *precursors*; specifically, how training, education, habituation, and other aspects of an individual’s personal context and history—as well as the sensitive and affective, animal aspects of human

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<sup>5</sup> LeBar, “Aristotelian Constructivism,” 192.

<sup>6</sup> As in phronesis, having to do with practical reason.

<sup>7</sup> There are undoubtedly a few potential problems with this emphasis, notably how to think about universal concepts of eudaimonia that would need clarification and justification before they could be fully embraced. Since this concept is not an active ingredient in the argument for this paper, however, I will leave such tangential legwork for another time.

<sup>8</sup> LeBar, “Aristotelian Constructivism,” 196.

being—impact and shape that capacity.<sup>9</sup> I will return to these ideas later on. There is a very real sense in which my intervention on Korsgaard’s framework in the following chapters can be understood as a decisive shift in the Aristotelian direction. However, I make this move in a way that offers novel contributions to extant Aristotelian constructivisms as well. With this broader understanding of constructivism in hand, I now turn to Korsgaard’s particular version of metaethical constructivism.

## 4 | KORSGAARDIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM

### 4.i | The Normative Question

Korsgaard’s metaethical constructivism is structured as a response to what she refers to as “the normative question.” To understand this idea, it helps to begin with what it is *not*. The normative question is not the merely descriptive, explanatory problem regarding the foundations of morality or the psychological sources of moral feeling that can be answered simply by showing that morality is “real” or “objective,” as opposed to unreal or at least subjectively invented. Ethical standards do not (or at least do not *merely*) describe a feature of reality or experience. Rather, they command us, or at least *recommend* one course of action over another. In “asking” the normative question, Korsgaard is putting aside, for a time, the realist question of whether moral claims are descriptive of something “real” in order to focus on *whence their “force” derives*. This undertaking requires more than an *explanation*; it requires *justification*. In other words, for Korsgaard, the question of moral foundations is not

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. The conversation around basic goods (Phillipa Foot, William Schweiker, and Martha Nussbaum among others) also deals with these issues.

answered by anthropological or psychological explanations. It can only be answered by understanding *on what justificatory grounds* a claim can “compel” us.<sup>10</sup>

This need for justification is particularly urgent and pressing because of how hard the moral life is. We as human individuals have many competing aspirations, dearly held values, and motivating interests that constantly come into conflict with each other as well as with more external moral “dictates”. The first question to be answered is not therefore “*what morality demands,*” but *on what grounds*. Why, after all, should I be moral? Why should I prioritize specifically moral imperatives over and against those other values or goals that I hold so dear? Whereas the explanatory question alluded to above is a theoretical and “third-person” descriptive question about the often psychological explanations for behavior, the normative question is a first-person, *practical* question of whether-one-must and for what reason(s). These tensions between the “moral law” and our other concerns are most obvious in extreme cases, but the justificatory problem itself is always there. As Korsgaard rather cheekily puts it, “just as we may find ourselves rebelling against, say, the sacrifice of our happiness to the demands of justice, so also, in a smaller, more everyday way, we may find ourselves bucking against doing our chores or returning unwanted phone calls or politely thanking a despised host for a dull party.”<sup>11</sup> Why can we not opt out of the task of finding justification for normative claims? It is well and good to point out that we *feel the force* of this normative question, but Korsgaard goes further to say that we *must answer* it as well. Why must these claims be *justified*, and not merely *followed*? As later sections will explore, Korsgaard argues that the need for justification is rooted in our uniquely self-reflective

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<sup>10</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Korsgaard. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 2.

human nature. In fact, it is our same capacity to *question* the force of normative claims that makes the normative question *inescapable*. Before exploring the ways in which the critically self-reflective nature of human beings engenders the demand to answer the normative question, I must first articulate Korsgaard's particular view of *reason*.

#### 4.ii | Korsgaardian Rationality

Korsgaard is careful to differentiate three distinct senses of the term "reason" which need to be clearly delineated. The first type, capital "R" *Reason*, is the general human faculty of reason which Korsgaard in turn defines as "the active rather than the passive or receptive aspect of the mind. Reason in this sense is opposed to perception, sensation, and perhaps emotion, which are forms of, or at least involve, passivity or receptivity."<sup>12</sup> Her second type of reason can be understood as the gerundive form of *reasoning* because it refers to the *employment* of rational principles as an activity or verb. It could also be understood as the adjectival form of *reasonable* insofar as it denotes *conformity to* certain specifically rational principles such as Kant's principles of understanding, the law of non-contradiction and other requirements of logical inference, mathematical principles, accepted criteria for the assessment of evidence and, Korsgaard will argue, the Kantian principles of practical reason.<sup>13</sup> The third type refers to concrete *reasons*, i.e. "the particular, substantive, considerations, counting in favor of belief or action, that we call 'reasons.'"<sup>14</sup> Korsgaard's holistic "definition" of reason then prioritizes and organizes these three separate types in a hierarchy where *Reason* refers to the transcendental active capacity of our minds, and *reasoning* refers to the successful or ideal activities of that capacity that then produce and respond to *reasons*. I will critique

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

certain aspects of this framing later on in the chapter, nevertheless these ideas undoubtedly do a great deal of helpful heavy lifting for her project that should not go unappreciated. In particular, the Kantian concept of *practical reason*, under this picture, helpfully describes both reasons for action, as well as the phenomenon of acting for a reason which in turn informs Korsgaard's specific notion of 'action', as opposed to mere 'act'.

For Korsgaard, acting is essentially and crucially rational, and is distinguished from an "act" insofar as the action encompasses both the act as well as the *end* for which one performs the act, i.e. the *justification* for why the agent considers the act worth performing.

A rational principle or logos, therefore, represents the agent's conception of what is worth doing for the sake of what, and especially, of what in his particular circumstances is worth doing for the sake of what. It is not merely a view about which ends to pursue and how to pursue them, although of course it is that, but also a view that the end is one that, here and now, in one's circumstances, makes the act in question, and so the whole action, worth doing.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, it does not make sense to say that we have reasons for an action, reasons are an intrinsic aspect of action; on Korsgaard's model, you cannot be performing an action without them. Acting without reasons is not acting, it is mere movement triggered by some other force working on or in the mover in question. I will explain this in more depth below, first I must introduce the aspect of human nature which Korsgaard argues is the ultimate source of these various senses of reason: our reflective self-consciousness.

#### **4.iii | Reflective Self-Consciousness**

To be human is to be self-conscious, and it is precisely this deeply reflective self-consciousness that Korsgaard claims generates the normative problem. We feel impulses,

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<sup>15</sup> Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 147.

instincts, and desires as other animals do, but we are one step further removed from them such that we do not just feel or experience them, we reflect and think *about them*. This capacity is at the root of the normative question insofar as that distance not only *enables* us to call those impulses into question, but *forces* us to do so. “Cut loose from the control of instinct, we must formulate principles that will tell us how to deal with the incentives we experience. And the experience of decision or choice, the work of these principles, is a separate experience from that of the workings of the incentive itself.”<sup>16</sup> We still experience instincts, and they are in fact crucial in providing us with motives to action in general; they do not, however, *immediately determine* our actions. Instead, they present us with options which we must then reflect upon and from among which we must then *choose*. Thus, Korsgaard posits that self-consciousness creates a “wedge,” a reflective space between incentive (instinctive impulse) and response (action): a gap that must be actively bridged. This gap is a manifestation of the normative question: it asks, does this incentive give me a reason for action? Am I *justified* in obeying this instinct? To answer these questions, to bridge the gap, she argues:

We need principles, which determine what we are to count as reasons. Our rational principles then replace our instincts—they will tell us what is an appropriate response to what, what makes what worth doing, what the situation calls for. And so it is in the space of reflective distance, in the internal world created by self-consciousness, that reason is born.<sup>17</sup>

This means that, unlike for other animals, instincts and incentives are only *potential*, not *immediate* grounds, and it is this uncertain potentiality which requires us to engage in a process which Korsgaard refers to as reflective scrutiny and endorsement.

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<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 116.

#### 4.iv | Reflective Scrutiny and Endorsement

Reflective scrutiny and endorsement are twin concepts that serve as the “bridge” referred to above. In a sense, reflective scrutiny is the *process* and reflective endorsement (or rejection) is the *product*, a progression which has epistemic as well as practical manifestations. The epistemic level of *belief* is perhaps simpler: “I perceive, and I find myself with a powerful impulse to believe. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I believe? Is this perception really a reason to believe?”<sup>18</sup> A parallel process occurs at the practical level of action: “I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a reason to act?”<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, there are many instances where these operations occur automatically and perhaps even subconsciously. If you are a student in a classroom you will not stop and doubt every statement your teacher tells you. In the same way, if you have already reached the conclusion once that it makes sense to start each day with a cup of coffee, you will not revisit the proposal unless some new information or situation arises to challenge that decision. Nevertheless, the fact that the endorsement has become an unquestioned habit does not undermine the idea that in both kinds of situations something more than the triggers of perception<sup>20</sup> (epistemic) or desire (practical) are needed to proceed:

The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a reason. Otherwise, at least as long as it reflects, it cannot commit itself or go forward. If the problem springs from reflection then the solution must do so as well. If the problem is that our perceptions and desires might not

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<sup>18</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In later chapters I will even be challenging the straightforwardness of perception as a trigger.

withstand reflective scrutiny, then the solution is that they might. We need reasons because our impulses must be able to withstand reflective scrutiny. We have reasons if they do.<sup>21</sup>

This capacity to withstand our reflective scrutiny and consequently serve as a reason (for action or belief) is what Korsgaard refers to as *reflective endorsement*:

Once the space of awareness—of reflective distance, as I like to call it—opens up between the potential ground of a belief and the belief itself, or between the potential ground of an action and the action itself, we must step across that distance with some awareness that we are doing so, and so must be able to endorse the operation of that ground as the basis for what we believe or do. And a ground of belief or action whose operation on us as a ground is one that we can endorse is a reason.<sup>22</sup>

Note how the three types of “reason” are working together here. It is because of our RReason, (our capacity for rationality) that we are reflectively distanced from our beliefs and actions. It is through reasoning that we are able to bridge that gap by coming up with reasons for or against the belief or act under review. Thus our self reflective nature is simultaneously that which enables us to have reasons and that which forces us to “acquire” them: it is our reflective distance that requires us to *choose actions* rather than merely *react*, or be acted upon.<sup>23</sup> And this need to choose is not itself a choice; it is a necessity, “the simple inexorable fact of the human condition.”<sup>24</sup> To explain how all of this relates to Korsgaard’s metaethical framework I need to turn now to the “self” piece of reflective *self*-consciousness, because to be reflective in this way requires us to have a conception of ourselves, whether or not such a self ‘exists’. This brings me to one of Korsgaard’s most central concepts and significant

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<sup>21</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> The Kantian ideas of autonomy as opposed to heteronomy are relevant here.

<sup>24</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 2.

contributions to constructivism as a whole: the concept of practical identities.

#### 4.v | The Need for a Self

Our capacity for self-reflection provides us with far more freedom, opportunities, and control than is enjoyed by non-human animal counterparts, but it also creates problems for us insofar as it requires us to not only decide to act but also choose which action to undertake. Pure *Reason* is necessary, but not sufficient for this endeavor. “If you conceive yourself simply as a pure rational agent, and are not committed to any more specific conception of your identity, you are, as it were, too distant from yourself to make choices.”<sup>25</sup> The attentive reader will see clear Kantian and Aristotelian influences crashing into one another here. As I mentioned above, Kantian constructivists, like their namesake, are often accused of bland proceduralism, empty formalism, or blunt universalism. Korsgaard is keen to avoid these vulnerabilities, and her concept of selfhood—and the practical identities which work to constitute it—can be understood as her way of avoiding these sorts of accusations. *Reason* alone can prohibit certain actions or inferences through laws of non-contradiction, but it cannot generate a choice in favor of one specific concrete action (or inaction) in this moment. The “empty self can have no reason to do one thing rather than another.”<sup>26</sup> Korsgaard refers to this as the more *formal* aspect of the problem, i.e. *why* we need a ‘self’ as opposed to the question of the kind of self we need.

Even if you could locate some such reasons, there is also what Korsgaard calls the *commitment problem*: a reason that is only a reason in this moment and never again, cannot really be distinguished from the animal’s impulsive instinct. Thus, it would seem that

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<sup>25</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

normative reasons demand some amount of consistent commitment over time. To be a person is not simply to exist in the world as a rational animal; “to be a person is to be constantly engaged in making yourself into that person,”<sup>27</sup> that is, in *committing yourself* to being a certain kind of person that can “fill in” the empty self of the purely rational Kantian agent. Reason alone is not sufficient for selfhood. Thus, it is because of our embodied and reflective nature—because we are not *purely rational*, but rather *relentlessly self-reflective*—that we need a more robust understanding of the self, one that can generate *reasons* for action by integrating our myriad animal impulses under a unified normative source. This robust understanding of the self is what Korsgaard refers to as our integrated collection of *practical identities*.

#### 4.vi | Practical Identities

Throughout her many writings on the subject, Korsgaard consistently defines practical identities as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”<sup>28</sup> We have many such conceptions which can range from accidental born-into identities like citizenship, sex, or filial identity, as well as consciously adopted or chosen identities such as vocations, religious or philosophical orientation, relationships, or causes. As is clear from the definition’s wording, the crux of a practical identity concerns *value*<sup>29</sup> and *action*.<sup>30</sup> Let me first unpack the emphasis on “value” and “worth/whileness.”

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Korsgaard uses the idea of self and person interchangeably so I too use the terms here interchangeably. I am however well aware of other philosophers like Jay Garfield who use these terms *in opposition to one another*.

<sup>28</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> A description under which you value yourself.

<sup>30</sup> A description which can motivate specific actions over others.

As I explained in the previous section, *Reason* is necessary but not sufficient to generate a choice for one *reason* or action over another, except insofar as it can rule certain options out if they are logically inconsistent. Reflective endorsement—as opposed to mere reflective rejection—requires *value* in addition to *Reason*. In other words, it is only by possessing *values* in addition to our *Reason* that we can in fact identify *reasons*. Value in this sense can consequently address the formal version of the problem just identified:

Valuing yourself under a certain description consists in endorsing the reasons and obligations to which that way of identifying yourself gives rise. To say that a citizen of a certain nation values himself under that description is not to say that his purpose is to be a citizen of that nation. It is to say that he ratifies and endorses the reasons and obligations that go with being a citizen of that nation, because that's how he sees himself.<sup>31</sup>

But as I mentioned above, there is another aspect of the problem: *commitment*, for which the momentary endorsement of a value is insufficient. This is why we need valued *identities* (i.e. commitments) and not just *momentarily endorsed values*.

This leads right into the other crucial emphasis in this definition: *action*. Practical identities only count as practical because of their ability to generate actions. They do not just lead us to endorse certain values, they compel us to *act* on the basis of those values. “Our conceptions of our practical identity govern our choice of actions, for to value yourself in a certain role or under a certain description is at the same time to find it worthwhile to do certain acts for the sake of certain ends, and impossible, even unthinkable, to do others.”<sup>32</sup> While this does not mean that it is *causally responsible*, or *determinative* of a singular path forward, a practical identity does generate principles for *guiding* action. Because practical identities are descriptions under which you value yourself and find your actions to be worth

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<sup>31</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 20.

undertaking, they not only make a robust notion of the self possible, they also make *action*—as opposed to impulsive *acts*—possible. More on that to follow. Finally, it is important to emphasize that the relationship between our practical identities and our choice of actions is not *unidirectional*. While our practical identities govern the types of choices we can reasonably make, those same choices are also what constitute our practical identities in an ongoing, reciprocal give and take. This feature relates to the issue of commitment alluded to above. A person has an identity in a more complex sense than other animals, according to Korsgaard, because she consciously constitutes her own identities through the choices that she makes and her “everyday work of practical deliberation.”<sup>33</sup>

Note how Korsgaard’s Aristotelian influences come to the fore here: The fact that we actively constitute ourselves in this way is *not*, however, to say that all practical identities are actively chosen from the start. We do not begin our lives as blank slates. We do not choose the country we are born in, or the parents we are born to. As we grow and move about in our lives, however, we *can* choose the *extent* to which we *endorse* these identities by the extent to which we allow them to “win out” in the generation of our reasons for action. In other words, for practical identities *to in fact be practical*, we must first reflectively endorse them. The *contingent circumstances* of living in a certain country and being biologically related to certain persons only become *practical* identities when you reflectively endorse those circumstances as *reasons for action* and *affirm that identity* by acting in accordance with the values and reasons which that identity generates. As Korsgaard explains, “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. In choosing in accordance

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<sup>33</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 129.

with these forms of identity, I make them my own.”<sup>34</sup> There is not a significant or substantive difference, therefore, between practical identities which we are born into and then proceed to endorse, versus those that we consciously and voluntarily adopt.

Christine Korsgaard is a Kantian, so the active reader must be wondering where obligation fits in this picture. Once again the answer is in our practical identities: “Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, practical identities help us to choose actions as much through the options which they force us to “cross off”, as what they commit us to value. For example, if you reflectively endorse being someone’s friend you will find spending time with them, doing favors for them, or sitting by their sick bed to be actions worth doing, whereas undermining their opinions, ignoring their calls, or gossiping behind their back will be ‘unthinkable.’<sup>36</sup> Practical identities thus *obligate* insofar as an action can be deemed to be incompatible with the value precepts of a practical identity that we continue to reflectively endorse. Sometimes, of course, what one of our identities endorses, another may forbid. Sometimes, it is just a specific action that poses a problem, sometimes it is an entire identity that comes into conflict with another. In such latter cases, the reflective agent will have to decide which identity is more essential to their integrated self. Not all identities are valued to the same degree and commitment is not necessarily unconditional. As Korsgaard emphasizes, “some parts of our identity are easily shed, and, where they come into conflict with more fundamental parts of our identity, they should be shed.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101. N.B. These are not necessarily *moral* obligations. More on that in the coming sections.

<sup>36</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 129.

To recap so far, the (self-)reflective nature of our rationality puts us at a crucial distance from our impulses such that we must necessarily make decisions as to which of those inclinations we will pursue. Any actions we take, then, are necessarily based on *reasons*. This inescapable process of rational reflection and deliberation in turn requires us to have a substantive understanding of ourselves; not in the thin sense of Kant's imperfectly rational moral agent, but in a robust, thick, and sometimes (often) messy sense. Which is to say that practical identities do not, alone, remove the tragic challenges of moral deliberation. Daily we find ourselves in situations in which we must pit one genuinely held identity against another. Sometimes we make a decision to follow the obligations of one over the other while still endorsing both identities, but sometimes we will have to make a choice between identities themselves. It is natural and expected that we will shed and adopt various identities over the course of our lives whether those identities are related to specific roles like parenthood or new discoveries, like hobbies or philosophical perspectives.

But is this reflective process purely subjective, meaning radically relativistic? How do we adjudicate *between* identities and their respective values and obligations? In other words, how can this framework avoid the radical forms of relativism wherein a mafioso is justified in killing, stealing, and violence because it is part of the identity he holds dear as a member of that brotherhood and commitment to the values of family and loyal friendship? What regulates the adoption of these normative identities themselves? I have sought to explain how practical identities can generate normativity, but, as Korsgaard herself is the first to point out:

There is still a deep element of relativism in the system ...as I've said already, different laws hold for wantons, egoists, lovers, and Citizens of the Kingdom of Ends. In order to establish that there are particular ways in which we must

think of our identities, and so that there are moral obligations, we will need another step.<sup>38</sup>

This additional step is what Korsgaard refers to as the *moral identity*, one which governs our endorsement of other practical identities because it cannot be shed and so its demands necessarily supersede any practical identities or actions that conflict with its requirements.

#### **4.vii | The Moral Identity: “Humanity”**

Korsgaard’s “solution” to the threat of relativism is much in the Kantian vein of the second formulation of the categorical imperative: In recognizing our own Reason and values as a source of normativity, we must respect other similarly rational, valuing beings as normative “ends in themselves.” This argument takes distinct forms in her different writings over the course of her career, many of which have inspired a great deal of secondary critique. I do not have the space to explore all of these versions, so I will instead work through the main features of the version that I take to be the least vulnerable to critique and most helpful of the various iterations that she puts forward. There are roughly six distinct steps, I will deal with each in turn.

The first step in this argument is simply to acknowledge that as a result of our self-reflective nature, and its ensuing “normative problem,” we need practical identities and lots of them. As I have already discussed, Korsgaard refers to this as our “human plight”: we must act in one way or another, and to do so, we need *reasons*. Reasons, in turn, require principles which are themselves only possible from the perspective of a particular (practical) identity, or ideally, from the perspective of a cluster of integrated identities. Therefore, Korsgaard

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<sup>38</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 112-113.

claims, “carving out” such a perspective to which we hold ourselves accountable, “is one of the inescapable tasks of human life.”<sup>39</sup> The second step is to then recognize that what makes those *necessary* practical identities *possible* is our *capacity to value* specific “pictures” of life; certain goods and the actions required to bring about those goods. Recall the earlier sections on reflective self-consciousness and its connection with reflective scrutiny and endorsement. This self-conscious, self-reflective, rational, and axial nature is what Korsgaard will refer to, in a very technical, specialized sense, as our “humanity;” the defining feature that makes us human.

Step three then puts forward a transcendental argument. Endorsing any single one of your practical identities, Korsgaard argues, logically requires you to implicitly and simultaneously endorse the specifically human nature or capacity *that makes such self-reflective rational valuing possible*. You cannot endorse the demands of those practical identities without necessarily and simultaneously endorsing the inherent value of the capacity that makes those identities possible. This capacity is what makes the various other “voluntary” practical identities and their values (and actions) possible. Korsgaard therefore refers to it as the “moral” identity; “humanity” valued as an end in itself. And as Korsgaard is keen to emphasize, “if you are to have any practical identity at all, you must acknowledge yourself to have moral identity—human identity conceived as a form of normative practical identity—as well.”<sup>40</sup> Like the other practical identities which not only motivate certain actions, but also forbid through “obligation”, the moral identity not only values humanity as

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<sup>39</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 125.

an end in itself, it also generates or entails certain obligations, what Korsgaard delineates as specifically *moral* obligations.

Step four of the argument is to articulate the implications of this logical demand; unlike our other practical identities, our moral identity cannot be shed or demoted without serious repercussions for the integrity of our self, and as a consequence—as I will explain below—agency itself. As Korsgaard explains, “what makes morality special is that it springs from a form of identity which cannot be rejected unless we are prepared to reject practical normativity, or the existence of practical reasons, altogether.”<sup>41</sup> Because it “cannot” be *shed*, the moral identity possesses a certain “supremacy” over the other practical identities, such that this identity and its obligations “must” be prioritized over and against those of the other practical identities if and when conflicts arise. Insofar as the moral identity can “negate” the incentives and obligations of practical identities that come into conflict with its own, Korsgaard argues, it can in this sense can “govern” among them. It is consequently this identity that engenders specifically *moral* obligations, because it tells us which values we “can” (legitimately) value, which practical identities we “can” in fact endorse. It also moderates the extent to which we “can” prioritize our own interests over those of others because it prohibits courses of action that inhibit someone else’s ability to direct their life according to the dictates of their practical identities.

Understanding how the moral identity can accomplish this in a rationally necessary way brings us to step five, which explores what concrete obligations this identity supposedly generates. Recall that under Korsgaard’s deontology, one’s obligations spring from what one’s practical identities *forbid*. It will therefore be most helpful to understand how the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

moral identity generates obligations in terms of what it purportedly disallows. According to Korsgaard's transcendental argument, the moral identity "requires" us to value our humanity because that is what makes our own valuing and action *possible*. Any inclination brought before us by one of our personal practical identities, must be able to pass the "test" of valuing that capacity to generate value(s) and direct your life accordingly, both in yourself, and crucially, in *everyone else*. If you murder someone, for example, or cheat them, or lie to them, you are "taking away" their ability to self-reflectively generate value and direct their actions accordingly. Such behavior on your part would therefore be logically self-contradicting (though of course not physically impossible) because you would be endorsing your own capacity to value and direct your actions, while simultaneously undermining and subverting that same capacity elsewhere. I will explore some more illustrative examples below in further, more helpful detail. First, however, I must confront the rather obvious solipsist's objection.

It is one thing, the solipsist might argue, to point out that I must value *my* humanity i.e. *my* capacity to value, insofar as *I* endorse various practical identities and take action, but surely the same logical necessity does not apply to the humanity of others? What is keeping me from prioritizing my own reflectively endorsed desires and impulses over those of everyone else? Korsgaard, of course answers in the negative, claiming that "what is your own, in the individual sense of your own, is not your humanity but what you make of it, your practical identity, and the existence of that depends on your respect for humanity in general."<sup>42</sup> Whereas our individual practical identities are indeed specific to us, the moral identity is *universal*. My capacity to reason and value *is the same capacity* as anyone else's,

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<sup>42</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 204.

even if *what* we value is completely different. In other words, it is not the “mineness” that makes the moral identity normative, it is its universally-human-ness. There is no functional distinction between “my own” moral identity, and anyone else’s. It is therefore self-contradictory, at least so Korsgaard argues, to simultaneously value and respect our own capacity for rational valuing, and acting upon the precepts of our reflective discernment, while making decisions that inhibit that same capacity in others. This is what the moral identity forbids, and its obligations spring from this potential incoherence.

Step six of Korsgaard’s argument continues with this motivating concern around avoiding relativism: any values and their associated actions that contradict the moral identity are non-endorsable. This should be relatively clear in light of the previous explanations. To see how this is supposed to work in practice, however, consider the following case. Imagine you own a company, and to have the company function successfully, you need to hire workers. In the interest of maximizing the success of your business (as dictated by your dearly held practical identity as a successful business owner), what courses of action are—or are *not*—available to you? Suppose that someone comes in for a job interview, you think they would be a good fit for the position in question, so you make them an offer of ‘x’ compensation in return for a specified amount and type of labor. Upon their own self-reflective deliberation, they agree. So far so good. You have both freely entered into an agreement as a result of autonomous self-reflective deliberation, and each person subsequently keeps up their end of the bargain. This is all morally “legal” according to Korsgaard’s framework. All the individuals involved are able to autonomously endorse certain values from the perspective of their practical identities and make informed decisions about courses of action they will take to manifest those values. Worker and employer are

also free to end the agreement (within the constraints of set contract lengths) if the arrangement ceases to be something that they reflectively endorse.

Consider, on the other hand, a far less ideal example of employment, one that unfortunately happens every day across the world. A young woman receives a pamphlet promising lucrative waitressing work and visa sponsorship in another country. Excited for an opportunity far beyond what is available in her small rural town she accepts the ticket and travels to the new location. Here however, the employer has lied, the work is not waitressing, but sex work and it is not compensated lucratively but instead consists in forced labor wherein she is forced to stay in this position and work off the “investment” made by the “employer” until she has paid off the “debt.” This tragically familiar case would be morally speaking “illegal” under Korsgaard’s framework even though in both cases the “employer” is simply taking action to manifest the reflectively endorsed value of maximizing the efficiency and success of his or her business as dictated by the practical identity of “successful business owner.”

How can Korsgaard’s framework claim that the former is acceptable while the latter is somehow logically, i.e. transcendently prohibited? Duping an individual into forced labor under false pretexts in the interests of shaping your life according to your design is logically inconsistent because you are inhibiting the capacity of autonomous reflective deliberation in another while self-reflectively endorsing the value of that same capacity in yourself. Recall that you cannot logically endorse any practical identity (such as successful entrepreneur) without simultaneously endorsing the universal human capacity to value, deliberate and act according to that deliberation. This second example is not immoral because of the nature of the work in question. Freely endorsed careers in sex work can be well within the confines of

Korsgaard's moral framework. What makes this example untenable is the *logical contradiction* involved in self-exemption or self-exception on Korsgaard's model. In the latter example, the employer is denying the other moral agent the possibility of directing their life actions in accordance with their reflectively endorsed practical identities. While the lines become blurrier in cases of sweatshop labor, or anti-union legislation, it should be clear at this point how Korsgaard can at least *claim* to avoid worrisome forms of relativism, solipsism, and egoism etc. There are limits and constraints on both which practical identities we can adopt (slave owner, conman, assassin), as well as which inclinations of those acceptable practical identities (stealing a dress to be a good friend) we can consistently endorse. Unfortunately, the fact that such actions are rationally incoherent, does not mean that we are physically *incapable* of performing them. What is to actually stop us, then, from such actions, apart from a self-reflective valuation of "being a moral person"?

I mentioned above that Korsgaard argues that such logically inconsistent action is *destructive to the self*, but how exactly can she make such a claim? What actually "happens" when an individual fails in their moral task, as we inevitably do, at least on occasion? Obviously, it is not as if we disappear in a puff of "unselfing" smoke. Rather, Korsgaard argues, these failures build up over time in a way that undermines our structural integrity as self-reflectively rational beings and thus, threatens our capacity for agency itself. But this disintegration is an admittedly gradual thing. In the same way that a few criminals counterfeiting even millions of dollars will have no real effect on a country's inflation, so too, our practical identities and even our moral identity itself can take quite a few hits. Korsgaard will nevertheless argue, however, that

Respect for humanity is a necessary condition of effective action. It enables

you to legislate a law under which you can be genuinely unified, and it is only to the extent that you are genuinely unified that your movements can be attributable to you, rather than to forces working in you or on you, and so can be actions. So the moral law is the law of the unified constitution, the law of the person who really can be said to legislate for himself because he is the person who really has a self. It is the law of successful self-constitution.<sup>43</sup>

To fully evaluate the merit of this claim I must first turn to Korsgaard's understanding of agency and self-constitution which together build upon the features already discussed to form her "constitutional model" of the moral life.

## 5 | THE CONSTITUTIONAL MODEL

### 5.i | Action and Agency

Action, for Korsgaard, is far more than mere physical movement. In order to distinguish an action, from a mere movement, "twitch", or sequence of events, it must have an identifiable *agent*; an author to whom the action can be attributed<sup>44</sup> such that the acts in question are directed and "self-guided, by those who engage in them"<sup>45</sup> whether in reference to external or internal goals. This idea is a further elaboration of the discussion above around what distinguishes human actions from those of other non-human animals for Korsgaard. Not all agents are people nor even physical entities, however; corporations, governments, institutions, and God are all examples of non-physical action authors. For Korsgaard, an agent is an actor with *agency*, which may just sound like a tautology, but brings me to the second important concept for this section (agency).

Korsgaard describes the *ideal form* of agency as "inserting yourself into the causal

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<sup>43</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 206.

<sup>44</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 29.

order, in such a way as to make a genuine difference in the world.”<sup>46</sup> Because she defines agency in this way, an agent must act from *autonomy*—in the Kantian sense of not being determined heteronomously—and with *efficacy*; that is, they must actually effect a change in the world; they must be able to “make a difference.” You cannot be an agent without *both* of these attributes and you cannot be efficacious without first being autonomous. “So no matter how much stuff is happening as a result of your movements, you are not efficacious unless you are the author of those movements, and you are not their author unless they are expressive of your own autonomous choice.”<sup>47</sup> For this reason, Korsgaard describes the relation of efficacy and autonomy as two sides of the same “coin” of ideal agency. Autonomy “looks behind” insofar as it is the *source* of action and agency, while efficacy “looks ahead” to the agent’s *effects*. What is important about this understanding of agency for my purposes is that Korsgaard identifies autonomy and efficacy with Kant’s categorical and hypothetical imperatives respectively, referring to them collectively as the laws of agency.<sup>48</sup> In order to clarify this claim about imperatives, I must take a short detour through what Korsgaard refers to as “constitutive standards” and “constitutive principles.”

## 5.ii | Constitutive Standards and Principles

As Korsgaard defines it, a *constitutive standard* is a standard “that arises from the very nature of the object or activity to which it applies. It belongs to the nature of the object or activity that it both ought to meet, and in a sense is trying to meet that standard.”<sup>49</sup> Constitutive standards most obviously apply to functional objects like houses, knives, blenders, etc. If a

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<sup>46</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 7.

knife cannot cut anything at all one might question whether one should really consider it a knife, but non-functional objects also ‘possess’ such standards. It is a constitutive standard of being a bachelor, for example, that you are a man and that you are unmarried. *Constitutive* standards must be contrasted with *external* standards which simply “mention desiderata for an object that are not essential to its being the kind of thing that it is.”<sup>50</sup> It is not a *constitutive* standard, for example, that a bachelor be fun at parties, or galant, or handsome, even though such attributes might render him a more *eligible* bachelor. He need not even, contra the brilliant Jane Austen, “be in want of a wife.”<sup>51</sup> All of these ideals are *external* standards, possibly desirable to himself or others but having no bearing on whether he *is or is not a bachelor*.

There are two important features of constitutive standards. First of all, Korsgaard emphasizes that they are simultaneously normative *and* descriptive. They are descriptive insofar as the thing in question must succeed in—or at least come close to<sup>52</sup>—“achieving” them, simply in order *to be that thing*. At some point, an object will simply *not count* as the type of thing in question if it goes too far in failing to conform to the relevant constitutive standards. As alluded to above, we can criticize a knife for being bad at cutting, but if it was a bad enough knife we might say that it is not in fact a knife at all. The second key feature is a consequence of the first: constitutive standards are able to *withstand skepticism* more easily than are external desiderata. Someone who asks why a bachelor must be unmarried simply does not understand what a bachelor is. Another way of putting this, of course, is that constitutive standards are in some sense tautological, but the lines are not always so easy to

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<sup>50</sup> Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Austen, Jane, Austin Dobson, and C. E. Brock. *Pride and Prejudice*. London; New York: Macmillan, 1901.

<sup>52</sup> I will discuss varying degrees of failure in more detail below.

draw. Returning to my previous example, it is one thing to say that a fork is not a knife, but what about a very blunt “knife”? Consider, for instance, a paring knife that cannot even cut butter. At what point does this object cease to be a knife at all? Put differently, not all constitutive standards operate like an on-off switch, as in the case of the bachelor. Korsgaard addresses this issue with her concept of *defect*. A functional object is defective insofar as it fails to meet constitutive standards that it is “trying” to manifest. A blunt knife is defective insofar as it is a knife’s *telos* to be sharp enough to cut things. A blunt spoon is not defective because it is not a constitutive standard of spoons that they be able to cut things. Thus, at least when it comes to functional objects, defect is a *spectrum*, and this feature becomes especially important for Korsgaard’s claims about (im)moral action and (dis)integration of the self.

### **5.iii | Constitutive Principles**

Whereas constitutive *standards* applied to *nouns*, there are also what Korsgaard refers to as constitutive *principles* which refer to *verbs*, i.e. *actions*. Constitutive principles describe the standards according to which one must be guiding one’s actions in order to “count” as performing the activity in question. It is a constitutive principle of horseback riding that you (try to) stay on the horse, for example, and it is a constitutive principle of swimming that you move through the water at your own discretion without filling your lungs with said water. In the case of product-oriented activities like making a knife, constitutive principles are intimately related to the constitutive standards of their goal product. You can judge the process of making a knife according to how well the materials and methods will lead to the creation of a “good” knife. But constitutive principles are also connected with constitutive

standards insofar as they too are both *normative and descriptive*, and insofar as they too can be *defective*.

Constitutive principles are *descriptive* insofar as they describe simply what it is to do a certain activity. Horse riding simply *means* some form of staying atop a moving horse in one way or another. This can obviously take many more specific forms; there are substantial differences between galloping, jumping, walking or dressage but all of these would count as some form of horseback riding. Constitutive principles are therefore also normative insofar as you can *fail* to accomplish or enact those principles well. There is a tricky puzzle that appears here upon closer examination. How can one differentiate, in a clear cut way, between doing something poorly and *not doing it at all*? Put differently, how does failing to do something, not just consist in succeeding at a very different sort of activity? To return to the previous example of swimming,

If I am not swimming, but just cooling myself by splashing about in the water, then my failure to make headway through the water is no failure at all. But if I am trying to swim—suppose there is a shark headed towards me—and all I succeed in doing is splashing around in the water, then my failure to make headway is a failure indeed.<sup>54</sup>

How, then, can one distinguish between these two examples (splashing around for fun, vs. failing to swim)? As is clear from this quote, it comes down to a question of *intention*, or *orientation*. You must be guiding yourself according to those constitutive principles in order to be judged by them (you must be trying to stay atop the horse as it moves rather than trying to brush its coat), but there is nevertheless usually room for varying degrees of success. There are, that is, principles to which you can fail to conform; just like constitutive standards, constitutive principles also have their respective defective forms. If you are not being guided by the principles of moving through water in a single direction, then it is illogical to say that

you are failing in that task. But if two people are both trying to swim to the other side of the pool and one makes it and the other just floats on their back and flaps their arms around, then you can say that one is swimming well, and the other is not. In such a case it is not accurate to claim that they are endeavoring in two separate activities, rather, “it is the same activity, badly done.”<sup>53</sup> Now I am finally in a position to return to the importance of the Kantian imperatives in Korsgaard’s framework, because for her, these laws of practical reason (the categorical and hypothetical imperatives) just *are* the baseline constitutive principles for action of any kind.

#### **5.iv | The Constitutive Principles of Agency**

Recall from above that true agency is defined by efficacy and autonomy, and that action, unlike mere causality, is subject to normative standards of success and defect. Simply put, agents can fail. If the constitutive *standards* of an *agent* are efficacy and autonomy, then the question follows: what are the corresponding constitutive *principles of acting* that can correspond with these constitutive *standards* of efficacy and autonomy? Korsgaard argues that the Kantian categorical and hypothetical imperatives are precisely those constitutive principles which map on to the constitutive standards of autonomy and efficacy respectively. This makes sense in the context of her framework, because if being an agent requires you to be efficacious and autonomous, then the principles which must guide the process of “*being* an agent” must be those which “create” or constitute an efficacious and autonomous actor.

As I explained above, to be efficacious is to cause a change in the world, to perform the means necessary to bring about some specific end. To be autonomous, is to be identifiable

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<sup>53</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 29.

as the sufficient source of that effect. Efficiency requires that you be the cause of the outcome in question, that you choose the means that will effectively bring about that end. Hypothetical imperatives typically take an IF/THEN format. For example, IF you want to bring about the effect of being a good violinist, THEN you must practice every day. Thus, the hypothetical imperative is the constitutive principle of *efficacy* because it dictates *how to bring about* an intended end.<sup>54</sup> The categorical imperative, by contrast, is not reliant on any “IF factor.” In Kant’s framework it is closely related to the concept of autonomy insofar as it is the only law according to which one can act without being *heteronomously determined*. Even acting according to personal desires can be heteronomous for Kant, however, the details of Kant’s argument are not necessary for the present issue. What is important is the way in which the categorical imperative is meant to “guarantee” the autonomy of the agent in question. In other words, the categorical imperative is the constitutive principle of (autonomous) agency because it demands that YOU be the source of your actions, rather than some other *heteronomous* force. Whereas the hypothetical imperative enables *efficacious* action, the categorical imperative enables *autonomous* action. This is why Korsgaard says that in following the categorical imperative we make ourselves the *cause*, and why she is able to claim that “unless we are guided by these principles—unless we are at least trying to conform to them—we are not willing or acting at all.”<sup>55</sup>

It is important to note that this constitutive relationship goes both ways; you must be an agent in order to truly act, but it is actions themselves (in her precise definition of the term) that in fact “create,” i.e. constitute their respective agents.<sup>56</sup> I will dive deeper into this

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<sup>54</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 72.

<sup>55</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 80.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* We can see her Aristotelian/virtue ethics impulses here.

idea, what Korsgaard refers to as her constitutional model, below. First, however, there is a crucial implication of the preceding argument: Korsgaard's idea of *unification*. I alluded to this concept in the discussion of practical identities and the necessity of integrating those identities satisfactorily in order to succeed as a moral agent. But this concept of unification is also necessary to agency tout court. In order for a movement to be an action rather than a twitch or spasm, that movement must be attributable to my *whole self* as an individual agent, rather than from a heteronomous force working in or on me. Otherwise, all that is happening is something happening *to you*, and such an event cannot be understood in terms of success, defect, or failure:

To call a movement a twitch, or a slip, is at once to deny that it is an action and to assign it to some part of you that is less than the whole: the twitch to your eyebrow, or the slip, more problematically, to your tongue. For a movement to be my action, for it to be expressive of myself in the way that an action must be, it must result from my entire nature working as an integrated whole.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, being a unified agent mostly means being an agent, full stop. A “disunified” agent will very quickly cease to be an agent at all because disunity—and the warring impulses which result—make efficient, autonomous action impossible. This is the case because there will be no identifiable agent performing the actions, just reactive, heteronomous “twitches” of desire working on a body. And yet, this does not mean that we will be a fully-fledged agent before we ever act, there is admittedly a bit of a catch-22 here. While there is no pre-existent self that then begins to act, it is simultaneously true that we need a self to act but also that we achieve that unified self through our deliberative actions. This necessary unification of the self is an active, on-going, and inescapable task, which

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<sup>57</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 18-19.

Korsgaard will term “self-constitution”: a process of integrating our various practical identities under the moral identity and *acting* (effectively and autonomously) accordingly out in the world. The details of this process are fleshed out in Korsgaard’s “constitutional model”, to which I turn now.

## 5.v | The Constitutional Model

As I just noted, there is a bit of a catch-22 involved in ideal agency; you must have a self in order to be truly acting, but it is through genuine action, i.e. *autonomous* and *efficacious* action, that we constitute those same (acting) selves.<sup>58</sup> Korsgaard, however, claims that this apparent paradox is really no paradox at all, invoking Aristotelian notions of life and biology according to which it is simply tautological to say that living beings are constantly engaged in self-constitution whether those living beings are human beings, other animals, or even plants. To live, simply *is* to make oneself into oneself, over and over again. Under the Aristotelian framing, “a living thing is a thing that is constantly making itself into itself.... No one is tempted to say: ‘how can the giraffe make itself into itself unless it is already there?’”<sup>59</sup> For human beings who are inescapably self-reflective and reasoning creatures, deliberative action becomes a necessary self-constituting process. While our self-reflective human nature is what creates the problem—of needing to choose how to act—it is also the source of the solution. It is our self-reflective nature that enables us to constitute unified, acting selves through self-reflective deliberation about what kind of person we want to be, and what such an identity demands we do. This is why Korsgaard’s notion of practical identities is so

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<sup>58</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 45.

<sup>59</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 41-42.

important; *those identities are what enable us to be the genuine authors of our actions*. In choosing actions, we are endorsing certain impulses, desires, values, people, or principles over others. Because we are human, we cannot opt out of this constant valuing and discerning process, but it is also *through this process* that we become one particular unified person; a specific agent. So this phenomenon that Korsgaard terms “the paradox of self-constitution,” is not really so paradoxical after all.

As a result of this central feature of the constitutional model, “moral” action is consequently not so much about being “good” as it is about being unified and *integrated*. Being a “moral” agent, and being an agent tout court, become virtually indistinguishable. Every day, as we move about in the world we come across threats to our psychic unity in the form of tempting but conflicting practical identities or heteronomous impulses that are disallowed by one of our other practical identities or by the moral identity itself. We then must deliberate and act in the face of these threats. For Korsgaard, the moral life is, for these reasons, less about being “good” than it is about being *whole*. This, however, leads her to defend the rather tautological, ouroboric claim that “A good person is someone who is good at being a person.”<sup>60</sup> In order to understand how this basic requirement simply to be a person can generate and require the traditional kinds of moral standards that most of us would like to hold onto, I need to return to the concept of practical identities. It is from these various identities that we get our incentives, many of which conflict with each other or conflict with the undeniable demands of the moral identity. Constituting a unified person out of these diverse and conflicting ends, that is, prioritizing among, and thereby integrating these goals under a unified source of agency, is, after all, the primary task of the moral life.

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<sup>60</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 26.

This work of self-constitution is centered around the process of discernment, often referred to as practical deliberation, which, insofar as it consists in reasoning about *action*, is governed by the same constitutive principles as is action; the categorical and hypothetical imperatives. Practical deliberation is part and parcel of the act of self constitution and reconstitution.<sup>61</sup> Ideal action is what constitutes the agent; action in accordance with the constitutive *principles* of agency (the categorical and hypothetical imperatives) and the constitutive *standards* of our practical identities. But ideal action also involves integrating those identities into a coherent whole, and therefore eschewing those that come into conflict with either the moral identity or one of our more firmly held identities, because actions need to find their source in autonomous (and efficacious) agents, not in heteronomous forces working on the agent. If you act on the basis of conflicting heteronomous impulses from one moment to the next, there will come a breaking point where it is hard to identify any persisting agent, and thus correspondingly untenable to identify the movements as *actions* in Korsgaard's specific sense.

Here, the concept of defect re-enters the scene. Recall from above how we could fail to act according to constitutive principles of a particular action according to which we are indeed attempting to orient ourselves. In the same way that we can fail to swim if we fail to act in accordance with the constitutive principles of swimming (as opposed to say the constitutive principles of splashing or drowning), we can also be defective in our integrating processes of practical deliberation i.e. self-constitution. To fail, fully or in part, to constitute ourselves as agents is to fail to act efficaciously and autonomously; i.e. to fail to act according to the categorical and hypothetical imperatives. To understand why this is so, consider the

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<sup>61</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 126.

admittedly extreme example wherein someone simply allows their impulses of the moment to fling them in one direction after another without reflectively endorsing any of those objects as an object of their unified will:

If I give in to each claim as it appears I will do nothing and I will not have a life. For to will an end is not just to cause it, not even if the cause is one of my own desires and impulses, but to consciously pick up the reins, and make myself the cause of the end. The reason that I must conform to the hypothetical imperative is that if I don't conform to it, if I always allow myself to be derailed by timidity, idleness, or depression, then I never really will an end. The desire to pursue the end and the desires that draw me away from it each hold sway in their turn, but my will is never active. The distinction between my will and the operation of the desires and impulses in me does not exist, and that means that I, considered as an agent, do not exist.<sup>62</sup>

To unify our impulses and desires, we must, in our *willing*, accord with the categorical imperative and we must, in our *acting*, adhere to the hypothetical imperative in order to accomplish the objects of that willing. Defect here, as elsewhere, is a matter of degree; but to whatever extent an action fails to unify the agent—fails to manifest a unified will—to that extent it fails to constitute its “owner” as a unified autonomous and efficacious agent.<sup>63</sup>

At this point we have the relevant pieces of Korsgaard’s constitutional model of moral action in view. For the purposes of this dissertation, her argument can be boiled down to two main points. First is the claim that by acknowledging the empirical and inescapable fact of the reflective structure of our human consciousnesses, *we can ground the source of normativity in our own capacities*. This is the case because that same reflective distance not only *enables*, but *demands* that we provide ourselves with *reasons for acting* in the form of self-generated principles and values. These reasons in turn require a plurality of practical

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<sup>62</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 69-70.

<sup>63</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 174.

identities. We can hold many practical identities simultaneously, and we can adopt and discard any number of them over the course of our lifetime. There is only one identity, and this is her second point, which we cannot ever choose to reject; the universal identity of humanity, our moral identity, and the obligations which, she argues, this identity engenders. Because this is the identity which makes the others possible, we cannot prioritize the goods or dictates of any of those secondary identities over the dictates of this moral identity without incoherence. While our agency is quite tough and resilient, such incoherence is still destructive to our status as agents. Moral action—self-reflective deliberative practical reasoning—by contrast, “shores up” that selfhood. Moral action is thus action that constitutes its agent as a unified self, in the sense just described.

## **6 | EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE**

### **6.i | Returning to Rorty and Stout**

I noted earlier, that in order to respond effectively to Stout’s concerns, we needed a framework wherein moral truth was not merely relative to personal whims or context, without relying upon a problematically metaphysical correspondence theory of truth. Additionally, ideally, it would be able to account for improvability over time, and would provide space for religious or so-called private reasons to play a legitimate role in public moral discourse. Stout wanted a real, undeniable ethics, which could make claims to truth without relying on metaphysical correspondence theories that inevitably try to divide up reality into “value shaped chunks.” As we saw earlier, however, while trying to keep truth from collapsing into justification, Stout repeatedly lets correspondence realist epistemology in through the backdoor. Rorty, similarly, was searching for a way to confront and make

sense of the radical contingency of human beliefs across space and time, without falling into radical relativism and the (dehumanizing) dangers it brings with it. He accordingly proposed his concept of *solidarity* as a way to constrain the unbridled and potentially cruel “redescription” of his ironist. Like Stout, he wanted a solution that is both non-foundationalist and non-metaphysical, but that nevertheless draws a substantive distinction between the idea of a world “out there” with the idea of “truth out there.” And as I noted, an improved version of his framework would accomplish all this without relying on a robust set of (highly contingent) liberal social institutions and values, and without the irony-solidarity contradictions explored above.

Korsgaard’s constructivism, as it stands, is able to accomplish most of these goals. First, and fundamentally, she is able to claim a *kind* of moral realism without a correspondence theory of truth. By shifting the focus onto the very nature of our practical rationality, she has a productive framework within which to evaluate questions of moral truth which, while sensitive to facts from “the world out there”, does not need to find the *normative valence* in that sphere. Value is instead *constructed, necessarily*, by our self-reflective consciousness and the processes of practical rationality which that requires. Had Rorty and Stout begun from a constructivist standpoint, they would have been able to avoid much of their back-door correspondence theorizing. Korsgaard is also better able to accommodate Stout’s desire for the legitimacy of private (religious) reasons and Rorty’s concern about contingency through her emphasis on the multiplicity of our practical identities. We do not share all of our practical identities in common, therefore we will always necessarily have some reasons that are private and/or contingent to our complex and situated self. But rather than try to temper this subjectivity with a vague concept of

democratic discourse (Stout) or the problematically self-contradicting concept of solidarity (Rorty), Korsgaard is able to protect against cruelty and radical relativism without undermining the rest of her argument. She does this, as we saw above, through her demonstration regarding the rationally necessary primacy of the moral identity; the identity that grounds our respect for the dignity of all other rational beings in the undeniable capacity for valuation itself. She could also account for improvability over time, without the challenges Stout faced, by framing improvement as increased consistency in properly prioritizing our moral identity over the others, when conflict requires it. Nor does her solution require robust liberal institutions of the sort Rorty at least implicitly relies upon. Her framework is thus self-contained yet firmly grounded in the undeniable, inescapable guardrails of our own cognitive capacities, which are still sensitive to the *epistemically independent* facts of objective reality, the “world out there.”<sup>64</sup>

To reiterate, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, Korsgaard’s constructivism overcomes the issues inherent in the correspondence and substance-realist accounts, by shifting the criteria in question away from the problematic truth “chunks” out in the furniture of the universe to the processes of practical reasoning. Korsgaard situates the source of moral value normativity in a robust understanding of agency itself which, she argues, is undeniable and necessitates us, insofar as our very nature demands that we act *for reasons*. In so doing she puts forward a more productive framework within which to deliberate morally, which, while sensitive to experiential facts from “the world out there”, is

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<sup>64</sup> One issue which would require additional philosophical legwork beyond that already to be found in Korsgaard’s work is the particular concern of distinguishing between truth and justification. It is doubtful whether Stout would be satisfied with Korsgaard’s constructivism on this front, especially in his claim that there must be a truth, independent of justification, that we are fundamentally *incapable* of knowing. Such a version of realism is probably not compatible with Kantian strands of constructivism. Kantian frameworks as a whole tend, understandably, to view as irrelevant any truths that are inherently unknowable.

yet free from the need to “discover” the normative valence in that sphere. Value is instead constructed, but in a crucially *non-relativistic* way, according to the norms inherent in our inescapably self-reflective consciousness and the processes of practical rationality, and logical consistency which that requires. Her framework is accordingly self-contained, yet more firmly grounded than many rival metaethical systems in the undeniable guardrails of our own cognitive capacities. Moral truths under this model are not out there to be discovered or missed. Rather, they exist as the necessary, and rationally constrained product of our inescapably reflective nature. It is the *process* which determines the correctness of the *outcome*, not vice versa. In this way, Korsgaard is able to avoid at least *some* of the pitfalls of dogmatic substance realism without giving into the nihilist relativism of the agnostic approaches.

## **6.ii | Additional Strengths: Inter and Intra Personal Conflict**

Thinking about polarization (and its dehumanizing effects) in these terms is helpful for a number of reasons, most obviously because it can help us to think through—and make sense of—conflicting obligations in a way in which other forms of realism and Kant’s own system cannot. What it means to be a good soldier might conflict with what it means to be a good neighbor; what it means to be a good parent might conflict with what it means to be a good scholar or artist. As she emphasizes, “conflicting obligations can both be unconditional; that’s just one of the ways in which human life is hard.”<sup>65</sup> While Korsgaard’s framework does not offer an algorithmic “solution” to the problem of conflicting obligations, it does offer a more productive, or at least helpful way for thinking through these dilemmas. First, because she

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<sup>65</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 126.

roots obligations “negatively” in what our practical identities *forbid*, there is a clear cut way to adjudicate between the positive incentives of one practical identity and the negative forbiddance of another. In cases where neither option is forbidden, but we can only do one, as is quite often the case, we must instead deliberate about which practical identity is more dear to us; more important to our unified sense of self. This feature is related to another strength of her framework regarding a different kind of disagreement: the ability to account for some level of disagreement between agents faced with the *same* dilemma.

Consider the infamous example of Sartre’s student who must decide whether to go and fight for his country or stay home and care for his mother.<sup>66</sup> Now, depending on the details of this thought experiment, the moral identity might actually apply in such a way as to forbid one of these actions. If the war is unjust and he would be brutally murdering children, for instance, then there would really be no conflict on the Korsgaardian model. But if the war was a defensive move against an aggressor wherein he might save many lives just like his mother’s, the choice becomes a live one. A utilitarian framework would dictate that he choose the option likely to create or protect the most overall flourishing, but that is not necessarily what Korsgaard’s picture would argue. In fact, Korsgaard pushes back against the idea that we can weigh different goods against each other in this quantitative way. Assuming that the moral identity forbids neither action in this case, the question for the youth becomes *which of his practical identities is most dear to him*; that of citizen in this particular country, or that of son. Both of these identities are of the accidental sort I spoke of earlier in this chapter, which means that it is quite possible that he does not in fact endorse

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<sup>66</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, John Kulka, and Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. *Existentialism Is a Humanism* =: (L'Existentialisme Est Un Humanisme); Including, A Commentary On The Stranger (Explication De L'Étranger). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

*either* contingent identity. In such a case he would be faced with a completely different set of options. There might also be other consciously chosen identities that would weigh on the balance for him. Perhaps he is a pacifist or he actually supports the “enemy” for ideological reasons. One could think of American citizens who risked their lives to help Soviet forces during the cold war on the grounds that they believed communism would bring about a better world (and endorsed the contingent practical identity of communist for that reason). Korsgaardian constructivism does not offer a final answer to any of these deliberations. Instead, her framework can actually account for quite a substantial level of divergence among different agents when faced with the same dilemma, so long as their ultimate decision does not conflict with the moral identity. Depending on the various practical identities that we endorse, different actions will contribute more or less to our individual self-constitution and integration. This means that her system is able to accommodate a fair amount of moral difference, without conceding *too much* ground to the relativists. Whether or not it can account for the full level of polarization we encounter everyday (and its dehumanizing effects) is another matter which I will return to below.

### **6.iii | Private and Religious Reasons**

Through her emphasis on the multiplicity of our practical identities, I would also argue that Korsgaard’s system is additionally better able to defend the legitimacy of religious reasons and religiously grounded values against those who would argue that such reasons have no place in democratic discourse on account of their “private” i.e. “unshareable” nature. Korsgaard has a number of her own arguments around shareable and unshareable reasons that are wholly distinct from this “religious” version of the public-private reasons problem I

am interested in, and I will have much more to say on this topic generally in the concluding chapter. However, a brief aside is still warranted here. Because we do not share all of our practical identities in common, we will always necessarily have some reasons that are “unshareable” i.e. private, or at least specific to our complex and situated self. This helps with the problem of “religious” reasons in public debate because it is already accepted within the Korsgaardian framework that every individual will have many different practical identities, some of which they may hold in common with others, many of which they will not, or at least not in the details.

Korsgaard’s framework thus has much to offer in the way of supporting more productive interreligious dialogue and plural democratic discourse. In recognizing that everyone necessarily possesses myriad personal practical identities that will fail to be normative for all rational agents as such, Korsgaardian constructivism can alleviate *some of* the epistemic stigma around employing *religious* reasons in democratic debate, while still holding interlocutors to high standards of respectful, rationally interrogable discourse through its emphasis on the constitutive principles of agency and the demands of the moral identity. In other words, religious identity becomes one of many crucial practical identities that a person *requires* to carry out their quotidian practical deliberations. But because this system still bars us from *equating* the religious identity with the moral identity (as many religions are admittedly wont to do) it has some preclusion of dogmatism “baked in”. As I mentioned in the introduction, this concern is one of a few central motivators of this project as a whole, so while it will be set on a back burner for the next few chapters, it will return in the final Chapter 6.

## 6.iv | Critique

There have been many critiques made of Korsgaard's system at this point in her career which I do not have space or cause to enumerate. For the specific purposes of this dissertation, I have three *central* concerns. First, her framework can only account for moral disagreement insofar as it is the result of diverse practical identities, and this is insufficient to account for the diverse forms of disagreement which we experience on a regular basis, never mind the intractable issues around polarization and its dehumanizing effects. Put differently, deciding to act according to the dictates of a particular practical identity that you hold dear does not get us as far as would be required for the identity to *determine* specific actions. This is crucial for maintaining autonomy within her constitutional model, but it hobbles the explanatory power of her framework. It additionally runs the risk of undermining the apparent *normative force* of practical identities themselves insofar as different individuals can still reach diametrically opposed decisions in a given situation, on the basis of the *same* practical identity. Consider just one such example.

While there are many women who do not see motherhood as a source of meaning or an identity under which they take themselves to be valuable, do not see "mother" as one of their practical identities, the practical identity of motherhood is, for many women, a practical identity of the first degree, one which they will often prioritize over all others. But the fact that two or more women will prioritize the claims of this particular practical identity to the same degree, does not mean that they will make the same life choices. Two women who consider their role as a mother as essential to who they are, still often "perform" that identity through wildly divergent, and even *opposite* actions. One woman may give up a career she loves to care for her children, while another stays in a job she may detest to make more

money and provide better opportunities for those children. Another might send her children through dangerous waters without her to have a better life in another country while another mother in the same circumstances would see this course of action as deplorable. Two women who hold their identities of mother in “equal” regard may even reach opposite decisions regarding the possibility of abortion as a tenable course of action. During the Covid pandemic we saw how the identity of being a good parent—who keeps their children safe and helps them thrive—can just as easily motivate someone to vaccinate their children as it can to avoid vaccinating them at all costs. In the same way that a single practical identity can motivate two individuals to take opposite actions, the *same* action can similarly be motivated by *opposite* practical identities. Two women might both choose to give up their children for adoption, but one makes that decision out of her belief that this is the best way she can provide for that child; i.e. be a good mother to that child, while the other might reach the same decision to give up her child because motherhood is not a description under which she values herself, “mother” is not a practical identity which she self-reflectively endorses. These same phenomena occur with other identities: just because two individuals share the same practical identity does not mean they will take the same course of action, and *the reverse is true as well*.

Korsgaard is not unaware of this issue, she freely acknowledges that there is room for both creativity and argument when it comes to the question of what *specifically* a certain practical identity can require.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, her system does not confront this issue in a satisfactory way, nor does she even adequately address how such divergence comes to be in the first place if practical identities are as normatively productive as she wants to claim. This

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<sup>67</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 21.

lacuna then hobbles her overall framework in its ability to navigate such divergences and disagreements in practical terms. How indeed do individuals come to such plural understandings of what the same practical identities require? At stake in this concern is the *actual normativity* of these practical identities themselves. If she is unable to explain how agents might reach divergent conclusions about what actions are entailed by a given practical identity, then on what grounds can she say that these practical identities *are in fact normative*? While she gets us quite far in terms of overcoming the problematic dichotomy between dogmatism and relativism, not to mention providing individuals with a helpfully explicit framework for thinking through their personal moral dilemmas, her system is still unable to account for the full array of moral disagreements which cause us so many problems in our communal moral life.

Part of the reason for this, I would argue, and this brings me to my second critique, is that Korsgaard is operating with an overly uniform, under-developed, and overly reductive understanding of rationality (and perception and objectivity) itself. Although I worked through and credited her tripartite differentiation of Reason, reasoning/able, and reasons back at the beginning of the chapter, even this admittedly nuanced picture is ultimately insufficient. Allow me to explain; even though her constitutional model provides crucial first steps in helping us to find our way out of the dead-end dichotomy of realism-relativism in metaethics, her framework fails to account for the way in which our perceptive-cognitive-rational capacities are themselves dynamic, constantly (re-)constituted, actively discerning, practically relevant identities. Or, so I will argue throughout the foregoing chapters. As with the moral identity, these more epistemic identities have normative influence over which identities we reflectively endorse, and what kinds of demands those identities will require

(see the problems from our first critique). Korsgaard's concept of how the personal identities that we adopt can generate particular duties and impact our moral deliberation does add helpful nuance to the overly uniform Kantian picture of practical reasoning and moral agency. She has little to say, however, as to how we come to adopt those particular identities over others in the first place, nor how these personal contexts, experiences, and identities impact the shape and outcomes of our processes of perceptual experience, practical reasoning, reflection, endorsement, and deliberation themselves.

As I alluded to earlier in the chapter, this underdeveloped picture of rationality is not just problematic for the cohesion and "stability" of her philosophical framework, it also contributes to the dehumanizing implications of her constitutional model. Recall that under this picture, failing to act in accordance with the constitutional principles of action, failing to accord with Kant's rational imperatives—i.e. failing to be reasonable or "act rationally"—is not (just) about being good or bad, it is about *being a human person at all*. My third central critique therefore argues that Korsgaard's explicit connection of moral agency and actual-being-human-ness is deeply concerning because of the intimate relationship between dehumanization and violence, as well as subtler forms of societal deterioration.

If we want to keep our polarized disagreements from devolving into dehumanization and its various undesirable symptoms, we ought to want to be very careful and nuanced in how we evaluate "reasonableness" and rational action as it pertains to our criteria of being a human. I have great appreciation for the constitutional model, but leaving it as it stands risks providing conceptual cover for precisely the sorts of dehumanizing impulses that I am hoping to counteract. This is not to say that I will be doing away with Korsgaard's constitutional model itself, indeed I find it quite compelling. I will, however, be dramatically

complicating and redrawing the understandings of perception, reason, objectivity and identity, upon which it explicitly and implicitly relies, as a way to rehumanize, i.e. counteract the dehumanizing tendencies to which her system as it currently stands is vulnerable.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

In the following chapters I will be utilizing Korsgaard's basic metaethical framework as the backdrop for my further interventions for rehumanizing our moral conflicts and disagreements. While it certainly is not without its problems, it accomplishes crucial metaethical work in terms of countering the dehumanizing effects of the relativism-dogmatism divide described in the introduction. It is certainly possible that there is or will be a better metaethical system, indeed many religious frameworks are attractive precisely for their ability to offer a satisfying metaethical model. The special challenge of this dissertation, however, is to meet the needs of conflicting worldviews, "religious" and "secular" alike. I contend that Korsgaard's framework is the most helpful available model that can be *sufficiently inclusive* without simply giving in to relativism. All this being said, however, the remainder of this dissertation will be spent attempting to improve upon her framework, not as it relates to metaethical questions, but in terms of the underdeveloped and consequently reductive (moral) epistemology that it implicitly employs.

Fortunately, there is room within her constructivist framework, or so I will argue, for precisely this improved epistemology, one which integrates less passive understandings of perception, less mechanically reductive understandings of rationality, and less aperspectival notions of objectivity, as well as (practical) identity. Over the next couple of chapters I will endeavor to sketch out exactly what this would look like, ultimately arguing that a more

*autopoietic* and *dynamically co-enactive* understanding of these concepts can enable Korsgaard's constructivism to more successfully confront the kind of moral pluralism and conflict that we encounter and must navigate in our increasingly globalized and divided communities, without allowing such conflict to devolve into dehumanization qua subject *or* object. I will explain what these italicized terms mean, and the enactive school of cognitive science to which they belong in Chapter 5. First, however, I must elaborate my critique of the reductive picture of perception, rationality, "truth" and objectivity which I take to be too pervasive in our socio-cultural imagination, even despite a respectable corpus of philosophical work to counteract such impulses. To this end, the next chapter will dig into the weeds concerning cultural assumptions around rationality, objectivity, and epistemic virtue more broadly, that I take to be particularly problematic and corrosive vis-à-vis the dehumanizing effects of polarizing disagreement.

# Chapter 4: The Issue of Objectivity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

By way of review, in the introductory chapter to this dissertation I explored the problem of moral conflict and its dehumanizing effects. To make headway on this problem, I argued that moral *epistemology* (particularly interventions on perception, reason, and objectivity) represents an underappreciated, often overlooked approach. Epistemic interventions, I argued, could be particularly salubrious because of the way in which such methods could disrupt the slide from mere “existence of moral conflict” to the idea that the person or people on the other side of the conflict must (as evidenced by the persistence of that conflict) be either unable or unwilling to engage in proper moral deliberation. For after all, the dehumanizing impulses so often connected with moral conflict do not just stem from the fact *that* we disagree about what is true or good, it has to do with *what that disagreement represents* and implies to us about the other person. Polarized, persistent moral conflict is not just damaging because we disagree about moral truths, and policy questions, it is damaging because the existence of this level of disagreement could seem to imply that “the other” is totally beyond the reach of moral dialogue, and consequently perhaps outside of our own moral universe entirely. Internal to these assumed implications seems to be the intuitive idea that competent and good faith exercises of “objective” rationality must or at least *should* yield identical results, regardless of the contingencies of the individual epistemic agent.

Under this picture, the kind of disagreement we see (amplified) on the news and in our national politics can “only” be explained if at least one side is either *incapable* or *unwilling* to engage in epistemically virtuous (practical) reason. The only other apparent (even more terrifying) explanation is that this other person’s core moral values must be so far from our own concerns around justice and human flourishing that no good faith discourse—no matter how epistemically virtuous<sup>1</sup>—could possibly bridge the divide anyway. And perhaps this means that they are somehow fundamentally if not unalterably outside of our own moral universe. At the very least, the available explanations are quite dehumanizing to the individual or community in question. To make headway on this issue, I argued, not only is a working metaethical framework needed (see previous chapter), but also a moral epistemology that can reshape how we understand perception, rationality, identity, and objectivity.<sup>2</sup> The previous two chapters made the case for the best metaethical system, the current chapter and the one immediately following turn to this epistemological legwork. The present chapter represents the necessary first step of critique by complicating some popular assumptions around perception, rationality, and objectivity which I take to represent central, albeit often unconscious catalyzers of the dehumanizing aspects of disagreement. The following chapter will put forward and explain the conceptual resources from enactive cognitive science which I will use in my own constructive proposals in the final two chapters. I accomplish my goals in the present chapter with the help of intellectual historian of science Lorraine Daston and her co-author Peter Galison, as well as a few key

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<sup>1</sup> I use epistemic virtue in the sense of intellectual virtues which are characteristic of an excellent or virtuous human knower. That is, epistemic virtue can be understood as the habits and dispositions which enable a knower to best hone their knowledge, whether that knowledge refers to a collection of descriptive or prescriptive beliefs; i.e. knowledge about reality or value; what one could call moral knowledge. Both kinds of knowledge are crucial to the moral life. More on this in later chapters.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this issue, refer back to the full discussion in the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

ideas from philosopher Quill Kukla that build on Daston and Galison’s work explicitly, and are thus able to serve as bookends to this chapter in a helpful and efficient way.

It is worth emphasizing that I do not see Daston and Galison as offering a radically new or wholly unique critique. I nevertheless chose to lean on their framing for a few important reasons. First, I find their cohesive disambiguation of the concept of objectivity and epistemic practices both efficient and nicely targeted to the arguments I myself will make in later chapters. In particular, their concepts of mechanical and aperspectival objectivity offer an ideal foil for the enactive framework I will be defending. Second, Kukla’s two arguments that bookend this chapter<sup>3</sup>—and which serve as key preliminary stepping stones in my own constructive proposal—are both explicitly inspired by, or at least in conversation with Daston and Galison’s work, thus enabling a chapter with multiple key interlocutors to retain a helpful cohesion. Third, Daston and Galison place an emphasis throughout their argument not merely on complex and changing epistemic virtues, but also on the pivotal visions of the *self* who is “doing the knowing.” Given the Korsgaardian roots of my project and her emphasis on the self, my motivating concerns around dehumanization of selves, as well as my later proposed interventions around identity, this emphasis on epistemic selfhood is particularly expedient.

I begin with the impulse in ethics toward so-called “impersonalist” approaches which try to “solve” the problem of moral disagreement, and moral deliberation generally, by removing “the self” as far away from those processes of moral reflection and deliberation as possible.<sup>4</sup> After differentiating *impersonalism* from the very related concern around

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<sup>3</sup> On impersonalism in ethics, and aperspectivalism in epistemology respectively.

<sup>4</sup> There is a sense in which impersonalism can itself be understood as a form of dehumanization insofar as it seeks to excise the human from human moral deliberation.

*impartiality*, I argue that these impulses are, at least in part, symptoms of a pervasive but problematically reductive, not to mention historically contingent, understanding of objectivity (what Daston and Galison helpfully describe as *aperspectival* objectivity) and its relationship to Truth. Their work serves to complicate our understanding of objectivity by first showing how many different types of objectivity and epistemic teloi there have been generally throughout even recent history, in even the “hardest” of the sciences, as well as how certain more reductive understandings of objectivity and rationality have come to somewhat blot out the others. I then conclude with Kukla’s distinction between *aperspectival* and ontological objectivity. It is this *aperspectival* understanding of objectivity and the passively *mechanical* picture of perception and rationality that goes with it, which I argue are at least in part to blame for Korsgaard’s challenges, and lie at the heart of the dehumanizing effects of moral polarization generally. In the next chapter, I will turn to a burgeoning field of cognitive science to paint an alternative picture of perception, rationality, identity, and objectivity that can provide innovative conceptual resources on these fronts.

## **2 | THE IMPERSONALIST CRITIQUE**

One of the reasons that Korsgaard’s framework is as effective as it is, stems from the fact that she is able, through her concept of practical identities, to avoid a reductive category of approach to ethics that Quill Kukla has referred to as “impersonalism.” So-called impersonalists can be found all over moral philosophy and are defined, according to Kukla, as those who “try to eschew threats of moral relativism and subjectivism by excising the very

self who could be a point of reference for such relativism and subjectivism.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, impersonalism serves as an umbrella designator for a diverse array of approaches to moral epistemology that implicitly or explicitly view self-negation as a necessary—or at least epistemically virtuous—means toward ideal moral perception, deliberation, and judgment. This moral-epistemic virtue can be understood as an ongoing pursuit of *aperspectivalism*, i.e. a view from nowhere (and no *one*). Thinking back to the metaethical divide discussed in the introductory chapter, the allure of this approach is not so mysterious. For those outside the dogmatically realist camp, who are nevertheless understandably eager to avoid the spiraling chaos of moral relativism, this idea of *aperspectivalism* offers a seductive replacement for the perennial epistemic telos of “Truth”. In other words, as Kukla explains, “the adoption of such an *aperspectival* and disengaged stance is seen as a way to secure the objectivity of moral judgment in the face of the impossibility of justifying such judgment using traditional principled arguments and conceptual criteria.”<sup>6</sup> Moral relativism in its more radical forms appears as such a gruesome specter that those without a robust correspondence-realist meta-ethical framework, still run from any wisp or whimper of contingency in the normative sphere. Excising the self in pursuit of ever more *aperspectival* (rather than specifically “accurate” or “true”) perception, deliberation, and judgment is thus, I think understandably, seen as a salvific escape hatch from the dogmatic-relativistic dichotomy.

The next sections of this chapter will explore why this *aperspectival* interpretation of the pursuit of “objectivity” is a questionable epistemic virtue in the first place: both within

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<sup>5</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. “Attention and Blindness: Objectivity and Contingency in Moral Perception.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume 28* (2002): 319–46.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2002.10717592>. 323.

<sup>6</sup> Kukla, “Attention and Blindness,” 322.

moral theory and other disciplines including even the “hard sciences.” This alluring idea of impersonalism will serve as an expedient foil going forward, so it may therefore be helpful to further explore *why* this oddly dehumanizing<sup>7</sup> approach to knowledge is in fact so alluring, as well as some hidden dangers which exist beneath the surface. As Kukla observes, impersonalists across disciplines are united by the idea that knowledge production should strive for the most “objective view,” and that such a view will be “the one that is least bound to a particular perspective and the least ‘distorted’ by the intervening presence of the perceiving agent. The personal, the private, and anything else that cannot be made a matter of public knowledge form the unsavory underbelly of epistemic practice.”<sup>8</sup> In the absence of empirical guardrails out in the architecture of the external world against which to curb radically contingent and arbitrary moral judgments, these impersonalist aperspectivalists search for objectivity in the asceticism of their *processes*, rather than the accuracy of the *products*. A core problem with the impersonalist approach is that this epistemic asceticism often “acknowledges only the lowest common denominator with respect to the intricacies of moral reality.”<sup>9</sup> Anything contingent, or private about the self, anything not universally accessible to all epistemic or moral agents must be cast aside as irrelevant, distracting, or even antithetical to the moral life.

There is of course a peculiarity belonging to the moral domain—in addition to the lack of correspondence realism—that I would argue contributes to the attractiveness of this

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<sup>7</sup> Dehumanizing in the sense that it seeks to exclude the human from its own solo moral deliberative processes, in a sense similar to the ways in which moral exclusion-qua-subject played out at the interpersonal level in Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kukla, “Attention and Blindness,” 331.

<sup>9</sup> Kukla, “Attention and Blindness,” 331-332. I described in the last chapter how Korsgaard pursues a version of this approach, however, she avoids many of the problems of impersonalism by taking a less self-denying approach with help from her emphasis on practical identities and self-constitution.

epistemic asceticism. This feature is the centrality of moral quandaries that involve *more than one agent*, and the consequent need for judicial *disinterest* in the evaluation of right and wrong. It is important to understand how this type of unselfish, un-solipsistic<sup>10</sup> *impartiality* is distinct from *impersonalism* in its problematic sense—even though I would still argue that the latter is often (implicitly) inspired by, and or seen as a necessary ingredient to the former. Impartiality is akin to Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative that seeks to avoid hypocritical self-exemption from moral principles that we would still have others follow. Ironically enough, impersonalism can in part be understood as a reaction to Kant’s *epistemic* rather than *moral* philosophy concerning the inescapability of the self as mediator of all knowledge. More on this idea will come later in the chapter.

The virtuous, but more basic and practical requirement of *impartiality* in arbitration between parties and one’s own deliberation has, I believe, provided outsized support for the intuitiveness of the idea that a pursuit of impersonalist aperspectivity is constitutive of, or at least a respectable replacement for ascertaining moral Truth. Take Adam Smith as just one example:

To the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion. His interests, as long as they are surveyed from this station, can never be put into the balance of our own...Before we can make any proper comparison of those opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place nor from his, neither with our own eyes nor with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has

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<sup>10</sup> Fun fact: the first antonym which comes up for solipsism on thesaurus.com is “objectivity” which is a perfect case in point for the reductive and muddled use of objectivity which I am seeking to counter in this chapter.

no particular connexion to either, and who judges with impartiality, between us.<sup>11</sup>

The self is a strong source of willful interest that can indeed *distort* situations and *blind* us to the relevant particulars. Similarly, it certainly is the case that allowing ourselves to be consumed with our own goals and aspirations can lead us to overlook the “other side” in moral disputes between vying interests. Adam Smith offers us an intriguing case study, however, into how this very defensible entreatment to impartiality and ‘walking in the other person’s shoes,’ is often distorted into a far more extreme aperspectival impersonalism, which, when followed to its logical conclusions, renders *meaning itself untenable*. Or, so I will aim to demonstrate in this chapter and the next.

As Lorraine Daston, the co-coiner of the term “aperspectival objectivity” argues, Smith’s proposed antidote to the distorting powers of self-interest “proceeds in incremental steps from the psychological tugs and pulls of sympathy, which transplant us at least partly into the minds and hearts of our fellows, to the more exalted demands of an idealized impartiality that transcends all particular viewpoints.”<sup>12</sup> The perennial concern of “sinfully” self-interested partiality is thus taken to its arguably *illogical* conclusions in the form of Smith’s ‘man-within-the-breast’ who is meant to represent the perfect and ultimate moral arbiter. While Daston is keen to acknowledge that there appears to be a gap in Smith’s argumentation here—between the more basically non-self-interested but still concrete spectating person, and the aperspectivally impersonalist ‘man-within-the-breast’—she nevertheless argues that for Smith himself there was *no* logical break.

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), eds D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 135.

<sup>12</sup> Daston, Lorraine. “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective.” *Social Studies of Science* 22, no. 4 (1992): 597–618. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/285456.604>.

There is a progressive escalation of the adjectives deployed to describe the impartial spectator that gradually lift him above any concrete identity, ascending from the 'indifferent bystander' to the 'great judge and arbiter'. Using the designations almost interchangeably, Smith transformed the flesh-and-blood 'impartial spectator', who sympathetically assumes any and all viewpoints, into the disembodied 'man-within-the breast', who rises above all particular viewpoints.<sup>13</sup>

The inclination of Kukla's impersonalists toward aperspectivalism is not merely the common sense idea of disinterest and impartiality in moral arbitration between two parties or two perspectives, but rather, a more perverse effort at approaching an idea of truth concerning values by excising all perspective from the equation.

This claim is further supported by the way in which aperspectivalism has shown up not just in questions of *moral* objectivity, but *aesthetic* objectivity as well. As Daston demonstrates, in her intellectual history work on the nature of objectivity, aesthetic theory has *also* sought for self-abnegation in the pursuit of truth. She cites Hume's directives on judging works of art, as a typical instance of this tendency. One must, Hume argues, consider oneself

as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being, and my peculiar circumstances. A person influenced by prejudice complies not with this condition, but obstinately maintains his natural position, without placing himself in that point of view which the performance supposes...By this means his sentiments are perverted; nor have the same beauties and blemishes the same influence upon him, as if he had imposed a proper violence on his imagination, and had forgotten himself for a moment. So far his taste evidently departs from the true standard, and of consequence loses all credit and authority.<sup>14</sup>

Here again, we see a version of the slippage from the more basic concern for avoiding a distorting *partiality* to the much more radical—even, according to Hume, *violent*—excision

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<sup>13</sup> Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," 604-605.

<sup>14</sup> Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," 604 fn 19: David Hume, 'Of Standards of Taste', in *Philosophical Works*, 4 Vols (Edinburgh, 1826), Vol. 3, 271.

of the person tout court from the processes of perception and value judgment. He advocates for a *forgetting* of the self, a sublation of any peculiarities or particularities belonging to the individual.

Daston's co-conspirator in coining this idea of aperspectival objectivity, Peter Galison, takes Schopenhauer as his case study to show how self-suppression comes to be seen as a necessary antecedent to not only aesthetic truth, but personal salvation, and knowledge writ large.<sup>15</sup> On this view, it is *suppression* of the self and the self's perceptive capacities, rather than even the most epistemically virtuous *conditioning* of the self that makes possible true knowledge of a given object. Schopenhauer here uses language not only of forgetting one's individuality and the distorting interests of the will, but also of *losing oneself* so as to be a "clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it."<sup>16</sup> Talk about a view from nowhere, not to mention, a rather dehumanizing epistemology.

It is, I think understandable—though not, however, ultimately tenable—to search for truth in this type of self-abnegation. After all, outside a handful of singularly robust metaphysical systems, values do not "exist" in a way that can easily lend themselves to our aspirations toward unadulterated and empirically supported, ideally unquestionable Truth. Recall Stout and Rorty's struggles on precisely this front. Why not, then, attempt to at least *approach* ever closer to that ideal by means of tirelessly ascetic purification of our epistemic processes themselves?<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting the way in which many of these aperspectivally

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<sup>15</sup> Galison, Peter. "Objectivity is Romantic." In *Humanities and the Sciences*, edited by Jerome Friedman, Peter Galison, and Susan Haack, 15-43.

<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, and E. F. J. Payne. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover Publications, 1966. 178-79.

<sup>17</sup> Iris Murdoch is another, albeit "softer" proponent of this, see for instance her discussions of "M and D" in "The Idea of Perfection."

oriented impersonalists saw the harder sciences as aspirational embodiments of this ideal. It is here that I must turn to the heart of Daston and Galison’s joint project, which is not a critique of impersonalist tendencies in moral philosophy, but rather a critique of the imagined “scientific” objectivity (and scientific self) which I think in part inspires it.

The harder sciences and their apparent claims to unadulterated forms of truth, “objectivity,” and similarly purified epistemic virtues, have long served as both a motivating ideal and source of disciplinary insecurity for fields that by necessity deal with the messiness of human subjectivity—particularly those fields like ethics and aesthetics that proceed by way of even “messier” human *value* judgments. But is this chip on the shoulder warranted? And is this ideal of aperspectivity, of self-negation in pursuit of the view from nowhere, really such a timeless, unquestionable epistemic or even scientific ideal? How would a rebuke of the aperspectival-impersonalist hegemony around objectivity and truth open up fruitful possibilities for how we grapple with moral disagreement and the dehumanizing effects of polarization? These are just a few of the questions that I will engage with throughout the remainder of this chapter.

### **3 | THE MANY FACES OF OBJECTIVITY<sup>18</sup>**

In their many writings on the subject, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison work together to push back on the common assumption that objectivity—at least in its aperspectival sense—is a transhistorical if not immutable epistemic ideal. Not only are there many different definitions of the term objectivity itself that confuse our understanding of it

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<sup>18</sup> This is not an allusion to Hilary Putnam’s *Many Faces of Reality*, though I thank William Schweiker for making me aware of the possible connection.

as an epistemic ideal,<sup>19</sup> they further argue that these distinct meanings are often sutured on to one another in questionable fashion. Additionally, they demonstrate the multiple ways in which too many current scholars and thinkers across disciplines, the harder sciences included, have taken for granted faulty historical understandings of how, when, and in what sense this concept of objectivity entered their various domains.<sup>20</sup> Daston and Galison thus work to show that objectivity is neither as *monolithic* nor *immutable* as is generally assumed in our sociocultural imagination and in many “scientific” disciplinary communities as well.<sup>21</sup> Against the latter assumption, they demonstrate how the concept of objectivity itself has a history, and one that is much more complicated (and nascent) than this popular picture.

To challenge this latter issue of *immutability*, Daston and Galison first disentangle the *monolithic* view of objectivity to demonstrate how the many sub-virtues which have come to be umbrellaed under so-called objectivity are not only logically distinct, or separable, but also *questionably desirable*. As Daston claims at the outset of her article “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” the current or at least *commonplace* usage of objectivity as a term that is “hopelessly but revealingly confused”:

It refers at once to metaphysics, to methods, and to morals. We slide effortlessly from statements about the 'objective truth' of a scientific claim, to those about the 'objective procedures' that guarantee a finding, to those about the 'objective manner' that qualifies a researcher. Current usage allows us to apply the word as an approximate synonym for the empirical (or, more narrowly, the factual); for the scientific, in the sense of public, empirically reliable knowledge; for impartial self-effacement and the cold-blooded restraint of the emotions; for the rational, in the sense of compelling assent from all rational minds, be they lodged in human, Martian, or angelic bodies;

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<sup>19</sup> Such as empirical reliability, procedural “correctness”, or emotional detachment. See “Image of Objectivity” p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> I do not mean to overstate the pervasiveness of these assumptions. There are indeed many scholars who have historicized these concepts in helpful ways and who are not guilty of these reductive ways of thinking. I am here simply defining Daston and Galison’s foil, as I work to reconstruct the key contours of their argument.

<sup>21</sup> Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 598.

and for the 'really real', that is to say, objects in themselves independent of all minds except, perhaps, that of God.<sup>22</sup>

It is one of my central contentions that this confusion represents an opportunity, especially concerning the dehumanizing effects of polarization. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I have specifically chosen the work of Daston and Galison in part because of the connection I see between our collective confusion and conflation of these various meanings of objectivity and the dehumanizing implications we draw from the persistence of moral polarization. Confronting and disentangling this muddiness, will accordingly be productive. In the pages that follow I will focus on the key distinct epistemic sub-virtues that Daston and Galison distinguish: *ontological objectivity*, *truth to nature*, *mechanical objectivity*, *aperspectival objectivity*, *structural objectivity*, and *trained judgment*, as well as the corresponding vision of the knowing self and epistemically virtuous selfhood that is demanded by each in turn.<sup>23</sup> Some of these apply more directly to the issues of moral polarization, but each concept is helpful to this project insofar as they flesh out the *polythetic* and *mutable* counter-history of perception, reason, and objectivity that Daston and Galison helpfully defend. This challenge in turn opens up space for me to propose enactive cognition as a desirable alternative framework in the next chapter.

### **3.i | Ontological Objectivity, or Truth Itself**

“Ontological objectivity” is the version of objectivity most associated with Truth per se, the capital T, of the “really real,” whatever God would know if she does in fact “exist,” or

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<sup>22</sup> Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 597-598.

<sup>23</sup> While it is important to note that Daston and Galison’s joint monograph on the topic uses the history of scientific atlas making as a hermeneutic lens for this disambiguation, the insights have value and relevance far outside of this narrow domain.

correspondence-to-the-ultimate-structure-of-reality. Whereas the subsequent versions of objectivity that I will be exploring in the next sections are historically contingent, and relatively “young”, ontological objectivity (i.e. truth) is by far the most timeless epistemic ideal. The problem is the way in which it has come to be elided with other forms of objectivity. It is safe to assume that human beings have been seeking Truth in one form or another since the beginning of language and communication, if not before. It is therefore, admittedly, a rather obvious epistemic ideal, at least in contexts where there is an obvious ontological (or, depending on one’s philosophical and religious orientation, a *metaphysical*) “chunk” in question to which a proposition can “correspond.” Think back, again, to earlier discussions of Stout and Rorty. The problem is that often—in disciplines ranging from the humanities to the “hard” sciences to non-academic, everyday ventures—the straightforward “ontological chunk” is definitively missing, or at least not accessible in the way required. In the following sections I will turn to the other senses of objectivity that Daston and Galison describe, many of which can be understood as MacGyvered workarounds for precisely this category of epistemic challenges. Daston and Galison further argue that these workarounds are motivated by a concern around not only what is to be known, but around the *self* doing that “knowing.”

In other words, ontological objectivity is far more limited in application than one might at first assume. While the realism-anti-realism debates in ethics are clear evidence of the challenges and limitations of pursuing ontological objectivity when it comes to questions of *value*, (Korsgaard’s project in the last chapter can indeed be understood as a response to this very issue), I will be exploring these questions vis à vis the idea of *meaning itself* in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to note that not only is ontological objectivity more limited

in its applicability than is often assumed, public discourse also has a tendency to *elide* ontological objectivity with other epistemic ideals and/or virtues. Other versions of objectivity, particularly what Daston and Galison refer to as *aperspectival* and *mechanical* objectivity, have come to be seen as necessary to ontological objectivity/Truth, if not equal to it.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.ii | Truth to Nature

The next epistemic ideal which Daston and Galison disentangle they refer to as “truth to nature.” This concept dates to a period in scientific history that was actually *opposed* to objectivity in most modern senses of the term. Daston and Galison in fact refer to truth to nature as *prior to* objectivity even though it experienced its heyday during the scientific practices of the enlightenment, not the historical backwaters of the earliest human societies. “Truth-to-nature and objectivity are both estimable epistemic virtues,” they argue, but the two virtues “differ from each other in ways that are consequential for how science is done and what kind of person one must be to do it. Truth came before and remains distinct from objectivity.”<sup>25</sup> Daston and Galison take the naturalist Linnaeus as an emblematic example of truth-to-nature to show how the “four-eyed-sight” of the scientist with their artist, was exorcized in pursuit of a highly *perfected* representation of reality. Although they employed different forms of representation (engraving, mezzotint, etching, and, later, lithography) the scientific minds of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century were almost all:

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<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the humanities and other “softer” sciences are too often denigrated on account of their supposedly unique failure to live up to or have anything to do with objectivity in these senses, in a way which I am trying to show is misplaced.

<sup>25</sup> Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2007. 58.

United in the view that what the image represented, or ought to represent, was not the actual individual specimen before them but an idealized, perfected, or at least characteristic exemplar of a species or other natural kind...They defended the realism, the truth-to-nature, of underlying types and regularities against the naturalism of the individual object, with all its misleading idiosyncrasies. They were painstaking to the point of fanaticism in the precautions they took to ensure the fidelity of their images, but this by no means precluded intervening in every stage of the image-making process to "correct" nature's imperfect specimens.<sup>26</sup>

Intervention and interpretation, in other words, were not merely allowed into this pursuit of the truth, they were the name of the game, they constituted the height of epistemic virtue.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the various forms of objectivity that developed later on, (see below), which sought to *excise* the knower from the process of knowing, truth-to-nature saw the actively discerning, selecting, and interfering scientist as *essential* to accessing and depicting the True. In other words, the search for Truth under this picture was taken for granted as *an actively interpretive and constituting process*.<sup>28</sup>

In the next sections I turn to two related instantiations of the aforementioned excising efforts at self-erasure; mechanical and aperspectival objectivity. But while those epistemic virtues are much more familiar to us today, it is interesting to note the sense in which truth-to-nature is still intuitive in some sense when understood in relation to *expertise*. Expertise is the key bridge concept that connects truth-to-nature with our more modern understandings of objectivity, truth, and science. Under the standards of truth-to-nature, failure to intervene actively in the scientific process, that is, to fix, constrain, select etc. were all expressions of failure on the part of the knowledgeable and authoritative expert. As

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>27</sup> There is an interesting sense in which one could argue that some idea of a truth-from-nowhere ideal is enmeshed in this pursuit of perfection that is nowhere empirically realized.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 96.

alluded to above, however, various social phenomena including the copernican revolution of philosophical idealism, as well as advancements in technology and the industrial revolution, brought with them a distrust of the self that made such comfort with—and centrality of—subjective individuality an epistemic vice rather than a virtue.

### **3.iii | The Transition to Objectivity**

As I mentioned earlier, one of the central claims which Daston and Galison put forward across their projects on the idea of objectivity is that despite cultural assumptions to the contrary, objectivity itself (not in the sense of ontological objectivity, but rather objectivity as opposed to subjectivity) is not only a *historically contingent* epistemic virtue, but a *relatively recent* one at that. According to the story they tell, this objectivity-subjectivity distinction that has so pervaded science, philosophy, mathematics, and even literature, can be traced back to Kant’s “copernican revolution,” in particular his reformulation of the scholastic senses of objectivity and subjectivity à la Duns Scotus and friends. This reformulation, at least according to primary sources from the period:

reverberated with seismic intensity in every domain of nineteenth-century intellectual life, from science to literature. Whether Kant invented this idea from whole cloth or simply articulated a new way of dividing up the world is immaterial for our purposes; it suffices that he was at the very least a precocious philosophical witness to changes in conceptualizing the nature of self and knowledge that spread like wildfire in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this common origin, which was even widely acknowledged at the time, the substance of this new conception of self and knowledge varied widely across disciplines—and even among thinkers within disciplines—depending on how those individuals chose to *creatively*

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<sup>29</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 205- 206.

*reinterpret* the Kantian innovation. Some drew the boundary between mind and world, others between “the certain and the uncertain, the necessary and the contingent, the individual and the collective, the a priori and the a posteriori, the rational and the empirical.”<sup>30</sup> Despite these varied and even conflicting dichotomies, the one common thread, according to Daston and Galison, is an *elevation* of the “objective” at the expense of a *pejorative* stance toward the “merely subjective.”<sup>31</sup>

In his own article “Objectivity is Romantic,” Peter Galison argues that objectivity in its modern sense of “knowledge not dependent on our whims and desires”<sup>32</sup> must be understood in the context of the idealists’ emphasis on inescapable subjectivity. While this “Copernican revolution”, which reoriented all possibility and pursuit of knowledge around and through the lens of the subject-knower, would prove transformational and hugely productive, it simultaneously opened up an epistemic can of worms. As Galison explains it, the idealists:

introduced a massively powerful will directly into the possibility of epistemology. The willing subject might exist in mutual dependency with the object. Or it might be, as Schopenhauer would have it, that this ever-dominant will would need to be repressed for us to be open to knowledge. But however it was configured, the possibility of knowledge was, for the idealists, forever bound up with an active self.<sup>33</sup>

A related epistemic fear which similarly catalyzed the spread of this suspicion toward subjectivity, was ironically the very *success* of scientific endeavors during the mid-late 19th century. Daston and Galison evoke historian Henry Adams’ term “vertiginous violence” to describe the pace of scientific progress during this time from the perspective of not only the

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<sup>30</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 207.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Galison, Peter. “Objectivity is Romantic.” <http://archives.acls.org/op/op47-3.htm#n4>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

general public but the scientists themselves. “The headlong pace of scientific progress experienced within a single lifetime seemed to threaten the permanence of scientific truth. Scientists grasped at the new conceptual tools of objectivity and subjectivity in an attempt to reconcile progress and permanence.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, scientists were forced to ask themselves how, in the face of so much quicksand and contradiction, one could justify clinging to a “fantasy” like Truth. Giving up on the age-old quest for *ontological* objectivity, scientists sought for a new crowning epistemic telos that could replace that now seemingly inaccessible goal.

### **3.iv | Mechanical Objectivity**

Mechanical objectivity arose as a reaction against the centrality of the intervening scientist or naturalist in the truth-to-nature approach, as problematized post-Kant. Instead of seeking to improve on the individual instances of “truth” in nature through active interference and interpretation on the part of the scientist, the goal was to silence the self of the knower in order to let nature “speak for itself.”<sup>35</sup> According to Daston and Galison’s primary source material, this reaction was egged on by both hope and fear. Fear arose in response to the monster of subjectivity discussed above, while the hope was fed by a newly pervasive excitement around industrial revolution era machines, and the possibilities they represented for reducing variability and messiness in all their literal and abstract forms:

The great array of gear trains and looms promised regularity, predictability, conformity and rationality...But there was the flip side of that enthusiasm, an increasingly suspicious affect towards the particularity of the individual skilled worker whose muscles, judgment, and temperament worked against the grain of this ever-increasing standardization.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Galison, Peter. “Objectivity is Romantic.” <http://archives.acls.org/op/op47-3.htm#n4>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

This standardized automaticity of the factory machines spreading throughout Europe seemed to offer an answer to the fear of epistemic solipsism just described.<sup>37</sup> Why exactly was the idealism movement over in philosophy so terrifying to scientists working on concrete objects like plants and bodies? As Galison describes it, the problem was not with the subject matter being known, but with the “willing, intending, and intruding” *knower*.

The rational soul was not an optional facility that could be activated on command to order perceptions of a passive pre-existing world. Instead, just because the finite, active self was required for the world to be anything for us at all, there was a grave danger, a fear that in willing, desiring, intending, and schematizing, the image of nature would tell us no more than what we wanted to hear.<sup>38</sup>

With a bogeyman to run *from* and a newly sanitized ideal of mechanization to run *toward*, the nascent epistemic virtue of mechanical objectivity took on an inflated centrality in the age-old pursuit of Truth. At times this *process-oriented* virtue was so obsessed over, it would become the *end in itself*, sometimes at the expense, one should add, of the very truth, certainty, and accuracy it was meant to ensure.<sup>39</sup> There are certainly cases where this epistemic asceticism is indeed conducive to ontological objectivity, but there are many situations where it is not. As Galison explains, mechanical objectivity neither guarantees accuracy, nor can it claim to offer an *exclusive* or particularly *direct* path to truth. “Objectivity in its mechanical guise emerges as a ferociously austere, self-denying virtue, a virtue present when all the special skills, intuitions, and inspirations of the scientist could be quieted and nature could be transferred to the page without intervention or interpretation.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Weber makes similar arguments in his critiques of rationalization.

<sup>38</sup> Galison, Peter. “Objectivity is Romantic.” <http://archives.acls.org/op/op47-3.htm#n4>

<sup>39</sup> Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 612.

<sup>40</sup> Galison, Peter. “Objectivity is Romantic.” <http://archives.acls.org/op/op47-3.htm#n4>

Recalling the discussion of impersonalism at the beginning of the chapter, Daston and Galison actually claim, interestingly enough, that while moral philosophers attributed their own idealization of more mechanical and aperspectival versions of epistemic virtue to the harder sciences, the ordering of influence actually worked the other way round. On their view, it was philosophy's suspicion of the self that preceded and bled over into science's self-understanding of ideal epistemic practice. For the sake of clarity, I will simply emphasize here, that the "moral" conditions and impulses that Daston and Galison allude to throughout their work on objectivity are distinct from the moral-philosophical argument I am in the process of forming. Daston and Galison are simply emphasizing the ways in which supposedly strictly epistemic practices took on the language of moral virtue and religious asceticism. My project, by contrast, is attempting to draw out how these subject-negating epistemic virtues have created *surmountable*, rather than *hopeless* problems for moral theory concerning practical rationality, polarized moral disagreement, and its dehumanizing effects. Put differently, polarization feels hopeless because if aperspectival objectivity is a necessary and central ingredient to virtuous epistemic practice, the fact that people disagree means that one or both sides are not really engaged in virtuous epistemic work. When such disagreement persists, the only explanation seems to be that those actors are either unwilling or unable to do so. In the next chapters I will be arguing that this fearful excision of the knowing self is an unnecessary dead-end, especially in light of certain insights from enactive cognitive science. Furthermore, I will attempt to show that moral epistemology can benefit from an updated approach that emphasizes virtues *of* the knowing self, not *beyond* or *without* it, as is advocated by the next epistemic ideal: *aperspectival objectivity*.

### 3.v | Aperspectival Objectivity

The idea of aperspectival objectivity, which Daston and Galison argue has come to predominate our scientific and general notions of objectivity, is closely tied to what Thomas Nagel famously described as the view from nowhere. Daston in fact uses a passage from Nagel when defining this complicated ideal. Under this epistemic ideal, “a view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, whereas ontological objectivity concerns fealty to the world “out-there” that is to be known, and mechanical objectivity seeks to achieve that ontological objectivity by avoiding the hermeneutical, interpretive, and judging aspects of human knowledge processes, aperspectival objectivity takes mechanical objectivity one step farther and seeks to excise the knower from the knowledge process entirely, or at least as much as possible. Since such an exorcism is not sufficiently possible, however, acolytes of aperspectivity often espouse and promote the methods of mechanical objectivity as well as their own universalizing values of replicability and public accessibility.

During 19th century science, as Daston and Galison explain, contingency, idiosyncrasy, and perspective all became “tarred with the same brush of subjectivity.”<sup>42</sup> In her article titled “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” Daston explains how aperspectival objectivity emerged not as a self evident epistemic virtue early on in the history of science, but instead as a result of very concrete historical contingencies:

Aperspectival objectivity became a scientific value when science came to consist in large part of communications that crossed boundaries of nationality, training and skill. Indeed, the essence of aperspectival objectivity is

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<sup>41</sup> Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, op. cit. note 3, 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 599.

communicability, narrowing the range of genuine knowledge to coincide with that of public knowledge. In the extreme case, aperspectival objectivity may even sacrifice deeper or more accurate knowledge to the demands of communicability.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, it is not the case that aperspectival objectivity is *always* problematic, or always an epistemic vice tout court. Indeed, it has a great deal of intuitive utility that can be conducive to achieving *ontological* objectivity in myriad situations. As George Lakoff puts it, aperspectival objectivity rules out “perception which can fool us; the body, which has its frailties; society, which has its pressures and special interests; memories, which can fade; mental images, which can differ from person to person; and imagination ...which cannot fit the objectively given external world.”<sup>44</sup> Excising deceptive weaknesses and contingencies has its time and place, the problem is the way in which this one specific epistemic ideal too often blots out a more holistic picture of epistemic virtue and practice, and in some more extreme cases, comes to stand in for truth itself.

As Daston is keen to point out, the criteria of aperspectival objectivity can just as often inhibit such cultivation as it can help. The temptation to collapse or reduce objectivity writ large into the view from nowhere should therefore be adamantly resisted because the idea that ontological objectivity (truth) and aperspectival objectivity are somehow co-dependent or tautologically united, is not only *historically inaccurate* but oftentimes *epistemically self-defeating*. The way in which this complicated ideal has pervaded our understanding of all kinds of other pursuits of knowledge has created at least as many problems as it has solved. Indeed, part of the argument of this dissertation is that it has caused deep but surmountable

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<sup>43</sup> Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” 600.

<sup>44</sup> George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago, IL & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 183. Quoted in Daston OEP, 599.

problems for how we grapple with moral disagreement generally, and polarization in particular.<sup>45</sup> Part of this involves pushing back against the special treatment which aperspectival objectivity has come to enjoy in certain arenas, and restructuring our “hierarchy” of epistemic virtues accordingly. This does not require excommunicating aperspectivity entirely, but it will mean returning it to a more modest position alongside other virtues and ideals.

### **3.vi | Structural Objectivity**

As with many of the other epistemic ideals I have been exploring in this chapter, structural objectivity was a response to a specific kind of fear. In this case, the fear was instigated by not only the rapidly progressing state of scientific discovery, but by the equally “vertiginous” epistemic turmoil across disciplines concerning the disparate variety in how human beings perceived, described, reasoned, and believed. In the face of these more meta contingencies, the need for excising the particularities of the self took on ever more pressing and extremist proportions. As Daston and Galison describe, even “reason itself, since ancient times upheld as uniform and eternal, threatened to shatter into the reason of this culture or that time, or even this or that individual.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of taking this instability as good reason to un-crown the aperspectival and mechanical forms of objectivity which no longer seemed adequate, structuralists opted to double down by amplifying that very same asceticism. While they did

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<sup>45</sup> There is a slight discontinuity in terms of how Daston and Galison refer to this general impulse in epistemology across their various joint projects. While their earlier article-length treatises on the topic speak of aperspectivity and escaping from perspective, by the time the monograph of *Objectivity* is published they are referring to the more extreme manifestations of these same impulses as “structural objectivity.” While I have not been able to find any published explanations for this shift, my best understanding is that aperspectival objectivity, closely related to mechanical objectivity, is a throughline from that movement into one of the two reactionary responses to mechanical objectivity that I am about to lay out. That is, already in mechanical objectivity exist the seeds of aperspectival objectivity.

<sup>46</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 259.

not shy away from the findings of historians and ethnologists, for instance, “concerning the strikingly diverse mental lives of people from other times and places,” and similarly acknowledged “variability of individual physiology and perception” they nevertheless were stubbornly keen to insist “that there nonetheless existed a realm of pure thought that was the same for all thinking beings forever...Nor was it the bare face of facts, scrubbed free of any theoretical interpretation, for today’s facts might be cast in a wholly different light by tomorrow’s findings.”<sup>47</sup>

Thus, in order to take the tenets of aperspectivalism to their “logical” conclusions, structuralists turned away from even the *empirical* world, trying to achieve a mathematical purity for other areas of knowledge production as well. At this point, even sense perception was seen to differ from individual to individual and was hence “incorrigibly private.” Instead, they turned to a last frontier of what might, they hoped, at last offer an unchanging foothold for epistemology: a ground firm enough to resist and survive contingency in any form, be that “mathematical transformations, scientific revolutions, shifts of linguistic perspective, cultural diversity, psychological evolution, vagaries of history, and the quirks of individual physiology.”<sup>48</sup> According to this structuralist category of approaches, (across science, mathematics, philosophy and elsewhere), it was only *structural relationships* in one form or another that had any hope at this form of transcendent immortality.

As I mentioned above, one of the most central epistemic “fears” motivating this move was the seemingly insurmountably private nature of thought writ large. If privacy was the fear, shareability was the hope. What was sought was knowledge that could not only be true

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

everywhere at every *time*, but also be understandable, knowable, graspable, by *everyone*. This had important implications for how structuralists came to conceive of both self and world, as well as the relationship between the two:

On the side of scientific self, only that small sliver of the thinking being counted, purified of all memories, sensory experience, excellences and shortcomings, individuality tout court...Structural objectivity did not so much eliminate the self in order to better know the world as remake self and world in each other's image. Both had been stripped down to skeletal relations, nodes in a network, knower and known admirably adapted to each other.<sup>49</sup>

It is this ever more abstracted, pared back, and ascetic vision of objectivity that Thomas Nagel has so aptly coined "the view from nowhere." But despite his, and others' effective critiques, it is also, according to Daston and Galison, a view of objectivity that still pervades much of contemporary epistemology.<sup>50</sup> The question which remains is whether this persistent pervasion is warranted, or to what extent these extreme forms of aperspectival objectivity are justified in blotting out every other epistemic goal: in the sciences, epistemology, ethics, or anywhere else. Indeed, I will be arguing for a notion of objectivity that is practically its polar opposite. Daston and Galison, for their part, are adamant that to conflate this specific version of objectivity with the whole of epistemology or scientific endeavor is a serious mistake, though they do admit that it has its values, when tempered by moderation. Their point is that this seeming epistemic "pinnacle" of achievement is not the holy mountain top upon which the evolving history of epistemic virtue has, or will come to rest. Not only is aperspectival objectivity a relatively "young" epistemic virtue, it is one that has already been discarded, in some scientific circles, for an even younger one—what Daston and Galison refer to as *trained judgment*.

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<sup>49</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 301-302.

<sup>50</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 306.

### 3.vii | Trained Judgment

Whereas structural objectivity forced aperspectival objectivity up to and past its “logical” conclusions, a new epistemic ideal entered the scene in the early to mid 20th century that rejected this all-consuming concern with obliterating subjectivity and the contingencies of the self. Daston and Galison refer to this loosely defined movement as “trained judgment.” In contrast to adherents of mechanical, aperspectival, and structural objectivity, these scientists proudly pursued subjectivity, interpretation, intuition, and judgment. Such subject-oriented processes were taken for granted as necessary in order for images—from x-rays to brain scans, to stellar spectra—to *mean anything*, or serve any purpose. “Instead of the four-eyed sight of truth-to-nature, or the blind sight of mechanical objectivity, what was needed was the cultivation of a kind of physiognomic sight—a capacity...to synthesize, highlight, and grasp relationships in ways that were not reducible to mechanical procedure.<sup>51</sup> I will be exploring an analogously active sense of knowledge acquisition and cognition in more depth during the next chapter.

Whereas many of the epistemic ideals I have been exploring appear clearly reactive to specific, albeit *distinct* sources of epistemic *fear* and *anxiety*, Daston and Galison credit much of this shift toward trained judgment to a newly blossoming *confidence* on the part of scientists. Perhaps this confidence was born in the increasingly standardized and universally recognized training programs that accompanied the specialization of the sciences. Or perhaps scientific discovery had hit a smoother rhythm and speed by this time. Maybe the scientific community had just accustomed itself to the ever shifting sands of scientific progress. Whatever the historical or causal explanation, Daston and Galison trace out

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<sup>51</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 314.

localized shifts away from aperspectival and mechanical versions of objectivity during this period. As in the other epistemic virtues, this shift was echoed by “a new kind of scientific self, one that was more “intellectual” than algorithmic.”<sup>52</sup> Even the affective modes ceased to be so violently ostracized from epistemic practice.<sup>53</sup> In short, despite the persistence of aperspectival objectivity’s outsized footprint, the history of epistemic virtues and ideals has quietly been marching onward. Objectivity and subjectivity, it would seem, need no longer engage in manichean struggles, but further work is needed to chart this new territory, especially in the field of *moral* epistemology. This dissertation is dedicated to that work. In the next chapter I will turn to a promising approach to cognitive science that provides helpful resources to do just that. To lay the groundwork for those efforts, I return now to the work of Quill Kukla: this time the argument they put forward for disentangling aperspectival warrant from ontological objectivity.

## 4 | INTERLUDE

I have just been exploring how Daston and Galison helpfully complicate and disambiguate our understanding of objectivity, both conceptually and historically. I realize this foray got quite into the weeds, so I will pause here to reiterate the main points to be gleaned and carried forward. First, “objectivity” is not a straightforward or monolithic concept. It is not a transhistorical ideal (at least in the aperspectival sense), and its relationship to the pursuit of truth is consequently and analogously complicated. As Daston and Galison made clear, certain forms of objectivity, particularly *aperspectival* and *mechanical* versions of the concept, can even *inhibit* one’s attempts to achieve *ontological* objectivity (truth itself).

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<sup>52</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 325.

<sup>53</sup> Daston & Galison, *Objectivity*, 361.

Second, each of these forms of objectivity is connected with a very specific understanding of the ideal *knower*, and the (sometimes very self-abasing, self-denying) virtues which that knower must cultivate in themselves. As Quill Kukla, whose own work on these topics I will be returning to in the next section, notes in their review of Daston and Galison's work,

It is impossible to understand the character of objectivity except as intertwined with the character of the judging self. Different kinds of selves engage in different kinds of epistemic practices, and different kinds of epistemic practices demand different kinds of selves as their practitioners. Thus our naturalized epistemology must proceed hand in hand with an equally naturalized metaphysics and ethics of the self.<sup>54</sup>

This necessarily central role of the self in *scientific* work, should further buttress the critique of impersonalist ethics at the beginning of this chapter. Indeed, Kukla describes the impersonalist approach in ethics as idealizing and aspiring to some "rough-hewn mixture of mechanical and aperspectival objectivity;"<sup>55</sup> not to the degree of some of Daston and Galison's scientists, but the "unselfing" impulses are certainly there. This brings me to an important point concerning the relationship between scientific and more normative/moral/aesthetic disciplines on these deep epistemological problems.

Daston and Galison are keen to draw the causal and conceptual connections from (moral) philosophy into the sciences on this front. In particular they draw connections between the scientific professional virtues and developments in philosophy around the inescapability of subjectivity, as well as a rather ascetic and exceedingly rule oriented (also perhaps reductive) vision of morality centered self-discipline, and mechanized self-effacement.

It would be difficult to explain the force of these values by appeal to either rationality or self-interest alone, and equally difficult to deny that

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<sup>54</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Naturalizing Objectivity." *Perspectives on Science* 16, no. 3 (2008): 285-302. 289.

<sup>55</sup> Kukla, "Naturalizing Objectivity," 334.

aperspectival objectivity never shook off all traces of its origins in moral philosophy. In the self-denying counsels of aperspectival objectivity still reverberates the stern voice of moral duty, and it is from its moral character, not from its metaphysical validity, that much of its force derives.<sup>56</sup>

According to Daston and Galison's history, this is the case both in terms of the impersonalist, self-effacing epistemic virtues the aperspectivalists sought to promote, and the vision of the knowing self to which they aspired. Certainly, "the stern voice of moral duty" can hardly be said to speak for or be representative of "moral philosophy." But reductive encapsulations of moral philosophy aside, it is important to note that this phenomenon goes both ways. "Science" borrowed reductive visions of moral rectitude, but much of (moral) philosophy has also been inspired (and felt insecure) in the face of the harder science's *apparently* superior claims to seriousness and epistemic irreproachability. The impersonalism described at the beginning of this chapter is but one case of this phenomenon. But whereas a number of scientific subfields have begun to move on from aperspectival and mechanical objectivity in at least some of their gold-standard epistemic practices (trained judgment as just one example), our cultural understanding and general popular or mainstream vocabulary around both scientific and moral "objectivity" seems to be lagging far behind in ways that become glaringly obvious in our most polarized debates. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a fascinating case study where questions of moral and scientific "objectivity" both raised hysteria to astonishing levels in a way that was not even possible to fully disentangle, but these dynamics play out in more exclusively moral debates as well, and with similar levels of polarization.

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<sup>56</sup> Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," 613.

There is a sense in which we can understand this “lagging” in moral philosophy as rooted in an understandable insecurity around the possibility of ontological objectivity when there do not seem to be any ontological chunks in question. In the face of such groundlessness, it is understandable to cling all the more tightly to what appears to be the next best option; mechanized rationality and aperspectival objectivity. I take the baffling obsession with reducing all philosophical inquiry to claims that can be conveyed through logic formulas to be only the most extreme manifestation of these insecurities. Impersonalist impulses represent another. Some of standpoint epistemology represents promising movement in the right direction, but those conversations are still (though increasingly less) carefully siloed off from epistemic theory as a whole, in part because there is still understandable concern that standpoint epistemology must necessarily just jump headlong into the abyss of radical relativism. As I will explore, via the work of Quill Kukla in the next section, disentangling the concepts of ontological and mechanistically aperspectival objectivity can open up exciting opportunities for disagreement without relativism, and for divergence without defect and dehumanization.

Part of what leads polarization to have dehumanizing effects is this understandable intuition that moral disagreement, at least of the more radical kind, must represent similarly radical *irrationality* on the part of one or more actors. They must be either unable or unwilling to reason properly to correct moral conclusions. But on closer examination, this understandable position seems to rely implicitly on an elision of ontological and aperspectival objectivity. How would we be better able to grapple with moral disagreement and polarization if we could disentangle aperspectival objectivity from ontological objectivity, and come to understand rationality (practical moral deliberation and judgment)

in a less mechanical way? I will argue that this is a fruitful path for avoiding the dehumanizing effects motivating this project. I am working here toward an idea of what I will term *enactive objectivity* that can integrate an acknowledgement of the drawbacks associated with mechanically aperspectival standards of practical rationality and moral objectivity, without giving up on ontological objectivity altogether. To this end, I turn now to Kukla's argument around how and why we both can and *should* disentangle these two epistemic ideals of ontological and aperspectival objectivity.

## 5 | DISENTANGLING OBJECTIVITIES

In "Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge," Quill Kukla argues against a traditionally popular epistemological idea that *objectivity* requires *aperspectivity*, specifically, that *objective knowledge* requires *aperspectival warrant* or justification. In other words, this is the claim that for information to count as "genuine warrant" for one particular agent, that information "must be available to everyone who is exposed to the relevant causal inputs and is able and willing to properly exercise her rationality."<sup>57</sup> Kukla leverages what they refer to as an Aristotelian concept of second nature and Wilfrid Sellars' concept of perception as inescapably ratio-inferential, to defend the thesis that aperspectival warrants are *not* a necessary precondition for claiming *ontological* objectivity. Rather, Kukla argues, "inquirers can have contingent properties and perspectives that give them access to forms of rational warrant and objective knowledge that others do not have."<sup>58</sup> Kukla's argument itself is internally coherent and, I think, insightful. The problem is that, as Kukla readily

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<sup>57</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, no. 1 (2006): 80-95. 80.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

admits, they have not given us any *undeniable* reasons to accept the specific theories of perception upon which the argument as a whole depends. In the next chapter, I will seek to demonstrate the way in which insights from the field of enactive cognitive science that involve the interrelatedness of cognition, perception, and agency provide concrete empirical support for Kukla's original argument, which I turn to now.

### 5.i | The Aperspectivalist Problem

According to the aperspectivalist stance that Kukla critiques (and of course has borrowed from the work of Daston and Galison), an "objective" view cannot be bound to a particular perspective, and any partiality, in fact anything that "fails the litmus test of democratic accessibility,"<sup>59</sup> is to be excised from 'legitimate' epistemological practice entirely. In other words, if our claims are to have objectivity, our warrants for those claims must be aperspectival. While this is of course not the single ubiquitous view in epistemology, it is still pervasive (and deleterious) enough to warrant targeted critique. Kukla first pushes back on this assumption by employing Daston and Galison's distinction between the *ontological* and *aperspectival* types of objectivity that I laid out above. To review, *ontological objectivity* describes the extent to which *facts or objects* are "real" and independent of their mere "appearance" to epistemological agents. A *claim or judgment* will have *ontological objectivity* when it accurately asserts those types of ontologically objective facts.<sup>60</sup> *Aperspectival objectivity*, on the other hand, zeroes in on *warrant*, or *justification*. A claim will have *aperspectival objectivity* to the extent that its justification is not reliant on the contingencies and idiosyncrasies of the agent's subjectivity, and context. In other words, "aperspectival warrant is what is left over when the contingent self is forcibly exorcized from the epistemic

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 81.

scene.”<sup>61</sup> For the traditional epistemologists whom Kukla is taking to task, the *aperspectival* objectivity of our warrants is a *precondition* for securing the *ontological* objectivity of our *claims*.

Kukla, however, challenges this presumed dependence between *aperspectival* and *ontological* objectivity, beginning with what they view as the problematically restrictive picture of *perception* and *rationality* which it employs. Under the *aperspectivalist* description of rationality, the contexts of *discovery* (perceiving the relevant facts) and *justification* (appealing to properly processed facts) are wholly separated. “Rationality,” so they claim, only occurs in the latter, while perception is considered to be straightforward, passive *reception* or reality-absorption. The problem, for Kukla, is that on this view, in order to count as correct reasoning for one person, an epistemic process must count as reasonable for everyone “and the criteria for what counts as a proper exercise of reason are decidable in advance, ready to be diligently applied to whatever evidence happens to show up within the context of discovery.”<sup>62</sup> This view leads to an overly reductive account of knowledge-acquisition because it overlooks the extent to which rationality is already actively involved in our perception and inflects even the basic processing or absorption of the “facts” in the discovery phase. Kukla introduces an Aristotelian (and McDowell-inspired) conception of second nature and Wilfrid Sellars’ ratio-inferential view of perception to defend this claim.

## 5.ii | “Second Nature”

First, Kukla brings in the McDowell-Aristotelian idea<sup>63</sup> that *moral* perception, that is, the ability to interpret the brute facts of existence as moral reasons or justification, is “a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, “Objectivity and Perspective,” 83.

<sup>63</sup> Kukla alludes to both Aristotle and McDowell when introducing the concept of second nature used in their paper. The historical trajectory and coining of this phrase is somewhat more complicated, but what is important for the argument is not who inspired it, but how Kukla uses the phrase.

contingently inculcated second nature, cultivated through history and education and unevenly distributed, even among those whose organs are equally capable of processing sensory inputs.”<sup>64</sup> Kukla argues that this idea is *also* applicable to non-moral epistemic practices insofar as our second natures impact what will ever even be perceived in the “discovery context” described above.<sup>65</sup> If one accepts this second nature view,<sup>66</sup> the context of discovery can no longer be seen as a straightforward process of total-reality-absorption, but rather as a potentially limitless, and hence necessarily *discerning* and *selective* process. In other words, mere *exposure* to the ‘relevant causal inputs’, as the aperspectivalists would put it, is not the full story: reason is already present and inescapably necessary in the discovery stage.

While the concept of second nature *complicates* the aperspectivalists’ reductive view of perception, it is not enough to *refute* aperspectivalism because it does not address their claim that “rationality *per se* consists in the proper application of domain- and agent-independent principles of justification to evidence.”<sup>67</sup> The stalwart aperspectivalist could acknowledge the reality of second nature perceptual dispositions without relinquishing the distinction between those dispositions to notice certain kinds of evidence and our *rational response* to that evidence. Kukla describes this foil as a more sophisticated but still deeply problematic version of aperspectivalism:

Certainly, this line goes, different people will have physical sense organs capable of processing different inputs, and different opportunities to be exposed to information, but given the same exposures and the same inputs, everyone who is genuinely rational will perceive the same things, and their

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<sup>64</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 83.

<sup>65</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 84. Kukla’s account does not claim that either that second natures necessarily inhibit or enhance our rational inquiries. While it is the case that these dispositions, which we develop over the course of our lives, can bias or distort those inquiries, they can also be helpful, enabling some to better identify the salient pieces of evidence for the inquiry at hand.

<sup>66</sup> While Kukla acknowledges that there is nothing stopping the aperspectivalist skeptic from rejecting this second nature account, I will be providing additional “less rejectable” cognitive science reasons for accepting this view in the next chapter.

<sup>67</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 84.

perceptions will entitle them to the same warrants (whether or not they are insightful enough to notice these warrants)...it allows for an enriched conception of our rational capacities, upon which rationality is contingently inculcated and operates within the context of discovery, but insists that genuine receptivity to reasons manifests itself as the same capacity in everyone who has it.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, these sophisticated aperspectivalists could allow that interest-inflected, second nature, perceptual capacities do influence what evidence we absorb, but nevertheless deny that the exercise of those capacities is a part of rationality.<sup>69</sup> It is this view of perception and rationality that I think lies at the heart of much of our polarization problems, in particular the dehumanizing impulses that such a view implicitly supports. In order to actually refute the aperspectivalist position, Kukla needs to show that second nature perceptual dispositions, and the processes of perception they inflect, are *part of the rational justification process itself*, and consequently, how the actual *rationaly justifiable, epistemic* status of a given piece of evidence *as warrant* can in fact depend on the individual standpoint of the agent. In other words, our contingent histories and contingently formed second natures must enable us not only to perceive different reasons but actually to “access different warrants when being rational in response to the same causal inputs.”<sup>70</sup> Kukla must be able to show that perceptual capacities can be simultaneously *contingently-inculcated*, yet *genuinely rational*. This, in turn, will mean that they must be *educatable, reasons-receptive* sensitivities. To achieve this, Kukla introduces Wilfrid Sellars’ ratio-inferential account of perception.

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<sup>68</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 84-85.

<sup>69</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 84.

<sup>70</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 85.

### 5.iii | Sellars' Ratio-Inferential Account of Perception

According to Sellars, individuals' perceptual capacities are developed through their contingent histories, over the course of which they acquire "piecemeal habits of response to various objects in various circumstances."<sup>71</sup> The nuance which Sellars contributes to Aristotle's original concept is that he further unpacks *perception* by distinguishing it from the absorption of brute sense data. Perceiving 'that x (brute sense data) is F (actual concept)' entails a *rational* understanding of the necessary conditions which must hold in order for us to apply the concept F. There is also a crucial distinction here between "being" and "appearing." Hence perception under Sellars' model also involves an understanding of the conditions under which certain (rational) inferences "are or are not licensed by appearances."<sup>72</sup> This critical wedge between reality and how reality appears means that our capacity to recognize a piece of evidence, *as evidence*, "cannot be neatly separated from our ability to use it in inference, and hence perception cannot be taken as a capacity for discovery that lies outside the context of justification."<sup>73</sup>

If we integrate this claim for perception as an inescapably *rational* capacity and process, with the Aristotelian notion of perception as a contingently developed capacity, Kukla can finally claim, contra the aperspectivalists, that contingent histories and contingently formed capacities not only enable us to perceive different reasons but actually allow different agents to access different *warrants* when being rational in response to the same "causal inputs."

Thus, if x is indeed perceptibly F for a particular agent, this fact is dependent upon the agent's contingent past. Only if she has the right history will she have developed the capacity to perceive that x is F, and only then will her empirical confrontation with x warrant beliefs and inferences based on the fact that x is

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<sup>71</sup> Sellars, Wilfrid. (1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. §19.

<sup>72</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 86.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

F. An agent's particular history of observational situations and learned responses will inflect the topography of the recognitional concepts she brings to bear in perception, by giving these concepts their life and hence their content within differently inflected spaces of reasons. Our contingent history of concerns, experiences, and conditions of observation helps determine which facts and properties can show up for us and what counts as normal and aberrant behavior for objects of different sorts. Thus these contingent histories...will help constitute what evidence is available and which inferences are warranted in the face of worldly objects and events. But if our ability to perceive inferentially fecund facts is a contingently inculcated second nature capacity, then there is no *prima facie* reason to think that we share it in all of its details. We should expect the rational deliverances of perception to vary depending on the experiences and practices that gave form to an inquirer's normative grasp of standard conditions and appropriate inferences...If this is right, then our perceptual capacities can provide variant warrant that fails the test of *aperspectival objectivity*.<sup>74</sup>

Although this is a philosophical rather than biological or cognitive science argument, Sellars provides crucial support for Kukla's separation of ontological and *aperspectival objectivity*. If, as Kukla proposes, and Sellars affirms, contingent events and experiences impact how we perceive and how we generate "inferentially fecund facts," then it indeed seems to indicate that we will be entitled to different warrants even in identical worldly contexts, and even when both parties are being properly rational in their inferential activities.<sup>75</sup> A concern that might arise here is that we can just perceive poorly with no consequences, or that such a contingent framework opens the floodgates on anything-goes relativism. Kukla, however, wards off this potentiality, maintaining that these capacities still need to be *reality-* or *reasons-responsive* if they are to count as truly rational: that is, they must be open to rational revision in the face of new evidence. In other words, because warrant is an epistemic notion, "nothing can count as warrant unless it can be rationally corrected by the testimony of independent objects."<sup>76</sup> After all, we are not giving up on ontological objectivity altogether,

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<sup>74</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 86.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* (rationally) is mine.

<sup>76</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 87.

only the supposed inextricability of a perspectival warrant as a *transcendental requirement* for that objectivity. Kukla maintains, along with more traditional epistemologists, that “if a practice is to count as epistemic, fealty to the facts and objects it tries to capture has to be the tribunal of its adequacy.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, for *warrant* to maintain its status as an *epistemic* concept, even *contingent, perspectival warrant* must be *reality-responsive*. This brings me to Kukla’s idea of plasticity.

#### 5.iv | Ontological Objectivity and the Plasticity of Perception

Not only do our second nature perceptual capacities shift and evolve over time, but, Kukla argues, we can actually work to *improve* them because the exercise of our rational capacities can influence and develop these other capacities. Our rationality, in tandem with the plasticity of our perceptual capacities means that we can render our epistemic capacities more sensitive and accurate through the virtuous use of those capacities themselves. One of the reasons that perception is plastic and cultivable in this manner has to do with the way in which perception is neither passive nor immediate, at least not to the degree often assumed in traditional epistemology (and classical cognitive science, as I will show in the next chapter):

Though perception is always receptive, this doesn't mean that it is always immediate. We might have the capacity to see something, but only with work. We may need to draw on our current epistemic resources in novel and creative ways in order to perceive, and in doing so we may incrementally rehabilitate our perceptual practices...we can recognize the limitations of our perceptual capacities and draw upon other resources in order to hone these capacities.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, "Objectivity and Perspective," 88-89.

In other words, insofar as perception is indeed an epistemic capacity; it must maintain “fealty to the facts and objects it tries to capture,”<sup>79</sup> but the fact that perception is “answerable” to reality does not render it a merely passive and immediate process. According to Kukla and their interlocutors, perception takes work which itself requires humility, openness, discernment, and critical self reflection among countless other moral-epistemic virtues. Other agents, new experiences, and ineffable insights can all surprise us with new possibilities, if we let them.

### **5.v | What’s Been Argued, What’s Still Missing**

Kukla’s key intervention can be boiled down to the claim that we need to disentangle the traditional epistemological linkage between Daston and Galison’s concepts of ontological and aperspectival objectivity.<sup>80</sup> Doing this, they argue, will enable us to avoid the problematic “view from nowhere” criteria involved with the aperspectivity of warrant without being forced to give up on the idea of truth altogether. In other words, under Kukla’s rejection of aperspectival warrant, one can still claim that “some perspectives are more objective than others,”<sup>81</sup> and that ontological objectivity is still an epistemic ideal worth pursuing. The type of *perspectivally accessed* objectivity that results, rejects the idea that one needs a “view from nowhere” from which to access truth, which in turns means that disagreement is not necessarily a sign that one of the parties is being (irredeemably) irrational; not grounds for moral exclusion qua subject. In this way, a merely epistemic intervention could enable seriously *rehumanizing* effects. Moreover, this disentanglement has the further implication

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<sup>79</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, “Objectivity and Perspective,” 87.

<sup>80</sup> Daston and Galison would certainly support this move.

<sup>81</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, “Objectivity and Perspective,” 90.

that the disagreement itself can remain a rationally-interrogable, and thus potentially resolvable<sup>82</sup> conflict situation. This would be good news indeed for those concerned by the seemingly hopeless levels of polarization (and its dehumanizing effects) that pervade our political and moral communities. Unfortunately, as Kukla is the first to admit, they have not actually “given arguments that would compel us to accept this picture of perception”<sup>83</sup> upon which the otherwise compelling argument rests.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Because Kukla has not provided the reader with the necessity or “proof” of this picture of perception and rationality, aperspectivalists can still dismiss the whole account on the grounds that it is purely hypothetical, wishful, philosophical theorizing.<sup>84</sup> In the next chapter, I will accordingly introduce insights from enactive cognitive science regarding the inextricable relationship between perception, cognition, and agency that not only support this effort at disentangling ontological and aperspectival objectivity, but which provide the conceptual resources for me to put forward my own constructive (rehumanizing) intervention on the issue of polarized moral conflict and its dehumanizing effects. A key component of this moral epistemology—which when reintegrated with key facets from Korsgaard’s metaethics I will term *enactive constructivism*—will be a specifically *enactive*

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<sup>82</sup> It is important to note, however, that I am not primarily interested in this project in offering ways of resolving disagreement itself. I am not necessarily even interested in a monoculture world of totalizing agreement. I am concerned with disagreement’s dehumanizing effects; and for that I do not take agreement to be a necessary or even helpful antidote, especially since it tends to come at the cost of free speech, nuance, and creativity.

<sup>83</sup> Kukla, Rebecca, “Objectivity and Perspective,” 90.

<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Aristotle infamously claimed that men have more teeth than women, so why should we take seriously anything he has to say about the nature of perception?

understanding of objectivity, which makes a version of Kukla's argument, albeit on what I believe to be firmer conceptual ground.

With this *enactive objectivity*, I will strive to move the conversation away from the epistemic fear of subjectivity (and the conflicts it engenders) and thread the needle between dogmatism and relativism in the process. My deep dive into the work of Daston and Galison during this current chapter has been intended to highlight and articulate some of the more problematic ways that objectivity is popularly understood, aspirationally invoked, and implicitly appealed to in the cultural imagination concerning both ethics *and* epistemology. Indeed, these reductive conceptions enable exactly the sort of deduction from the existence of moral conflict to the assumption that "the other" must be unable or unwilling to engage in proper, interrogable, (collective) moral deliberation. Mechanical and aperspectival objectivity absolutely have their value within certain spheres, the problem is that they have spilled over into other domains, and this seepage has come at the expense of deeper conversations around the possibilities for virtuous epistemic *subjectivity*. Korsgaard's concept of practical identities holds promise in the way that it recenters the subject. As I attempted to show in the previous chapter, however, her framework is still limited by an understanding of *rationality* that seems to veer too close to the mechanical. Given her Kantian roots, and the Kantian motivations behind mechanical and aperspectival objectivity, this is not necessarily surprising. I will advocate, by contrast, for a picture of objectivity that is *dynamically co-enactive* rather than *aperspectival* and an understanding of rationality that is *autopoietically adaptive* rather than *mechanical*. To understand what these words mean, I now turn to the work of Evan Thompson and the field of enactive cognitive science.

# Chapter 5: The Enactive Approach

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the earlier chapter on Korsgaard, I outlined a metaethical system that I take to be the most promising currently available, particularly in the context of moral disagreement and polarization. I nevertheless critiqued her framework for what I take to be an underdeveloped moral epistemology which takes for granted certain reductive visions of perception, rationality, objectivity, and identity. In the previous chapter, I sought to articulate some of the reductive and problematic epistemic impulses which seem to pervade too much of our social imaginary (Korsgaard's philosophy included), and which exacerbate the dehumanizing tendencies of polarization. I used Daston and Galison's concepts of aperspectival and mechanical objectivity not as a way to introduce radically new ideas, but as an efficient shorthand for some of the problematically reductive conceptions of perception, rationality, objectivity, and knowledge creation generally that I see as key to rehumanizing polarized moral conflict. My intervention into both of these arenas (Korsgaardian metaethics and the reductive epistemology of the social imaginary) centers around autopoietic and dynamically co-enactive understandings of perception, rationality, identity and objectivity, critical conceptual tools to help me disrupt the pathway from moral conflict to moral exclusion. In this chapter, I begin the work of explaining what this means by laying out the key tenets of enactive cognitive science. Since enactive cognition falls under the umbrella category of situated and embodied cognition generally, it will be helpful to

provide some cursory conceptual context regarding the dramatic shifts that have begun to take place in cognitive science over recent decades.

### **1.i | Enactive and Embodied Cognitive Science**

Embodied cognition as a paradigm falls under a broader category of “situated cognition,” which explores the ways in which the natural and social world not only provide the individual with additional processing power, but also play an active role in cognitive processes that have been traditionally located exclusively in the brain. Embodied approaches to cognitive science include a collection of various and distinct subspecies of this paradigm who disagree about much, but who are more or less united insofar as they critique traditional computational and representational approaches to cognitive science. These more traditional approaches are committed to a representational and computational model—also sometimes referred to as the “Classical Sandwich Model” of cognitional theory—according to which cognition is framed as a set of algorithmic process whereby symbols are “given” i.e. “represented” to the system from the outside to be subsequently manipulated for the purpose of some specific problem-solving task, which is also necessarily imposed “from the outside.” As I will elaborate below, enactive theorists challenge this model and defend their own account of cognition that replaces symbolic representation and computational processing with an alternative system wherein cognition consists in active, “needfully free” processes of “sense-making” in shaped by dynamic response to and engagement with the environment. These perhaps unfamiliar ideas should become clear by the end of this chapter.

The enactive strain of embodied cognition was first introduced in 1991 with the publication of *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*.<sup>1</sup> Integrating insights from phenomenology with biological investigations, the three authors challenged the core tenets of traditional cognitive science by demonstrating ways in which a cognitive agent's physical embodiment as well as its broader situatedness is in fact a *crucial component* of any and all cognitive processes. This new work also challenged traditional computational models with the claim that cognitive agents should be understood, not as representational, algorithmic machines, but rather as *dynamical, emergent, and self-organizing systems*. This emergentist perspective argues for a non-computationalist approach wherein "cognition is a situated activity" rather than a mechanistic algorithm, "which spans a systemic totality consisting of an agent's brain, body, and world."<sup>2</sup>

Since its first publication in 1991, *The Embodied Mind* has engendered a number of sub-genres including *sensorimotor enactivism* and *radical enactivism*. For the purposes of this project, however, I will be focusing on *autopoietic enactivism*, cohesively presented by Evan Thompson (co-author of *The Embodied Mind*) in his magnum opus *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*.<sup>3</sup> Autopoietic approaches to enactive cognition build off the earlier work of Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (the latter of whom was another co-author of *The Embodied Mind*). Maturana and Varela first coined the term autopoiesis in their 1972 book *Autopoiesis and Cognition*<sup>4</sup> as a way to

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<sup>1</sup> Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. 1st MIT Press pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Froese, T. (2009), "Hume and the enactive approach to mind", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 8(1), pp. 105.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Maturana, Humberto R., and Francisco J. Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht, Holland ; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1980.

describe the necessary features and organizational structure of biological life as such. I will therefore begin with the central concept of *autopoiesis* before diving into the key components of the specifically autopoietic approach to enactive cognition. With that central concept in hand, I will work through the other key components of enactive cognition including its emphasis on autonomy, the dynamic co-emergence of part and whole, and self and world, as well as its claims about the needful nature of freedom, and the adaptivity, which such needfulness in turn requires. These features work together to shape how we ought to understand the relationship between identity and sensemaking, and thus cognition itself. With the enactive picture of cognition finally in view, the chapter concludes (Section 10) with an exploration of what this picture entails concerning the embedded, embodied, and affective nature of cognition.

## 2 | AUTOPOIESIS

The term “autopoiesis” was first coined by Maturana and Varela to describe the circularly self-sustaining organization that is the minimal criteria for “life” as such. I will, however, be leaning heavily on Evan Thompson’s work on the concept in his magnum opus *Mind in Life* where the autopoietic approach to enactive cognition is most effectively laid out. Since its original introduction, the term has come to be applied to all kinds of phenomena: from the literal biological functioning of the cell, to organisms and even social systems. In its most literal and biological sense, it describes the state wherein “every molecular reaction in the system is generated by the very same system that those molecular reactions produce.”<sup>5</sup> Going forward I will be frequently referring to “autopoietic entity” as a shorthand for any of

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 92.

the myriad types of autopoietically organized systems; including, but not limited to, single cells, microbial communities, nervous systems, immune systems, multicellular organisms, moral agents, and even ecosystems and socio-political communities. While the most basic instance of autopoiesis is the single biological cell, autopoietic organization is radically fractal: autopoietically organized cells are then autopoietically organized into more and more complex systems which are in turn autopoietically organized into full organisms, and so on. I will therefore simply use the term “autopoietic entity” to refer to this entire category going forward.

Although enactive cognition is very much concerned with understanding *human* cognition and consciousness itself, the aforementioned autopoietically self-organizing and autonomous systems that serve as its central heuristics are most accessible and straightforward at the level of the biological cell. I will accordingly start there, where autopoiesis is the term used to describe the circular and crucially self-sustaining organization of a cell’s self-production and constant *reproduction*. Specifically, the term describes the state wherein “every molecular reaction in the system is generated by the very same system that those molecular reactions produce....a cell produces its own components, which in turn produce it, in an ongoing circular process.”<sup>6</sup> Systems which do not produce their own components, but rather something else, and which cannot regenerate the necessary resources for their own continuance are conversely referred to as *allopoeitic*. Allopoietic systems, such as stars, are relatively contained reaction networks but are unable to *reproduce* the components necessary to those reactions. Even though the life of a star is orders of magnitude longer than that of a cell, the process is unidirectional, not circular, and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

not re-creative in the same way. Although all living things do seem to die, as far as we know, life itself is defined by this self-perpetuating, remaking, and active processing. There are also allopoietic systems which arise in the world of human-made systems such as factory assembly lines, or ATMs whose products are not only thoroughly distinct from the systems themselves, but which are also *externally controlled*. Such systems are not only *allopoietic* but also *heteropoietic* for that reason.

The self-re-generating nature of autopoietic organization is not a physico-structural descriptor, but it does require a semipermeable physical boundary onto the surrounding environment: that is, a mediating boundary that is itself produced by reactions within the boundary, and those reactions must themselves regenerate both the system and boundary in question. As Thompson explains, “the form or pattern of the autopoietic organization is that of a peculiar circular interdependency between an interconnected web of self-regenerating processes and the self-production of a boundary, such that the whole system persists in continuous self-production as a spatially distinct individual.”<sup>7</sup> All living systems, therefore, are autopoietically organized. While the biological cell is the least complex instantiation of the principle, there are many other living systems including nervous systems, immune systems, and full organisms and potentially even social systems that are also autopoietic in the sense that they are *constituted by autopoietic components organized autopoietically*. As I noted above, autopoietic organization is profoundly fractal, I begin with the cell as a way to introduce concepts which similarly manifest at more complex scales. This is not to reductively boil human consciousness down to a purely biological process, per se. It is just a helpful heuristic for understanding, analogically, these rather complex ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 101.

As just alluded to, the feature which is relevant in determining whether a system is autopoietic is its *organization*, not any specific concrete chemical reaction, nor any specific spatial structure aside from the necessity of being self-contained and separable from the background thanks to its mediating membrane. Earlier, I promised to put forward an *autopoietic and dynamically co-enactive understanding* of identity, perception, practical rationality and objectivity. This idea of the spatially distinct autopoietic individual will become central as I work toward an explanation of what identity signifies in this paradigm and its transcendental character within the enactive approach to cognition. More on that to come. The biological cell is the most rudimentary instantiation of autopoietic identity, however, I will need to flesh out what this actually means over the following sections. This is not only the way to make good on my promise of providing a dynamically co-enactive understanding of Korsgaardian practical identities, it is also a necessary intermediary step toward understanding the enactive approach to cognition as a whole that will serve as the supportive basis for the enactive approach to epistemology which I propose as an intervention against the dehumanizing effects of moral polarization.

### **3 | AUTONOMOUS VS. HETERONOMOUS SYSTEMS**

The first step in this elaboration is to understand the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous systems. In order for identity to exist in the first place, the system in question must first possess a baseline level of *autonomy*, that is, it needs to be functionally distinct and distinguishable from the surrounding environment, and it must be able to actively regulate its relation with that environment. One generally only speaks of autonomy at the level of human animals, or political states, however, from the enactivist perspective, all of these

socio-political forms of autonomy are anteceded by a biochemical autonomy that goes ‘all the way down.’ At the level of the cell, this concept of autonomy singles out a specific type of *organization* that defines the relations which hold between *processes* rather than physical components per se. As Varela explained when first introducing this idea, “in an autonomous system, the constituent processes (i) recursively depend on each other for their generation and their realization as a network, (ii) constitute the system as a unity in whatever domain they exist, and (iii) determine a domain of possible interactions with the environment.”<sup>8</sup> What does this actually mean? In the paradigmatic case of minimal biochemical autonomy, i.e. the living cell, the relevant “constituent processes” are of course strictly chemical and metabolic. As explained above, their autopoietic organization manifests “a self-producing, metabolic network that also produces its own membrane; and this network constitutes the system as a unity in the biochemical domain and determines a domain of possible interactions with the environment.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the cell is autonomous insofar as it can actively “determine” what features of the outside environment should be repelled or engaged in turn, instead of passively receiving all external phenomena into its internal organizational structure indiscriminately. In the case of a cell, there is a physical membrane that serves as a material (and actively discerning) boundary, but Thompson also points to phenomena like ant colonies as an example of a different kind of autonomous system; one where the network is social rather than bio-chemical, and the boundary is also social and territorial rather than material. The autopoietic organization of the cell thus constitutes the most fundamental form of autonomy—the most fundamental example of an autonomous

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<sup>8</sup> Varela, F.J. *Principles of Biological Autonomy*. New York: Elsevier North Holland. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 44.

“individual”—because of the way in which it not only “stands out from a chemical background as a closed network of self-producing processes,” (making it an individual) but also “actively regulates its encounters with its environment”<sup>10</sup> (making it autonomous).<sup>11</sup>

Autonomous systems can also of course be understood in contrast to heteronomous systems, which are those—generally found in the human domain—whose organizational structure is “defined by input-output information flow and external mechanisms of control.”<sup>12</sup> Cars, computers, and ATMs are all emblematic examples of heteronomous systems insofar as they require an (autonomous) outside observer or operator to impose tasks, input information, and evaluate the results (outputs). Even self-driving cars require an external observer to set a destination for them before they are able to respond “successfully” to events in the environment without the moment-to-moment assistance of a human driver. An autonomous system, by contrast, is *self*-determining; it is, as Thompson explains, “defined by its endogenous, self-organizing and self-controlling dynamics, [it] does not have inputs and outputs in the usual sense, and [it] determines the cognitive domain in which it operates.”<sup>13</sup> Because of the heteronomous, input-output organization of the former, deviations from desired or imposed goals can only be evaluated as outright failures, or system errors. The model for autonomous systems with the external environment is more comparable to a conversation, Varela argues, because “unsatisfactory outcomes are seen as breaches of understanding.”<sup>14</sup> This will become important for our discussions of moral

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 149.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting the way in which these criteria of individuality and autonomy evoke Korsgaard’s constitutive principles of action

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Varela, *Principles*, xii.

disagreement and polarization later on, but it is by no means the central contribution which the enactive approach makes to that problem.

All autopoietic entities<sup>15</sup> are autonomous systems insofar as they are their own goal-setters, the “sources of their own activity,” who specify “their own domains of interaction” rather than serving “as transducers or functions for converting input instructions into output products.”<sup>16</sup> The attentive reader will already begin to see the challenges this introduces for the classical computationalist approaches to cognitive science. To understand the mind as a machine like a computer or ATM is not only biologically inaccurate but in fact undermines *autonomy as such* for the cognitive agent in question. I will discuss this at greater length later on. At this stage, I am still working towards an understanding of *autopoietic identity* and for this I need to first flesh out—and in some ways constrain—the picture of autonomy just sketched. To this end, I turn now to a key pillar in the enactive approach to cognition: *dynamic co-emergence*, which will enable me to fully explain the specifically *needful freedom* that characterizes autopoietic autonomy—and thus autopoietic entities themselves.

#### **4 | DYNAMIC CO-EMERGENCE OF PART AND WHOLE**

A central contention of the enactive approach is the phenomenon of *dynamic co-emergence*, both at the level of part and whole of the autopoietic entity as well as between that whole and its environment (see following section on dynamic co-emergence of self and environment below). In some ways this is an answer to a specific chicken-and-egg problem: which “comes first,” part or whole? The enactive answer is that the chicken and the egg in

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<sup>15</sup> See note on the term autopoietic entities above in the section on autopoiesis.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 46.

fact arise from and mutually co-enact and characterize each other such that neither can be reduced to, nor understood apart from, the other. As Thompson explains, “dynamic co-emergence” describes any situation or process wherein:

the whole not only arises from the (organizational closure of) the parts, but the parts also arise from the whole. The whole is constituted by the relations of the parts, and the parts are constituted by the relations they bear to one another in the whole. Hence, the parts do not exist in advance, prior to the whole, as independent entities that retain their identity in the whole. Rather, part and whole co-emerge and mutually specify each other.<sup>17</sup>

The autopoietically organized biological cell is the paradigmatic example of this dynamic co-emergence insofar as the cell membrane enacts and makes possible the internal chemical reaction network, but it is also that network which is able to perpetuate the material and organizational existence of the membrane in the first place. The cell is thus dynamically co-enacted through the metabolic processes within it; external cell membrane and internal reaction network co-emerge “through their integrative, metabolic relation to each other.”<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon occurs wherever distinct entities arise in tandem through mutual and reciprocating self-constitution: dependent, but also independent. The dynamic co-emergence of part and whole thus describes the sense in which the components of autopoietic systems are dynamically co-emergent with the systems themselves. Those autopoietic entities are *also*, however, dynamically co-emergent with their *environments* and it is here that I am at last able to articulate what *identity* means in the enactive cognition context.

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5 | IDENTITY: DYNAMIC CO-EMERGENCE OF SELF AND ENVIRONMENT

The paradigmatic autopoietic process of producing and reproducing a membrane, discussed above, brings about not just the dynamic autopoietic whole that can be understood as a self, but also, simultaneously, though not *automatically*, the environment within which that self is situated. The relation between the self of the autopoietic entity and the “other” of its environment dynamically co-enact each other, isomorphically echoing the dynamic co-emergence of the whole-part relationship. Once there is a boundary that can reproduce itself (autopoietically), we no longer have the chaos of ontological “quark soup,” so to speak. Instead, we have a novel distinction between a *self*—whether that self is a cell, a full-blown organismic individual, or something in between—and its specific, dynamically co-enacted environment. At the strictly cellular and biological level, this process is metabolism, which defines an interiority marked off from the rest of the world. But in the very act of the “self” defining its *interiority*, it also necessarily defines its *exteriority*; interiority and exteriority dynamically co-enact *each other*. It is this generation of an interiority in the face of and in response to a specific exteriority that serves as the foundation of identity at all levels of biological self-hood.

To exist as an individual means not simply to be numerically distinct from other things but to be a self-pole in a dynamic relationship with alterity, with what is other, with the world. This kind of relationship is not possible for non-autonomous entities. Without organizational and operational closure—without, in other words, any circular and self-referential process whose primary effect is its own production—there is no identity-producing mechanism. Hence there is no dynamic co-emergence of an individual and environment.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 153.

Autopoietic organization is thus what makes both autonomy and selfhood possible, however, this dynamic relationship with alterity has the further implication that while autopoietic entities do possess the autopoietic autonomy of self-generation,<sup>20</sup> their autonomy with regard to their environment is not an isolated or radically unconstrained “freedom-from.” Instead, the autonomy of autopoietic entities is better understood in Hans Jonas’ evocative phrase “needful freedom.”

## 6 | NEEDFUL FREEDOM

Autopoietic autonomy does not imply a relativistic and unconstrained “anything goes.” The relationship of the autopoietic entity to its environment is instead a responsive, adaptive, i.e. *conversational* “needful freedom.” Thompson adopts this concept from Hans Jonas<sup>21</sup> to evoke the sense in which the autonomy of the autopoietic entity is constrained by the relevant features of the environment. Life is a form of dynamic *co-emergence*, afterall, not radical ex nihilo generation. This is deeply interconnected with the sense in which selfhood, i.e. identity, is not a straightforward “given” that arrives pre-packaged when life happens to happen. Identity, in the autopoietic sense, is always *actively enacted*, not in isolation or independence from the world, but through constant and active “assimilation of, and accommodation to the world.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, autonomy, for the enactivists, is not the “adolescent” vision of autonomy as “freedom from” laws, rules, limitations, or constraints

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<sup>20</sup> And in a Kantian sense of being the source normativity for oneself.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Jonas. *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 150.

etc. “Far from being exempt from the causes and conditions of the world,” the autopoietic autonomy of the enactive approach “is an achievement dependent on those very causes and conditions.”<sup>23</sup> This means that in order to persist, the self must constantly re-evaluate and adaptively respond in its co-emergent relation with the “other-ness” of its environment, an environment which itself contains selves and non-selves. The autonomy of the autopoietic and dynamically co-emergent self is thus not a “radically-free-from” but rather a “needful” i.e. necessarily and constantly *adaptive* form of freedom wherein the self is self-determining and autonomous insofar as it is the autonomous source of the *response* it levies in conversation with its environment.

This is why the metaphors of conversation and (mis)understanding are so appropriate in the enactive context, even at the level of biology. The external environment “utters” certain physico-chemical “propositions” or “situations” to which the autopoietic self entity must then respond. As in conversation, a single utterance can have many meanings, and the set of appropriate possible responses is rarely if ever a computable monolith. For this reason, “adaptivity” is a transcendental feature of these processes, and hence of the individual’s ability to converse with its environment, and thereby persist. Because there is autonomy in how the self responds, the autopoietic entity cannot be said to be determined heteronomously as it is under classical cognitive science paradigms. In other words, adaptivity is what protects the needful aspect of the autopoietic entity’s autonomy from becoming *heteronomous*, while also ensuring that such autonomy is reality-responsive. I must therefore, further unpack this notion of adaptivity.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## 7 | ADAPTIVITY

Adaptivity, under the enactivist paradigm, is “an invariant background condition of all life.”<sup>24</sup> The needfully-free relation between self and environment just discussed engenders an immanent, naturalized kind of teleology insofar as it creates a need for constant “re-selfing” on the part of the autopoietically organized entity. The environment, as ultimate “other,” simultaneously *enables the differentiation* of a self and *threatens the persistence* of that same self. That necessary and constant “other” is not only a source of perennial perturbation in the form of concrete challenges relating to nutritive scarcity and excess, it also threatens in the more nebulous, existential sense by representing a constant and ominous shadow of potential non-being, non-self. In other words, dynamic co-emergence is never over: it is a constant, ongoing practice of self-constitution and reconstitution. I will, of course, be connecting this back to Korsgaard’s sense of self-constitution in the next chapter.

This dynamic represents a further irony involved in the needfully-free nature of existence: the self can only persist as autonomously *distinct* from its environment through *assimilation of* and *accommodation to* that same otherness. The term used by Thompson and his colleagues is adaptivity or adaptation, but they are not of course speaking here about the generational-scale, genetic adaptations of Darwin. Adaptivity in the autopoietic context is instead a radically *individual, intimate*, and moment-to moment *attunement to the world*; a flexibility of response to external perturbations that is autonomously generated and yet simultaneously constrained by the normative demands of the interior autopoietic self and the external environment.<sup>25</sup> At the most basic cellular or bacterial level of life, these internal

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 159.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 148.

norms boil down to a fundamental concern for continuing existence and everything that requires and entails.<sup>26</sup> A point worth emphasizing here is the sense in which the enactive cognition camp enthusiastically, perhaps some would say *brazenly*, embraces a form of naturalized teleology at even the most rudimentary levels of life. Typically, we associate teleological and normative “concerns” with our own species and at most a generous handful of other sufficiently complex, “higher-level” organisms. For enactive theorists, however, even bacterial life is endowed with this capacity for normative concern. In the following sections I will explore how such a stance is justified.

Before forging ahead, however, it is necessary to complicate this concept of adaptivity slightly. I have already addressed the way in which the needfully-free structural coupling involved in the dynamic co-emergence of self and environment triggers an ongoing requirement of self-adaptivity on the part of the autopoietic entity.<sup>27</sup> However, *self*-modification is not the only course of action available to the adaptive self; the process ‘goes both ways.’ While the first and perhaps most obvious option available to the autopoietic entity in the face of threat is to adjust the *internal* milieu to accommodate the perturbation, the sufficiently adaptive autopoietic entity will also “modify” its *external* milieu. This brings me to the final key component necessary for understanding the enactive approach to cognition, what Thompson and his colleagues refer to as *sense-making*. In the following section I will dig deep into this somewhat radical, and in some ways *inverted* notion of adaptivity wherein “vital structures modify their milieus according to the internal norms of

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<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 204-5.

their activities.”<sup>28</sup> Making sense of this requires that I first return to the process I described above as dynamic co-emergence; the co-enactive constitution of the self and its environment.

## 8 | IDENTITY AND SENSEMAKING

It is this process of dynamic co-emergence that Thompson points to as the “identity producing mechanism.”<sup>29</sup> But as I explained above, this is not the basic fact of self and non-self; that if there is a self, there will be other phenomena that are not that self (or even other selves), and vice versa. Instead, it is a rather Korsgaardian point about the way in which self-identity must be *actively constituted*. What the enactive theorists contribute to the Korsgaardian picture is the idea that with the “need” for an actively enacted or constituted *self*, comes a reciprocal, analogous “need” for an actively enacted or constituted *environment* as well. In other words, with the circumscription of a self—with the construction of a mediating membrane, literal or figurative—there must simultaneously arise not simply a world defined as the remnant physico-chemical phenomena that are *not* that self, but instead what Thompson refers to as an *umwelt*.

In contrast to the physico-chemical world of total “reality,” an *umwelt* refers to what Thompson describes as a “sensorimotor world—a body-oriented world of perception and action.”<sup>30</sup> He borrows the term from the German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll who used *umwelt* to differentiate the animal’s lived, phenomenal world as distinct from raw reality.<sup>31</sup> An *umwelt* is consequently an environment with meaning and value, and is thus

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<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 153.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Von Uexküll, Jakob Johann. “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men.” In K.S. Lashley, ed., *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, pp. 5-80. New York: International Universities Press, 1957.

crucially distinct from the physico-chemical totality of the aforementioned “raw reality,” or Nagelian view from nowhere, which Thompson claims has no particular meaning or significance at all.

An organism’s environment is not equivalent to the world seen simply through the lenses of physics and chemistry. Physical and chemical phenomena, in and of themselves, have no particular significance or meaning; they are not “for” anyone. Living beings shape the world into meaningful domains of interaction and thereby bring forth their own environments of significance and valence.<sup>32</sup>

It is here that the enactivist position comes right up against traditional cognitive science’s obsession with context-independent representation and subsequent but automatic computational processing.<sup>33</sup> One of the great insights and contributions of the enactive approach, is to demonstrate how profoundly mistaken this “ideal” of context-independence really is.<sup>34</sup>

While enactivists push back against the idea of representation, there is still a beholdenness on the part of the organism to the physico-chemical features of the external world. Indeed, the section on needful freedom laid out the various ways in which the autopoietic entity (as cognitive agent) must be able to successfully respond and adapt to the physico-chemical realities of its environment, in order to persist at all. The on-going process of enacting a self is not some anything-goes series of personally indulgent artistic choices. The self’s structural coupling with the environment must still be responsive to the physico-chemical reality of that environment and thus the question of external-world-representation is still a live one in the enactive framework. It does, however, mean something very different.

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<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 153-4.

<sup>33</sup> Recall here the critiques made by Kukla, Daston, and Galison in the last chapter concerning mechanistic and aperspectival emphases in epistemology.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 58.

While the needful nature of autopoietic freedom involves a certain beholdenness-to-reality, the realism possible under enactive frameworks is still crucially distinct from that of its traditional counterparts.

In opposition to the automatic, total, and mirror-like signification of “representation” in the classical cognitive science sense of the term, which prioritizes and idealizes an intrinsically passive (but also heteronomous) virtue of aperspectival “objectivity,” the enactive approach speaks instead of “representational vehicles” which designates those processes of structural coupling through which meaning and cognitive “content” is enacted. Thompson, unwittingly arguing in parallel with Daston and Galison, explains that

Autonomous systems do not operate on the basis of internal representations in the subjectivist/objectivist sense. Instead of internally representing an external world in some Cartesian sense, they enact an environment inseparable from their own structure and actions...they constitute (disclose) a world that bears the stamp of their own structure.<sup>35</sup>

This “constitution of a world” is the activity referred to above as sense-making. It is not merely the idealist idea that no individual self can ever hope to access the Nagelian view from nowhere, it is that no “self” can truly be said to even *exist* in such a world. Life always lives, and to live—on the enactivist model—simply *is* to constantly and adaptively enact an umwelt of perception and action. Identity is not pre-given, and neither is the *environment* in which and through which that identity is enacted. Autopoietic life processes actively create both *self and world*, not merely at the level of citizen and society, but even at the level of each individual cell. This is a key part of the fractal structure that I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter.

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<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 59.

This is also why enactive cognitivists defend a naturalized kind of teleology. Once there is a “self”—even a merely bacterial one—phenomena in the external milieu are no longer merely neutral, physico-chemical facts or events. Now there is a “self” that must be perpetuated, that can be at risk of annihilation and the bacterial level, metabolism is the mediating process that enables the bacteria-self to adaptively persist in the face of the constant threat of non-being. Even at this basic, literally microscopic level, the actively enacted self-identity “brings” with it a whole chorus of internal norms and values that in turn “interpret” i.e. actively (re)define and (re)construct a radically mediated version of the physico-chemical outside world, via the representational vehicles described above. Even bacterial self-identity thus actively *constitutes* the external umwelt, it does not merely absorb some specific slice of brute physico-chemical reality. The enaction of an umwelt involves more than simply lasso-ing a manageable nearby chunk of Reality. It is not merely a subtraction-from of brute data, but an “adding-to” of meaning and value.

In the most basic case of the bacterial cell, the mediating membrane (a literal one in this case) not only determines what data are “allowed” or able to interact with the cell-self; rather, the membrane—in concert with the internal and normative functional dynamics of cellular metabolism—is what actively constitutes the actual meaning or significance to which any chunk of brute data can “lay claim.” Thompson here makes use of one of Francisco Varela’s helpful examples for describing the umwelt in terms of a “*surplus of significance*”:

There is no food significance in sucrose except when bacteria migrate up-gradient and metabolize sucrose molecules, thereby enhancing their autopoiesis. The food significance of sucrose is certainly not unrelated to the physics and chemistry of the situation; it depends on sucrose being able to form a gradient, traverse a cell membrane, and so on. But physics and chemistry alone do not suffice to reveal this significance. For that the perspective of the autopoietic cell is needed...Whatever the organism

encounters it must evaluate from the vantage point established by its self-affirming identity.<sup>36</sup>

This is sense-making at its most basic, literal, and biological level. As the autopoietic entity gains in complexity, however, so too do the sense-making processes and the relevant components required. The mediating boundaries at play multiply and complexify as the autopoietic entity itself becomes more complex until we reach the level of full blown traditionally understood cognitive agents. Here, the mediating boundaries and normative constraints proliferate to encompass self-conscious perceptions, evaluations, judgments, fears, values, aspirations, and so on. But whether in the context of a bacterial cell, or discerning human moral agent, sensemaking “lays a new grid over the world: a ubiquitous scale of value.”<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, then, all across the living spectrum—from single cell to moral agent—the “raw”, aperspectival, physico-chemical world must be *actively imbued* with significance. As a result, meaning and significance can and will only ever exist insofar as there is a self that is actively enacting them. The autopoietically organized self achieves this by transforming the physico-chemical world into an umwelt of meaning and significance according to the internal norms of its own identity. Even in the most “basic”, i.e. bacterial instances of autopoietic selfhood, the self in question must still *actively generate* the required significance from the surrounding physico-chemical world and be adaptive to those conditions. It is here that the intimate and inside-out relation between adaptivity and sense-making begins to

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<sup>36</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Weber, A., Varela, F.J. “Life after Kant: Natural purposes and the autopoietic foundations of biological individuality.” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1, 97–125 (2002). 118.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020368120174>

become more clear: Adaptivity denotes how the autopoietic entity modifies itself in response to its environment; sense-making describes how the autopoietic entity modifies its environment in response to its identity.<sup>38</sup> Cognition then, even in its most basic and biological forms is an actively creative, constituting process.<sup>39</sup> It should, therefore, be understood not as *passive information representation and processing*, but as inherently active, subject-relative and context-dependent, but non-relativistic (recall the needful nature of that freedom) *meaning-constitution*. Here at last I am able to sketch in full the enactivist counter to the classical, reductively computational approach to cognition.

## 9 | AUTOPOIETIC ENACTIVE COGNITION

Thompson succinctly summarizes the points we have so far covered via an efficient five-point schematic:

1. **Life = autopoiesis and cognition.** Any living system is both an autopoietic and a cognitive system.
2. **Autopoiesis entails the emergence of a bodily self.** A physical autopoietic system, by virtue of its operational closure (autonomy), produces and realizes an individual or self in the form of a living body, an organism.
3. **Emergence of a self entails emergence of a world.** The emergence of a self is also by necessity the co-emergence of a domain of interactions proper to that self, an environment or Umwelt.<sup>40</sup>
4. **Emergence of a self and world = sense-making.** The organism's environment is the sense it makes of the world. This environment is a place of significance and valence, as a result of the global action of the organism.
5. **Sense-making = enaction.** Sense-making is viable conduct. Such conduct is oriented toward and subject to the environment's significance and valence. Significance and valence do not preexist "out there," but are enacted, brought forth and constituted by living beings. Living entails sense-making, which equals enaction.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 148.

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 159.

<sup>40</sup> I want to thank William Schweiker for pointing out a shared position here with Tillich's view of the self-world as ontologically basic, for instance in Volume I of *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 158.

The enactive approach to cognitive science at the human level is radically distinct from the classical machine-oriented frameworks which I lightly alluded to in the context of Daston and Galison's critique of objectivity. It broke onto the scene in 1991 when an interdisciplinary collaboration between Francisco Varela (professor of cognitive science and epistemology), Eleanor Rosch (professor of cognitive psychology) and Evan Thompson (professor of philosophy) published *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*.<sup>42</sup>

The approach has five main tenets, which are intimately *related* to, but not synonymous with the five-point schematic just sketched. "The first idea is that living beings are autonomous agents that actively generate and maintain themselves, and thereby also enact or bring forth their own cognitive domains."<sup>43</sup> This refers to the sense in which living entities actively generate and maintain themselves in the sections on autopoiesis and adaptivity, among others. Dynamic co-emergence means that self and context are mutually co-creative—simultaneously co-enacted—through adaptive processes of sense-making (which is cognition in its natural biological form). What is important for full human-level cognition is that the nervous system itself is one of these dynamic autopoietic systems, and therefore it too creates meaning, rather than processing data in the traditional computationalist sense. It does so by actively generating and maintaining "its own coherent and meaningful patterns of activity, according to its operation as a circular and reentrant network of interacting neurons."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. 1st MIT Press pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

This “circular and reentrant network of interacting neurons” is an instantiation of the autopoietic organization that I laid out earlier in this chapter. While the most basic instances of autopoietic organization are found in the single cell, I have already noted how autopoietic organization can occur everywhere along the spectrum of complexity from single cells to microbial communities, immune systems, and multicellular organisms including human persons. One can even argue, as some already have, that even societies of human persons are autopoietically organized. The autopoietic organization of *nervous systems* provides the crucial support for the enactive approach to cognitive science specifically, however, in the rest of this dissertation, I will also be arguing that there are good reasons to take an analogous approach to questions of practical reason, moral perception and deliberation, and the polarization which proliferates from these processes.

The third pillar of the enactive approach to cognition integrates a brain-level-reframing of the ideas of adaptivity and sensemaking laid out in previous sections.

Cognition is the exercise of skillful know-how in situated and embodied action. Cognitive structures and processes emerge from recurrent sensorimotor patterns of perception and action. Sensorimotor coupling between organism and environment modulates, but does not determine, the formation of endogenous, dynamic patterns of neural activity, which in turn inform sensorimotor coupling.<sup>45</sup>

The sensorimotor coupling between organism and environment, that “modulates but does not determine,” is a needfully-free interaction at the specifically cognitional level. This third tenet entails the fourth: the world in which a cognitive being exists is not a predetermined chunk of information ready to be passively by—or heteronomously *represented* to—the brain. It is instead “a relational domain enacted or brought forth by that being's autonomous

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<sup>45</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 13.

agency and mode of coupling with the environment.”<sup>46</sup> This of course emphasizes the point that everywhere in life, even at the level of the humble bacterium cell moving up the sucrose gradient, meaning is *created*, not “found.” Physico-chemical reality is not divided into chunks of significant, meaning-laden data that are ready and waiting to be “represented” and subsequently computed. Cognitive knowledge-seeking processes are active, necessarily discerning, and to some degree, open-ended. The final central idea is really best understood as a conclusion drawn from the previous four: it emphasizes a rather phenomenological point about the centrality of *experience*. Rather than being written off as an “epiphenomenal side issue” as it is in many traditional approaches to cognitive science, enactivists argue that it is in fact “central to any understanding of the mind, and needs to be investigated in a careful phenomenological manner...mind science and phenomenological investigations of human experience need to be pursued in a complementary and mutually informing way.”<sup>47</sup> With these core tenets in hand, I will now turn to an explicit cross-comparison of the enactive and more classical conceptions of cognitive science.

Whether computationalist, connectionist, or cognitivist, traditional cognitive science has sought to understand cognition as some sort of (often machine-like) direct, representational absorption and processing of the “world out there” within the structure of our minds. Under such a framework, “thoughts” are no more than symbols we use to translate “objective reality” into the input-output machinations that we know as cognition. Furthermore, the cognitive processes that cognitive science purports to study, are simply the computational processings of encoded but context-independent inputs from the world.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 13-4.

“According to the received view in cognitive science, in order to explain cognitive abilities we need to appeal to information-bearing states inside the system. Such states, by virtue of the semantic information they carry about the world, qualify as representations.”<sup>48</sup> This picture is pretty clearly in conflict with the *enactive* cognition framework wherein self and world are mutually co-generated; where the environment that any cell or nervous system or organism can interact with is simultaneously so much more and less than the raw brute entirety of the physico-chemical world.

As I alluded to earlier, the *umwelt* *with* which and *in* which the autopoietic entity interacts and cognizes is quantitatively *less* than the totality of the physico-chemical universe; less than the so-called god’s-eye-view or in Nagel’s terms the “view from nowhere.” What the enactive theorists show is that this *umwelt* is also much *more* than that view from nowhere insofar as it possesses a *surplus of meaning or significance*. To return to the earlier example, a bacterium that swims up the sucrose gradient is limited in its “understanding” of the physico-chemical world; there are countless corners of the universe and even local neighbor molecules that the cell has no sense of nor any ability to engage with. This is not an issue of sinfully emotional, muddy subjectivity; it is an empirical problem of finite sensorimotor capacity. Nevertheless, there is also a sense in which the *umwelt* of the sucrose gradient for the bacterium is itself “more-than” the physico-chemical universe. That universe does not include the meaning of *sucrose-as-food*; *that* significance is something that *can only arise in the context of the cognitive subject*. This is why, Thompson explains, “for enactive theorists, information is context-dependent and agent-relative; it belongs to the coupling of a system and its environment. What counts as information is determined by the history,

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<sup>48</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 52.

structure, and needs of the system acting in its environment.”<sup>49</sup> As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, there are still robust “realist-style” constraints on this subject-orientedness thanks to the mutually co-enactive, needfully free, and actively adaptive relationship between the self and the physico-chemical reality (see below). Furthermore, although this sucrose example takes place at the level of individual bacteria cells, this phenomenon of surplus significance is *more*, not *less* relevant at the complexity level of self-conscious and linguistically oriented human subjects.<sup>50</sup>

It is also worth noting an irony which Korsgaard and constructive ethicists generally would care about, namely, the extent to which it is the enactive framework that is able to preserve the *autonomy* of cognitive systems, over and against other cognitive paradigms. In the latter’s pursuit of a sanitized “objectivity”, the traditional cognitive scientists have in fact rendered *autonomy* impossible. As Thompson explains, “this objectivist notion of information presupposes a heteronomy perspective in which an observer or designer or operator etc. stands outside the system and states what is to count as information (and hence what is to count as error or success in representation).”<sup>51</sup> This is well and good for ATMs or automobiles, but to reduce human cognition to the same level is to undermine the possibility of autonomy at the very basis of the system. This is not, however, to say that “anything goes” in the enactive camp. The cell cannot choose to find a sucrose gradient where there is none, the physico-chemical components *do matter*, and they *do constrain* what possible information and meaning can be enacted. The point here is that, once again, it takes two to tango, so to speak. In the same way that self and world are mutually co-enacted, information

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 51-2.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 52.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

itself only becomes possible (and is defined at every step of the way) as a result of the particular organizational dynamics of the “individual,” in concert with the structural coupling of that individual with its environment (which can consist in everything from the flat physico-chemical “facts” of reality, as well as other autopoietically organized entities like other human beings).

Compare this picture to the traditional cognitive science approaches, which aim to portray the brain as a mere representing-and-computing machine, with cognition as a complex form of computation wherein “object features outside the organism provide informational inputs to the brain, and the brain's information processing task is to arrive at an accurate representation of the objective world and produce an adaptive motor output.”<sup>52</sup> Not only does such an approach now appear *biologically inaccurate*, it is also *phenomenologically unsound* from an explanatory point of view insofar as it must necessarily relegate the mind to a heteronomous status wherein meaning can only be imposed from outside. The mind in this framework is a passive receptor, not capable of the dynamically enactive processes required for such basic tasks as reporting an event, or planning a trip, nevermind truly creative activities like writing a play, or even coming up with a cognitive theory like computationalism. Enactive cognition is much better able to account for the cognitional activities we perform and experience every day, because it accommodates an autonomous framing wherein the outside environment *modulates but does not determine* neural activity. As Thompson emphasizes again and again, “individual neurons do not detect objectively defined features. Rather, assemblies of neurons make sense of stimulation by

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<sup>52</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 52-3.

constructing meaning, and this meaning arises as a function of how the brain's endogenous and nonlinear activity compensates for sensory perturbations.”<sup>53</sup>

This picture of cognition can thus be described as “autonomous” insofar as it articulates the needfully free nature of meaning-construction-within-a-context rather than a heteronomous imposition of pre-packaged information from the outside world.<sup>54</sup> The emphasis here on autonomy, as well as the sense in which all meaning must be actively constructed are just two of the many ways in which the enactive approach to cognitive science provides rigorous support for Korsgaard's metaethical framework. I will explore more aspects of this symbiotic relationship in the next chapter. First, however, I must explain how the autopoietic insights in enactive cognitive science have further implications for the embedded, embodied, and affective features of cognition generally which will also play key roles in the next chapter.

## **10 | EMBODIED, EMBEDDED, AND AFFECTIVE COGNITION**

In the next chapter I will be putting forward a moral epistemology that builds on this enactive understanding of human cognition as well as the related ways in which cognition is embodied, embedded, and affective. To clarify what these terms mean, and why they follow from the enactive features of cognition I laid out above, I here introduce the arguments of Dave Ward and Mog Stapleton in order to integrate these concepts in as efficient a way as possible. In their joint article “Es are good: Cognition as enacted, embodied, embedded,

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<sup>53</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 57.

active and extended,”<sup>55</sup> Mog and Stapleton show that to the extent that cognition is in fact enactive, a special relationship holds between cognition, perception, and agency; a relationship which in turn entails that cognition is also embodied, embedded, and affective.<sup>56</sup> I will deal with each of these concepts in turn before concluding the chapter as a whole.

## 10.i | Enactive Agency

Ward and Stapleton defend their claims about the embodied, embedded, and affective nature of cognition by highlighting the unique conceptions of perception and agency that are common to most if not all versions of the enactive approach.<sup>57</sup> What all these versions of enactivism share is a commitment to the idea that to say that cognition is enactive is to make a further claim about how cognition is “dependent on aspects of the activity of the cognizing organism,”<sup>58</sup> that is, its *agency*. They cite Thompson’s point about the dynamically co-enacted nature of self and *umwelt*<sup>59</sup> to emphasize the inherently active and adaptive nature of cognition in general: “Cognition itself arises out of this same mode of adaptive interaction with the environment. To be a cognizer...is to manifest an appropriate degree of attunement to the objects, features, threats and opportunities present in the immediate environment.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ward, Dave & Stapleton, Mog. “Es Are Good. Cognition as Enacted, Embodied, Embedded, Affective and Extended.” In Fabio Paglieri (ed.), *Consciousness in Interaction: The role of the natural and social context in shaping consciousness*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 90.

<sup>57</sup> While they explore sensorimotor and action-space branches of enactivism in addition to the original form of autopoietic enactivism introduced by Thompson and his colleagues, as a way to strengthen universality of their thesis, I will focus on their comments vis a vis autopoietic constructivism to avoid confusion. It is also worth noting that autopoietic constructivism (Thompson 2007, Di Paolo (2005) Hurley 1998; Noë 2004, among others) represent the strand of enactivism most closely resembling the original Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991;) Ward and Stapleton include the others simply to ensure that their argument can be seen as applying to all forms of enactivism which stem from this original work of Thompson et al.

<sup>58</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> Thompson, *miL*, 407. The claim that “a cognitive being’s world is not a pre-specified, external realm ... but a relational domain enacted or brought forth by that being’s autonomous agency and mode of coupling with the environment”

<sup>60</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 91.

This emphasis on adaptive interaction, which includes the dynamic co-emergence of cognizer and environment, as well as the needfully free structural coupling of adaptivity discussed earlier in this chapter, enactivism also requires a central emphasis on *agency* because cognition is no longer a passive procedural calculation, but rather an active, constructive and dynamic process.<sup>61</sup> This deep connection between active agency and cognition challenges the traditional, passive views of perception as well as the supposed relationship between perception, cognition, and agency. Certainly, enactive cognitive scientists are not the first to have the idea that knowledge is not a passive process. Kantians, Hegelians, Pragmatists, and Phenomenologists, among others, have been building philosophical frameworks around these ideas for centuries, if not millenia. The fact that enactive cognition marks a breakthrough in cognitive science is not to say that it marks a breakthrough in human thought writ large, but it does translate these ideas in a way that can provide better push back against what Susan Hurley has dubbed “The Classical Sandwich” approach to cognitive science.

## **10.ii | Enactive Perception**

The sandwich moniker singles out a particular, widely accepted, but faulty view of the relation between perception, cognition and agency. To review, according to that approach to understanding cognition, these three capacities are wholly separable (like components in a sandwich). Under this model,

Perception consists in input from world to mind, with the possible contribution of cognition to processing that input in such a way as to render it meaningful to, or useful for, the subject. Cognition...works with this perceptual input, uses it to form a representation of how things are in the subject's environment and, through reasoning and planning that is appropriately

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<sup>61</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 94.

informed by the subject's projects and desires, arrives at a specification of what the subject should do with or in her current environment.<sup>62</sup>

But as I have argued in the earlier sections of this chapter, "representation" in this rote and passive sense is not an accurate description for how a cognizing entity perceives and processes informational phenomena in its environment. Rather, the environmental content that is available to the cognizing organism is itself a feature of that entity's internal, autopoietically reproduced identity, and that internal autopoietically reproduced structure is simultaneously informed by the informational significance that the autopoietic membrane actively generates with the physico-chemical ingredients encountered, i.e. "perceived" from or in the external environment. This active and dynamic circularity would seem to indicate, then, that the Classical Sandwich separation of cognition from both perception and agency is untenable.<sup>63</sup>

For all the reasons that have been sketched out in this chapter, then, the separable sandwich understanding of perception, agency, and cognition should be set aside, and ideally, overcome. Cognitional activity should not be understood as mere "causal commerce" of stimulus and response within a predefined, already meaning-imbued space. Instead, perception, cognition, and agency need to be understood as inseparably integrated, mutually defining and co-constituting capacities. The enactive attunement to the environment, which Thompson describes as a constitutive feature of life itself, *necessitates* a non-sandwich relationship between perceptual sensitivity and active agency.<sup>64</sup> This empirically supported,<sup>65</sup> necessarily-interrelated character of perception, cognition, and agency is what

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<sup>62</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 94.

<sup>63</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 95-96.

<sup>64</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 96-7.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 100-102.

leads Ward and Stapleton to put forward their thesis that these interrelated phenomena of perception, cognition, and agency are all also embodied, embedded, and affective. I turn now to address each of these three claims in turn.

### **10.iii | Embodiedness**

Ward and Stapleton argue that insofar as the enactive approach to cognition is indeed accurate, it follows that perception, (and consequently cognition and agency), are necessarily and inescapable *embodied* because “the categories and structure of perception and cognition are constrained and shaped by facts about the kind of bodily agents we are.”<sup>66</sup> This is not merely the offensively obvious point that human eyeballs are not equipped to see ultraviolet rays, while other animals’ are. It is a deeper point about the recursive interrelatedness of self and world. As I have attempted to show throughout this chapter, the way in which we are able to interact with the environment, i.e. the meaning and significance which we are able to enact, is defined, all the way down by the type of being we are, which itself is an *actively constituted* identity. We are constituted by our environments and our environments are constituted by us, that is, by our perception, cognition, and agency. All of these features of our identity are shaped by the kind of embodied beings that we are. Features of our embodiment are thus active ingredients in the constitution of both ourselves and the environment that we dynamically co-enact because our embodiment affects both how and what we perceive, which itself in turn shapes the autonomous or at least needfully free processes of our cognition and agency. This framing is not novel to human thought. Again, I am not claiming as much, but what is exciting and of value, at least for the purposes

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<sup>66</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 98.

of my dissertation, is the way in which enactive cognitive science affirms the kind of Kantian, Hegelian, Pragmatist, and Phenomenologist insights in terms that are more amenable to audiences outside and skeptical of those fields. Enactivists are themselves fully cognizant of this indebtedness.

The role of such facts about our embodiment in structuring our perception and cognition is...not accidental, but a result of the constitutive role those facts play in setting the boundaries of the categories. So the essential embodiment of perception and cognition, on the view we present here, is again a consequence of the enactivist's Kantian view that the cognizer's activity plays an essential role in the constitution of the world as it is accessible to them in perception and cognition.<sup>67</sup>

I will explore the very Korsgaardian features of this line of reasoning in the next chapter. First, however, I lay out the second idea; that cognition is not only embodied, but *embedded*.

#### **10.iv | Embeddedness**

If the idea of embodiedness owes a great deal to Kant and the others just referenced, embeddedness can similarly trace its lineage (though not its empirical support) to versions of the historicist tradition represented by the likes of Troeltsch and Weber, among others.<sup>68</sup>

The claim that cognition is embedded articulates the sense in which “our cognitive properties and performances can crucially depend on facts about our relationship to the surrounding environment.”<sup>69</sup> Recall my point about recursiveness above; in some ways, this claim is just an extrapolation from the idea that cognition is embodied. Because of the interrelated nature of perception cognition and agency for the enactive approach, as well as the dynamic co-enaction of identity, meaning and environment at every level, the embodied

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<sup>67</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> I thank William Schweiker for pushing me to emphasize these connections between enactive cognitive science and other philosophical traditions more clearly.

<sup>69</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 89-90.

cognitive agent cannot cognize separately from the environment in which it is necessarily always already embedded.<sup>70</sup> While the autopoietic entity's processes of perception and cognition are not passive in the way that traditional adherents of the Classical Sandwich approach to cognitive science would have us believe, those active, and co-enactive cognitional processes still require an environment—an *umwelt*—in which and through which to carry out their cognitional processes of dynamically co-enactive sense-making.

Cognition is organized recursively:

The possibility of engaging in the embodied activity which is constitutive of perception and cognition depends on the existence of an arena of potential engagement – the embedding environment. Moreover, the cognizer's activity plays an essential role in constituting the boundaries and contents of that environment. Cognition is essentially embedded because the mode of activity on which it essentially depends simultaneously constitutes both the cognitive life of the subject, and the environment to which the subject is responsive.<sup>71</sup>

Because the constitutional nature of dynamic co-emergence that they are describing here goes *both ways*—that is self and world enact *each other*—the cognizing self (and hence its cognitional activities) are also constituted by features of the environment in which the agent is “embedded.” So when Ward and Stapleton say that cognition is embedded, what they mean is that the environment in which cognition takes place has a necessary and necessarily relevant, constitutive, and *active* role to play in the cognitional activity of the individual, it is not just ‘where the agent is doing the cognizing’.

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<sup>70</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E's Are Good*, 99.

## 10.v | Affectivity

The final point to make is that, for all of the reasons sketched above, cognition is also affective; “that is, intimately dependent upon the value of the object of cognition to the cognizer.”<sup>72</sup> This feature offers a particularly helpful push-back against the aperspectival objectivists I discussed in the previous chapter who sought to excise the self, and particularly the *interested self* from any pursuit of knowledge. Instead, cognition, even in its most straightforward forms, *requires evaluation*. Axiality is not circumscribed within some pejoratively “subjective” or explicitly normative sphere, it is a baseline requirement for cognition itself. As Ward and Stapleton explain, cognition:

essentially depends on the cognizer occupying an evaluative stance with respect to the objects of cognition and their relationship to the cognizer’s interests...affect comprehensively permeates our perceptual openness to the world, acting as a transparent background that constrains and informs the features of the environment which show up for a perceiver.<sup>73</sup>

This does not mean that we cannot ever become reflectively aware of this ubiquitous affective lens.<sup>74</sup> Transparency does not equal invisibility; rather, it is a tinted lens that fades into the background, can be overlooked, or taken for granted as a part of the external world, when in fact it is an integral part of our perceptive and cognitional autopoietic “membrane.” Indeed, from single cell bacteria with literal cellular membranes, all the way up to human animals with (Korsgaardian) self-reflective distance, the perceptive membrane requires the generative normativity of affect to “do its job” of circumscribing a self and mediating between that self and the raw, meaningless, physico-chemical static. In other words, we need

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<sup>72</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 99.

<sup>73</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 99-100.

<sup>74</sup> Recall Kukla’s arguments about how we are able to perceive such features, but only with work.

an affective stance in order to dynamically co-enact an environment with meaning of any kind in the first place.

Michelle Maiese elaborates on this claim in her book *Embodiment, Emotion, and Cognition*, explaining that there simply can be no cognitive processing of information which is not affectively inflected. Without affective framing, she argues, “these cognitive processes could not even effectively get started” because of the way in which it makes possible “the spontaneous, continuous coordination of activity that takes place outside our self-reflective awareness and often prior to conceptual information processing.”<sup>75</sup> Affect gives shape and contour to an otherwise undefined physico-chemical brute “reality;” it is what enables that staticky boundless soup to become a *traversable terrain*. Affective framing is not specific to more messily, “emotionally” subjective areas of interpersonal, aesthetic, or moral life; rather, *all* cognitive processes are oriented against, and relative to, a “backdrop” of affect:

Even playing a game of chess or solving a geometry problem, for example, engages our lived bodily dynamics, desires, and concerns. This is to say that thought is not prior to and more basic than feeling, but rather inseparable from it, insofar as all thinking is colored and contoured by an individual’s affective stance.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, as I alluded to in the last chapter when discussing the impersonalists, affectivity is part of what makes meaning *of any kind* possible. Think of the color blindness tests where colored dots fill up a circle. If you are color blind, the circle will just appear to be a jumbled mess of smaller muddy shapes. It is only by having the proper optical lens that you can differentiate the red from the green and read the number, letter, or message “hidden” in the mix. Or, for a similar example, think of standing only inches away from a vast pointillism

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<sup>75</sup> Maiese, Michelle. *Embodiment, Emotion, and Cognition*. Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 188.

<sup>76</sup> Maiese, *Embodiment, Emotion, and Cognition*, 120

painting. Without affect, without that normative lens of affectivity, “reality” is nothing more than pointilist chaos.

This “caring-contoured map,”—what aperspectivalists would want to deride as problematic bias—is in fact *necessary* to any and all cognition, not a sinful “vice” to be overcome. Without affective “bias” we are left tumbling through the aforementioned unbounded pointilist soup, a meaningless and chaotic static, which is not a painting of anything at all.<sup>77</sup> Meaning is impossible in such a case, as is agency and action. Put differently, the view from nowhere is not a view of anything at all. Or, as Maiese puts it, “without affective framing, we would enter into a state of cognitive and behavioral paralysis, and effectively engaging with our surroundings would become impossible.”<sup>78</sup> I will return to the implications this holds for metaethics and moral epistemology in the following chapter. For now, the key point is that we need to overcome the aperspectivalist, impersonalist aversion to affect. While aperspectivalists may not find more philosophical versions of these same arguments compelling, the fact that such insights are now being affirmed by the “harder field” of cognitive science should give them pause. Thus, if enactive cognitive science is as promising as its empirical successes seem to imply,<sup>79</sup> then we should indeed understand our cognitive processes as embodied, embedded, and affective all the way down in the way that Ward and Stapleton describe: “Capacities for perception, agency and cognition are essentially intertwined, and in turn essentially depend upon the cognizer’s being embodied,

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<sup>77</sup> I will explore later on in the dissertation the implications this has for common critiques around the role of the emotions in public discourse. Emotional reasons, much like religious ones, have commonly been ostracized in similar ways and for similar reasons.

<sup>78</sup> Maiese, *Embodiment, Emotion, and Cognition*, 123.

<sup>79</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 100-101.

embedded within a meaningful environment, towards which she occupies an affective stance.”<sup>80</sup>

## 11 | CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have sought to lay the conceptual groundwork for my own interventions on the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict, interventions which I endeavor to finally articulate in the next chapter. In particular, I will be sketching an *enactive moral epistemology*, that draws together a more dynamically co-enactive picture of perception and objectivity as well as more autopoietic understandings of rationality and identity. When integrated with Korsgaard’s metaethical system, I will argue, these ideas have the potential to not only plug some holes in her system for its own sake, but also for counteracting the dehumanizing impulses that characterize too much of our current socio-cultural and political moral conflicts. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, my constructive proposal is two-pronged; explanatory and practical, i.e. action guiding. The following chapter will elaborate how a better understanding (explanation) of our own epistemic practice, in particular, enactively-informed ideas around perception, rationality, and objectivity can counter the dehumanizing implications of entrenched disagreement; I synthesize these ideas with Korsgaard’s metaethical system to propose what I term *enactive constructivism*. The final chapter will offer concrete (practical) guidance for *rehumanizing* our moral-epistemic practices through what I refer to as the “epistemic virtues” called for by *enactive constructivism*.

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<sup>80</sup> Ward & Stapleton, *E’s Are Good*, 100.

# Chapter 6: Enactive Constructivism

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter I outline the moral-epistemic metaethical system that I believe offers the most promise for rehumanizing our moral conflicts. Because this proposal can best be understood as a careful weaving-together of Korsgaard’s metaethical constructivism with insights from enactive cognitive science, it is worth first highlighting some key ways in which Korsgaard’s philosophical impulses are in fact already substantively *supported* by the central tenets of enactivism (Section 2 of this chapter). This section will also serve to justify and ground the legitimacy of reconstructing Korsgaard’s framework in this enactivist vein. It is this reframing that will not only offer solutions to the weaknesses in Korsgaard’s original version of constructivism, but also serve as the raw ingredients for my own proposed enactive constructivism later on in the chapter. With these “compatibilities” in hand, I will then highlight the ways in which enactive insights provide helpful *pushback* to the mechanical, aperspectival, and impersonalist impulses I worked through in Chapter 4, before digging into the details of the specific enactivist epistemic interventions I propose to integrate with Korsgaard’s metaethics. This work culminates in Section 5 where I introduce and lay out my twin concepts of “phronetic fingerprint” and “endaptive umwelt,” before turning at last in Section 6 to a full elaboration of how all of these pieces work together to constitute what I am terming *Enactive Constructivism*. I conclude the chapter with an

assessment of the extent to which *Enactive Constructivism* can overcome the shortcomings in Korsgaard's.

## 2 | COMPATIBILITY OF THOMPSON WITH KORSGAARD

In this section I will work through the four shared features which I judge to be the *most* crucial to the reconstruction of Korsgaard's position and thus to the moral-epistemic project at hand, namely: (1) the centrality and robust notion of the individual knower or moral agent, for both Korsgaard and enactivism, (2) their analogous framings of agency as constituted by *autonomy* and *efficacy*, (3) the *active* understanding of meaning constitution which they each share, and (4) the degree to which each acknowledges the centrality of *affective framing*.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with these four pre-existing points of contact will enable me to not only clearly differentiate what enactivism is actually *contributing* to Korsgaard, but also to defend the general viability and compatibility of this synthetic project.

### 2.i | Agency As Autonomy + Efficacy

The first point of commonality to note is the emphasis on autonomy at the heart of each framework. In fact, the (needfully free) agency of the autopoietic entity involves autonomy and efficacy in a remarkably Korsgaardian sense insofar as her constitutional model dictates that to be an agent in the world one must act from autonomy—in the Kantian sense of not being determined heteronomously—and with efficacy: that is, one must actually effect a change in the world, or “make a difference.” You cannot be an agent without both of these attributes and you cannot be efficacious without first being autonomous. In the enactive context, autonomy is a baseline requirement for autopoiesis and cognitive agency in a

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<sup>1</sup> They also seem to share an impulse towards naturalized understandings of teleology

strikingly similar, though not fully analogous way. Autopoietic cellular agency, for example, requires both that the cell membrane be autonomously discerning in how it processes information from the environment, and that it be able to carry out these autopoietic processes without simply absorbing or caving to heteronomous inputs. But recall that the cell was also needfully free: in order to persist, it needs to successfully interact with the physico-chemical contingencies of the outside world, even as it constitutes its own meaning from those same contingencies.

Whereas for Korsgaard, efficacy is simply about effecting a change in the world, for Thompson's enactivism there is an added "existential" feature of effective survival; persistence and maintenance of identity in the face of the environmental other and the threat of non-being it represents (though it is important to recall the similar threat of de-constitution that failure or very extreme defect can lead to under Korsgaard's constitutional model as well). This precarity is most obvious at the level of more basic life forms like bacteria, but even at the level of a person, the enactive framework has the direction of influence going both ways (between self and world), much more than Korsgaard's notion of efficacy above. I will be discussing this further in 2.iii. As a general theme, however, Korsgaard's implicit notion of the self-world relationship could benefit from the enactivists' more co-equal framing: The self is not just creating effects on the world in order to successfully persist, it is responding to that world "appropriately." This relates directly to the needfulness of autonomy for the enactivists. Efficacy is only possible for an autonomous agent under both frameworks, but the needfulness of that autonomy under the enactive picture better (or at least more directly) accounts for the crucial way in which an agent's autonomy must still be acutely environment-sensitive and responsive, especially insofar as

they hope to be truly efficacious. One could say that both autonomy and efficacy need to be conceived of as more of a two-way street than Korsgaard seems to allow. This has the further, but related implication of the extent to which efficacy additionally requires an active constitution of the external world, not just successful interaction with a preformed environment, or ready-made world of significance and meaning. Put differently, agents must first enact/effect a world before they can enact or effect a change in that world. And these tasks of course assume the simultaneous active constitution of the self doing the enacting, without lapsing into either solipsism or simple representationalism.

## **2.ii | Shared Emphasis On The Need For A Self**

In the previous chapter I laid out just how central the active constitution of selfhood is to the enactivist paradigm: meaning cannot exist in the first place except as actively (but responsively) constituted by an autopoietically organized, needfully-free self in conversation with its world. Korsgaard, on the other hand, is of course the veritable queen of self-constitution. Additionally, I would argue that one of her most important contributions to both getting us out of the metaethical trap from Chapters 1 and 2, and to metaethics in general, is her acknowledgement and central positioning of a self-reflective and axiologically discerning individual at the heart of her system. This is all simply to highlight that Korsgaard and Thompson share a fairly staunch rejection of the impersonalist impulse I critiqued in Chapter 4, albeit to differing *extents*. I will be more closely examining the actual extent, or staunchness of Korsgaard's rejection of impersonalism in later sections, especially 3.ii, 3.iii, and 4.iv. It is worth noting here, however, that Korsgaard's contribution of practical identities does indeed do an admirable job avoiding and even explicitly *rejecting* the impersonalist temptation when it comes to the axiological (value-oriented) aspects of

practical reason. Indeed, she grounds the very *possibility* of value in the notion of the individual self, even as she tempers any risk of relativism with her universal, moral identity.

Nevertheless, part of what the enactive insights indicate is that she does not adequately expand that anti-impersonalist impulse beyond the issue of moral *value* into the more epistemic facets of phronesis concerning *perception* and *rational reflective deliberation*. Indeed, at least one of the underlying causes of the weaknesses I identified at the end of Chapter 3 can be understood as the result of failing to resist the impersonalist impulse *fully enough*. In other words, I am arguing that much of her inability to account for how those refreshingly *personalist* practical identities can yield such wildly divergent results can be attributed to a generically *impersonalist* epistemology—which features an *overly automatic and passive concept of perception* paired with an excessively *aperspectival, mechanistic, and uniform account of rationality*—as well as some complicated understandings of objectivity.

### **2.iii | Active Constitution Of Meaning And Selfhood (Without Relativism)**

Beyond the general emphasis on the epistemic importance of self and selfhood, Thompson and Korsgaard also share an emphasis on the active constitution of that self(hood) and on meaning<sup>2</sup> itself, while simultaneously rejecting any concerningly radical forms of epistemic or moral relativism. Recall from Chapter 3 that active constitution is central to Korsgaard's metaethical framework, both in regard to the constitution of normative truth contra the substance realists, as well as the constitution of the self (the moral agent) itself. The enactive approach in cognitive science affirms this emphasis on the necessity of actively constituting the self (and value) but goes further: the subject must not only actively constitute itself, it

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically moral meaning in the case of Korsgaard.

must also (to a degree) actively constitute the external environment it inhabits and with which it interacts.<sup>3</sup>

An organism's environment is not equivalent to the world seen simply through the lenses of physics and chemistry. Physical and chemical phenomena, in and of themselves, have no particular significance or meaning; they are not "for" anyone. Living beings shape the world into meaningful domains of interaction and thereby bring forth their own environments of significance and valence.<sup>4</sup>

This has the further implication that meaning itself is actively constituted. But, of course, at this point it should go without saying that for neither Thompson nor Korsgaard does the centrality of active constitution indicate a relenting to relativism or even some garden variety social constructionism. The idea that meaning is actively constituted does not mean that there is some unconstrained creation *ex nihilo* of meaning, or even value. For both thinkers there are norms and guardrails "baked in"—to rationality (for Korsgaard) and cognition (for Thompson). The concerning lacuna in Korsgaard that enactivism can help with concerns the sense in which Korsgaard fails to acknowledge the extent to which "the world"<sup>5</sup> is also actively constituted. The external environment in which moral agents act—i.e. one with any kind of basic meaning, nevermind moral value—is actively constituted by the self-reflective subject (via a needfully free conversation with the environment). In Thompson's phrasing, there is a dynamic co-emergence of self and world in all their complexity;<sup>6</sup> we must by necessity (enactively co-)constitute not only the selves that do the acting (in Korsgaard's specific sense) but also the environments in which those selves act. Perception of the external environment must consequently be understood as an active, cultivable epistemic

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 153-4.

<sup>5</sup> Not the physico-chemical world of brute data but the world with which human agents can meaningfully interact.

<sup>6</sup> This is not a simple I-Thou construction. The world and the self are internally complex and polythetic.

virtue unto itself, as I will explore in later sections and the final chapter in particular. This is one of a few areas in which enactivism can make crucial contributions to Korsgaard.

#### **2.iv | Affectivity And The Practical Identities**

This issue of world-constitution is closely related to the importance of *affect* or *affective framing* that I first introduced through the work of Ward and Stapleton in Chapter 5. Although Korsgaard does avoid many potential impersonalist pitfalls by centering the issue of practical identity, she does still seem to neglect the central importance of affect and the emotions for phronetic practice, as well as the skills of perception, rationality, and other epistemic categories that such practice requires. In other words, practical identities do indeed highlight the importance of how identity generates value in a way that is affirmed by Thompson and the enactivists. What Korsgaard fails to appreciate, or at least fails to include, however, and what the enactive approach can contribute to her framework is a more robust understanding of how an agent's "affective stance"—including, for instance the values generated by her practical identities—affects perception itself, and hence also the practical rationality required for moral deliberation and agency as well.

In sum, Korsgaard's framework already possesses a surprising number of enactivist ideas, impulses, or instincts, though she would of course not recognize them as such. I would argue that these commonalities not only mutually co-affirm the intellectual promise of each, but also render my upcoming constructive synthesis of the two that much more plausible, coherent, organic, structurally sound, and potentially successful. In the course of this section, however, I have also identified a few key points of departure, where Korsgaard could benefit from more enactivist interventions. The next section will highlight these core ideas from

Thompson that I believe have much to offer Korsgaard's metaethical system, and its epistemological features in particular.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 | KEY ENACTIVIST INSIGHTS

Despite the many commonalities highlighted in the last section, I also sought to cast light on some lacunae in Korsgaard that Thompson's enactivist work addresses. In this section I will therefore synthesize these mostly *epistemological* insights from Thompson, before (re-)integrating them into Korsgaard's *metaethical* framework in the sections that follow. As just alluded to, this move puts Thompson and Korsgaard in direct conversation with the critiques of mechanical reason, aperspectival objectivity, and impersonalist approaches to moral deliberation and agency from Chapter 4. I have consequently organized the following subsections along these earlier lines of concern.

#### 3.i | Contra the Mechanical Impulse and Orientation

Recall that the mechanical idea of reason (and objectivity) understands this capacity as “a ferociously austere, self-denying virtue, a virtue present when all the special skills, intuitions, and inspirations of the scientist could be quieted, and nature could be transferred to the page without intervention or interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> It prizes uniformity, passivity, and automaticity in the perception and processing of its conceptual objects. Enactivists, by contrast, counter that even *perception* is itself an active(ly) discerning, rather than a passive or immediate process. Reason is consequently anything but mechanically straightforward, even in its most ideal

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting in advance that this section will also take us back to the ideas of mechanical reason, aperspectival objectivity, and impersonalism from my earlier Chapter 3 on Kukla, Daston, and Galison. Demonstrating how enactivism aptly pushes back on these concerning impulses within Korsgaard's work will set the stage in the following part of the chapter (Section 4) for integrating these insights with her framework.

<sup>8</sup> Galison, Peter. “Objectivity is Romantic.” <http://archives.acls.org/op/op47-3.htm#n4>

forms. Instead, all attempts at knowing are *active* endeavors of *sense-making*; the result of *needfully*-free, interpretive conversation between the self-knower and what is being known.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the mechanical ideal is a fallacy in even factual, perceptual aspects of epistemic practice, nevermind the normative terrain of practical reason, moral deliberation, and agency.

I am arguing that Korsgaard's framework appears to (implicitly) take for granted some mechanical views of perception and reason. While her versions are *nowhere* near as radical as the foils of Daston and Galison, her approach would nevertheless benefit from a more explicitly enactive approach to these pieces of the puzzle. As I laid out in Chapter 2, Korsgaard defines *Reason* as "the active rather than the passive or receptive aspect of the mind. Reason in this capital R sense is opposed to perception, sensation, and perhaps emotion, which are forms of, or at least involve, passivity or receptivity."<sup>10</sup> Her employment of "perhaps" and "at least involve" do indeed help to temper her risk of excessive "mechanicity". Nevertheless, while she does not go as far as Daston and Galison's foils in seeing ideal reasoning or cognitive activity as *passive*, she does cordon it off decisively from perception, sensation, and emotion in ways that I (in step with the enactivists) would argue are flawed. This, in turn, means that even if her vision of *Reason* is active enough, it is still intended to be free from personal contingencies, not embedded, embodied, or affectively valenced,<sup>11</sup> which means it still leans too mechanistic and impersonalist.

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting generally, that the enactivist interventions and my employment of them are distinct from more garden variety "value-is-a-social-construct" arguments insofar as "the world" is still an active player, providing guardrails and pushback. My central framing of enactive *adaptivity* is a crucial ingredient in differentiating my proposals from this garden variety constructionism (not to be confused either with Korsgaard's constructivism which is also "its own thing").

<sup>10</sup> Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Recall the arguments from Ward and Stapleton at the end of Chapter 5.

The Chapter 4 notion of autopoiesis is helpful here because of the way in which it evokes the recursive, environment-sensitive (i.e. adaptive and conversational) nature of epistemic experience, even at the level of perception and data processing. We ought, in other words, to think of ideal (human)<sup>12</sup> rationality not as a well-oiled, impersonalist rube goldberg machine, but rather as an autopoietic, adaptive, “porous” and “absorbent,” but nevertheless *actively mediating*, “membrane.” This mediator enables and shapes the “conversation” which an individual can have with the external environment as they attempt (moral) knowledge thereof—whether that environment consists of other agents or reality in general (or both). Thus, in sum, my own proposed framework of *Enactive Constructivism* departs from Korsgaard’s constructivism by integrating a more active (and actively discerning) understanding of perception and a more autopoietically adaptive understanding of rationality. I will unpack what this looks like in Sections 4 through 6.

### **3.ii | Contra the Aperspectival Impulse and Orientation**

Returning now to the idea of aperspectivalism from the last chapter, these enactive ideas of perception and rationality have further implications worth discussing. Daston (using Nagel) characterized the aperspectivalists’ ideal of ‘objective’ epistemic practice as relying “as little as possible on the specifics of the individual’s makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is.”<sup>13</sup> It should already be clear, therefore, how enactivist insights concerning the dynamically-co-enactive relationship between the individual and its environment—as well as the way in which meaning itself is dynamically co-enacted between self and world—provide serious pushback to the aperspectivalist

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<sup>12</sup> Questions of godly rationality are beyond the confines of this project.

<sup>13</sup> Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, note 3, 4-5.

agenda and general worldview. Of particular benefit is the enactivist understanding of the sense in which both identity and environment are dynamically *adaptive*, mutually co-enactive and responsive in ways that are neither straightforwardly determined nor radically relativistic. A needfully-free ‘self’ is consequently inescapable, and thus constitutes a necessarily active ingredient in any epistemic process. This is not something to bemoan—there simply *is no* aperspectival “view from nowhere”.

Again, I certainly would not accuse Korsgaard of being a *staunch* aperspectivalist. She explicitly rejects even Nagel’s version of the *view from nowhere* in an argument I will dig into in Section 4.iv. Nevertheless, I worry that her Kantian (and even Rawlsian) roots leave her vulnerable to similar critiques, as evidenced in the concerns I raised in Chapter 2 with respect to how a lack of nuance and complexity across her moral epistemology places regrettable limitations on the types of disagreement with which her framework can satisfactorily deal. I accordingly argue that her system could stand to benefit from a more nuanced and explicitly enactivist rendering of these epistemological concepts; an intervention which I will flesh out over the remaining course of this chapter.

### **3.iii | Contra Impersonalist Impulses in Ethics**

What then, finally, can these enactivist insights tell us about the *impersonalist* impulse in ethics generally, and Korsgaard’s system in particular? For one, if the knowing individual is by necessity already inescapably present in the very act of *perception*, the impersonalist enterprise seems already flawed. Certainly, there is legitimate cause for concern in terms of solipsism, hypocritical self-exemption, or excessive self-focus. Indeed, I would endorse many of the motivating worries that ground the impersonalist project. Where I push back is in their “solution,” of seeking to simply excise the moral, knowing subject from its own moral and

epistemic endeavors. Enactivism charts an alternative: one where the self need not ascetically strive to remove itself from those processes. Instead, the emphasis shifts to the question of excellence (virtue) in how that self engages and responds to the “outside”, the environment with which, in which, and through which it is carrying out its perceptual and phronetic processes. This has important implications for how to amend Korsgaard’s framework, because while the idea of practical identities does much to push back against more extreme impersonalist inclinations, her Kantian commitments around agency and universally uniform (practical) reason leans too far in that impersonalist direction. I will unpack this aspect of her project when I work out her stance on objectivity in Section 4.iv.

By way of recapitulation, then, the key enactive insights which I aim to weave into Korsgaard’s existing metaethical framework are as follows: First, insofar as reason is embedded, embodied, and affectively attuned in the sense described by my discussion of Ward and Stapleton in Chapter 5, its telos should be understood in terms of an epistemic virtue of *autopoietic adaptivity*. Ideal reason is thus crucially “*reality-responsive*” in ways that simultaneously stave off concerns against radical relativism, while still rejecting the mechanistic-aperspectival understanding of reason as passive, automatic, and monolithic across individuals. Furthermore, and in fact *because* of this central role of adaptivity, the possibility of improving these world-responsive practices and processes over time is a core feature of the system. Secondly, the environment within which we then carry out our phronetic practices, is itself always already the result of active discernment and even actively constituted meaning and significance. Finally, and relatedly, (practical) identity not only inflects the *values* that we will choose to pursue as moral agents, it also shapes and inflects the environment in which we carry out those normative activities. With these admittedly

broad brushstrokes painted, I will now turn to a more in-depth articulation of how I propose to effectively integrate these general enactive ideas into an improved “Korsgaard 2.0”.

#### **4 | INTEGRATING THESE INSIGHTS INTO A “KORSGAARD 2.0”**

The current section will take the general enactive insights from the previous section and zero in on the specific areas within Korsgaard’s framework where I believe an enactive grafting will be most perspicacious, namely, a *dynamically co-enactive* and *autopoietically adaptive* understanding of perception, rationality, self-constitution, and identity. Before diving in, I want to be as clear as possible concerning the question of where on the spectrum from “purely metaphorical” to “biologically literal” these enactive insights should be understood to fall. The challenge or potential for muddiness here, in part, concerns the way in which enactive cognition spirals out fractally from the biological operations of the individual cell, “out” or “up” through full-on human cognition (and perception and reason). While the former would indeed be a merely symbolic or metaphorical heuristic, the latter has concrete literal implications for how human beings actually reflect rationally and conduct their moral deliberations. Indeed, what the enactivists show is that the same kinds of recursive, embedded, embodied, affectively framed, potentially extended cognitive activities operate at the cellular level. Yet, while the adjectives remain the same, I do not wish to *elide* the distinctions between the processes those adjectives modify. As one example, the discerning membrane at the cellular level is a literal, *physical* membrane. At the cognitional level, however, that same purpose is carried out by a much more complex set of perceptual, reflectively rational and emotional systems, personal history and memory, not to mention a full-body nervous system (which *is* physical). The latter complex set *literally* impacts how

we ought to understand rational (moral) deliberation, the former physical membrane is more than just a tidy metaphor, but its significance and relevance is more metaphorical than the enactive insights directly concerned with full-human-level cognitive operation. With these caveats in mind, I turn now to the core set of enactive interventions I am proposing.

#### **4.i | Perception as Actively Discerning Meaning Constitution**

First, perception needs to be understood as *actively discerning* meaning-constitution, as opposed to *passively mechanical* and pre-reflective data absorption. I explored the caricaturish heights of this passive ideal of perception in Chapter 4's discussion of Daston and Galison's work. Korsgaard comes nowhere near these foils, nevertheless I sought earlier in this chapter to highlight how aspects of her own framing do seem to implicitly take for granted a similarly, (though not as aggressively) *passive* understanding of perception in opposition to both the "active" and critically reflective features of reason.<sup>14</sup> Explicitly integrating the enactive understanding of perception that I have laid out in Chapter 5 and the earlier sections of this chapter would have a number of interesting, and *beneficial* implications for the coherence and success of Korsgaard's metaethical system.

One such implication is that *perception itself* could be understood as shaped and impacted by our practical identities. Our contingent histories, memories, and self-understandings not only inflect the "landscapes" (both literal and socio-cultural) in which we will find ourselves and through which we will enact our (moral) agency—they also shape what we will actually perceive within those landscapes, nevermind how we understand, interpret, and *make sense of* what we notice. Put differently, I am arguing that practical

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<sup>14</sup> Later on, I will explore below the way in which this means that we need to think not only about Korsgaard's idea of self-constitution but also environment-constitution.

identity shapes *perception itself* and the *descriptive* milieus in which we act, not just our normatively valenced environments of meaning and value. Indeed, what we value shapes what we will ever perceive in the first place, and of course, vice versa. In the same way that practical identities constitute and are constituted *by* our reflective selves, perception too plays this constituting-constituted role. This means that what we perceive will itself be recursively impacted by the gestalt of our previous decisions, observations, judgments, actions, etc., in addition to all the persisting complexities of the environments within which we carry out these tasks. It goes both ways: each decision we make (and consequent action we take) is not merely influenced *by* what we see, those personal contingent histories also shape *what we will ever “see” in the first place*.

In other words, *perception itself* needs to be understood as *not only normatively inflected*, but also *part of*, not *prior to* the self-reflective features and nature of experience that is so central to Korsgaard’s project.<sup>15</sup> While it would mark a substantial shift in her framework, such an intervention would not be wholly foreign because of the way in which it actually echoes Korsgaard’s own insight that our practical identities are constituted by, and constitutive of, our actions and judgments (values): that they simultaneously shape our decisions and are shaped by them. I am further arguing, however (in line with the enactivists), that the environment in which these activities are carried out, including any information that is perceived in the first place, will also not only *shape* but *be shaped by* our contingent selves; including, but not limited to, all of the practical identities therein.

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<sup>15</sup> I am not arguing that this idea around biology and value-construction is radically novel but I do contend that the enactivists’ particular framing of this dynamic is uniquely well suited to integration with Korsgaard’s metaethical constructivism.

While an enactive picture of perception is certainly relevant to basic “first-personal” information-gathering, similar issues come into play with second- and third-personal processes via so-called “testimonial evidence” where the information or meaning in question comes not from the perceived world at large, but from other epistemic agents, whether in the form of verbal conversation, the written word, or some other medium like art. Here, the active complexities of perception and sense-making are multiplied tenfold by questions around what other agents or epistemic resources *we happen to interact with*, nevermind perceive, listen to, trust or “take seriously”. Complications arise which influence what we understand, take in, accept as true, and then remember. Similarly there are divergences in terms of what we take at face value and accept *automatically*, versus what we challenge, doubt, or follow up on rigorously. All of these complexities support the enactive framing of perception as an actively discerning process of *sense-making*, as opposed to the passive receptivity that Korsgaard describes. Furthermore, it demonstrates that such perceptive sense-making takes *work*—time, energy, skill, commitment and cultivation—and needs to be recognized as an active and critically self-reflective piece of both our epistemic and phronetic processes. This in turn means that perception is a skill that can be developed and executed or carried out both well *and poorly*, which has important implications for my Chapter 3 critiques of Korsgaard, as well as the notion of divergence with and without defect that I will focus on later in this chapter.

#### **4.ii | Autopoietically Adaptive Rationality**

It has been difficult to zero in on perception alone without simultaneously diving into rationality, and for good reason. Much of what I am arguing here has to do with the actively

discerning—i.e. critical, and thus not-pre-reflective—nature of perception, as well as how that active picture of perception impacts how we ought to conceive of “reason”, which is of course inflected at every point by the complex sense of perception just described in Section 4.i. The enactively amended version of reason that I would like to put forward is thus in some ways an intuitive “outgrowth” of the enactive idea of perception as actively-discerning meaning-constitution. In any case, it represents an autopoietically adaptive capacity in its own right, and, crucially, models an alternative to the mechanical emphases and framings that I critiqued in Chapter 4. In order to paint the clearest picture of what I am proposing here in terms of amending Korsgaard’s approach, it will be helpful to first revisit what exactly she had to say about Reason/reasonable/reasons back in Chapter 3.

Recall that Korsgaard delineates a triumvirate articulation of **R**reason, reasonable and reasonss. The first type, so-called capital “R” Reason, is the general human faculty of reason which Korsgaard in turn defines as “the active rather than the passive or receptive aspect of the mind. Reason in this sense is opposed to perception, sensation, and perhaps emotion, which are forms of, or at least involve, passivity or receptivity.”<sup>16</sup> Her second type of reason can be understood as the gerundive form of reasoning because it refers to the employment of rational principles as an activity or verb. It could also be understood as the adjectival form of *reasonable* insofar as it denotes “conformity”<sup>17</sup> to certain specifically rational principles. The third type refers to concrete reasons, i.e. “the particular, substantive, considerations, counting in favor of belief or action, that we call ‘reasons.’”<sup>18</sup> Korsgaard’s hierarchy then

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<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 129, 220, 235, 236. See also *The Constitution of Agency* sections 7.1 and 7.3, also the introduction section 1.1.

<sup>18</sup> Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, 2.

prioritizes and organizes these three separate types where Reason refers to the transcendental active capacity of our minds, and reasoning refers to the successful or ideal activities of that capacity that then produce reasons. It was in part this excessively mechanical understanding of reason, I argued, that prevented her from adequately accounting for diverse forms of disagreement, especially what I am describing as divergence without defect (more on that below). In particular, the emphasis on *conformity* proved limiting when it came to the question of how the same practical identity can motivate radically divergent outcomes, without undermining the normative force of practical identities themselves.

I am therefore proposing, by contrast, a more autopoietically adaptive model of “reasonable” which can help us to understand the ways in which Reason is not a rube-goldberg machine where the ball either gets to the end, without falling off the chute, or it does not. Being reasonable, in its ideal form is not merely a question of perfect (passive) conformity to principles.<sup>19</sup> Rather, the reasoning process should be understood as an autopoietically adaptive self-reflective activity of *needfully free creativity*. Moreover, our *capacities* to Reason, like our practical identities and perceptive capacities, are actively and self-reflectively constituted through agency, over time, and in response to our contingent histories and phronetic environments. Just as reason cannot be neatly separated from

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<sup>19</sup> Either those Kantian principles or bare bones logic, or something else. It is important to note that I am drawing a distinction here between reason or rationality and what could be termed “logic” which describes the mathematical relations such as the identity property or principles of non-contradiction, philosophical logic, perhaps, or the means-end calculations which all certainly have their place but which represent a far less significant role in human processes of reasoning and deliberation, and general epistemic experience than they are often given credit for. The question of why these separate concepts have come to be so frequently elided is beyond the scope of this chapter, though my suspicions lie with the mechanistic and aperspectival impulses I wended my way through in Chapter 3. Reason is not wholly unrelated to this more mathematical set of principles and standards, I would certainly affirm that it remains beholden to them.

perception—and is in fact inflected, shaped, and constituted by it—so too, I am arguing, is it inflected, shaped, and constituted by our practical identities, as well as the myriad experiential phenomena which shape *them*.

What exactly, then, does the modifier of “autopoietically adaptive” single out vis à vis our capacity to reason? Recall from Chapter 4 that autopoiesis describes a type of organization that weaves back and forth between self and world, mediating, creating, responding to, and *recreating* that intermediary membrane in light of the conversation between the two. Reason, I would argue, is like this membrane. It interacts with the external environment, discerning what ‘nutritive’ resources to admit into its various internal, ‘metabolic’ processes. However, it is also *constituted and reconstituted by* those “materials”, experiences which in turn transform *it*; sometimes in small ways, sometimes to an unrecognizable degree. To persist successfully, our reason itself must adapt to this open environment. This, however, is a case of needful freedom: *not passive conformity*, but *constrained creativity*.<sup>20</sup> An autopoietic understanding of reason, therefore, is fundamentally shaped by the experiences and experiential ‘psycho-genetic’ memory of the autopoietic individual, as well as by its dialogues with the physico-chemical features of the external milieu and the sense-making co-enacted therewith. Thus, it is neither passive conformity to principles nor some sort of radically relativistic process of construction. The features of the external environment are an active and integral part of the conversation, and, as with the cell and its membrane, our reason must be adaptively sensitive to that world, or it will wither.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Needful freedom should not be confused with the passive conformity to principles that is central to Korsgaard three-pronged description.

<sup>21</sup> This is just one way in which the enactive approach dovetails elegantly with the defining features of Korsgaard’s constitutional model.

Put differently, instead of being a question of following the rules (principles) of a game like chess, rationality is more like dance. You must obey the laws of physics, gravity, and keep to the beat—i.e. dance to the actual music that is playing. You must also, however, implicitly recognize what *your body in particular* is capable of, and dance in the room in which you are situated, with whatever furniture and architectural features might help or hinder that process. Put differently, rationality is both general (in the sense of Korsgaard's 'Reason') and *particular*, insofar as the universality of reason is always indexed or embodied relative to the individual person actually making sense of the world. The dance is not pre-given or pre-established but must be worked out enactively, adaptively through trial and error. There will be many beautiful or at least “successful” ways to dance to the same piece, and we can also identify when someone *is not dancing to the music at all*, or at least not the music that *we* can hear. Practical identities—as well as other phenomena—shape both our processes of perception and how we then rationally process and use that which is perceived. Consequently, our individual concatenation of perception and reason will also inflect how we work from a given practical identity on an individual level. Practical identities and this enactive autopoietic rationality co-constitute each other, dynamically co-enacting and co-defining each other in much the same way that Korsgaard’s constitutional model highlights the reciprocal co-constitution of (moral) agent and (moral) action.

As with perception, this does not mean that anything goes, that any deliberative process can count as reasonable, or that a given practical identity could justifiably motivate an *unlimited* number of actions. It also does not mean that I am using enactive cognitive processes as the “evidence” for why we should think about practical reason (and perception and objectivity and identity) in this way. I am arguing that *conceptualizing* our phronetic

processes on an autopoietic rather than mechanically algorithmic *model* enables us to bridge the metaethical divide from Chapter 1, and (in part thereby) counter the dehumanizing forces toward which our moral disagreements too often spiral. Moreover, *vis à vis* reasoning in particular, I am arguing that this model of autopoietic self-organization offers a better way to understand practical reason as precisely the self-constituting activity for which Korsgaard is advocating. Under such a model of rationality, a “single” practical identity could—while the agent is operating properly (non-defectively)—generate various, even contradicting or “opposite” courses of action.<sup>22</sup> I explore a concrete case of this below in Section 7. This autopoietic, as opposed to mechanical picture of *Reason* will in turn, I believe, enable a less *aperspectival* picture of *objectivity* (Section 4.iv), to which Korsgaard herself purports to be committed. Before that step, however, I lay some important groundwork by returning to Korsgaard’s concept of defect, and my own project of making room for some amount of phronetic divergence (moral conflict) that does not automatically imply equal parts (dehumanizing) *defect* in one or more parties.

#### **4.iii | Returning to the Notion of Defect**

As I have alluded to elsewhere in this dissertation, the overall project could in some ways be described as searching for a way to accommodate *divergence* (moral conflict) *without defect* (which could justify dehumanizing moral exclusion), and, crucially, *without relenting to relativism*. Korsgaard seems to have wanted this as well. She does admit, for instance, that

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<sup>22</sup> We can perhaps lean here on an analogy from complex systems theory and the mathematical model of the strange attractor. That is, although there are infinite trajectories that fall within the shape of the attractor, they are still bound by a definite abstract structure, despite the fact that this structure is never fully representable; instead manifesting a model of 'local unpredictability, global predictability.' At single points it can appear to skip around randomly and yet, when viewed from a different perspective the pattern or form becomes clear. I would like to thank Jesse Berger for help with this side example.

there could be many ways to be a good friend,<sup>23</sup> but this is in tension with her ideas of defect when it comes to things like knives and swimming. As I elaborated in Chapter 3, however, her constitutional model, though compelling, provided ammunition for exactly the sort of dehumanizing effects that extremer cases of normative divergence (moral conflict) can generate insofar as it perpetuates the often subconscious instinct that someone who disagrees with me about something “so important” must be just a little (or a lot) less well-constituted qua human being.

Neither her under-interrogated epistemology nor her very well-elaborated contribution of practical identities could *systematically* arbitrate *multiple*—nevermind mutually *conflicting*—ways to meet the requirements of a given identity, even though she clearly affirmed this possibility. Put differently, while her system claimed to *allow* for such divergence, it threw up its hands when trying to *account* for it or satisfactorily adjudicate where to draw the line between allowable and unallowable divergence. Not only does this represent a concerning vulnerability at the heart of Korsgaard’s constitutional model, it is antithetical to the *rehumanizing* (as opposed to dehumanizing) effects I am trying to bring about. With the assistance of an enactive moral epistemology, however, I believe we can indeed accomplish precisely this. There will still, certainly, be phronetic practices that count as defective (contra relativism), but the fact that two agents diverge in their phronetic conclusions need not imply that one or both are wholly defective in their *phronetic practice*—or, most concerningly, *as a human being tout court*—as Korsgaard’s constitutional model would seem to allow.

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<sup>23</sup> Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, 21.

To reiterate, there are still real, non-negotiable features of an agent's internal and external capital R reality that can define and give pushback to acceptable vs. defective modes of practical reasoning: defect is still a thing, and ideally a thing to be avoided. The crucial point, for my interventions on both Korsgaard and the dehumanizing forces of moral polarization in general, is that opposing outcomes of moral reasoning *need not necessarily* damn one or both parties as *fundamentally* (irrevocably or hopelessly) defective—either as knowers, or moral agents, or human beings. This is also, incidentally, the key to preserving the normativity of Korsgaard's practical identities in the face of such divergence. Indeed, later in this chapter I will explore how these more (en)active understandings of both perception and reason can help account for the limitations I identified in Korsgaard's framework back in Chapter 3 with respect to how we come to adopt and discard various practical identities in the first place, in addition to how we then interpret the normative implications of those same identities in such wildly divergent ways. The final fruition of this effort will not arrive until Section 7. Nevertheless, I wanted to preemptively flag this issue of divergence-without-defect here, so that it can walk alongside us as I work through the other components of *Enactive Constructivism* that I am currently elaborating.

#### **4.iv | Perspectival Objectivity**

I spent a great deal of time back in Chapter 3 challenging certain ideas around objectivity that have seeped into our collective impulses, thought patterns, etc. While the picture of autopoietically enactive rationality just sketched is meant to challenge and counter the reductively mechanical, impersonalist understanding of (practical) *rationality* described back in Chapter 4, I also want to challenge the aperspectivalist picture of *objectivity* that I

believe causes problems in our collective epistemic and moral lives. Not only is such a move a necessary complement to the understanding of (practical) rationality I am defending, it also plays a key role in the dehumanizing effects of disagreement motivating this project. Korsgaard does not exactly confront (moral) objectivity head on, however there are a few different—sometimes conflicting—ways in which she uses the term that can still help to clarify to what extent she is or is not falling prey to the seduction of impersonalism and its aperspectivalist impulses.

As I noted back in Chapter 4 by way of Daston, objectivity has been described variously as *empirical reliability*, *procedural “correctness”*, or *emotional detachment* on the part of the scientist/knower, or even *truth itself*.<sup>24</sup> My aim in this section can accordingly be understood as an effort to interrogate the similarly polythetic sense in which Korsgaard variously engages with the term in order to get clear on the extent to which my enactivist interventions on this point are in fact *correctives*, or merely amplificatory emphasis of Korsgaard’s own views. I am therefore most interested in zeroing in on the sense or extent to which Korsgaard relents to impersonalist temptations by subscribing to some version of the aperspectivalist understanding of (moral) objectivity. This requires first understanding what she means by objectivity, i.e. how she is using the language of objectivity and then assessing the extent to which any of these understandings of objectivity seem excessively aperspectival. There are at least three separate ways that Korsgaard uses the term, so I will explore each “use case” in turn before concluding with a holistic assessment.

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<sup>24</sup> See “Image of Objectivity,” 82.

#### 4.iv.a | Objectivity for the Sake of Moral Realism

The first sense in which Korsgaard uses the term objectivity relates to her metaethical concerns around moral realism and, in particular, her goal of defending *normativity*—especially the method of reflective endorsement—from certain critiques often levied against it from various corners. It is important to recall here, from the earlier Chapter on Korsgaard, that she is a moral realist but not in the traditional substance or correspondence realist sense. As Korsgaard frames the issue,

Modern moral philosophers have been engaged in a debate about the 'foundations' of morality. We need to be shown, it is often urged, that morality is 'real' or 'objective.' The early rationalists, Samuel Clarke and Richard Price, thought that they knew exactly what they meant by this. Hobbes had said that there is no right or wrong in the state of nature, and to them, this meant that Rightness is mere invention or convention, not some-thing real.<sup>25</sup>

Here, we see objective used to seemingly denote two things: existence (of moral facts/human values) in general and specifically existence *apart from* human experience, desires, or tradition. Put differently, these uses of “objective” are answers to two separate questions; do moral claims say something “true about the world” *and if so* is that truth more than merely descriptive of (fallible) cultural or individual human tastes and preferences?

Interestingly, Korsgaard not only pushes back on these thinkers, she also seems to invert this traditional order of operations, zeroing in not on *human values* as they fluctuate across space and time, but on the *value of the human*, writing that “if humanity is not regarded and treated as unconditionally good then nothing else can be objectively good.”<sup>26</sup> It is not quite clear here whether Korsgaard is using objectively to mean “truly” or metaphysically, or “in fact,” or simply as a synonym for unconditionally. What is clear is that,

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<sup>25</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Christine Korsgaard. “Kant’s formula of humanity.” *Kant-Studien* 77(2):183–202. 1986. 198

because she is concerned with the “normative question”, she is determined to show that moral claims are more than *descriptive claims* of human opinion, or transient cultural tastes. Moral claims, she wants to argue, are compelling precisely insofar as they denote something *intrinsically normative*. This brings us right up against the next use category.

#### **4.iv.b | Objectivity in the Sense of “Intrinsic Normativity”**

You will recall from Chapter 3, that Korsgaard’s so-called normative question is intimately connected with the idea of duty or obligation, i.e. what it is about value that compels obedience and *action*. In fact, she argues that for the realists “it is because we are confident that obligation is real that we are prepared to believe in the existence of some sort of objective values. But for that very reason the appeal to the existence of objective values cannot be used to support our confidence.”<sup>27</sup> Korsgaard highlights the somewhat circular reasoning here wherein we simultaneously need objective values in order to account for the force of the normative question, but it is because we are struck by senses of obligation that we find reason to believe in the existence of those same values. In other words, any realist claims about the existence of such “objective values”—which she will more or less equate with her concept of “intrinsically normative entities”—is reliant on a prior confidence that obligations “are a thing,” so to speak; that we are *indeed* beholden to their dictates. In any case, Korsgaard seems, here, to be using “objective” in the place of real, or “really real”, but also as distinct from our “mere” *desires*. Obligation is after all only felt *as* obligation when it compels us to do something we do not otherwise desire to do. So objectivity does appear to

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<sup>27</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 40.

be tied up here with impersonalist notions, even though, as I will show below, Korsgaard appears to push back on the aperspectivalist impulse more generally.

To reiterate her concern here, and to dig in to the issue of intrinsic normativity, obligation can only be real if values are, but this would seem to imply that it is our sense of obligation's "veracity" that leads us to postulate the reality (i.e. objectivity?) of values in the first place. She argues that, at least for would-be realists, the only way to avoid such a regress in answering the normative question, is "by postulating the existence of entities—objective values, reasons, or obligations—whose intrinsic normativity forbids further questioning. But why should we believe in these entities?"<sup>28</sup> Why should we indeed? Here, "objective" seems to indicate the metaphysical chunks that so-called 'correspondence realists' desire, but Korsgaard's relationship to this idea is not straightforward, and she uses the foil of J.L. Mackie<sup>29</sup> as a way to distinguish herself from both correspondence realists—who, you will recall from earlier chapters, are absolutely committed to the "objective existence" of objective values, or intrinsically normative entities—as well as the likes of Mackie, according to whom:

it is fantastic to think that the world contains objective values, or intrinsically normative entities. For in order to do what values do, they would have to meet certain impossible criteria. They would have to be entities of a very strange sort, utterly unlike anything else in the universe. The way that we know them would have to be different from the way that we know other sorts of facts. Knowledge of them, Mackie said, would have to provide the knower with both a direction and a motive. For when you met an objective value, according to Mackie, it would have to be...able both to tell you what to do and make you do it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Mackie is famous for his pugnaciously titled book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

<sup>30</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 166.

Note here how objective value, by being connected so closely with the idea of intrinsic normativity, is simultaneously indicative of *separating* value or meaning from the individual perspective but also of exerting a kind of force or compulsion *over* the individual as well. It is not enough for objective values to exist “out there”, they must be internally related somehow to the individual, must “do something” in here, within us. Mackie cites platonic forms as the case par excellence of what such “entities” would need to be like:

The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it.<sup>31</sup>

Note the impersonalist and aperspectivalist impulses here: to be objective, a good must be “sought by anyone who was acquainted with it”, being objective means still being compelling from some version of the view from nowhere.

This is where objectivity gets linked up with intrinsic normativity in the form of inherent to-be-pursuedness that is not reliant on desire. Of course, it is not Korsgaard who is speaking here, but the foil of Mackie is nevertheless helpful for getting at her own view because of the extent to which she positions herself *against* him. As she bluntly puts it,

Mackie is wrong and realism is right. Of course there are entities that meet these criteria. It's true that they are queer sorts of entities, and that knowing them isn't like anything else. But that doesn't mean that they don't exist. John Mackie must have been alone in his room with the Scientific World View when he wrote those words. For it is the most familiar fact of human life that the

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<sup>31</sup> See Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth ; New York: Penguin, 1977. 38,40. Found in Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 37.

world contains entities that can tell us what to do and make us do it. They are people, and the other animals.<sup>32</sup>

Here Korsgaard appears to not only be pushing back on Mackie's impersonalist moral impulses but taking a Daston-and-Galison-style jab at him for a kind of scientific-aperspectivalist impulse as well. The critique of Mackie thus indicates a crucial sense in which Korsgaard rejects an aperspectivalist approach to (moral) objectivity, even if her moral epistemology, as it explicitly stands<sup>33</sup> does not seem quite up to the task. This brings me to Korsgaard's engagement with an exceedingly important figure when it comes to the question of aperspectivalism, Thomas Nagel, coiner of the very "view from nowhere" himself.

#### **4.iv.c | Objectivity as the View from Nowhere**

As with Mackie, Korsgaard's disagreement with Nagel represents another distinct sense in which she employs the term objectivity, and also provides helpful insight into the extent to which she may be guilty of excessive aperspectivalism or impersonalism. *His* view, in *her* view (all puns intended), is that

reflection just amounts to viewing things more objectively or impersonally, where 'objectivity' is understood in a 'realist' way: to seek an objective understanding is to try to see what is really there, or, in the case of practical reasons, what you should really do, in a way that is uninfected by the particularities of the perspective from which you see it. The ideal of objectivity is to approach as closely as possible to seeing the world from no particular perspective at all - in Nagel's famous phrase, From Nowhere.<sup>34</sup>

This is clearly a very aperspectivalist, impersonalist view, if not the epitome of it, but it is a position which she explicitly rejects even as she is advocating for a form of realism. Korsgaard frames her own position in contrast to Nagel's as one that sees such a view as

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<sup>32</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 166.

<sup>33</sup> Particularly the way she seems to understand rationality and perception.

<sup>34</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 245.

fundamentally incoherent: “The fact that we can never escape viewing the world from somewhere is not a regrettable limitation, since there is nothing that the world is like from nowhere.”<sup>35</sup> Such a statement should immediately call to mind the enactivist framework and insights from Chapter 4 concerning the importance of the situated self for all sense-making.

Korsgaard is still a Kantian, however, so she does temper her rejection with the caveat that while there is no view from nowhere, there may be views from *everywhere*, or closer to it; “something that the world is like for knowers as such or for rational agents as such.”<sup>36</sup> Here, the goal of being objective does take on a bit of an impersonalist—or maybe every-personalist—hue. The (noble) quest for objectivity is understood as a process of overcoming “more local and contingent perspectives”<sup>37</sup> in order to view the world from the most “necessary and inescapable points of view. Practical reasons that can only be found in the perspective of rational agents as such or human beings as such are ‘objective’ if we have no choice but to occupy those perspectives.”<sup>38</sup> So while she pushes back against Nagel’s *aperspectivalism*, she almost appears to replace it with a similarly *impersonalist* concept of objectivity as something like “*omniperspectivalism*.” I would allow that in cases where such universally held values or perspectives exist, this is an acceptable move. Indeed, the categorical imperative is intended as just such a “perspective,” as is her argument around the moral identity, both of which were of course crucial for her ability to avoid relenting to relativism.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 246.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

What enactive insights have to offer her project here, is the way in which concepts like needful freedom and adaptivity within the self-world relationship can enable what I would describe as a kind of *perspectival objectivity* that allows Korsgaard to have her “moral realism cake” (answering the normative question) and eat it too (not cede ground to the impersonalist aperspectivalism of the substance realists). Put differently, my proposed *enactive constructivism* can better support the weight of a *non-aperspectival understanding of objectivity* that Korsgaard herself appears to endorse, and which is crucial to the task of bridging the dogmatic-relativism divide. Fleshing out this idea of *perspectival objectivity* requires me to return to the enactive ideas of adaptivity and co-enactive self-world-constitution.

#### **4.v | Adaptively Co-enactive Self-World-Constitution**

There are a few key points I would like to make when it comes to Korsgaard’s concept of self-constitution, some of which may echo, or overlap with earlier interventional points. First, Korsgaard’s central notion of “*self-constitution*” needs to be understood as dynamically co-enacted, *self-world-constitution*. As I have alluded to in several places earlier concerning perception, Korsgaard’s constitutional model would benefit from an acknowledgment of the ways in which it is not only our *persons* (with all their practical identities) who are actively constituted, but also the *environments within which that constitution takes place*. In other words, what I want to add to Korsgaard’s picture is an acknowledgement of the ways in which processes of self-constitution are not only crucially *embedded within the environment*, but also the way in which self-constitution is also (simultaneously) an act of *dynamic self-environment co-enaction*. This is not, of course, to create any conceptual space for a solipsistically generated-ex-nihilo outside world. Recalling the discussion of needful-

freedom from Chapter 4, there are still non-negotiable guardrails in the “world out there” (including other selves), as well as our own self-reflective rational capacities (including adherence to Korsgaard’s Kantian principles of agency) which constrain both self- and world-constitution. The *shading-in* processes of those non-negotiable guard rail-lines (of both self and world) are what occur in active, dynamically-adaptive (needfully free) conversation with one another.

This brings me to the second key point for this section, which concerns the crucial role that *adaptivity*, in the enactive sense, has to play in (and partially as a result of) this dynamically co-enacted self-world-constitution.<sup>39</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, the self constitutes (and reconstitutes) itself in response not only to its own pre-existing values, rational capacities, etc. but also in response to the enacted environment of its perception.<sup>40</sup> The centrality of adaptivity thus describes the way in which the individual must constantly persist in *responsive conversation with* the general features and constraints of its environment (which also includes other individuals). This has important ramifications both for how our rational deliberations can yield different results because our practical rationality is a capacity that gets shaped and reshaped over time through these adaptive interactions. At the same time, however, adaptivity emphasizes rather than undermines the *non-relativism* commitment by “demanding” that we constrain the creativity of our phronetic activities according to the “results” of that on-going responsive conversation.

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<sup>39</sup> Recall that this is not to be understood in a reductively dyadic I-thou sense, but rather in the much more polyvalent co-enactive sense from the previous chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Shaped as that is, recall, by the agent and its affective framing.

#### 4.vi | Enactive Identity

Most of my interventions around identity will come into play with the introduction of the double helix concept in Section 5. The purpose of this subsection is to recollect the concerns around identity from Chapter 3 regarding which enactive interventions can be most helpful. Simply put, the idea that identity is dynamically co-enacted with the environment, means that these adaptive, co-enactive processes not only impact the particular Korsgaardian practical identities that one will adopt—like teacher or rebel or artist—but they will also shape how an individual *interprets* and/or *carries out* those reflectively endorsed identities and the values or actions they require. Enactive understandings of both perception and rationality further complicate these processes, all of which together open up crucial possibilities for addressing my concern from Chapter 3 regarding the *actual normativity* of practical identities: If the practical identity of mother, friend, or teacher can manifest in wildly contradictory actions, what does it really mean to say that a practical identity *is normative*?

As I referenced earlier in this chapter, Korsgaard does acknowledge that there needs to be room for divergence in how we manifest our identities, but the only *explicit* resource available within her metaethical framework for thinking through such divergence would seem to be her conception of *defect*. I am by no means jettisoning this concept, we need defect as a way to avoid relativism, but we also need room for divergence *without defect*, at least without certain kinds of defect if we want to avoid the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict and exclusion. Indeed, one of the central aims of this project is to get us away from seeing moral disagreement as *necessarily* an indication of defectiveness, and especially

defectiveness *qua human being*. The enactive interventions I am proposing will be helpful insofar as they create space for (a still limited) degree of *disagreement* (divergence) without *dehumanization* (radical defect). I have sought, in Section 4 and its subsidiaries, to dig into the details of what enactive insights have to offer in terms of a revised moral epistemology. The next section puts forward the particular (epistemic) practical identity which I will then propose working into Korsgaard’s metaethical framework as a way to corral and integrate these enactive insights in what I take to be a more helpfully explicit and succinct manner.

## **5 | THE SELF-WORLD DOUBLE HELIX: PHRONETIC FINGERPRINT AND ENDAPTIVE UMWELT**

I propose to draw together the multiple enactive interventions I have introduced in 4.i-4.vi “under” the umbrella concept of a double helix. I use this image for two reasons. First because of the way the structure of a helix highlights the mutually co-enactive, co-creating component of self and world and the type of existential problems which can occur when the two fail to “connect”. Second, the givenness internal to the idea of genetics paired with more recent insights from research in epigenetics around our ability to alter our genetic expression in various ways (and have it altered by outside environmental factors), is an elegant analog to the tension I want to account for—and embrace—between the *givenness* of our epistemic capacities and environment on the one hand, and our ability<sup>41</sup> *to alter and improve upon* that givenness via epistemic virtue and adaptive, needfully-free sense-

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<sup>41</sup> As well as, I would argue, our moral responsibility.

making.<sup>42</sup> What *are* these two interweaving, co-enactive “strands” that I am proposing? I refer to them as the *phronetic fingerprint* and the *endaptive umwelt* respectively.

On the one strand, the phronetic fingerprint encompasses our complex ratio-cognitional *interiority*, that is, the term seeks to capture the ways in which our contingent histories, diversely inculcated capacities, and affective framing, actively define and inflect the *internal* contours of those very capacities for discerning perception, reflective rationality, and critical deliberation, in a way that is personal to ourselves. To continue the earlier metaphor, the phronetic fingerprint describes the unique body that is “doing the dancing,” and maybe also our “shoes,” muscles, sense of rhythm, how restrictive our “clothes” are, etc. On the other strand, we have the *endaptive umwelt* which emphasizes the way in which the external environment is both dynamically co-enacted, and (as a result) demands ongoing active adaptivity on the part of the self-strand. The endaptive umwelt is thus “the room in which we are dancing,” the world of sense and meaning (as opposed to brute data pointillism) in which we carry out the phronetic activities of (moral) agency. This consists in the external world of meaning and significance that we are able to enactively perceive in the first place, and thus also the unique world upon which we are actually able to rationally reflect and then critically evaluate. This is also, therefore, the world within whose confines we must then act: there are different “obstacles”, or “architectural features” to play with, different “floor textures” that one must safely navigate, different size and shape “rooms” that all impact the “music” we hear and the “moves” we can make. Some architectural features are non-optional, some pieces of furniture we may have put there ourselves. In other words,

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<sup>42</sup> Again, I am not trying to integrate any kind of darwinian notion of adaptivity with this admittedly genetic and biological symbolism. The adaptivity in question is specifically that of the autopoietic kind I have been discussing in the previous and current chapters.

this phronetic *exteriority* of the “endaptive umwelt” shapes the relevant information to which we will have access when forming our judgments (i.e. dancing), including both moral insights related to what other moral agents will experience, the available courses of action that we can conceive of, nevermind carry out, in addition to the possible outcomes and implications of such actions.

What, then, is “the music” in this analogy? It is, simply put, what *happens; life itself, the events to which we must respond*. This is a particularly apt analogy because of the way in which music, with its vibrating sound waves, is something that is “objectively” grounded in the physico-chemical “view from nowhere,” there are guardrails built in that constrain the scope of how that music can come through to us. At the same time, in the most important sense, such physico-chemical details are more or less invisible or *meaningless* to the hearer, though of course inextricably significant and relevant to their experience in the ultimate sense.

I have been long-promising a way of understanding practical reason/rationality that can rehumanize interpersonal engagement in our increasingly polarized social communities by charting a middle path between what I referred to as the dogmatic/realist and skeptical/relativist stances. One key piece of this enactive view of practical reason that I am proposing is that practical reason needs to be understood not only as an improvable *capacity*, but also as an *identity* in the Korsgaardian sense. Practical rationality should itself be understood as a *practical identity* insofar as it will be shaped by our life experiences, and our critical reflection on those experiences, and will itself impact what values we endorse and what actions we undertake. Like Korsgaard’s practical identities, it too will ground our particular values and be a general source of normativity for us as well. It is also, like our

bouquet of practical identities, *unique to us*. While the *capacity for* practical reason is certainly universal in the Kantian sense, where it manifests in individuals, it is inescapably stamped by what I am terming the phronetic fingerprint. I refer to it as a fingerprint to highlight the way in which this *universal capacity* will manifest in such *uniquely personal* ways. This is the case because this practical reason is itself dynamically connected and reconstituted through autopoietically adaptive responses to our external environments (endaptive umwelts) of present and past. Thus, the self-world double helix describes (1) the unique and ever-adaptively-evolving interiority that leaves its phronetic fingerprints all over what values we endorse and what actions we undertake, as practical identities all do, and (2) the external *environment of sense and meaning*<sup>43</sup> in which, and in response to which we carry out those phronetic activities.

This means that while this “helix” is a dynamic, evolving and *personal* identity,<sup>44</sup> it would not just be one more practical identity like any other. *Like* the moral identity, there is a sense in which it too “governs” the adoption and implementation of all the others. Indeed it does critical work in terms of explaining why individuals with a universal, Kantian capacity for reason, might come to adopt diverse practical identities and diverse interpretations of the same identity.<sup>45</sup> *Like* those other practical identities, it would be dynamically adaptive, and evolving, but operating at a more meta level it would also inflect the “phronetic pathway” from practical identity→value→action around which Korsgaard centers her project.<sup>46</sup> For these reasons, there is an important sense in which this helix identity would be prior to, or

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<sup>43</sup> Dynamically co-enacted with and through the phronetic fingerprint.

<sup>44</sup> *Unlike* Korsgaard’s moral identity of “humanity” to which it is still beholden.

<sup>45</sup> Recall my example of the two mothers in Chapter 3.

<sup>46</sup> Though she did not develop it sufficiently, recall the critiques from Chapter 3.

“above” those other more contingent identities; a “background,” “meta” identity that cannot be entirely discarded, or fully “gotten out of”. *Unlike* the moral identity, however, it is *adaptive*, transformable, educable; it can be worked on and improved (it is plastic *and* educable in Kukla’s terminology) if we put in the effort and cultivate the appropriate virtues. Unlike the moral identity, it is also *personal*. It *is* ours: it belongs to us as individuals in a way that the moral identity crucially does not. Thus this self-world helix enables the integration of the various perspectival, embedded, embodied, dynamically co-enactive, autopoietically adaptive nuances into Korsgaard’s metaethical system. It does so, moreover, in ways that respond directly to the critiques I made in Chapter 3 concerning practical identities and the risks of excessively mechanical, algorithmic, and aperspectival approaches to reason and objectivity. The remaining sections will unpack how it accomplishes this.

## **6 | ENACTIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM**

My proposed framework of enactive constructivism, to be elaborated throughout Section 6 takes Korsgaard’s overall Aristo-Kantian approach to metaethical constructivism as the basic starting point, while making a number of key interventions inspired by the enactive insights, could be said to push her approach toward Aristotle and away from Kant insofar as it emphasizes cultivation and dynamic flourishing. As I have mentioned previously, I have much appreciation for the ways in which Korsgaard’s system helps us to overcome the metaethical challenge, and how the idea of practical identities in particular runs counter to the sorts of impersonalist temptations at play in many otherwise promising (meta)ethical systems. Nevertheless, and in light of the critiques raised against Korsgaard in Chapter 2, I

have my own proposed interventions which can be gathered into roughly four thematic clusters under my broader proposed *Enactive Constructivism* “umbrella” framework.

## 6.i | Perception

Against any possible temptation toward *passively automatic* and *mechanical* views of perception, *Enactive Constructivism* emphasizes and takes account of the actively discerning and autopoietically adaptive nature of perception, as well as how perception is itself impacted by our myriad practical identities. Perception, on my enactive constructivism model, does not merely entail *passive reception*; it requires active work, effort, developed skill, and constant reassessment and response within the self-world “conversation.” What is crucial to emphasize, is that this *active* and discerning nature means that perception can be *improved*; with the help of our own effort as well as the effort and insights of others. Additionally, the picture of perception I am working to define here is not *just* a question of *physical, ocular* sight (though this often plays a central role). Rather, perception also encompasses a sort of holistic sensitivity or *attunement* to possible information in the environment, including things that are not necessarily visibly “there” in the technical sense. Emotions (especially joy and suffering) are one good example of this, but lacunae, absence, and even ideas or possibilities need to be accounted for as possible *objects of perception*. There is also a crucial sense in which *we must perceive our own minds*; successful perception will demand and rely on a sensitivity to our own less conscious internal ratio-cognitive, emotional, and phronetic activities, as well as, ideally, those of others.

In short, perception is an actively discerning, educable skill that takes work and which can (accordingly) vary significantly from person to person. For these reasons, it is also a capacity which we must constantly and actively (and adaptively) work to question, enhance,

and expand if we want to improve in our epistemic and moral practice. As laid out in the introductory chapter, it is a central tenet of this project that a majority—certainly not all, but a substantial amount—of the moral disagreement we encounter is far more a product of divergent perception (including focus, awareness, or descriptive understanding) rather than a fundamental conflict of values like justice or human flourishing. We may vigorously disagree concerning how to bring about the instantiation of those shared values of human flourishing, how to prioritize finite resources and in what directions, especially when and because we disagree about the relative ubiquity or scale of harm that a given problem represents. These latter disagreements, I am arguing, should actually be understood more as issues of perception, of seeing more and better, rather than as questions of value disagreement. Given the educable and adaptive nature of perception I have been sketching, this should give us hope when it comes to the issue of dehumanization because shifting the emphasis to perception, allows us to shift away from the question of “being a bad person.”

## **6.ii | Reason**

I argued earlier in this chapter that practical reason, even in its most virtuous, perfected human forms cannot and *should* not be described as wholly or ideally *mechanically algorithmic*, *aperspectivally uniform*, nor radically *impersonalist*. Even if such extremes were *achievable*, they would not be phronetic goals worth aspiring towards. While Korsgaard does counter the impersonalist impulse through her concept of practical identities, I argue that the ideal exercise of practical reason is too *creative* to be duly captured by Korsgaard’s framing of practical reason as *conformity* (to principles) alone. It is interpretive, responsive, needfully free, and adaptive rather than algorithmic. This does not mean a general form, or even universal capacity for rationality does not exist or that it is culturally relative in some

Babellian sense. Rather, it is a claim that the normativity which governs *practical* reason has adaptivity, growth, and creativity as constitutive features. Thus, I am advocating for a model of *needfully-free, adaptive responsiveness* rather than *passive, algorithmic, rule-following conformity*.

Practical reason, under Enactive Constructivism, is an ongoing process of *needfully free* engagement with the world. When properly executed, this autopoietically adaptive, ongoing “conversation” is defined by creative, interpretive *conversation-with*, rather than a *heteronomously passive* relationship of *compliance* or *lack thereof*. Thus, I am neither controverting Korsgaard’s integration of Kantian principles of agency, nor her argument around the second formulation of the categorical imperative with the moral identity. The key is in *how we understand* the intrinsically *hermeneutically creative* nature of responding to those constraints, which include the features of our dynamically co-enacted *umwelts* that we are able to perceive, as well as those of our practical identities, and the phronetic fingerprint described above. In other words, practical reason need not be *uniform across individuals*, nor rely exclusively on *aperspectivally accessible warrants* in order to “count” as reason, or for a person to count as reasonable. Reason does, however, need to be a *relentlessly reality-responsive i.e.* a skillfully and tirelessly *adaptive activity*.

### **6.iii | Identity**

As mentioned above, I would assert that much of what Korsgaard has done with practical identities and the moral identity in her metaethical framework is valuable and worth preserving. Especially helpful is the way in which this emphasis helps to counter the impersonalist temptation discussed in Chapter 4, without relenting to relativism or some other form of garden variety social constructionism. The main interventions that I would

propose in this arena are represented by the double helix that I just sketched out in Section 5. As I sought to explain earlier, Korsgaard’s system as a whole would benefit from the relationship between practical identity and perception not only being taken into account in the first place, but situated center stage. Both our endorsement and rejection of practical identities—as well as *how we interpret the demands of those identities* we do decide to endorse—are deeply impacted by what we perceive; the world in which we understand ourselves to be participating. But the relationship goes both ways because these practical identities in turn impact how we make sense of that world in the first place; i.e. how we dynamically co-enact that same environment that we are always actively in the process of discerning. Under my proposed system of *Enactive Constructivism*, and its particular understandings of reason and perception, therefore, the “same” practical identities in two people could normatively call for different (even conflicting) judgments and actions thanks to both the *phronetic fingerprint* of the individual’s interiority (their memory, affective orientation, other practical identities and life experiences among other features) and the *endaptive umwelt* of their external world (the world of sense and meaning with which their practical rationality is engaging).<sup>47</sup>

#### **6.iv | Objectivity**

As mentioned earlier, I am proposing an enactive twist on Korsgaard’s system that can enable what I am terming *perspectival objectivity* which in turn can allow us to chart a path between the scylla and charybdis of the correspondence or substance realism of the

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<sup>47</sup> I will elaborate a concrete case of this with my vaccination example below. All of this highlights the way in which identity in general is dynamically co-enactive with the environment, which itself includes not only the independent physico-chemical world but also the umwelt of our sense-making processes as well as other selves and non-human life.

dogmatic camp and the radical social constructionism or relativism of the skeptics. The enactive approach—in particular its concepts like *needful freedom* and *adaptivity* within the self-world relationship—serves as a heuristic *model* for a normatively valenced world where that normativity is neither grounded exclusively in the (aperspectival) “world out there” nor exclusively in the problematically *relativistic* perspective of a particular subject. The enactive framing rehabilitates subjectivity in the epistemic sphere and undermines the idea of self-negation as a path to truth. Following these cues, my proposed *enactive constructivism* centers on the processes of *needfully free adaptivity* between knowing self and the external world (including other subjects); replacing self-negation with environment-sensitivity or attunement that is nevertheless always carried out *from some perspective(s)*.

It is admittedly remarkable to me that the idea of a view from *nowhere* has gained such traction in these conversations around objectivity and truth given the surface level absurdity of “nowhere” having any relevance to what exists, what *is*. I do, however, think this is informative in terms of the extent to which aperspectivalism has clawed its way into our intuitions around what (the pursuit of) knowledge is really *for*. Surely, if there is some godly vantage from which we might aspire to view the world, it is not the view from nowhere, but *the view from everywhere*. On the first-personal, individual human level, setting our sights on such a telos is obviously a fool’s errand, even if it could guide the cultivation of specific epistemic virtues.<sup>48</sup> Once we turn our attention from what the atomic individual can achieve to what we all might build together, however, the view from *everywhere*, pieced together through consistent acts of epistemic virtue, could indeed be a comprehensible, though never fully achievable, *collective* epistemic telos.

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<sup>48</sup> More on this in the conclusion.

On both the individual and communal level, however, the key point is that *truth is not out there to be discovered*,<sup>49</sup> not even once we have performed a sufficient quantity of self-flagellatory rites of epistemic asceticism. Truth is always dynamically co-enacted, suspended between self and world, self and other selves, self and maybe even god. Truth is a four-dimensional<sup>50</sup> *sculpture*, not a flattened bird's eye view. Under the enactive approach, therefore, the counter to excessive subjectivity is not *aperspectivalism* but *omni-perspectivalism*. If objectivity is aimed at truth (rather than being elided with it), it cannot be achieved through passive observation from a mile high, nor can it be achieved by an epistemic subject who has been bound and gagged. It must instead be actively carved and carried out; i.e. dynamically co-enacted between an epistemically virtuous self and the world it is seeking to understand.<sup>51</sup>

## 7 | CODA ON CHAPTER 2 CRITIQUES

I will return now to re-confront the three main concerns I raised against Korsgaard's version of constructivism back in Chapter 3 and assess to what extent my more enactive approach could carry her strengths forward while avoiding those pitfalls. To do so, I will first flesh out a basic concrete case study to ground these final sections and the chapter as a whole. While some might immediately think of abortion, gun rights, or Trumpism as some of the most vitriolic issues dividing the United States currently, I have chosen to focus on the issue of vaccines and vaccine hesitancy for the following reasons.

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<sup>49</sup> As Korsgaard herself notes, see Chapter 3.

<sup>50</sup> At least four dimensions.

<sup>51</sup> For these reasons, it can disrupt the channel from Chapter 1 wherein existence of moral conflict would inevitably be explained by inability or unwillingness to deliberate properly.

First, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been the backdrop for the majority of my entire writing process, this already fraught issue has reached new heights of ubiquity. It is a choice that everyone in this country has had to make, one way or another in the last two years. This makes it strikingly quotidian, but it is also crucially *ongoing*, we must all continue to decide whether or not to get vaccinated or revaccinated. Additionally, it serves my particular purposes by emphasizing the central role of perception and knowledge in our phronetic processes which exists more invisibly in longer standing moral dilemmas. Put differently, it highlights the inextricability of descriptive reality and normative agency: the interdependency of knowledge or assessment of *what is* (what is real and true) with knowledge or assessment of *what we should do*. Third, it is a genuinely confounding case insofar as individuals have been harmed both by taking the vaccine and not taking the vaccine and it is currently unclear how to accurately calculate probable harm in order to avoid those deaths. Fourth, it can highlight a multitude of ways in which we might dehumanize the Other.

One final note before digging into the example case itself. I am aware that at times it will seem that I am swinging too hard for the vaccine hesitant. Some readers may wonder if I am sneaking in a verdict in lieu of what I am framing as an illustrative example. I take this slant to be necessary insofar as it seems likely (at least at this point in time) that my readers will fall decisively into the pro-vaccine camp, and therefore may need extra convincing that there could conceivably be anything to justifiably disagree about. Indeed, it may even be the case that we ourselves are engaging in some of the sorts of dehumanizing rhetoric or thought patterns that I am hoping to challenge. So the fifth and final reason for focusing on the question of vaccines is that it seems particularly apt for stimulating the type of first-personal

self reflection that ethics is all about. I am affirmatively not weighing in on the vaccine debate one way or another, I am simply trying to apply my arguments to a concrete moral dilemma that is live and pressing as I am writing.

My illustrative example is inspired by a real student of mine, let's call him Clayton. However, the details which I flesh out are purely hypothetical and not grounded in any one particular person that I know. Four weeks into the semester, Clayton, a roughly 19 year old from Western New York has already missed four classes for heart specialist appointments related to myocarditis contracted as a result of Covid-19 vaccination. While this has undoubtedly caused problems for Clayton in his academic and social life, I want to turn our attention to how Clayton and his ongoing experience might affect the phronetic reality of those who know him back home.

Let us imagine that back home Clayton has a next door neighbor, the father of a family with its own children, and maybe a son who is coming up to the age where he will qualify for covid vaccination. Let's call the father Ted, and let's say Ted enthusiastically got vaccinated, had more or less zero side effects, and maybe some of his other children got the vaccine and also had no complications. But maybe his kids are friends with Clayton, maybe he watched him learn to ride a bike, maybe Ted was out mowing his lawn when Clayton was carted off to the hospital at age 17 with....heart problems? Maybe Ted was a fan in the bleachers cheering for the sport team on which Clayton *used* to play. Maybe he watched from the window at his work-from-home desk as Clayton trudges home dejectedly at 3pm every day because he can no longer practice. Maybe in the middle of all this Dr. Fauci admits (practically brags) on National Television that he purposefully lied to the American people about the

efficacy of masks.<sup>52</sup> Gee, Ted wonders, what else did he lie about? Then pharmaceutical companies refuse to allow other countries to manufacture the vaccine when the U.S. government asks them to,<sup>53</sup> and Ted is forcefully reminded how much harm pharmaceutical companies are willing to inflict in order to pad their already bulging bottom lines.

Some might say “look at the facts”, myocarditis only resulted from vaccination X%<sup>54</sup> of the time. Ted believes this fact. Maybe Ted even reaches out to his doctor or family pediatrician. Ted probably knew this fact *before* Clayton ever got vaccinated. The problem is that practical reason is not definitively deductive in the way required for this to be a valid critique (i.e. in the way that rational mechanicalists might wish). We must instead ask what does this abstract number, what *can* these myocarditis cases actually *mean* within the phronetic environment of Ted’s self-world? In such a case, one can easily argue that it is not the move of de-emphasizing the number X% that constitutes epistemic malpractice. Rather, it would be ignoring the living breathing Clayton and the ontologically undeniable reality of world events that Ted has experienced that would indicate perceptive or phronetic “defect”.

One can imagine all kinds of similar cases; a patient who has suffered at the hands of doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and or the medical establishment as a whole; a person who had to miss work because of side effects of the vaccine and then were fired two months later when they wound up contracting covid anyway; someone whose mother got all of her shots and still died from covid. All of these individuals are operating with *additional*

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<sup>52</sup> Kerrington Powell and Vanay Prasad, “The Noble Lies of COVID-19,” *Slate*, July 28, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/07/noble-lies-covid-fauci-cdc-masks.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Lee Fang, Moderna Among Firms Quietly Granted Powers To Seize Patent Rights During Early Days Of Covid Pandemic,” *The Intercept*, August 23, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/08/23/covid-vaccine-patents-moderna-big-pharma-section-1498/>

<sup>54</sup> At the time of writing this number is on the rise in double blind peer reviewed studies. For my present purposes it is enough to assume that the number is low but not negligible.

information—not *bad* or *fake* information—and while we may want to challenge what emphasis this information deserves, or challenge the way that this emphasis might block out other pieces of information that we deem important, it is nevertheless undeniably furniture *around which* they must now “dance” in ways that others need not. With this example in hand, I will now return to an assessment of how Enactive Constructivism can better meet the core concerns I raised against Korsgaard in Chapter 3.

### **7.i | How We Come to Divergent Views of What a Practical Identity Entails**

The first concern was that Korsgaard’s framework can only systematically account for moral divergence or disagreement insofar as it is the result of diverse practical identities, (or differing prioritization of those identities) and this is insufficient to account for the diverse forms of disagreement which we experience on a regular basis, never mind the more intractable issues around polarization and its dehumanizing effects. Deciding to act according to the dictates of a particular practical identity that you hold dear does not get us as far as would be required for a given identity to determine specific, circumscribed actions. Indeed, as I have noted multiple times, a single practical identity can frequently generate—or be the source of—differing, or even opposite actions in different individuals. This hobbles the explanatory power of Korsgaard’s framework and runs the risk of undermining the required normative force of practical identities themselves.

The dynamically co-enacted strands of my double helix are crucial here because of the way in which they *contour* our various practical identities on an individual level, “shading them in for us,” so to speak, in *unique* rather than universal ways. Put differently, the phronetic fingerprint inflects how an individual will understand the axiological features of a given identity and thus also how they will interpret what that identity normatively requires

in a “given situation”. For example, Ted’s personal history shapes what the practical identity of “loving father” demands in terms of vaccinating his children. On the other hand, the concept of the *endaptive umwelt* seriously complicates how we come to know and understand that same situation which is “demanding” phronetic response in the form of judgment and action. How have the significance and meaning of events, numbers, and even words in the “outside” world shifted and transformed for Ted over the time period in question? How has the epistemic trustworthiness of various testimonial interlocutors like the pharmaceutical industries or Dr. Fauci changed in a way that destabilizes what he thought he knew reality to be?

In other words, the aforementioned “given situation” is not “given” at all, but is instead the result of an on-going, active, needfully free co-enaction of a self-world. These twin concepts thus helpfully enable us to explain how the practical identity of teacher or friend, or concerned father, can yield many legitimate judgments or actions, without thereby undermining the *normativity* of those practical identities or rendering those deliberations epistemically un-interrogable by ourselves or others. By integrating a complex understanding of the world with which those practical identities are engaging, we can create room for divergence without defect and without thereby automatically sacrificing the normativity of practical identities. This brings me directly to my second critique concerning Korsgaard’s epistemology itself.

## **7.ii | The Underdeveloped Epistemology**

My second critique was that Korsgaard is operating with an overly uniform, underdeveloped epistemology, in particular, what appeared to be an overly reductive understanding of perception and rationality, that then made it harder for her system to

“support” the kind of objectivity that she seems to desire (recall section 4.iv). Back in Chapter 3, I argued that even though her constitutional model provides crucial first steps in helping us to find our way out of the dead-end dichotomy of dogmatism/realism-skepticism/relativism in metaethics, it fails to account for the way in which our perceptive-cognitive-rational capacities are *themselves* dynamic, constantly and adaptively constituted and reconstituted, actively discerning, and constitutive of their own sort of practical identity. While I acknowledged that Korsgaard’s concept of how practical identities can generate particular values and duties, and thereby impact our moral deliberation, does add helpful nuance to the overly uniform Kantian picture of practical reasoning and moral agency, I nevertheless noted that she has little to say as to how we come to adopt those particular identities over others in the first place, nor how these personal contexts, experiences, and identities impact the shape and outcomes of our processes of perceptual experience, practical reasoning, reflection, endorsement, and deliberation themselves. For example, one might ask how Ted’s concrete experiences might inflect how his practical identity of “father” plays out divergently from a father in the same position whose nurse wife died in the pre-vaccine period of the pandemic, even if both men had access to all the same “information.” Practical identities do not exert their normative force in isolation from the interior-exterior environment of the self-world helix which transforms the Sellarsian-style space of reasons within which the individual is carrying out their phronetic agency.

I hope it is clear at this point in the chapter how the concepts laid out in sections 4.i-4.vi represent my efforts to shade in these lacunae in her work. By not only highlighting the ways in which Korsgaard’s system is already unconsciously compatible with much of the enactivist school of thought (Section 2) but also zeroing in on how these core enactivist

insights might simultaneously help her framework avoid the problems associated with an perspectivalist, mechanical, and impersonalist temptations (Section 3), I hope to have developed an enactively informed moral epistemology that is better able to support Korsgaard's own goals, without sacrificing her system's key strengths or any of its central "load-bearing" commitments.

### **7.iii | Potential for Dehumanization**

The final key concern I raised in Chapter 2 concerned the issue of dehumanization, particularly the unique potential for dehumanizing effects of disagreement in the context of Korsgaard's constitutional model of agency. Recall that under this model, failing to act in accordance with the constitutional principles of action, that is, failing to be reasonable or "act rationally" is not (just) about being *good* or *bad*, it is about *being a human person at all*. It is this admittedly philosophical threat of dehumanization that I actually see echoed and born out in societal discourse, especially in the more extreme arenas of polarized moral disagreement, and in the various acts of violence and hatred which increasingly seem to constitute their tragic "resolutions". We need to create more space for moral divergence without dehumanizing ideas of defect. I have consequently been arguing that we need a way for disagreement to not indicate that someone is necessarily being irrational and hence *failing to be a person* in the relevant sense(s). For this reason, among others, we ought to want to be very careful and nuanced in how we evaluate "reasonableness" and rational action. What my various enactivist interventions seek to provide in this regard is a way to rehumanize polarization by delineating an epistemology wherein disagreement does not *automatically* indicate irrational, i.e. subhuman, error.

Consider the following memes, taken at random points over 2021-2023 from the popular image and meme sharing site Imgur which boasted over 300 million active monthly users as of January 21, 2021.<sup>55</sup> These are meant to serve as representative snapshots of the type of dehumanizing rhetoric that has become widespread over a phronetic deliberation as arguably mundane as vaccination. While such images were more narrowly circulated before the pandemic concerning general vaccine hesitancy, they reached analogously epidemic proportions in the wake of widespread Covid vaccine availability.



We are all the same underneath.

Except some



**White**



**Black**



**Asian**



**Gay**



**Straight**



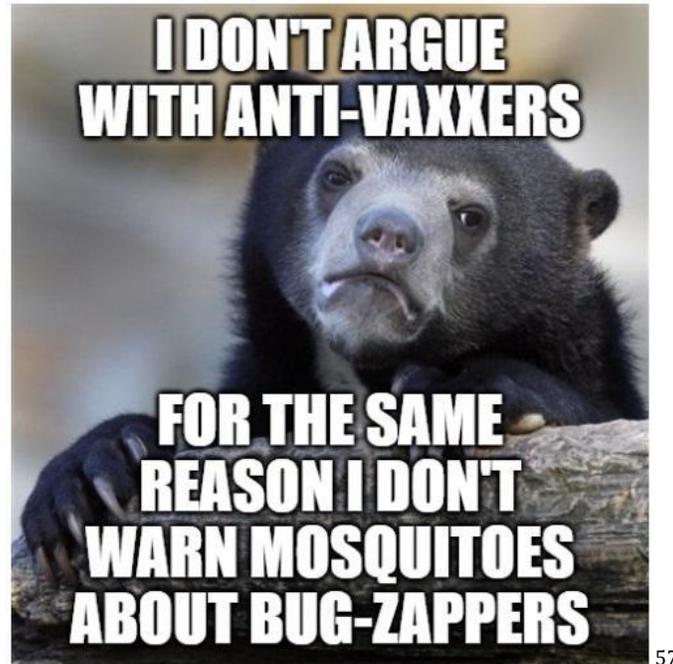
**"Vaccines  
cause autism"**

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<sup>55</sup> Craig Smith, "Imgur Statistics and User Count for 2024," *DMR*, January 6, 2024, <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/imgur-statistics/>.

<sup>56</sup> [imgur.com](https://imgur.com).

**Figure 1: Vaccine Autism Memes**



**Figure 2: Bug Zappers**

It is worth noting that all three of these sample memes made it, by popular vote, to the “front page” of Imgur, meaning that not only did one individual feel inspired to take time and energy to create such memes, they were also “upvoted” by hundreds if not thousands of individuals. I want to first flag the ableist undertones of the top left image, which make the meme doubly dehumanizing both to those who are vaccine skeptics and those who are physically disabled. Although the top two are explicitly referencing autism and vaccines generally, the context and comments were related to the Covid-19 vaccine. They are relevant to this argument regardless of what type of vaccine skepticism specifically they are referencing. What I want to highlight is the way in which an arguably mundane disagreement<sup>58</sup> results in at least three genres of dehumanization. First, the vaccine skeptical are compared to disabled human

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> I have purposefully not chosen abortion for that reason.

beings which is dehumanizing on multiple levels: both to the unvaccinated but perhaps even more so to the disabled. Then (top right), they are compared to neanderthal, i.e. nonhuman or prehuman individuals. Finally they are (bottom center) likened to bugs, and one of the most loathsome bugs that humans interact with on a very regular basis. How might Korsgaard's constitutive model and its framing of improper practical deliberation as degrading us not qua moral human, but qua human itself, take on insidious form in the social imaginary as embodied by all three memes, but by the neanderthal meme in particular? In the bottom center bear meme the implication is that they do not argue with "anti-vaxxers" *because they want them to die*. They are more than happy to sit back and might even rejoice if the bug zapper of disease were to zap (kill) them.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the "OP" (original poster) saw it as a type of poetic justice, but the violence that is erupting in spurts across this country currently leads me to believe that such impulses do not always end at the *passive* level of "let them experience the consequences of their actions". What I hope that enactive constructivism can sketch out is a way to understand differing phronetic outcomes on even such a surprisingly vitriolic topic as vaccines, without needing to appeal to any form of dehumanization. It is my hope that it is a framework that encourages exactly the type of conversation that the bear meme seems to deem pointless. At the same time, however, enactive constructivism still leaves space for phronetic defect: practical reasoning is hard, and adequate, fulsome *perception* is also hard, so we are going to fall short of these ideals to greater and lesser degrees all the time. What Enactive

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<sup>59</sup> Indeed, a concerning collective celebration and mockery played out repeatedly during the height of the pandemic when gleefully circulating obituaries of the willfully unvaccinated became a way to earn points (literal or metaphorical depending on the platform).

Constructivism enables is a space for some level of good faith<sup>60</sup> defect that need not immediately threaten our humanity itself. For these reasons, it can disrupt the channel from Chapter 1 wherein existence of moral conflict would inevitably be explained by inability or unwillingness to deliberate properly.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

An underlying thread of this project is that much of what we might at first see as a conflict at the level of capital V values is often in fact a matter of difference at the level of reality-perception. We *almost* all desire the maximal eudaimonic flourishing of human beings the world over. We may certainly disagree about what we ourselves have to sacrifice or give up for the sake of others' flourishing, but we may also fail to perceive all the relevant issues at stake or the possible, available courses of action. We may fail to perceive the twisting ripples of effect that our phronetic choices will make real. It is doubtful that any individual or society will so thoroughly perfect its capacities of perception that we will achieve some form of *agreement* on everything. Indeed, enactive constructivism's emphasis on the formative power of personal experience means this is well nigh impossible. Nevertheless, by improving our holistic perceptive capacities we can gradually increase the type of *rehumanizing* understanding that can at least render those disagreements (ideological, moral, religious) less caustic and lethal. Indeed, simply acknowledging how interrogable and improvable our capacities for perception (nevermind phronesis) are can significantly undermine and unjustify the dehumanizing slide from moral conflict to moral exclusion from my original table in Chapter 1.

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<sup>60</sup> I will deal with bad faith actors in the final chapter.

A crucial methodological component of the rehumanizing project has taken the form of creating room for disagreement without relenting to relativism. This has by no means been an easy task, but by creating space and mapping out more ways in which disagreement can result *without* a dehumanizing level of epistemic malpractice on the part of either “side”, I believe this *Constructive Enactivism* can rehumanize the face of disagreement and, encourage further interpersonal phronetic engagement and dialogue. But this does not mean that there is not still ample room for genuine epistemic malpractice to be committed, or that such activities do not indeed risk the kind of de-constitution which Korsgaard warns about. We are still responsible to Reality and other moral-epistemic agents in ways that endorse certain epistemic practices (virtues) while forbidding others. I turn to an elaboration of these virtues, now.

# Chapter 7: Epistemic Virtue for a Dehumanizing Age

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

I have been promising that this project will not only put forward an explanatory contribution as well as a practical contribution in the form of concrete action guidance. In this final chapter, I turn to the moral-epistemic virtues which are called for by *enactive constructivism*: habits which we can cultivate in ourselves and encourage in others. I refer to these as virtues (in the Aristotelian sense) because of the way in which they must be actively cultivated, represent a disposition toward the world generally, rather than being limited to self-standing one-off actions, and because, like Aristotle's virtues, it is important to understand these virtues as carefully calibrated means between extremes that should be avoided. These dispositions are not only virtues insofar as they avoid *akrasia*, but also insofar as they avoid overwhelming and unsustainable levels of supererogatory effort and vulnerability.

Although this is a chapter on virtues, I will highlight certain vices as foils along the way. Most notable is Jonathan Lear's idea of knowingness which I complicate in Sections 3-3.ii. These sections build on the ideas of perception that I emphasize in Section 2 to articulate a broad category of epistemic vice which my proposed virtues hope to counter. In particular, "knowingness" serves to highlight the fundamentally active and interpretive nature of (moral) perception and knowledge which will return throughout the chapter, culminating in my proposed concept of enactive hermeneutic humility. In Section 4 I return to the work of

Quill Kukla and their arguments for the plasticity and educability of our perceptive and rational capacities that will serve as a helpful springboard for my own proposed virtues insofar as they help to frame and justify why such virtue cultivation is both possible and possibly productive. With these ideas in hand I turn to an additional set of foils in the work of Miranda Fricker; in particular her concepts of hermeneutic and testimonial injustice, epistemic erosion and objectification. With all of these foils in hand, I turn in Section 6 to my own six central virtues: enactive hermeneutic humility (6.i), uncomfortable friendships (6.ii), epistemic allyship (6.v), and (epistemic) environmental stewardship (6.vi). Sections 6.iii and 6.iv bring back Korsgaard's notion of practical identities as a way to counteract the dehumanizing impulses of Fricker's epistemic erosion and objectification against ourselves and others. While Fricker and Kukla are my key interlocutors, Aristotle and Korsgaard's Kantian priorities are operating in the background (and foreground) throughout.

With my proposed virtues finally *proposed*, I conclude in Section 7 with some lingering concerns related to the idea of Aristotelian virtue highlighted above. 7.i explores the potential for such virtues to pose excessive burdens; i.e. supererogatory virtue burnout, especially for individuals already burdened by various structural injustices. After reflecting on various ways to avoid this risk, I move to the other end of the spectrum to work through what akratic vice looks like on this picture. In particular, I articulate how to retain the possibility of vice without allowing it to become a source of dehumanization. Finally, I turn to the ominous figure of the bad faith actor or troll who poses the gravest threat to my proposed system insofar as they really are unwilling to engage in good faith collective moral discourse and deliberation (recall my table from Chapter 1). While I do not shy away from the challenge which such individuals represent for my framework, I nevertheless emphasize

bigger picture “environmental” factors which are often at play in these cases, and what hope and solutions such acknowledgments make possible. With all of these pieces finally in view, Section 8 then serves as a conclusion for this chapter as well as the project in its entirety.

## 2 | SEEING THE GOOD: RETURNING TO PERCEPTION

Recall from Chapter 2 that Korsgaard’s substance-realist foils claim that there is a correct procedure for arriving at moral conclusions because only certain procedures will be able to successfully discover the proper moral facts “out there” in some normative part of the world. I am still deeply sympathetic to Korsgaard’s insistence that there are no moral facts out in the universe that loudly make themselves known to us in “right” and “wrong” shaped metaphysical chunks. I do, however, argue (and I think Korsgaard would too) that there are morally relevant “facts”<sup>1</sup> or features of the world. There is a distinct difference between the idea that there are moral truth shaped chunks (“abortion is wrong”) out in the metaphysical furniture of the universe and the idea that there are morally relevant facts within human experience: anguish, physical pain, shame, hardship, grief, lost or gained opportunities, possibilities for joy, creativity to name but a few. These merely morally relevant “sense-clusters”<sup>2</sup> can take the form of anything from very directly relevant aspects of reality such as “this action creates this sensation of pain and suffering in this many people” to less immediately relevant issues of structural (in)justice that reframe how we should evaluate an individual’s virtues on the basis of their failures or success in myriad respects. Indeed, there are *all kinds* of “sense-clusters” that matter for the ends of moral deliberation.

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<sup>1</sup> I am of course not referring to facts here in the aperspectivalist or mechanical objectivity sense that I critiqued back in Chapter 3 and with the help of the enactivists in Chapter 4. “Facts” regrettably has connotations of passively receivable and incontrovertible data nuggets which enactive constructivism rejects wholesale. I use the term here simply because it is less clunky than dynamically co-enacted sense clusters.

<sup>2</sup> See comment above about what I am referring to here.

What I am interested in exploring in this final chapter is how we can get—modestly but significantly—better at perceiving those relevant “sense clusters”; acknowledging that “perceiving” includes hearing, noticing, understanding, and that the relevant sense clusters are not “given” and so these gerunds all require some amount of *interpretation*.

This project of course relates back to the view-from-everywhere<sup>3</sup> rather than the view-from-nowhere approach to objectivity. The more we can expand our understanding of the lived experience of others, the more we can perceive the lived experience of those at the farther ripples of our actions and awareness, the closer we will come, relatively speaking, to achieving that view-from-everywhere.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will be laying out some concrete ideas for how we can better “see” those “facts” i.e. how we can dynamically co-enact our moral-epistemic environments more responsively, perceptively, adaptively as a means for approaching this goal. Each of the virtues I am proposing are centered around various ways of “seeing better,” perceiving more relevant layers of that more richly textured reality. This perception is not just visual, however, it involves listening and experiencing and most of all a kind of vicarious yet embodied mode of understanding. In order for any of these epistemic virtues to be helpful, however, we need to start from a place of epistemic humility.

### 3 | KNOWINGNESS

To get at the particular form such humility must take, I turn now to its foil, what Jonathan Lear has helpfully described as “knowingness.” I will be articulating a vice of specifically moral knowingness over the course of this section, one which not only highlights a

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<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Daston has used this phrase to talk about objectivity in the humanities generally.

<sup>4</sup> To reiterate, we will never be able to achieve the view from everywhere, in speaking of virtue, that idea is an aspirational north star, guiding toward a gerundive destination that turns out to be the process itself.

problematic lack of epistemic humility but also a refusal to acknowledge the inherently (en)active and interpretive nature of perception and knowledge. First, however, I will set out Lear's concept in its original form. Put most succinctly, Lear's knowingness is a pathological lack of epistemic curiosity. As Lear describes, "the stance of "already knowing" functions as a defense: if you already know, you do not need to find out." Regardless of the "truth status" of the claim in question, then, knowingness represents a nearly airtight barrier to learning anything new, or changing one's mind on a given question. Although Lear was writing at the end of the 1990s, before the explosion of social media, these issues have only become more extreme in recent decades. As Jonathan Malesic put it in an article for *Psyche*, "knowingness is why present-day culture wars are so boring. No one is trying to find out anything. There is no common agreement about the facts, and yet everyone acts as if all matters of fact are already settled."<sup>5</sup> As I argued in the previous chapter, disagreement about the descriptive nature of reality is as much or more the cause of radical disagreement than disagreements about fundamental normative values connected with human flourishing. So too here, I would argue, knowingness in matters of fact is as much (or more) a part of the problem as knowingness about the good. And as I laid out in the introduction, dehumanizing moral exclusion qua object and subject rely on descriptive assessments for drawing their normative conclusions. I thus diverge with Hume's infamous claim about the unbridgeable is-ought divide and would counter that, our claims of "what is" can never be neatly separated away from claims of "what ought to be (done)," though I would agree that one cannot logarithmically or mechanistically *derive* or deduce an "ought" from an "is" in most cases.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Malesic, "Our big problem is not misinformation; it's knowingness" [Ihttps://psyche.co/ideas/our-big-problem-is-not-misinformation-its-knowingness](https://psyche.co/ideas/our-big-problem-is-not-misinformation-its-knowingness).

### 3.i | Friendly Reminderism

Nevertheless, one can see cases of “knowingness about the good” abounding across social media, especially when some new catastrophe captures the attention of enough of the population. Responses on public square platforms frequently adopt what I refer to as “unfriendly reminderism”: rather than asserting a claim (that might, horrifyingly, invite a counterclaim) an author will instead explicitly frame their (often very arguable) assertion as a “friendly reminder.” The implication, of course, is that the flag they are planting is not only *not* an invitation to discussion, but it is so unquestionable that it does not even warrant justificatory effort. Rather, whatever statement they are making is so *indisputable* that the only reasonable/virtuous/acceptable response is one of applause or appreciation. Take just a smattering of examples below to get a taste for this subgenre of knowingness. I have tried to collect as wide a range of examples as possible.





**Figure 3: Friendly Reminderism**

I am not arguing that *none* of these statements have any truth to them, you may even agree with some of the statements. Nevertheless, by couching them in terms of a “friendly reminder” they represent the unproductive if not insidious vice of *knowingness*. The ACAB<sup>6</sup> sub-genre (see below) is particularly helpful in highlighting why such statements are a problem *even if and when they are “true”* insofar as any claim that purports all X’s are anything (aside perhaps from tautological claims of the “all bachelors are unmarried” sort) already indicate a definitively unsupportable knowingness: an incendiary, polemical insistence to know precisely what one could not possibly know. The knowingness is thus *weaponized*. It is precisely the chasm between the claim that *can be* legitimately made (these particular cops are bastards) and the claim which *is* made, (all, each and every cop everywhere is a bastard) which amplifies the acronym to a battle cry. When couched by the preceding “friendly reminder” it is even more troublingly *a battle cry which refuses to engage in battle*: this is not a flag to be planted and defended, this is a claim to “truth” so obvious and irrefutable that it refuses to stoop to defend itself. Not only is there a lack of curiosity about the beliefs of *others*, there is a lack of curiosity as to the legitimacy of one’s own beliefs. Indeed, the perpetrators of toxic friendly reminderism are so walled up in knowingness that

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<sup>6</sup> The acronym ACAB stands for All Cops Are Bastards.

they are not only satisfied beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are right, and others wrong, but they refuse to even advocate for that knowledge. Implicit in this refusal, it seems, is an assumption about “the other”; either they already agree with us, or else we do not deem them capable or deserving of the knowledge we (believe) we already have. In other words it is a perfect example of moral-exclusion-qua subject from Chapter 1.



**Figure 4: ACAB**

So, to complicate Lear’s original framing, there is a specifically *moral* knowingness, in addition to *descriptive* knowingness. There is additionally a double, twinning manifestation of knowingness as both a refusal *to find out*, but also as a refusal *to have one’s beliefs challenged*. As Lear notes, “if boredom and irritation accompany the claim to already know, the violation of the presumption to already know is met with moralizing fury. It seems almost as though a taboo has been violated.”<sup>7</sup> (Recall the moral indignation and outrage that I spoke

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Lear. *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. 38.

about in Chapter 1). This works on a double level because taboos, too, not only raise outrage when they are contradicted, they are also *not open to discursive interrogation*. In many cases, to question the taboo, to demand reasons or explanation, or even to argue for a little nuance, is already to have transgressed, perhaps irredeemably so.

### **3.ii | Reason and the Problem of Knowingness**

This issue of discursive interrogability brings me to an additional aspect of Lear's argument upon which my project builds and which it further fleshes out: the type of *reason* that underlies, limits, and is thought to justify such knowingness. As Lear acknowledges, "Oedipus, with some plausibility, takes himself to have got where he is by the clever use of human reason."<sup>8</sup> But this use of reason is crucially not the enactive, autopoietically responsive and adaptive sort of reason I have been advocating for. Instead, "reason is being used to jump ahead to a conclusion," Lear writes, "as though there is too much anxiety involved in simply asking a question and waiting for the world to answer."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when other characters, such as Tiresias interfere with Oedipus' knowingness acrobatics, "refusing to let him "knowingly" leap to a practical conclusion," Oedipus responds not with curiosity, but instead "interprets it as an aggressive act and strikes a retaliatory blow."<sup>10</sup> Note how this "knowing leaping" echoes the moral-exclusion-qua-subject leap from "this person refuses to agree with me" to "this person is unable or unwilling to engage in proper moral deliberation"

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<sup>8</sup> Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Note here the unconscious allusion to the sort of adaptive, dynamic co-enaction of self and world that is a hallmark of enactive constructivism.

<sup>10</sup> Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 44.

(and thus deserves to be derided and or actively excluded from collective moral deliberation).

It is no accident that one of Thebes' most respected "seers" was, physically speaking, *blind*. Perhaps we are meant to understand the profound value of being forced to acknowledge our blindness: perhaps, having a blindness that cannot be denied is in fact the key to full perception and insight. Tiresias cannot hide behind a comfortable knowingness in any of his activities, and so he has perhaps developed perceptive skills from which the rest of us would do well to learn.<sup>11</sup> Oedipus of course, does not. His knowingness in this situation blinds him to the admittedly uncomfortable possibility that Tiresias might actually possess "meaning (Oedipus) doesn't yet grasp." There is, Lear observes "no room for the possibility that the world is different from what he takes it to be...the space of inquiry has collapsed...And there is no place for a challenge to Oedipus' "reasonableness" to take hold."<sup>12</sup> Even when Creon entreats him to simply hear Tiresias out, Oedipus takes this, not as cause to pause, but rather only as proof that Creon is also part of the conspiracy, and hence unworthy of epistemic respect or consideration. Conspiracy has come to the fore in our own moral-epistemic landscapes, particularly in the wake of Trump's 2016 election and worries of Russian interference, and in the wake of the COVID crisis. While different from the sort of conspiracy theorizing of Oedipus' suspicion, many of us indeed cry "conspiracy theorist" whenever someone disagrees too far with our point of view. This is indeed sometimes justified, but sometimes it is not. And if we allow our temptations toward knowingness to win out, we will never learn or discern the difference.

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<sup>11</sup> I will propose some such skills or virtues in later sections.

<sup>12</sup> Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 45.

There is another way in which Oedipus' epistemic flaws highlight the need for a more enactive and autopoietically responsive orientation:

Even when he isn't angry there is a flatness in his reasoning. With the sphinx, Oedipus may have "hit the mark by native wit," but he didn't understand it. He treats the Sphinx's riddle as a straightforward puzzle - the one in which the stakes are very high (as though it were set by an arch villain) - ignoring any sacred dimension or oracular meaning which would require interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

My excursions in chapters 3 and 4 have, I hope, highlighted the ways in which all meaning requires some level of adaptivity and interpretive *sense-making*, so we should take it very seriously indeed if someone falls prey to this vice of knowingness and the reductive understandings of perception and reason, and truth which it entails. Indeed, Lear reads the entire play as Sophocles:

offering a diagnosis of "knowingness": both a critique of its thinness as a way of being in the world, and an account of how it comes to take over a culture. And insofar as this knowingness presents itself as a reason, Oedipus the Tyrant becomes...Oedipus tyrannized - tyrannized by what he takes to be the reasonable movement of his own mind.<sup>14</sup>

I have been arguing throughout for the centrality of interpretation, not the *radically relativistic* interpretation of post-modernism, but the *needfully-free* hermeneutics of autopoietic sense-making. Oedipus is the foil to this view: "He cannot recognize any dimension of meaning other than the one he already knows;" he is not in dynamic co-enactive conversation with the external world. For him, moreover, "there is no point to the activity of interpretation. No sooner does he hear the news than he already knows its significance."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 47-48. Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 51.

Knowingness—of both the descriptive and moral kind—certainly seems to be taking over our culture. And yet, as Lear already noted back in 1999, “no matter how insistently the culture clings to its “knowingness” and its boredom, Oedipal confidence is breaking up before our eyes. Of course, one response to this collapse is pathetic, not tragic: attempted flight back to pre-modern, fundamentalist forms of religious engagement.”<sup>16</sup> This is the preferred route of those whom I have been referring to as the dogmatic realists. There is also their counterpart, what Lear associates with the post-modern generally, and which I have been collecting under the umbrella of radical relativism: the worldviews which espouse the unfettered freedom-*from* of more garden variety social constructionism (against which I framed my own enactive constructivism). Both of these options, Lear and I seem to agree, ultimately fail. What I have been trying to set up in the preceding chapters with the help of Korsgaard’s metaethical framework is a *third* option. What I hope to sketch out in this concluding chapter is a practical antidote, not a magic silver bullet, but the “healthy” epistemic lifestyle which is called for by enactive constructivism. It is my hopeful belief that my proposed collection of virtues can temper the corroding and blinding, and crucially, dehumanizing effects of knowingness. How then can we *rehumanize* our epistemic practice and “see” better? In order to elaborate my vision here I will now turn to what I take to be helpful contributions in the work of Quill Kukla and Miranda Fricker.

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<sup>16</sup>Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, 55.

## 4 | KUKLA'S INTERVENTIONS

I have woven insights from Quill Kukla throughout this project, most notably in Chapter 3 with their disentanglement of a perspectival warrant and ontological objectivity as well as their critique of impersonalism in ethics. I want to return to their work once more as a way of integrating some key epistemic virtues that I take to be crucial to countering knowingness: the plasticity/educatability of our rational capacities, a particular understanding of epistemic humility, and third, what I will here simply gesture at as an injunction to “make more (better? different?) friends.” While I am using Kukla’s work as a springboard, I am putting my own twist on their ideas and reimagining these concepts.

### 4.i | Plasticity

As Kukla is the first to point out, their proposed differentiation of a perspectival warrant and ontological objectivity will only be successful if our “epistemic practices are themselves open to rational revision in the face of new evidence.”<sup>17</sup> Openness, revisability, and “teachability” constitute what Kukla refers to as “plasticity of perception.” Not only do our perceptual capacities shift and evolve over time, but, Kukla argues, we can actually work to *improve* them, because the exercise of our rational capacities can influence and develop these capacities. We are certainly “irrational”<sup>18</sup> in myriad ways, with countless biases and blindspots. Nevertheless, our rationality, in tandem with the plasticity of our perceptual capacities means that we can render our epistemic capacities more sensitive and accurate

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<sup>17</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, no. 1 (2006): 80-95. <https://doi.org/10.1353/epi.0.0005>. 87.

<sup>18</sup> I'll return to this term below.

through the virtuous use of those capacities themselves. Recall from Chapter 3 that Kukla's justification of perception as plastic and cultivable in this manner has to do with the way in which Sellarsian perception is neither *passive* nor *immediate*, at least not to the degree often assumed in traditional epistemology and cognitive science:

Though perception is always receptive, this doesn't mean that it is always immediate. We might have the capacity to see something, but only with work. We may need to draw on our current epistemic resources in novel and creative ways in order to perceive, and in doing so we may incrementally rehabilitate our perceptual practices.<sup>19</sup>

This *possibility*, argues Kukla, opens us up to distinctive epistemic and ethical *responsibilities*. One often speaks in ethics of the idea that ought implies can; in this case, Kukla seems to argue, *can* implies *ought*. This capacity for educable plasticity, they argue, demands the cultivation of distinctive sensitivities:

Given the possibility of cultivating more sensitive, more inclusive perceptual capacities – capacities that allow us to be claimed by more of the reasons that the ontologically objective world can warrant – both ethical and epistemic responsibility demand that we attempt to bridge perceptual divergence through such cultivation, rather than writing off the other as simply mistaken or as trapped in a perspective incommensurable with our own. If my picture of perception is right, then perspectives can indeed license different warrants, but there is no reason to think that such epistemic inaccessibility is necessarily permanent.<sup>20</sup>

Kukla refers to this idea as the “thesis of optimistic plasticity”<sup>21</sup>; the hope that *all* rational agents could be “educated into” a *maximally*, if not quite *universally* inclusive rationality or space of reasons. You may not share such an optimistic view, I am certainly not holding my breath for a universally inclusive space of reasons, but even if we accept the idea as an aspirational north star, such a telos, like the view-from-everywhere, requires extensive and

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<sup>19</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. “Objectivity and Perspective,” 89-90. Though this is basically a Kantian point.

<sup>20</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. “Objectivity and Perspective,” 91.

<sup>21</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. “Objectivity and Perspective,” 92.

disciplined hard work. Given the rehumanizing aspirations of this dissertation, a more inclusive space of reasons would do much to counter the dehumanizing exclusion from Chapter 1. It is Kukla's concept of educatability that makes such optimism *possible*, if not fully justified, so I turn to that feature now.

#### **4.ii | Educatable**

How is educatability distinct from the plasticity discussed in the previous subsection? Plasticity is passive, and non-normative. Put simply, it is the idea that our perceptual skills can shift and transform over time. Educatability, by contrast, makes the case that we can (actively and autonomously rather than passively and heteronomously) *improve*. So to put the distinction very succinctly: plasticity says our perceptual capacities can change, educatability says they can change for the better in response to our own critical reflectivity on the world and the other subjects in it. The latter is a much bolder claim because it not only asserts that we can purposefully shape the direction of the perceptual development, but also that we can evaluate the legitimacy or make a normative evaluation of the transformation. Furthermore, plasticity is more passive, and while it implies the possibility for change, such change would be arbitrary and contingent (as well as heteronomous as just mentioned.) Educatability means that we can not only improve those capacities, but that improvement is, at least in part, within our own control and thus there is a real possibility for epistemic *virtue* and its cultivation.<sup>22</sup> As Kukla argues:

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<sup>22</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 87.

Indeed, it now looks as though a key element of epistemic responsibility is the ongoing cultivation of our perceptual capacities; being a responsible observer requires not just using our perceptual capacities to look carefully and fairly at the evidence, but working to develop these capacities so as to render our perceptual apparatus more sensitive and accurate. We need to take it as an epistemic failure and not just a piece of bad luck if we are unable to access warrant that others seem able to access...It is not fully under our control what we can learn to see, but there is also no reason why we must leave the direction of this development entirely up to chance. Yet taking responsibility for rectifying deficits in our perceptual capacities is no trivial task. Mere observational vigilance will not do the trick, since we are seeking to fix the very perceptual capacities we exercise during such vigilance.<sup>23</sup>

My goal in this chapter is to highlight some of the concrete ways in which we can take on this responsibility in our own lives, while acknowledging how very difficult and serious this endeavor can be. In many ways, my interventions here can be generally understood as seeking to responsibly counteract our temptations toward knowingness (though there are positive, not just avoidant virtues I will flesh out as well). With this goal in view, the first step is the cultivation of a specific kind of epistemic humility.

#### **4.iii | Epistemic Humility**

While the suggestion that epistemic humility can counter knowingness is perhaps excessively obvious, I will be complicating and fleshing out the specifics of the idea in later sections. After all, not *all* manifestations of epistemic humility are equally virtuous. Nevertheless, the point still bears articulation here: we cannot hope to counter the various disasters that knowingness (of moral conflict in particular) engenders if we are unwilling to open ourselves up to a critical, self-reflective epistemic humility. As Kukla acknowledges:

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<sup>23</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 88.

We can recognize the limitations of our perceptual capacities and draw upon other resources in order to hone these capacities...In order to accept and benefit from this assistance, though, we first need enough humility to acknowledge that perception is a contingently variable capacity, and that in some domains, others are well equipped to educate us if we let them. This sometimes requires us to make a provisional metacommitment to trusting in someone else's perceptual capacities.<sup>24</sup>

The question of epistemic trust is one that I will return to in the section on Fricker below. Whom (or what) to trust—and under what circumstances—is so central to our epistemic activity it can often fade into the background when not loudly challenged by unexpected events or other individuals. Nevertheless, due to the expansive distribution of epistemic labor that characterizes our social reality, it is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Often, the idea of whom to trust, whom to look to for guidance, is couched in reductive terms of institutionally acknowledged expertise: “we trust music critics to teach us how to listen to music and doctors to teach us how to look at diagnostic images...We look to various kinds of experts to help us form beliefs, set goals, develop preferences, and make choices.”<sup>25</sup> While such experts are often “intertwined with the larger structure of social institutions”<sup>26</sup> there are good reasons to practice active discernment, neither accepting wholesale the views of the stamped mainstream authorities, nor shutting out those who have been marginalized to epistemic backwaters. As many standpoint epistemologists have pointed out, the latter has often meant that vital information is missed, lost, or silenced. It should be noted, however, that (unsurprisingly) trust in institutions in the United States is at historic<sup>27</sup> lows. The more our institutions continue to lose the public's trust, the more chaotic will be the testimonial

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<sup>24</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 89.

<sup>25</sup> Kukla, Rebecca. "Objectivity and Perspective," 89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lydia Saad, "Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues," *Gallup News*, July 6, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508169/historically-low-faith-institutions-continues.aspx>.

landscape, and the more need we will have for epistemic virtues of discernment, active vigilance and constant reassessment.

The crucial point is that we will need not only to inculcate our skills of perception for our personal phronetic practice; we also need these skills in order to responsibly choose whom to offload some of that work onto. Much of our polarization can be understood in terms of whom we trust or view with skepticism, derision, or as worthy of “cancellation.” Epistemic humility, executed in the right ways, can help us avoid overlooking the kinds of crucial information that might otherwise be overlooked or shut out; whether that comes from the environment or the other knowers within that environment. At the same time, epistemic humility also requires *vulnerability* and as such we want to be careful in how we manifest this virtue. Vulnerability too can cause us harm.

This is just one area where the enactive constructivist approach can assist. In thinking about our attunement to the world, we would do well to evoke not just the algorithmic rule following of institutional expertise and authority, but rely instead on our perceptive and critically reflective capacities to manifest an autopoietically responsive and actively engaged orientation toward the world. Enactive epistemic humility, then, does not entail a merely skeptical attunement to one’s own beliefs. Rather, it entails the relentlessly questioning openness to the “outside” world, discerning openness and adaptive conversation with that which is outside ourselves. To further flesh this out I want to first highlight some key barriers which get in the way of epistemic virtue and humility, and which, I will argue, can helpfully inform our understanding of what the virtuous Aristotelian mean of epistemic humility ought to look like.

## 5 | FRICKER

There are four central concepts that I want to bring in here from Miranda Fricker's monograph *Epistemic Injustice*<sup>28</sup>: testimonial and hermeneutic injustice (the two sub genres which make up epistemic injustice), epistemic erosion, and epistemic objectification. While they are not all vices in a straightforward sense, they do serve as effective foils for some of the moral-epistemic virtues for which I will be advocating.

### 5.i | Hermeneutic Injustice

Hermeneutic injustice describes situations in which an epistemic agent is unable to correctly, or properly, or successfully interpret their life experiences because of some paucity of conceptual resources. These lacunae can either be due to a lack of *personal* knowledge and understanding or a *universal* lack of adequate concepts to actually explain the experience. One example of the latter which she explores is the difficulty women had in conveying more “subtle” experiences of sexual harassment—especially those that involved no physical altercation—before the idea of sexual harassment “existed” as a defined concept. These women not only recounted high levels of emotional anguish, but also an actual *inability* to make sense of the experience to themselves, nevermind communicate it effectively to others. This hermeneutic type of epistemic injustice can also lead to additional, practical difficulties and injustices: individuals in such a circumstance may be viewed as irrational, inarticulate, or delusional on the basis of their inability to convey the experience. Certainly it will make it almost impossible to improve their situation, and they may even suffer further injustices as

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<sup>28</sup> Miranda Fricker. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

a result of the way in which such experiences can also lower their epistemic status from the perspective of others as well as themselves. This in turn means an increased probability that they will be excluded from communal processes of knowledge-creation (and knowledge-*correction*) in the future, which in turn exacerbates all kinds of epistemic injustice.

How then does or *ought* hermeneutic injustice inform my own project and the sorts of virtues we need to cultivate? First, to whatever extent there are any universally human hermeneutic lacunae, that state of affairs alone ought to inspire a certain level of humility as well as *curiosity*. Insofar as there are undoubtedly more localized, unevenly distributed hermeneutic lacunae as well—lacunae that we can ameliorate through teaching and learning—this ought to affect our orientation towards the other subjects we might otherwise discount as having nothing to offer us (epistemically or otherwise). I am certainly not arguing that mere *awareness* that such lacunae must exist, just beyond our field of moral-epistemic vision will effectively inspire all individuals to stop what they are doing and hop to this project. While there certainly are selfish reasons for seeking out and acquiring for ourselves new and better hermeneutical resources (they are *resources* afterall), I am not so naive as to claim that any and every person will automatically be convinced to engage in the difficult work demanded by this realization. I would, however, insist that for those of us concerned with our being in the world, hermeneutic lacunae of various sorts throw down gauntlets of corresponding sorts.

Before moving on, it is important to note that I am not exclusively concerned with the lack of hermeneutic resources that result from *systemic injustices*, the way that Fricker is. There can be critical hermeneutic lacunae that result from any number of innocent (not systemic injustice) background situations. There can also be hermeneutic lacunae that result

from new technology, circumstances, and/or fluctuating historical dynamics. There can also be what one might call a mere *hermeneutical disconnect*, where people talk past each other while using the same words. Any of these events might represent a relatively innocent state of affairs (no injustice per se systemic or otherwise), but when such lacunae persist, it is generally the result of a certain level of (culpable) knowingness. This knowingness might take the form of passively resting on our epistemic laurels, as a general orientation toward the world and the hermeneutic resources on which we might be missing out. It might also, or instead, involve *active disdain* for those who hold differing views as a result of their access to those hermeneutic resources which are as of yet out of our reach.

Failure to cultivate the kinds of virtues which will allow us access to new and better hermeneutical resources will not only hamper our ability to make sense of our own experiences or be plastic in the appropriate way. It may additionally hinder us from understanding the value that someone else's perspective could hold for our own selfish projects. The idea of hermeneutic resources can also articulate ways in which we might fail to understand how another person's differing viewpoint might not in fact be due to inability (hopeless stupidity) or unwillingness (bad faith trolliness)<sup>29</sup> but instead to a lack of experiential hermeneutic resources that we or they do not yet have access to, or have not yet encountered in a meaningful way. Finally, it is worth noting how hermeneutic injustice highlights a very enactive constructivist point concerning how complicated perception and understanding of "what is" can be. As I explained earlier, one of the reasons that hermeneutic resources are so essential (and therefore have the potential to engender injustice in the first place) is due to the inherently interpretive nature of human knowing. Hermeneutic

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<sup>29</sup> I return to these ideas at the end of the chapter.

resources and lacunae would not be nearly so important or relevant if enactive ideas of sense-making were not so central to the individual's navigation through—and engagement with—the world. With these points in view, I would therefore like to propose my own (moral-)epistemic virtue of enactive hermeneutic humility.

## **5.ii | Hermeneutic Humility**

This virtue would involve/encompass the following five features or sub-virtues. *First*, hermeneutic humility requires acknowledging the complicated nature of hermeneutic inquiry as a central strand in nearly all modes of knowing. This includes, moreover, recognition of the role which localized experience can play in granting other individuals (and ourselves) unique access to particular hermeneutic resources; followed by the related implications for what this means regarding our own educability as well as those of others. *Second*, hermeneutic humility requires a certain baseline of enactive-style openness (plasticity) to the world, its inhabitants and their hermeneutical resources. It is important, however, that such openness and receptivity does not devolve into uncritical absorption: the autopoietic membrane still has critical discernment to perform. *Third*, hermeneutic humility requires significant levels of patience and generosity for sharing our own hermeneutical resources with others. This means that we must not only work to notice when individuals or groups seem to be struggling to understand or communicate their experience or perspective effectively, we must also (in sustainable moderation) take the time to work with them to potentially construct new hermeneutic resources, rather than assuming that they are unwilling or incapable of engaging. *Fourth* is what I term epistemic allyship. Not only should we actively seek out hermeneutic resources and insights from the marginalized backwaters,

we should also try to alleviate some of the excess epistemic burdens which fall to those epistemically marginalized groups in explaining experiences which are unfamiliar to the mainstream (LGBTQIA individuals are just one such group). Finally, hermeneutic humility calls for a sustainable baseline of good faith effort to work with others to pool our existing epistemic resources to generate the necessary responses to new problems which confront humanity as a whole (AI would be just one example of such a novel problem for which we are collectively in need of new tools).

### **5.iii | Testimonial Injustice**

Whereas hermeneutical injustice highlights ways in which conceptual resources in the collective social imaginary may be lacking, testimonial injustice, as one might expect, delineates the ways in which an individual is not valued or respected as an equal or worthy member of their epistemic community. Specifically, it highlights how this lack of respect or active prejudice results in an individual's testimony<sup>30</sup> not being taken seriously, or potentially not being "heard" at all. Fricker describes the second type of epistemic injustice as an instance where a "hearer" underestimates the reliability or trustworthiness of another's testimony on the grounds of inaccurate prejudice, or what she calls "prejudicial dysfunction" which can consist in a credibility excess or deficit (but usually deficit).<sup>31</sup> Fricker additionally distinguishes between *incidental* as opposed to *systematic* testimonial injustice. The former indicates less moral culpability, if any, on the part of the "hearer" and could result

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<sup>30</sup> Testimony in the ordinary everyday sense, not the courtroom, legal sense.

<sup>31</sup> "Broadly speaking, prejudicial dysfunction in testimonial practice can be of two kinds. Either the prejudice results in the speaker's receiving more credibility than she otherwise would have—a credibility excess—or it results in her receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have—a credibility deficit." Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.

from a mistake as banal as thinking someone was an expert in William Blake instead of William Faulkner, and thereby mis-assessing the probable validity of a surprising claim they make, on those grounds. *Systematic* testimonial injustice, by contrast, involves a credibility miscalculation as the result of some common prejudice (like race, class, or gender) that is connected with broader social injustices:

Systematic testimonial injustices, then, are produced not by prejudice simpliciter, but specifically by those prejudices that ‘track’ the subject through different dimensions of social activity—economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious, and so on. Being subject to a tracker prejudice renders one susceptible not only to testimonial injustice but to a gamut of different injustices, and so when such a prejudice generates a testimonial injustice, that injustice is systematically connected with other kinds of actual or potential injustice.<sup>32</sup>

Fricker is here focused on social identity prejudice. This is definitely an issue for the kinds of epistemic virtue I am hoping to highlight, however, I also want to highlight the ways in which it is not necessarily identity prejudice in the traditional sense (against gender, race etc.) that is at issue in our dehumanizing age. New social categories such as MAGAt (maggot), libtard, anti-vaxxer, Karen, boomer, or Bernie bro are being added to the traditional prejudices of race, class, gender, etc. Even just the identity of considering oneself religious (regardless of the specific religion) or, depending on the social circle, not religious, has become its own social-epistemic albatross. Admittedly, these more ideological identities are indeed more likely to inflect an individual’s knowledge or beliefs in real and relevant ways, thus complicating accusations of stereotyping and injustice. Nevertheless, they create problems for both hearer and testifier if these incidental identities are allowed to blot out or fully encapsulate the testimonial value of the individual in a given public square debate.

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<sup>32</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 27.

This one-strike policy can be helpfully understood, I think, as an issue of *knowingness*. Of late in particular, if someone says even just one thing we disagree with (such as “I voted for Trump”), there is a taken for granted assumption that we are consequently justified in disregarding just about anything else they might say. We already “know” that they have nothing to offer us (weak moral exclusion qua subject). We might even (claim to) “know” that they are in fact a malicious “deplorable”<sup>33</sup> beyond repair and worthy of actual silencing (strong sense of moral-exclusion-qua subject). We then justify ourselves in our dismissal of the individual, and rest easy in our knowingness because we use one, easily digestible and ascertainable piece of information about an individual to then “know” everything “worth” knowing about them (a dehumanizing knowingness leap). I would argue that such a move is rarely if ever justifiable, but it is often at least *understandable* insofar as figuring out whom to trust is one of the most labor intensive aspects of our epistemic life. And as I hope was evident in the discussion of knowingness above, it can be motivated as easily by the less interesting problem of laziness as it can by the sort of aggressive, hateful, defensiveness that Lear focuses on in his Oedipus examples. But regardless of motivation—though of course motivation is sometimes *very* important—we do need to worry about what this kind of knowingness does to ourselves and our societies. As I will lay out in the following subsections on epistemic erosion and objectification, *knowingness* paired with *hermeneutic lacunae* and *testimonial malpractice* can exacerbate the problems of dehumanizing moral exclusion in response to moral conflict that motivate my project as a whole and thus set the final stage for the positive virtues I want to advocate as a part of my own virtue framework.

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<sup>33</sup> Domenico Montanaro, “Hillary Clinton's 'Basket Of Deplorables,' In Full Context Of This Ugly Campaign,” *NPR*, September 10, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/10/493427601/hillary-clintons-basket-of-deplorables-in-full-context-of-this-ugly-campaign>

## 5.iv | Epistemic Erosion

Fricker's concept of epistemic erosion highlights ways in which epistemic injustices can lead, over time, to an *erosion of actual personhood*, insofar as it degrades one's status as a knower. However, it can also undermine one's status qua moral subject (moral deliberator/knower).

Fricker frames her approach to epistemic erosion mainly in terms of confidence:

Many definitions and conceptions of knowledge cast some sort of epistemic confidence as a condition of knowledge, whether it comes in as part of the belief condition or as part of a justification condition...The significance for the present discussion is that, on any confidence-including conception of knowledge, the implications for someone who meets with persistent testimonial injustice are grim: not only is he repeatedly subject to the intrinsic epistemic insult that is the primary injustice, but where this persistent intellectual undermining causes him to lose confidence in his beliefs and/or his justification for them, he literally loses knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

While Fricker is more concerned with how epistemic malpractice degrades the victims of testimonial injustice, we should also be concerned with how *perpetrators* of epistemic injustice<sup>35</sup> and vice can themselves be degraded as knowers. Thinking in terms of Korsgaard's constitutional model, even if we are not on the receiving end of the injustice or malpractice, our epistemic selfhood can also be eroded insofar as they fail to embody the Kantian principles of practical reason. The victim of testimonial injustice, however, is doubly wronged. As a result, the speaker is excluded from participating in the communal creation of knowledge and, in Kantian language, barely even treated as an adequate means to an end, nevermind as an end in themselves. Their experiences, perspectives, and values are

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<sup>34</sup> Fricker, Miranda, 'Original Significances: The Wrong Revisited', *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, 2007; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Sept. 2007), <https://doi-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.003.0007>, accessed 18 Jan. 2024.

<sup>35</sup> One could consider moral exclusion qua subject to be a form of moral-epistemic injustice.

dismissed as worthless, which in turn can perpetuate all sorts of practical injustices such as false imprisonment, unfair retribution, and unjustified socio-economic stagnation. Testimonial injustice is thus also, I would argue, a central issue in the forces of dehumanization that are running rampant in the current polarized age. This last issue serves as a helpful segue into a second concern arising from testimonial injustice: that of “epistemic objectification.”

## 5.v | Epistemic Objectification

Epistemic objectification occurs when the speaker is not treated as an active, generative source of knowledge, but rather as a mere object from which information may or may not be extractable. In some ways, then, as Fricker herself points out, the harm is almost a Kantian failure of adequate respect.<sup>36</sup>

The sort of epistemic objectification that we are concerned with is the cognitive counterpart to Kant's practical rationality conception of what constitutes immoral treatment of another person—treating them in a way that denies or undermines their status as a rational agent. In testimonial injustice, one person undermines another's status as a subject of knowledge; in Kant's conception of immorality, one person undermines another's status as rational agent. Obviously the two sorts of wrong are closely intertwined...We might say that both picture the wrongdoer as engaged in an ontological violation of another person—the violation involved in treating them as if they were not (or not fully) a rational being, practically or cognitively conceived.<sup>37</sup>

As you can see, this distinction organically maps onto Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative which distinguishes between treating someone as an *end in themselves* as opposed to merely treating them as a mere *means to your own ends*. The

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<sup>36</sup> Once again, this fits elegantly with a Korsgaardian framework

<sup>37</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 134.

epistemic version of this latter treatment is helpful for thinking through my own project insofar as such treatment amounts to a serious sort of dehumanization. Treating someone as a means to one's own epistemic ends—especially when those ends are themselves integral to broader socio-cultural dynamics of one kind or another—is wholly distinct from recognizing the other as a genuine source from which you might learn, i.e. treating them as an epistemic end in themselves.

The dehumanizing polarization we are experiencing currently in our societies is not just a form of epistemic Kantian malpractice, but also, I would argue, another phenomenon rooted in the problem of *knowingness*: we learn one piece of information about a person—that they are shaking their umbrella or that they voted for Trump—and instead of just surmising, “it is wet outside,” (“they voted for Trump”) we fabricate an entire narrative of their (lack of) epistemic personhood (they are stupid, bigoted, racist,) and cease to give a fig what they think or know about anything else. In so doing, we reduce their epistemic humanity to this one single piece of (admittedly “true”) information we have about them. Fricker at one point describes testimonial injustice as akin to relegating a person “to the same epistemic status as a felled tree whose age one might glean from the number of rings.”<sup>38</sup> This is an excellent metaphor for what Lear critiqued in Oedipus’ knowingness. Too often we take this “felled-tree approach” to one another. Our knowingness blots out any curiosity one might otherwise expect surrounding surprising pieces of information one encounters in the world. Rather than be intrigued—‘how could such a divergent perspective exist in my little corner of the world?’—we instead resort to the unchallenging comfort of knowingness. The price we pay for this comfort is our fellow human beings’ subjectivity (and our own if we

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<sup>38</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 133.

subscribe to a constitutional model). Epistemic objectification is thus just one way in which the epistemic entrenchment of polarized politics is both a source and product of the type of dehumanization motivating my entire project.

This does not, however, mean that there are no circumstances in which a subject may be distrusted or disbelieved. As Fricker acknowledges,

There is neither epistemic nor ethical fault in judging someone, without prejudice, to be untrustworthy if they are indeed untrustworthy—on the contrary, there is epistemic merit in it. No doubt we should give some ethical weight to the fact that judging someone untrustworthy does *pro tem* strip them of their function as an informant and confine them to functioning merely as a source of information—perhaps, for instance, we have an ethical obligation not to over-react to a one-off moment of untrustworthiness, never trusting them again about anything—but other things being equal, there is no wrong done here. Some forms of epistemic objectification, then, are ethically acceptable, not to mention epistemically meritorious.<sup>39</sup>

Applying this to the issues of dehumanization raised in Chapter 1, there are situations in which moral (as well as epistemic) exclusion are warranted; there are cases wherein *well-founded* distrust is in fact necessary a virtuous refusal to relent to radical (moral) relativism. It is when the distrust is based on laziness, knowingness, prejudice or some other epistemic malpractice,<sup>40</sup> that it risks bleeding over into problematic objectification (and dehumanization). Thus, there are still certainly cases where we are correct and just in distrusting someone or what they have to say. Indeed, learning whom (or what) to trust and distrust is one of the most labor intensive and most important skills we develop as subjects. In epistemic and moral exclusion, the problem arises in reductive (over)reaction: when we allow one small feature (of their identity or values etc) to stand in for their *whole epistemic*

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<sup>39</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, as Fricker alludes to, when we overreact and never trust them about anything else either ever again.

*and/or moral worth*. Such an overreaction would count as a paradigmatic manifestation of the objectifying impulses of knowingness (Oedipus' leaping) and unjustifiable moral-exclusion-qua subject.

Returning to the arguments of previous chapters (particularly Chapter 4), you will recall a similar concern and move away from such objectification of the external world. One of my main critiques of the mechanistic, computational approaches to cognition was in many ways the reductive approach which Fricker condemns here as well. The enactive approach helps us overcome the (knowing) temptation to view reality itself as some passive object from which we must simply absorb the relevant facts. That is to say, knowingness leads us to objectify reality itself (and perhaps even ourselves) in problematic and concerning ways. In contrast to this (dehumanizing) view, the enactivists emphasize the actively responsive, and adaptively conversational nature of virtuous epistemic engagement, which does not reduce the external environment (including the other subjects therein) to some passively exploitable resource. In the following section, I will weave together the above concepts from Fricker and Kukla with my own enactive constructivist framework to articulate a set of virtues which I believe can help us counter knowingness and think through a starting point for what epistemic virtue "looks like" in a dehumanizing age.

## **6 | THE VIRTUES CALLED FOR BY ENACTIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM**

As I emphasized in Chapter 4, the external environment to which the knowing self is autopoietically adaptive and responsive includes other subjects as well as their activities and other events which transpire. We as epistemic agents are neither so ascetically pure and passive as the mechanists and aperspectivalists would wish, nor are we so radically

hermetically sealed and solitary in our epistemic endeavors as they (and the relativists) would like to think. Sense-making is an inherently co-operative affair; one in which we must take an active and adaptive approach. The former is required so as not to objectify ourselves, the latter so that we do not problematically objectify others or the external epistemic environment. I elaborate on these ideas and some additional virtues in the following subsections.

### **6.i | Enactive Hermeneutic Humility**

The particular type of epistemic humility I am seeking to advocate for here is very much inspired by core tenets of the enactive approach I laid out in Chapter 4, though it can also be thought of in Aristotelian terms. As with most virtues, (epistemic) humility must achieve a mean between extremes: if it is to count as a virtue it must be directed at the right ends, be executed in the proper way, at the right time, to the right degree, etc. Too little epistemic humility, and we find ourselves wrapped up in a suffocating shroud of knowingness, too much humility and we will toss about on the buffets of other people's (bad) ideas, or hover through life, paralyzed by uncertainty. As I mentioned in the previous section, trust is important here; the process of discerning whom to turn to, whose special insights to lean on in diverse situations, is its own complex skill if not also an epistemic virtue unto itself. As a way to zero in on this appropriate balance I will return here to the concepts of humility which I introduced in sections 4.iii and 5.ii. Inspired in part by the challenges posed by hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutic<sup>41</sup> humility starts with the recognition that the world is

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<sup>41</sup> Hermeneutic is being used in the Frickerian sense of recognizing the need for active interpretation of experience and the acknowledgment that we do not always have sufficient conceptual and/or experiential resources to best interpret certain aspects of reality.

dynamic and complex. This not only means that we need to actively interpret (sense-make), and adaptively interact with reality, it also indicates that the existing collection of concepts percolating in the social imaginary is not likely to be wholly adequate to many complex situations, normatively valenced ones least of all. Moreover, because the world is also *dynamic*, and *constantly changing*, new and different tools will forever need to be brought to bear in innovative and creative ways in order to meet the (evolving) moment.

Perceiving reality is hard, but the various facets of hermeneutic humility introduced earlier can, I think, help us grapple with the myriad challenges with which this problem presents us. It does so in the first place, by requiring us to (first) acknowledge the complicated nature of hermeneutic inquiry and reflection as central strands in nearly all modes of knowing, and thus (secondly) to cultivate a certain baseline of enactively informed Kuklian plasticity in the form of critical openness to the world, its inhabitants and their hermeneutical resources. Third, hermeneutic humility helps us perceive better through its mandates of (sustainable levels of) patience and generosity for sharing our own hermeneutical resources with others, and learning from them in turn. This, you will recall, leads directly to the fourth feature, epistemic allyship: alleviating some of the excess epistemic burdens which fall to those epistemically marginalized groups in explaining experiences which are unfamiliar to the mainstream (LGBTQIA individuals being just one such group). This idea is crucial, so I return to it and elaborate upon it in Section 6.vi. Finally, hermeneutic humility calls for a sustainable baseline of good faith effort to work with others to pool our existing epistemic resources to successfully grapple with new problems. If the possibility of hermeneutical injustice requires its own special hermeneutical humility, the threat of testimonial injustice too requires its own sub-virtues. There are a few virtues I will

be putting forward in this regard, the next of which helps avoid both hermeneutical *and* testimonial injustice—a virtue which I describe as pursuing (beneficially) uncomfortable friendships.

## 6.ii | Uncomfortable Friendships

As discussed above, one of the most important sources of insight and informative resistance in that dynamically co-enacted external world is *other people*, who can most effectively break through the calcification of knowingness. As I have repeatedly noted, it goes without saying that the telic view-from-everywhere is not achievable by a single individual in any meaningful sense: It is crucially a *collective* project. The world of human knowers can indeed make a small but meaningful step in the direction of that north star by cultivating epistemic virtue in ourselves, and lending a hand, a thought, a concept, to others in their endeavors. Because sense-making is social, we need sufficient humility to recognize when someone else can be the one to lend a hand *to us*. This, of course, means that we must avoid engaging in testimonial injustice when someone with whom we disagree is speaking to us. But avoidance of vice alone is insufficient for virtue: We may need to do much more than merely avoid perpetrating injustice. We must also, as possible, actively seek out and befriend (at least epistemically) the sorts of individuals who can *challenge* and *augment* our understanding, even if and when we do not perceive any lacunae in that understanding. In other words, if we are to remake and expand our epistemic perspectives, we must curate a *biodiverse epistemic community* for ourselves. These individuals need not be “enemies” with whom we disagree on everything, but it is important that we surround ourselves and engage with individuals who can challenge our sedentary beliefs, insofar as they possess wildly different

personal histories and experiences from our own. There are so many wondrous and terrifying corners of the universe; a single human life is wholly insufficient to know them all. To engage autopoietically with all the many environments which could threaten, enlighten, and instruct us, we would do well to reciprocally outsource some of that labor.

Thinking along similar lines (though for somewhat different reasons), Kukla argued that “we need to recognize it as a moral problem, if we have no intimate contact with anyone who is disabled, or poor, or transgendered.”<sup>42</sup> I would go further to argue that it is a moral and epistemic problem if we surround ourselves with only those who already agree with us, those whose holistic worldviews too fully overlap with our own. This virtue, however, brings with it a very real risk of perpetrating a different type of epistemic objectification; of using other individuals (often already marginalized, vulnerable individuals) as mere *means* for our own ends of epistemic self-improvement. As Kukla puts it,

This does not mean that we should awkwardly force intimate ties into existence in an effort to check off items on a laundry list of identities. To do this would be to forge a usurious relationship with an other—usually an other marked by ‘difference’—for the purposes of one’s own moral edification. Theorists of colonialism, gender, and race have notoriously argued for the problematic moral status of such relationships. Instead, we need to take engaged responsibility for the contours of the social situations and the lived patterns in which we find ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

Although Kukla is promoting this virtue in the pursuit of overcoming specifically moral blindness, this active, friend-making habit is, I would argue, crucial to *all kinds* of perception. Kukla and I also share a concern here for the objectifying tendencies of this type of moral-epistemic “outsourcing.” In the following section, therefore, I sketch out a crucial complementing virtue that not only is expedient to my broader project of *rehumanizing* our

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<sup>42</sup> Kukla, “Attention and Blindness,” 341.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

moral-epistemic processes, but which is also effective as an antidote to epistemic objectification of the other in particular.

### **6.iii | Rehumanizing The “Other”**

Recalling Fricker’s idea of epistemic objectification and the ways in which social stereotypes in the collective social imaginary can cause us to epistemically objectify an individual in our quotidian knowledge work—by treating them as *merely* a source of information—I want to turn now to put forward a different way of thinking about (and avoiding) this problematic type of objectification, of others (in this section) and ourselves (the next section). I am returning here to Korsgaard’s concept of practical identity, however, it is important to emphasize that while I am making the following proposals with the aid of her terminology these are not ideas which she herself has explored or endorsed. My basic prescription is this: avoid reducing another human being down to “bearer-of-a-single-practical-identity.” If the conversation, or disagreement, or interaction in question is particularly related to a specific practical identity (perhaps the issue is vaccines and they are an anti-vaxxer or the issue of abortion and they are pro-life Catholic) it can be understandably tempting to get tunnel vision around the single practical identity that is most directly connected to the issue at hand, and consequently boil down the individual to that one feature. This, however, is a dangerously reductive and objectifying move. It is dangerous both insofar as it is quintessentially dehumanizing, but also insofar as it undermines any impetus to deeper understanding, collective phronesis or productive dialogue (recall my table from Chapter 1). Indeed, it is even problematic from the selfish perspective of the one doing the dehumanizing

insofar as they are bound to miss out on other insights that might otherwise have benefited them in any number of current or future epistemic endeavors.

There is also a way in which this failure or vice enables us to *blame the identity itself* for the belief we find abhorrent which in turn has two additional dehumanizing and objectifying effects: First, by assuming a *causal link* between the identity and the belief;<sup>44</sup> and a *passively automatic* rather than self-reflective and autopoietically adaptive link at that, it is nearly impossible to avoid the implication that *dialogue will be futile*. In other words it lubricates the slide from existence of moral conflict → dehumanizing assessment from the table in Chapter 1. It is worth noting the tentacles of knowingness wrapping around us here as well. Insofar as we link identity with a belief in this way, we claim to (already) “know” that there can be *no good (or at least understandable) reasons* for the belief. As a result, we contentedly blame it on a (deplorable) identity, a “too-far-goneness” and move on. Like Lear’s reading of Oedipus, we take it for granted that we already know everything about their reasons, that we already have the full picture in view, that there is nothing they can possibly contribute to our understanding of them, or the world—at least in any respect that we care about. This may indeed sometimes be the case—I will address, later on, the issue of bad faith actors, trolls, etc.—I am simply arguing that many more are worthy of epistemic humanity than we currently realize, in part because of the mechanistic understanding of reason (perception and identity) with which we are often unconsciously operating. And even in such cases where we make every concerted effort and still deem further conversation to be a poor

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<sup>44</sup> This relates importantly with my critique of Korsgaard’s inability to account for the many (contradicting) manifestations which a single practical identity can take.

use of our own time, we can and should refuse the temptation of reducing that individual to the single belief-identity in question.

For indeed, this is the second degrading effect: by reducing the individual to just that one practical identity alone, we reduce their humanity itself. This type of dehumanizing reductionism can occur when we find out an identity of a person (being Catholic) but also when we find out something they believe (anti-abortion). While such a belief can indeed sometimes constitute a practical identity for someone, it can also (as a consequence) serve as an inaccurately reductive identity when the individual becomes—in our eyes—that one belief identity and nothing more. There is, in such a case, no productive interrogability to be explored, no reason to pursue further understanding or even recognition that the individual is more than this one practical identity or belief: nothing is left but a dead end of contempt, disdain, and possibly even fear. This is why it is so important to integrate the more enactive understanding of knowledge building and the more perspectival understanding of objectivity (the view from everywhere) that I advocated for in the last chapter. Not only do these nuances give us a better understanding of how a given identity might manifest in wildly divergent ways, they also keep in view the ways in which our beliefs, moral choices, and practical identities themselves remain interrogable, responsive to critical (self-)reflection, non-deterministic and generally open to improvement (plastic and educatable in Kukla's terms). Thus, in some ways, this virtue can be understood as a cultivation of *unknowingness* vis à vis other people: avoiding the tempting position according to which there are not only no other viewpoints which might benefit one's overall understanding, but also that a certain type or types of person are categorically not capable of being a source of that new knowledge.

Put in Fricker's terms, then, we should avoid objectifying an individual into a *mere* holder of a belief or identity, and instead keep in view the idea that there *are* reasons—potentially bad, but nevertheless interrogable, changeable reasons—for whatever it is that they believe, or the practical identities they have come to espouse. We must also avoid perpetrating testimonial injustice against their other identities (and the individual as a whole) on account of our prejudice against *one* of their identities. We must in other words, not allow one identity prejudice to bleed over into discounting their perspective on every topic as a result. This would be a paradigmatic case of the overreaction discussed previously. This vice has gained increasing popularity in the U.S. in the years since Trump entered national politics, and was exacerbated in the pandemic vaccine debates and the various anti-woke wars which have since been ginned up for public consumption during quieter moments. But these directives are not meant to imply that we must agree with individuals, or come to espouse their views, only that we seek to understand them for what they truly are. Once again, in other words, these suggestions are offered in the context of *seeing better*; perceiving more fully. While the view from everywhere will never, strictly speaking, be possible to achieve, we can come closer by pooling resources and learning from others. This is only possible if we keep their whole personhood in view. While this section has been focused on ways in which we can and must avoid reductively dehumanizing or objectifying “*the other*” (qua subject) I turn, in the next section, to highlight ways in which we also need to avoid objectifying (dehumanizing) *ourselves* (qua subjects).

## 6.iv | Rehumanizing Ourselves

The main suggestion for this section can be captured by the idea of “diversifying your practical identity portfolio.” This is not meant to imply some financialization of our worth, but rather, to emphasize the need to avoid putting all our eggs in too few baskets when it comes to our sense of self (worth), meaning and purpose. While Korsgaard tends to focus on the challenges which can arise when practical identities and their guidance come into *conflict* with one another, I have also sought to highlight the ways in which such tensions are in fact *crucially necessary*, providing grist for the autopoiesis mill by opening up space for new interpretations, insights, and possibilities for engaging with the world. These opportunities will be lost if we allow a single or too few practical identities to rule oligarch-style over our epistemic lives and moral lives. Indeed, I would assert that the polarized moral conflict I described in Chapter 1 is both a catalyst of—and catalyzed by—a disturbing trend toward what I would describe as “practical identity monoculture.” A figure like Trump may be the initial spark, but what follows is a drastic shift into prioritizing a single, notably reactive identity; of being “anti trump” or a so-called “resistance liberal,” (or being a die hard member of the MAGA faithful, as the case may be). Put differently then, there are two types of objectification to be avoided: reducing the other to a single identity we despise, but also reducing *ourselves* to monovalent practical identities; letting one identity alone shape the lens through which we see the world, while we let the others wither on the vine.

A version of this type of monotrait personality is made fun of on the internet by the “not a personality” meme genre which criticizes the likes of the bearded bro whose defining feature is “craft-beer-expert-fanatic” (or for that matter, simply “beard-having-man”), or the 20 year-old sagittarius for whom that is all you really need to know about her. And of course

one need not think back too far in history to remember the hipster anti-identity, defined by all the things they didn't do, like, or participate in. While I would never try or even *want* to deny someone the meaning and joy and community they might find through being a part of a tv show fandom, or their identity as a "dog mom," my argument here is simply about making sure to not let a *single* (practical) identity come to blot out or overpower all the rest. This is all the more important when it comes to identities that explicitly shape how you engage with the world and the people in it. While being an avid plant, or tea, or interior design enthusiast (guilty on all fronts) may not create serious problems for your phronetic agency, allowing any one practical identity (no matter how innocuous or frivolous) to blot out the others is both reductively dehumanizing to yourself and can create further barriers to the already admittedly arduous (moral) perception for which I am advocating.

When it comes to an identity like a political affiliation or any other practical identity that is defined directly *in opposition to* another, or which comes to serve as *the* ideological lens through which you view and make sense of reality (be that resistance liberal, or even feminist, or gun owner, or pro-lifer) our phronetic existence and our humanity itself is significantly hampered, shrunk, ossified. Moreover, our ability to counter the dehumanizing effects of polarization more generally are consequently stifled and undermined insofar as we come to understand the other through a similarly reductive lens. Because our various practical identities are integral to our ability to make sense of our experiences and critically engage with reality, the overemphasis of one identity becomes a hindrance to "seeing" because it artificially roots our particular view-from-somewhere to an *excessively limited and fixed point*. At the risk of repeating myself, the fact that the view from everywhere is a receding horizon, does not justify our setting up a lawn chair at the geodetic pin point where

we just so happen to find ourselves. How then do we work to make sure that our practical identities serve as epistemic helpmates rather than barriers?

What I am advocating, in light of the foregoing points, is to highlight the crucial importance of intentionally developing a carefully curated *hodge podge* of practical identities; coherent enough for the individual to successfully operate in the world (to be an agent in Korsgaard's sense), but dynamic enough to avoid the ossification of static knowingness. I am not only thinking in terms of Korsgaard's classic examples of parent or profession, I am also encouraging us all to go try a new hobby. Cultivating yourself as a quilter, or gardener or even watcher-of-football, can, I believe, help you see better and see more. Learning to quilt will not in itself make you a "better person" but it will, I would argue, stretch you in ways that open up new possibilities for morally relevant perception. Cultivating new practical identities of this sort also puts us in a much better position to encounter more types of other humans (the better friends) who will be able to help us hone our phronetic skills, as laid out in 6.ii.

I am not proposing that we artificially adopt conflicting political or religious identities, or any other actively conflicting practical identities that would undermine our agency and prove more or less untenable. Rather, I am trying to advocate for what I take to be an untapped resource for cultivating the kind of plasticity and enhanced perception I have been discussing throughout this chapter. Such efforts can also counter the destructive and dehumanizing potentials of religious identities in particular which I highlighted in the introduction. Recall that I there described the challenge which religion and religious identities represent for moral exclusion and its dehumanizing effects as multi-pronged. On the one hand religions (and their adherents) are often accused (rightly or wrongly) of

viewing non-followers as unsaved, less-than-humans (dehumanizing non-religious individuals or individuals who follow a different religion).<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, self-described “non-religious” persons often see religious groups and individuals as the exclusive culprits of especially zealous intolerance (designated in my table as excessive moral outrage) and an inability to “live and let live.” Additionally, in terms of the concepts from my original table, critics of religion and the religious will often refer in one way or another to the ways in which religious adherents seem to combine the “identity” motives with the “moral outrage” motives; thereby implicitly endorsing a particularly caustic potential for dehumanization in its adherents. While the “magnitude” of dehumanization in such cases may not exactly be doubled, the fact that “the religious” are claimed to (at least sometimes) have such explicit identitarian understandings of their moral outrage in turn brands them as particularly likely to engage in moral exclusion qua object.

Returning to these issues now, in the context of my proposed virtue of polythetic identity cultivation for which I am advocating, we can reframe this issue not as a problem with religious identity per se, but rather with the monoculture approach to religious identity. That is, we can temper and circumvent the aforementioned dehumanizing impulses associated (rightly or wrongly) with religious identity, not by ostracizing or seeking to excise religious identities either from the public square or altogether, but rather by cultivating other practical identities in tandem with those religious identities. It is not a radically novel idea to say that we need to avoid reducing “the other” to their religious affiliation alone as a basic first step in avoiding dehumanization. What is less often, if ever acknowledged, is that we can also treat ourselves reductively in this same way, and such reductive treatment can

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<sup>45</sup> The suggestions in 6.iii can assist in countering this impulse as well.

dehumanize *ourselves* (and this self-dehumanization can in turn motivate and catalyze the dehumanization of *others*). Rehumanizing ourselves by cultivating a bouquet of dynamically evolving practical identities can enable us to perceive reality (its human and nonhuman features) more and better. Learning to perceive through a polyphonic (though ordered) bricolage of identities, can also serve as a rehumanizing counter force to the relentless dehumanization beating down on us from all sides from society itself; whether in the form of unsustainable work-life balances, news cycles that work tirelessly to generate decisively monovalent characters and storylines, or simply social media algorithms that promote and reward vitriolic interaction above all else. These features of our current reality bring me to the next virtue for which I wish to advocate: what I am referring to as a kind of “epistemic environmentalism” or stewardship.

## 6.v | (Epistemic) Environmental Stewardship

As just alluded to, our societies—local and global<sup>46</sup>—are currently tailored for the exact opposite of everything I have been proposing. Late stage capitalism comes with the charming features of an overworked and overwhelmed populace who must often work multiple, soul-crushing jobs just to afford life’s luxuries like toilet paper and gas. Because permanent capital seems intent on becoming america’s landlord,<sup>47</sup> even those who are able to scrape together the cash to pay for shelter still often remain without a place they can truly call *home*. Under such conditions, who will have the time, energy, or sense of security to risk wasting those

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<sup>46</sup> I focus on the current climate in the U.S. however many if not most of these issues are not unique to the States.

<sup>47</sup> Alcynda Lloyd, “Home flippers are having a tough time selling to regular people who need a mortgage, so they’re offloading their properties to big investors instead,” *Business Insider*, November 8, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/big-investors-purchasing-more-single-family-homes-from-home-flippers-2022-11>

precious resources on the efforts for which I am advocating? Our existing public square institutions are not helping. Legacy media across the political spectrum from MSNBC, NBC, CNBC, to FOX, and OAN among others, have learned that their best chance at keeping the lights on is to drum up enough fear of, and hatred for, our fellow neighbors that we might just tune in, (all while conveniently quashing any critiques of the power forces that are actually to blame for lives being worse). *Social* media is doing no better. Here too, *hate is what pays*. It is fear, outrage, contempt and conflict which drives engagement and thus the bottom line. Many algorithms<sup>48</sup> and “engagement rewards” (retweets, comments, points, clout etc) are predicated on precisely the type of epistemic malpractice embodied by the *opposite* of the virtues which I am promoting. Too often, moreover, the proposed solutions involve a dangerous bandaid approach of limiting free speech. I will turn now to an exploration of why this is so dangerous and what else we might do, before returning to the broader virtues of epistemic environmental stewardship for which I wish to advocate.

There seems to be a rising tide of nonchalance, sometimes verging on antipathy,<sup>49</sup> toward free speech protections in certain very surprising (viz. otherwise justice and freedom-oriented) quarters of the United States currently. While I find this trend deeply concerning, and dangerous for our individual and societal survival, I nevertheless want to begin with why these feelings are particularly understandable in the current social reality. At least three phenomena are, I think, conspiring to provoke this apparent lack of concern around free speech protections.

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<sup>48</sup> Luke, Munn. “Toxic by design, toxic communication and technical architectures,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00550-7>.

<sup>49</sup> In some cases there is even antipathy towards the same protections for lack of which people elsewhere around the world regularly die.

The first of these dynamics is the rise of social media and globalized “speech” networks which have massively expanded the (apparent or actual) reach of even ordinary citizens; and thus their ability to get (potentially toxic) ideas out into the air we all must breathe. This new radius of free speech seems to have alarmed many, either because they actually started hearing what people who disagreed with them have to say, or because they worried that other people would be able to hear it (and be convinced by it) too. Did we really only want to protect speech insofar as it had no practical impact? This cannot be right. Still, it is hard to deny the impression that we have grown disenchanted with free speech precisely when it has become most real and potentially impactful. At the same time, of course, we are still favorable toward our *own* free speech, we tend not to think that *that* should be limited.

This self-excepting, hypocritical move brings us to the second catalyst; how we have come to view “the other.” A dehumanizing combination of fear and contempt for those who do not share our views seems to have proliferated in the wake of the 2016 election and the various culture wars which both preceded it and have followed suit. There seems to be a counterintuitive *disdain* for the other side’s intelligence, hand in hand with a *terror* of what they might be capable of (recall Chapter 1). This dangerous cocktail is ironically leading us to hand over our rights of expression to *precisely* the powers that can do us *real* harm. It would appear as though either hatred is blinding us to the fact that we are cutting off the nose to spite the face here, or we have so dehumanized the other that we are willing to throw away our own protections just so that they will suffer. Either way, short term comfort, and a sense of progress, for long term vulnerability and risk is a trade we seem increasingly eager to make.

This brings me to a third dynamic; we are (understandably) impatient to bend down the arc of justice to where (we believe) it needs to be. There is a moral knowingness here: *we know what the good is*, and have no patience for the slow work of perceiving more angles or convincing another side; especially when those perspectives represent ideas or values we find abhorrent. Moreover, everything else in our lives moves so very quickly, why should the arc of the moral universe not also pick up the pace? Understandable as this impulse seems, I think what we miss here is that the available options are not in fact fast or slow justice, but rather sustainable (but unfortunately slow) justice, *or none at all*. Clamping down on, or attempting to silence the perspectives that we dislike no matter how “despicable” and “wrong” they are, does not defeat them. If anything, it doubles their power and moves the moral universe backward on that arc, while those views we find abhorrent only fester and grow stronger. There appears to be some unshakable sense that we could be living in a moral utopia if only these maliciously blind ones would shut up or disappear. We, like Oedipus, have no patience for second thoughts or second chances when the (moral) truth is “so obvious.” I am admittedly sympathetic to this perspective. There are certainly humans who commit unforgivable actions, who I believe deserve punishment, and there are certainly individuals who harbor what I take to be noxious beliefs, who spew vitriol and who indeed deserve to be roundly criticized. The answer however, I would argue, should be *more speech* not less.

Engaging in epistemic environmental stewardship, does not entail the short term thinking of cancel culture or censorship. It means working against these (admittedly understandable) impulses and instead contriving to cultivate the kinds of epistemic environments in which productive exchange can occur. Not only does this mean fostering

communities where people can achieve the security and energy to foster epistemic virtues, we must also give people the opportunity to autopoietically interact with each others' views. The environment in which the good can flourish is not one in which dissent is never allowed; it is one in which dissent is autopoietically processed. Ironically, I would argue, it is when ideas are denied participation that they become the most powerful and potentially dangerous. Recall from Chapter 5 how the cell must confront those dangers in the external environment, not simply deny their existence. In defending the absolute necessity of free speech, it is, however, exceedingly important to flag the relevance of my earlier remarks concerning allyship and the responsibility of "epistemically (and otherwise) privileged" individuals to take on more of the burden of confronting these potentially dangerous and dehumanizing ideologies.

## **6.vi | Epistemic Allyship**

My last proposed virtue contends that it is the job of the epistemically comfortable to defend those who are put at risk by such harmful perspectives; not by silencing or "canceling", but by taking up some of the neverending labor of autopoietic engagement and discourse. During my "make better friends" section (6.ii), I highlighted ways in which that virtue could excessively burden those who are already burdened by other forms of social or epistemic injustice. For example, the good faith effort to gain a better understanding of the epistemic experience and insights of an immigrant or a trans person can actually make the life of that individual even harder. Such well-intentioned efforts not only have a strong tendency to (unwittingly) *objectify* the very person you are trying to *understand* (and humanize), it can also generate any number of additional practical burdens on them: the time taken to explain

basic concepts over and over again to various individuals, the discomfort or painful reminders that such interactions might dredge up, or embarrassment if such interactions take place in public, to name just a few. One of the virtues I therefore wish to advocate for here, is to not only reach out into the marginalized corners of public discourse, but to try and *take on* some of these burdens once preliminary learning has happened. This becomes all the more necessary when it comes to countering the necessary evils which can arise from protecting free speech.

There is an additional difficulty here as well. Those who are marginalized may not be in a position to safely “befriend” the exact people who would most benefit from such friendship; friendships which in turn could cultivate the kind of environment best suited to collective knowledge building and moral growth. If an individual is aggressively prejudiced against immigrants, or trans people, or black people, members of those groups will not be able to safely engage in the exact sort of epistemic relationships which could have transformative effects. Friendship of any kind (and indeed the very picture of epistemic community I am advocating for) requires *vulnerability*, but one cannot be vulnerable to a world that is still holding daggers. I therefore need to add another caveat to this virtue: look out for one another and work to (non-paternalistically) protect those less secure than oneself. Not only should we find ways to share in the epistemic burdens, we must also be on the lookout to protect those whom these collective projects put at risk. Like most aristotelian-style virtues, however, this virtue can quickly become a vice. The line between alleviating someone else’s burdens and paternalistically *speaking for them* is sometimes vanishingly thin. Even well meant efforts on this front can too easily exacerbate the exact types of epistemic injustice we are trying to overcome. This is no easy tightrope. The key is,

once again, the ongoing, relentlessly responsive and adaptive kind of attunement for which I have been advocating. Always be listening, in other words, never assume that this work is over.

Admittedly, even the most virtuous efforts on our part are no match for the type of epistemic environmental degradation with which we are currently faced. While total cultural transformation is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to acknowledge that personal virtue alone will not be sufficient to overcome the problems I have been addressing. Collective cleanup and ongoing stewardship of the environment in which such virtues (or lack thereof) are being carried out are also necessary. The various degrading forces I have highlighted have been wildly successful in rendering us unable and often unwilling to *see the good; to perceive well*; to grant the proverbial “other” the kind of grace and reciprocal vulnerability which is absolutely crucial to any progress on these fronts. Again I return to an enactive point: we are all needfully free “creations” of our environments. It will by no means be easy, but we can still change; we can exert new virtuous energy in the dynamic co-enaction of self and world. Currently, we are caught on the back foot, often only capable of reactive and defensive engagement. Those of us who are fortunate enough to not be *as* victimized by “environmental” epistemic injustices, have a responsibility, I would argue, to lead the way in taking on the burdens of this important work. But how much burden are we required to take on and at what cost? This brings me to my final section for this chapter, where I will address a couple of lingering questions and concerns, including this one of “excessive burden.”

## 7 | SOME LINGERING CONCERNS

### 7.i | Excessive Burden

There is indeed the possibility that virtue itself, and moral action in general, becomes excessively burdensome and perhaps ceases to be a virtue at all once it becomes uncoupled from the agent's flourishing. The epistemically marginalized are not the only ones at risk of burnout. I have been alluding to the issue of sustainability throughout this chapter as a placeholder for this concern. Put differently, one can ask, what manifestation of these various virtues constitute obligations; baseline requirements, and what counts as supererogatory excellence? Even more importantly, when might these virtues become so overwhelming that they become uncoupled from the agent's own flourishing and hence cease to be virtues at all? In Lear's terms, there is a reason we cling to knowingness, it is a buoy in the sea, a shelter from the storm. True virtues, at least on an Aristotelian model, avoid harmful excess; to be a virtue, the practice must be done in the right way and to the right degree. And like other Aristotelian virtues, these epistemic practices can be overdone to a degree that even harms the more or less epistemically privileged individual. Caring concern can snowball; and the endless goal of perceiving "more" and "better" can quickly reach untenable heights of effort, anguish, or perfectionism.

As a separate concern, I must also acknowledge that truly perceiving, i.e. really understanding the pains, sorrows, and tragedies ongoing at any moment also generates secondary harms in the perceiver; thereby creating a general reality with more suffering rather than less. I am consequently only advocating for the kind of perception that falls within the humble boundaries of our own moral "ripple effect". There are certainly

supererogatory acts via which one can expand that reach, however, what I am not arguing for is the view-from-everywhere that would encompass the world's suffering. Rather, one must ask, what is the view from everywhere for your moral universe of actual agency? Obviously this universe will constantly be shifting, and globalization has certainly expanded the reach of our moral agency and thus also the moral universe in which we must act and which we must also therefore perceive, know, or understand. Thus I want to be clear as I conclude here; even as I push for more virtue, I am not pushing beyond what is humanly possible or reasonably doable at a human scale. In other words, "ought" implies (responsible/sustainable) "can". The details of this balance must, however, be negotiated through our daily acts of ongoing critical self-reflection and deliberation.

## **7.ii | Vice**

On the opposite side from supererogatory virtue burnout, we must also ask about what vice might look like on this picture. I have been advocating for a far more complex and flexible understanding of reason, perception, and objectivity, but this does not mean that there is not still room for failure. As I emphasized in earlier chapters, I have been building a framework that allows for deviance without (ipso facto) defect, but there is certainly still room left for genuinely defective phronetic activity. Although I have sought to complicate Korsgaard's underdeveloped ideas around reason, perception, and objectivity, I do think her constitutional model and its related notion of defect are still well suited and helpful for the notion of epistemic vice on my own proposed framework. For one thing, there are certainly degrees of vice; degrees of deviance from the ideals I have been articulating throughout this chapter. And if we think back to the table in Chapter 1, we can make use of the scale from

weak to strong descriptive assessments that make space for exactly this nuance. As Korsgaard discussed, in the same way that you can swim slowly or sloppily and still be swimming, one can work away at these virtues slowly, or less than fastidiously, without thereby rendering oneself worthy of moral exclusion-qua-subject. Indeed, some implications of the previous section on excessive burden directly emphasize this very need; to make space for grace toward shallow bits of defect.

But what does (inexcusable) failure here look like? And, given my concerns with dehumanization in its many guises, is there any level of epistemic vice that might indeed deconstitute someone to the extent that moral exclusion would be justifiable? A full interrogation of this issue is beyond the scope of the present project, but I do want to disentangle two sets of distinctions that seem promising. The first is the distinction of defect qua knower as opposed to defect qua human. In the case of the former, the individual is not yet able to understand, but they are making good faith efforts. Vice may come into the picture insofar as they are perhaps akratic but not willfully failing to understand. This returns us to the earlier distinction between being unable and or unwilling to engage in exchanges of reasons. Too often we lump these together, taking current inability on the part of the individual as a case of permanent (subhuman) incapacity, or we take such inability as proof of willful refusal as opposed to mere temporarily confused in-the-dark-ness. So long as we keep Kukla's ideas around plasticity and educatability in view, such defect need not become dehumanizing, because it need not indicate a permanent, too-far-goneness. The question of defect qua human, by contrast should only come into question with the second piece of the second distinction in the Table; being consciously unwilling to engage; bricking oneself up in

a tower of knowingness with plenty of arrowslits but no windows. This last concern brings me to the challenge posed by bad faith actors and trolls.

### **7.iii | Bad Faith Actors And Trolls**

One might legitimately raise the objection—which, indeed, is often raised—that too many people are operating in bad faith, and that, consequently, the types of virtues I have been promoting will simply mean playing into the grubby hands of the (internet) troll in its various manifestations. This is indeed a serious objection because in some ways it is a concern that is constitutive of, internal to the dynamics of polarization I have been working to counteract: It is at the dehumanizing heart of the issue that we take other people to not only be unable to engage in respectful exchanges of reasons, but also (worse?), to be unwilling to do so. The internet troll is the case par excellence: it is not so much that they do not or cannot understand you, it is that they derive joy and satisfaction through purposefully misunderstanding you, and also in sometimes purposefully misrepresenting their own position as well as those of others. In other words, their modus operandi is defined by what I would label as disrepresentation and misunderstanding. Bad faith actors of all types, and trolls in particular, do indeed seem to represent a real problem for the types of virtues for which I am advocating. While a full psychological exploration of these archetypes would be a fascinating future project, I can here only point to reasons why I do not see the existence of trolls and their kin as a legitimate excuse for opting out of the virtues of *Enactive Constructivism*, apart from the fact that to do so would be to deny or at least undermine my Kantian-Korsgaardian concerns in favor of a kind of rudimentary consequentialism.

In the same way that we do not see the fact that some people are going to steal as justification or cause to give up on the entire norm of “not stealing”, or to see not-stealing as some supererogatory act of self-sacrifice, the fact that there are trolls does not mean we are justified in giving up on the entire project. And, like stealing, I should note, trolling is often appealing specifically to those who have experienced some related form of prolonged or episodic injustice in a related area; for example the self-described incel who becomes a self-described misogynist. Without lumping trolls together in an objectifying and dehumanizing way, it does seem often to be the case that trolling is *most* or at least *far more* appealing to those who feel their voices are not heard, their legitimacy is frequently undermined, or their authority often mocked.<sup>50</sup> While those who troll—like those who steal—are undoubtedly responsible for their responses to these injustices, we can *also* critique the upstream environmental injustices with which they are forced to contend. This is yet another reason why the epistemic environmental stewardship that I sketched out earlier is such a crucial feature of my system.

We need societies in which good faith engagement does not itself become dehumanizing or degrading, one in which people are heard and responded to, not silenced. Injustice begets injustice, and epistemic injustice—in the form of cancellation, testimonial or hermeneutic injustice, or good old fashioned censorship—begets further (epistemic and moral) problems and crises. This also raises hope, however, that snowball effects are possible. Creating moments of understanding, no matter how humble, can, I think, proliferate in wonderful directions. Trolling, and its related epistemic vices, are not (just) a cause of our current crisis, they are a product of it. But this means that we can generate upward spirals

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<sup>50</sup> All features of my dehumanization table in Chapter 1.

as well; increased opportunities for breakthrough understanding, and maybe even—though far less often—something approaching actual consensus. So yes, virtue is most transformative when we all do it. There is undoubtedly risk in vulnerability here. But is it so different from the risk we take on every day by being virtuous in a world where others are not? Every day we must make these kinds of choices; whether to cheat the system or build a better one. It is my hope that *Enactive Constructivism* can provide at least a partial map for the latter.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation with the motivating problem of dehumanization-as-moral-exclusion; specifically, what I articulated as axio-doxastically (as opposed to identity) grounded, dehumanization-qua-subject. After highlighting various epistemic, religious, and metaethical complications, Chapter 2 began with an exploration of two very promising but ultimately unsatisfactory attempts to bridge this last issue of what I termed the metaethical divide in the works of Richard Rorty and Jeffrey Stout. With this further understanding of the challenge in hand, I turned in Chapter 3 to an exploration (and advocacy) of Christine Korsgaard’s metaethical constructivism as a promising third option. After laying out the central features of her constructivist framework, I then concluded with a reconstruction of her so-called “constitutional model” before turning to an analysis of her framework’s strengths and, importantly, the weaknesses which my later interventions sought to overcome.

Chapter 4 began with the general impulse in ethics toward what Quill Kukla describes as “impersonalism” which attempts to “solve” the problem of moral disagreement, and moral

deliberation generally, by removing “the self” as far away from those processes of moral reflection and deliberation as possible. These impulses are, I argued, at least in part, symptoms of a pervasive but problematically reductive, not to mention historically contingent, understanding of objectivity (what Daston and Galison helpfully describe as *aperspectival* objectivity) and its relationship to Truth. The work of Daston and Galison then served to complicate our understanding of objectivity by first showing how many different types of objectivity and epistemic teloi there have been generally throughout even recent history, as well as how certain more reductive understandings of perception, objectivity, and rationality have come to somewhat blot out the others. It is this *aperspectival* understanding of objectivity and the reductively *mechanical* picture of perception and rationality that goes with it, which I argued are at least in part to blame for Korsgaard’s challenges, and lie at the heart of the dehumanizing effects of moral conflict generally.

Because my interventions on both Korsgaardian metaethics (Chapter 3) and the reductive, mechanistic epistemology of our social imaginary (Chapter 4) centers around autopoietic and dynamically co-enactive understandings of perception, rationality, identity and objectivity, Chapter 5 began the work of explaining what this means by laying out the key tenets of enactive cognitive science through the work of Evan Thompson. I then turned to the ideas of enactive agency and perception as well as the necessarily embodied and embedded nature of our epistemic practice.

With these epistemological interventions in hand, Chapters 6 and 7 put forward my own constructive proposals (explanatory and action-guiding, respectively). In Chapter 6 I argued that the enactive approach to cognition provides key epistemological resources for improving upon Korsgaard's framework, whereby it could overcome the critiques of Chapter

3 and serve as a metaethical system that can accommodate moral outrage (denying moral relativism) without so much moral exclusion (dehumanization). After highlighting some key ways in which Korsgaard's philosophical impulses are in fact already substantively supported by the central tenets of enactive cognitive science, I then highlighted key ways in which enactive insights provide helpful pushback to the mechanical, aperspectival, and impersonalist impulses that I confronted in Chapter 4. I then turned, finally, to the specific enactivist epistemic interventions I proposed to integrate with Korsgaard's metaethics, which culminated in my introduction of the twin concepts of "phronetic fingerprint" and "endaptive umwelt," before articulating a full elaboration of how all of these pieces work together to constitute *Enactive Constructivism*. The chapter then concluded with an assessment of the extent to which my proposed *Enactive Constructivism* could overcome the shortcomings in Korsgaard's constructivism, which I highlighted back in Chapter 3. Having finally elaborated the conceptual contribution of *enactive constructivism* in Chapter 6, I turned in this final Chapter 7 to a practical contribution: the particular moral-epistemic virtues which I propose as antidotes to the concerns around disagreement and defect (moral conflict and dehumanization) that motivate this project as a whole.

Kant famously concerned himself with three questions; *What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for?* These foundational questions certainly lie at the heart of this project as well, but I have also tried, throughout these chapters, to explore what I take to be crucially central *syntheses* of the first two: How can we better understand our own knowledge processes? (Chapters 4 and 5); and how should we strive to alter our epistemic practice on the basis of this understanding (Chapters 6 and especially 7). It seems only fitting, then, that I should conclude in these last few sentences with the third question: What indeed

can we (justifiably) hope for? As my last musings on the challenges of vice, trolls, and overexertion suggest, we humans are so very limited in our capacities. But our own current failures here should I think also be a source of optimism. We are currently operating at such a base level (in both senses of that term) and yet we have still managed to get this far, the deadly facts of colonial brutality, world war, and genocide notwithstanding. Just think, then, what vast consequences even the smallest (random) acts of epistemic virtue could have. I want therefore to conclude here on a hopeful note, from the man himself:

Since the human race's natural end is to make steady cultural progress, its moral end is to be conceived as progressing towards the better. And this progress may well be occasionally interrupted, but it will never be broken off.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and Ted Humphrey. *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1983. 309.

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