Recovering the Categorical Imperative

The whole philosophy of Hell rests on the recognition that one thing is not another thing, and specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours... Now the Enemy’s philosophy is nothing more nor less than one continued attempt to evade this very obvious truth. He aims at a contradiction. Things are to be many, yet somehow also one. The good of one self is to be the good of another. This impossibility he calls love...

— C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (No.XVIII)

But love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people.

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (Book III, ch.9 on “Charity”).

Then she had a long shivering fit while holding tight the hand of Mrs. Fyne whose patient immobility by the bedside of that brutally murdered childhood did infinite honour to her humanity. That vigil must have been the more trying because I could see very well that at no time did she think the victim particularly charming or sympathetic. It was a manifestation of pure compassion, of compassion in itself, so to speak...


Metaphysics and morality

Shortly before turning to Wittgenstein for help in establishing the essentially public nature of reasons, and so, she supposes, undercutting the egoist challenge to morality, Korsgaard links the sort of necessary publicity or “shareability” of reasons she has in mind with the fact that “our social nature is deep” (1996, p. 166) No doubt there are ways of reading that claim such that even the most selfish amoralist could happily agree with it; and as we have just seen, Korsgaard does nothing in the end to
spell it out in a form that should occasion any threat to the rational T-Egoist. There is a suggestion, however, that by the “depth” of our “social nature” Korsgaard does in fact mean something that, if it could be sustained, would undermine TE as a source of moral scepticism. For at one point, in the course of what is in effect a discussion of how to achieve a rapprochement between the liberal and the communitarian, she seizes upon the possibility that the former might emphasize the universality of the very importance to us of particular communal ties and traditions that the latter places such weight upon. The communitarian may then come to realize, Korsgaard elaborates, that the normativity of the particular ties and identities s/he so values “comes from the fact that human beings need to have them”, and further, that

That is not a reason that springs from one of his own particular ties and commitments. It is a plea on behalf of all human beings, which he makes because he now identifies in a certain way with us all. And that means he is no longer immersed in a world of particular ties and commitments. Philosophical reflection does not leave everything just where it was. (1996, p. 119)

The italics are mine, and they are mine, I’m tempted to add, because Korsgaard cannot quite bring herself to follow through on the departure from Wittgenstein implicit in her last sentence with the full and frank avowal of the need to do some metaphysics that the italicized claim really commits her to. We are never quite told in which way the converted communitarian is supposed to “identify” with us all, or why anything like such an apparently astonishing claim is supposed to follow from the mere fact that all of us need particular identities and ties. No doubt there is a familiar sense in which we “identify” with others to the extent that we can see ourselves as resembling them, and there may be some basis for this in an implicit assumption that likeness reposes upon sameness of universals in the traditional sense of predicatable properties or relations. Korsgaard may then be implicitly appealing to this to justify her talk of us identifying with others simply qua possessors of the human property of needing some particular communally defined identity or other. But even assuming – and it is a big assumption – that no nominalist account of resemblance is possible here, the fact remains that as long as T-Egoists are allowed to identify their selves exclusively with particular instantiations of common properties, and to regard that identification as normatively crucial, then there is indeed no basis upon which to demonstrate the rational inescapability of moral commitment by invoking any other sense in which they may be forced to “identify” with others. I may be as like you as it is possible for two agents to be, and that may involve our possessing the maximal possible number of strictly identical universal properties, but as long as I am entitled to suppose that I am one thing and you are an entirely different thing, then not only can I not be convicted of any kind of irrationality in treating your good as exclusively your concern and my good as exclusively mine, but there is a real problem even in understanding how, independently of anything I happen to want, it can even make sense to say I have a reason to care about what is good for you, or vice versa.

Korsgaard’s deeper instincts here, however, are sound ones. What is really needed in order to overcome the application of the distinction between agent-relative and