

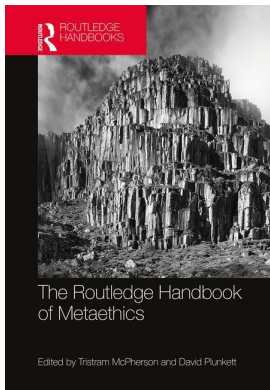
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### Constructivism

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# Constructivism

Melissa Barry

### CONSTRUCTIVISM: THE BASIC IDEA

In a well-known discussion of constructivism in ethics, Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton characterize the view as a form of proceduralism:

... the constructivist is a hypothetical proceduralist. He endorses some hypothetical procedure as determining which principles constitute valid standards of morality ... A proceduralist ... maintains there are no moral facts independent of the finding that a certain hypothetical procedure would have such and such an upshot.

(1992: 140)

*Restricted or local* constructivism confines itself to constructing normative truth in a limited domain, such as political justice or the morality of right and wrong. It aims to explain how such truths can be arrived at, through procedural reasoning, from other normative principles that are taken for granted for the purposes of the construction. In this sense, it is an intranormative enterprise. Since its ambitions are thus limited, it is free to use substantive normative judgments as inputs to construction. The role of the procedure of construction is to articulate and extend the input ideals or principles to generate new conclusions about the target domain. For example, John Rawls begins with a moral ideal of free and equal persons, from which he constructs principles of justice for the basic structure of society (1971; 1980). Likewise, Thomas Scanlon appeals to the ideal of living on terms with others that they could not reasonably reject, along with intuitions about substantive reasons for action, to construct principles for the morality of right and wrong (1998). To avoid circularity and un informativeness, the inputs to construction must be of a clearly different sort from the outputs. Objections to restricted constructivism typically focus here, claiming, for instance, that Rawls appeals too directly to intuitions about

fairness in the inputs and the design of the procedure of construction (e.g., Daniels 1975), or that Scanlon relies on intuitions about substantive moral reasons in his constructivist reasoning to moral principles (e.g., Kamm 2002; Gibbard 2003b).

*Unrestricted* or *global* constructivism aims, more ambitiously, to construct *all* reasons and values, and indeed normative truth as such. It seeks to be at once non-skeptical (claiming that there are normative truths) but also non-realist (claiming that these truths are constructed). This enterprise faces an initial challenge. Since the goal is to construct all normative truth, it cannot appeal directly to normative principles in the process of construction, either in the inputs or in the specification and defense of the procedure, on pain of circularity and uninformative. However, appealing only to non-normative inputs and procedures threatens to reduce normative truth to something else instead of explaining it. How, then, can this enterprise proceed?

The strategy of *unrestricted* constructivists is to derive all normative *substance* from normative *form*, and then to derive normative *form* from an analysis of the activity that the norms target (e.g., practical or theoretical deliberation). For constructivism about practical reasons, the inputs to construction are typically subjective states (e.g., unreflective forms of valuing). The procedure of construction is derived from an analysis of some aspect of agency (e.g., willing). The outputs of construction are substantive normative truths, reached through procedural reasoning from the inputs. Substantive normative judgments and truths must be confined to the outputs to avoid circularity (and a return to *restricted* constructivism).

The ambition of this form of constructivism appears to be both metaethical and normative. Three recent defenders—Onora O’Neill (1996), Christine Korsgaard (1996; 1997; 2008; 2009), and Sharon Street (2008; 2010; 2012)—attempt to explain what normative truth as such is, in opposition to realist and skeptical metaethical accounts, but also to identify the truth conditions of judgments about reasons, which takes them into normative territory. It is a distinctive feature of constructivism that it views these levels of theorizing as closely intertwined. This aspect, more than any other, has led to disagreement over how to interpret the view. Some critics argue that, while constructivism is a metaethical position, it is not a distinctive one, and is best interpreted as a version of one or another familiar metaethical view; others claim that it is not a metaethical position at all and remains entirely at the level of normative theorizing. One explanation of this disagreement, I’ll suggest, is a lack of clarity about constructivism’s stance on the relationship between metaethical and normative theorizing.

In what follows, I will focus exclusively on *unrestricted* constructivism, with special attention to its metaethical potential. Discussion will be confined to two recent accounts: Korsgaard’s Kantian constructivism and Street’s Humean constructivism (for discussion of O’Neill, see Barry 2013). Of necessity, I will neglect a host of other constructivist positions in ethics (see Bagnoli 2011). For simplicity, from here on, I will use the label ‘constructivism’ to refer only to *unrestricted* forms.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR CONSTRUCTIVISM

Since constructivists aim to develop a non-skeptical, non-realist account of normative truth, they typically motivate their view by arguing against skeptical and realist positions.

Against skeptical views, they offer two general forms of argument:

1. Deliberating and acting would be incoherent or impossible without normative truth; as agents we need to deliberate and act, so we should reject skepticism (Street 2010: 379, n. 60; 2011: 16 and throughout)—indeed, the fact that we *need* reasons is part of why there *are* reasons (Korsgaard 1996: 92–97, 120–123, 163–64; 2009: 23–24).
2. We take ourselves to know some normative truths, so skepticism is implausible (Street 2006: 109, 122, 125; 2011: 14).

Against realism, understood broadly as the view that normative truths and facts are mind-independent, constructivists offer several arguments, including the following:

1. Realist appeals to intuitions about substantive reasons cannot answer skeptical challenges, as an agent can always coherently ask why he *ought* to conform to such truths. An adequate answer must show the agent how a conclusion follows, as a matter of rationality or coherence, from things he is already committed to (Korsgaard 1996: 38–40; 1997: 240–242; 2008: 316–317; 2009: 5–6, 32).
2. A realist account of the principles of rationality is incoherent. If those principles were external normative truths, then an agent would need an additional norm in order to apply them since facts alone cannot obligate action; this norm could not, in turn, be just another external normative truth, on pain of regress (Korsgaard 2008: 315–316; 2009: 64–65).
3. The only non-arbitrary source of authority for a rational agent is that agent's own will or autonomous self-legislation. This means that reasons and values must be products of rational willing, not external truths (Korsgaard 1996: 90–130; 1997: 244–251; 2008: 316–317; 2009: 32, 66, 127, and throughout; Street 2008: 229–230, 237, 244).
4. Evolutionary theory implies that selective pressures pervasively shaped our normative commitments. There is no reason to think that normative truths could play any role in this evolutionary shaping, so if realism were true it would imply that we are hopeless at knowing normative truth. Since we do not regard ourselves as hopeless in this sense, and indeed could not coherently do so while deliberating, we should reject realism and conceive of normative truth as mind-dependent. (Street develops a version of this argument against both non-naturalistic and naturalistic forms of realism [2006], and also against quasi-realism [2011: 12–16].)
5. Non-naturalistic realism holds scientifically untenable metaphysical and epistemological commitments that constructivism avoids (Street 2006; 2008: 220, n. 30; Korsgaard 1996: 160–161).

Several of these arguments begin with a claim about what is necessary for coherent deliberation (or adequate justification) and conclude that realism or skepticism is untenable. This, I'll suggest in the section "The Relationship between Metaethical and Normative Theorizing," is part of a distinctive approach to metaethical theorizing.

### A MORE PRECISE FORMULATION OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

The claim that reasons and values derive from the commitments of rational agents makes constructivism a response-dependent account. A further differentiating

feature is a commitment to hypothetical proceduralism. Korsgaard characterizes the idea as follows:

The procedural moral realist [the constructivist] thinks that there are answers to moral questions *because* there are correct procedures for arriving at them. But the substantive moral realist thinks 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.

(1996: 36–37)

While a commitment to hypothetical proceduralism is an essential element of the constructivist views under consideration here (see also Street 2008: 208, 223), it does not distinguish them clearly from familiar Humean desire-satisfaction theories, which can also be viewed as response-dependent hypothetical proceduralist accounts (in virtue of taking an agent's desires as inputs, subjecting them to procedural [theoretical and instrumental] correction, and counting the resulting desires as reasons for action [Brandt 1979; Williams 1981; Lewis 1989] or non-moral values [Railton 1986a and 1986b]). Indeed, these shared features have led some to categorize Humean desire-satisfaction accounts as forms of constructivism as well (e.g., Cullity and Gaut 1997: 4–5; Shafer-Landau 2003: 14). (See Enoch 2009: 328–330 for related discussion.)

A feature that differentiates constructivism from these other proceduralist accounts is its strategy for defending the procedure of construction. Constructivists argue that the procedure is determined by constitutive standards of agency or the practical point of view, as such, and applicable for this very reason. As Street puts the guiding ideas: (1) “the only standards of correctness that exist are those set from within the practical point of view itself” (2008: 220), and (2) normative truth consists in “what is entailed from within the practical point of view” (2010: 367). While Kantian and Humean constructivists disagree about the content of the procedure, they agree on this strategy for defending it (Street 2010: 369–370; 2012). The strategy seems intended to do both normative and metaethical work: it claims not only that the truth conditions for reasons are proceduralist in nature, but that the procedure applies in virtue of deriving from constitutive standards of agency. The defense rests ultimately on a *constitutive* argument. (See Enoch 2006 for related discussion.) In contrast, non-constructivist Humean hypothetical proceduralist accounts typically defend the content and applicability of the procedure with a naturalistic reduction, according to which a reason is reducible to a complex natural fact about how an agent would be motivated after exposure to non-normative facts and reasoning. It's worth noting that realists (either naturalistic or non-naturalistic) can appeal to constitutive arguments of a sort, but they will view their potential differently, i.e., as at most identifying conceptual truths about agential structures and related principles, not as doing foundational metaethical work. According to realists, mind-independent normative truths are needed to establish any normative significance that constitutive principles might have.

One further way the constructivist accounts under consideration here differ from other forms of hypothetical proceduralism is in characterizing the inputs to construction as phenomenologically irreducible, i.e., as normative experiences or pre-reflective normative judgments. While the content of these inputs cannot be analyzed directly in

terms of the concept of a reason, on pain of circularity, the inputs are viewed as having a distinctively normative phenomenology (Street 2006: 117, 119, 128; 2008: 239–242; Korsgaard 2009: 110–132). This is in contrast to non-constructivist Humean hypothetical proceduralist accounts, which characterize the inputs as non-normative states of desire, typically with the aim of reducing the normative to the non-normative. (See Lenman and Shemmer 2012: 3, 6 for related discussion.)

Taking this last point into account, we might characterize the type of constructivism under consideration here as a *response-dependent hypothetical proceduralist constitutivist non-reductive* account of normative truth. It is the metaethical status of this view that is in dispute. I'll return to this issue in the section "The Metaethical Implications of Constructivism," after outlining the constructivist position.

### THE CONSTRUCTIVIST EXPLANATION OF NORMATIVE TRUTH

As noted above, a constructivist explanation aims to derive all normative substance from normative form, and normative form from an analysis of the activity the norms target.

Here is how Korsgaard describes the strategy:

... the argument goes from the nature of the rational will to a principle which describes a procedure according to which such a will must operate and from there to an application of that principle which yields a conclusion about what one has reason to do ... . There are then facts, moral truths, about what we ought to do, but that is not because the actions are intrinsically normative. They inherit their normativity from principles which spring from the nature of the will—the principles of practical reasoning.

(1996: 36)

Korsgaard takes the target of analysis to be *willing an end* (in contrast, Street takes it to be *making a normative judgment* [2008: 209, n. 4] or *valuing* [2010: 366–369]). The goal is to identify constitutive standards of this activity, i.e., standards one must follow to engage in it at all. Since such standards simply specify the way to do the activity, their authority is clear: rejecting them while trying to engage in the activity is incoherent (Korsgaard 1996: 235–236; 1997: 242–251; 2009: 27–34). Because the activities of willing or valuing cannot be escaped by anyone who deliberates and acts, their constitutive standards are normatively inescapable for any agent. As Korsgaard puts it, "A constitutive principle for an inescapable activity is unconditionally binding" (2009: 32). (For discussion of the difference between psychological and normative inescapability, see Fitzpatrick 2005 and 2013; Enoch 2006.)

An initial puzzle about constitutive standards is the following: if one is not an agent *at all* unless one conforms to them, how is bad or defective agency possible? Korsgaard addresses this worry by arguing that agency comes in degrees. To be an agent at all one must at least try to conform to constitutive standards of agency, and succeed to some degree; however, an agent can fail to meet these standards fully and still count as a defective agent. This is what allows constitutive standards to be normative. (2009: 31–32, 45–49, and 159–176) (Street worries that characterizing constitutive standards

as normative threatens the aims of *unrestricted* constructivism. This leads her to claim that they involve *entailment* relations, not normative relations [and that “constitutive entailment is not rational entailment” (2008: 232 and 228; 2010: 367, 374)]. This seems problematic, however, since constructivism needs the procedures of construction to be normative; otherwise, why follow them, and why count the results as reasons? In any case, Street mostly treats constitutive standards as normative. [See Wallace 2012: 33–34, and n. 11; Enoch 2009: 328, n. 14; Hussain and Shah 2006: 291 for related discussion.]

The idea, then, is that the essential activities of agency have a determinate structure, represented by constitutive standards. By engaging in these activities, an agent commits himself to meeting these standards, and thereby legislates them, which makes them normative (Korsgaard 2009: 32–33; Street 2008: 229–230, 237) Failing to meet them is then irrational by his own lights (Street 2008: 228, n. 37). Korsgaard also puts her argument in terms of a problem-solution structure, claiming that constitutive standards apply to agents because they solve an inescapable problem of agency, i.e., the need for reasons and unification. As she says, “if you recognize the problem to be real, to be yours, to be one you have to solve, and the solution to be the only or the best one, then the solution is binding upon you” (2008: 322). (See also Korsgaard 1996: 92–130, 225–233; 2009.)

Kantian and Humean accounts disagree about the content of constitutive standards. Korsgaard argues that the basic activity of agency, *willing an end*, constitutively involves willing the necessary means because if one always fails to will the necessary means then one will not be willing the end at all (1997: 244–248; 2009: 69–72). More ambitiously, she argues that willing particular ends constitutively implies valuing rational agency in oneself and others. (Very roughly, willing ends requires taking them to be valuable; since they do not get their value from outside, the agent must view her rational agency as the source of their value, which requires viewing rational agency itself as valuable [1996: 120–123]. See 2009, chapter 9 for a different argument to the same conclusion.) This yields a form of Kantian constructivism, in which formal procedural reasoning supports one required substantive value (i.e., rational agency). According to Humean constructivism, in contrast, while the activity of *valuing* constitutively entails a commitment to the instrumental and logical implications of this valuing (Street 2010: 367), it does not imply any commitment to valuing rational agency, or any other particular substantive value (Street 2008: 243–245; 2010: 369–370; 2012).

We can distinguish two elements in this account: (1) the objective structure of agency, represented by constitutive standards, and (2) an agent’s legislation of these standards through willing or valuing. It is not entirely clear which element is doing the work of making standards normative for an agent. Constructivists claim that it is the agent’s own will—his engaging in the activity—that makes constitutive standards normative. However, as constructivists are keen to emphasize, constitutive standards have objective implications with respect to which actual agents may be mistaken. As Street notes, even in the Humean account, there are determinate answers concerning which reasons an agent has: they are the commitments implied, logically and instrumentally, by his initial pre-reflective normative commitments in combination with the non-normative facts (2008: 230). These implications are what they are even if he is not aware of them and never would be (2008: 230; 2010: 367). This, however, opens up a potential gap, for the fully (logically and instrumentally) coherent set of an agent’s normative commitments may diverge sharply from his actual commitments, which in all likelihood are

not systematically coherent. He may care much more about his actual commitments and their local success, even if they conflict, than about the fully coherent version of them (or indeed the standard of coherence itself). Once such a gap opens between what an agent actually wills or values and what the constitutive standards of agency indicate he *ought* to will or value given his antecedent commitments, we can ask which of these is normative for him, and why. The same question arises for a Kantian constructivist account. When what an agent wills conflicts with the value of rational agency, which principle is normative: that expressed by his actual willing, or that set by the constitutive standards of agency as such, objectively understood? (For discussion, see Gibbard 1999; Wallace 2004, 2012; Fitzpatrick 2005, 2013; Enoch 2006; Street 2012.)

A clear way to resolve this ambiguity would be to claim that if an agent isn't actually motivated to conform to constitutive standards of agency, then they don't apply to him. This would locate the ultimate authority in the individual agent's choice, not in the objective structure of agency. Some things constructivists say point in this direction. Street claims that each person faces a radical choice of whether to be an agent (2008: 238). Likewise, in discussing a Mafioso who values honor but not rational agency, Korsgaard says that as long as he has not carried out the stretch of reflection that would unseat his immoral ends, they are normative for him (1996: 256–258). These statements, however, threaten the constructivist enterprise, for if agents are subject to constitutive standards only insofar as they are actually motivated to follow them (and be agents), normative authority reduces to motivational force. Perhaps for this reason, constructivists appear to reject this line in the end. As Korsgaard goes on to say about the Mafioso, reflection has standards of its own that he ought to have followed, which would have led him to recognize the value of rational agency (1996: 257–258). The upshot seems to be that substantive reasons and values derive from an agent's *rational* willing or practical reasoning, not from his actual (bare) willing. (For related discussion, see Wallace 2004; cf. Wallace 2012: 35–38.)

With the procedures of construction in place, the next step is to construct substantive reasons and values by applying these procedures to an agent's antecedent commitments. Interpretative and critical questions arise at this stage as well. I'll mention three.

First, as noted earlier, Korsgaard and Street view the inputs to construction as having an irreducibly normative phenomenology. Both claim that humans experience things in the world as *calling for* or *making appropriate* certain responses (e.g., Street 2008: 239–242; Korsgaard 2009: 111, 122–124). What kind of mental states are involved here? Insofar as these experiences involve normative *judgments*, worries about circularity threaten: if substantive reasons and values are the targets of construction, then judgments about these cannot figure among the inputs to construction. If these experiences do not involve normative judgments, however, then the sense in which they have normative content is unclear. (For related discussion see Ridge 2012; Lenman 2012.)

Second, there are related questions about the normative status of the inputs, and the coherence of the resulting theory. According to constructivists, agents experience things in the world as calling for certain responses. While constructivists deny that this involves attributing normative properties to the world, insofar as it seems to do so constructivists must give an error theory of the experience, as Street admits (2008: 240–241, and n. 55). This, however, threatens the coherence of the constructivist account, as truths about reasons and values would be constructed from mistaken or illusory experiences (Ridge 2012).



Third, constructivism may face a bootstrapping worry. By hypothesis, subjective normative experiences are not normative in their own right; they're a matter of nature, not reason (Street 2006: 152–154; 2008: 244; Korsgaard 2009: 122). However, how can inputs with no initial normative standing become reason-giving simply through increased coherence? It seems clear that coherently willed ends can be worthless (e.g., those of the grass counter) or perverse (e.g., those of a coherent Caligula [Gibbard 1999: 145, 149; cf. Street 2009]), and so justification here may be too hostage to the initial commitments of agents.

### THE METAETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

What are the metaethical implications of this constructivist story? For the purposes of this discussion, we can treat any claim that has direct normative implications for what we *ought* or *have reason* to do as a normative claim, and any claim that is *about* such a normative claim but does not itself have direct normative implications as metaethical. This distinction is easily blurred, however, since claims at each level can have implications for the other. Standard metaethical questions include the following: (1) Is there such a thing as normative truth? If so, is it mind-dependent, and in what sense? What are the truth-makers for normative claims? (metaphysics). (2) What do normative concepts mean, and how do they get their content? (semantics). (3) How, if at all, can we come to know normative truths? (epistemology). (4) Are normative judgments beliefs, desires, or some other kind of mental state? (moral psychology). (5) What is the connection between normative judgments, practical reasoning, and motivation? (practicality). As we'll see below, there is disagreement about how to interpret these questions, which in turn has implications for how we should view constructivism.

The question about constructivism's metaethical status comes into focus if we ask the following: at which levels does the account accept *mind-dependence*, and in what sense? Two central claims emerge from the constructivist explanation: (1) substantive reasons and values are a function of procedurally correct reasoning from an agent's commitments, and (2) the procedures of construction are principles constitutive of agency, and applicable because of this. In virtue of what are these claims true? Is their truth mind-dependent? At one level, constructivism gives an unambiguously mind-dependent account of substantive reasons and values, for it claims that these are constructed through subjecting an agent's initial commitments to procedurally correct reasoning. However, we can ask a further question here: is the truth that substantive reasons and values are constructions of procedurally correct reasoning *itself* mind-dependent? Put otherwise, what kind of fact is it (if it is a fact) that substantive reasons and values are constructions of procedurally correct reasoning? We can ask the same sort of question about the claim that the procedures of construction are constitutive standards of agency, and applicable because of this. Is the truth of this claim mind-dependent? As the discussion in the previous section revealed, this is not entirely clear.

These questions about mind-dependence are at the heart of the controversy over the metaethical status of constructivism. Some aspects of constructivism invite an interpretation along realist lines, while others fit naturally with an expressivist view. This has led critics to argue that constructivism should be viewed as a variety of realism or expressivism. Other critics, however, argue that the ambiguity in constructivism on this

point means that it is not a metaethical view at all and remains at the level of normative theorizing (Hussain and Shah 2006). In addition, critics argue that constructivists leave unanswered related metaethical questions about epistemology (Hussain and Shah 2006: 284–285), semantics (Hussain and Shah 2006: 286–288; Ridge 2012; Lenman 2012; Dorsey 2012), and moral psychology (Ridge 2012; Lenman 2012). These questions are important. Since their resolution depends largely on how questions about mind-dependence are answered, however, I'll focus on the latter.

On a realist reading of constructivism, the truth that substantive reasons and values derive from an agent's commitments is a mind-*independent* truth, either natural or non-natural. That is, it is either (1) a normative fact that is identical to a complex natural fact about how initial commitments would change if subjected to procedural reasoning, or (2) a non-naturalistic normative fact that supervenes upon a complex natural fact about how initial commitments would change if subjected to procedural reasoning. Likewise, the procedures of construction (or the constitutive principles of agency) are mind-independent truths that apply to any agent as such. They are either (1) normative truths identical to complex natural facts about consistency relations among mental states of commitment (or the structure of agency), or (2) non-naturalistic normative truths that supervene on relations of consistency among mental states of commitment (or the structure of agency). For the purposes of this discussion, I'll restrict my focus to the status of the procedures of construction.

The strand of constructivism thought by critics to invite a realist interpretation is the following. We saw in the previous section that there are two elements in the constructivist account: (1) the objective structure of agency, represented by constitutive standards, and (2) an agent's legislation of these standards through willing or valuing. Constructivists often talk as if the applicability of constitutive standards is volition-dependent, contingent upon an individual agent's willing or valuing. This suggests that the agent's individual will has ultimate say over whether the standards apply to her activity. However, as we saw above, in the final analysis, constructivists seem to treat these standards as applying to *any* agent simply by virtue of the fact that she wills or values at all (i.e., that she is an agent). In this sense, the standards are not (individually) volition-dependent. Moreover, we saw that denying this would threaten the distinction between normative authority and motivational force.

Insofar as the constitutive argument needs to rely on intrinsically normative principles of agency to make good on its claims to objectivity, it can look like a form of realism about formal principles. (See Wallace 2004; Fitzpatrick 2005 and 2013 for related discussion.) The same holds if Korsgaard's problem-solution structure needs to rely on a normative conception of the problem of agency and its solution—one that agents *ought* to recognize as their own. (See Fitzpatrick 2005; Ridge 2012; Barry 2013 for related discussion.) These and related points lead critics to argue that elements of Korsgaard's account are potentially compatible with non-naturalistic realism, contrary to its goals (Fitzpatrick 2005; Enoch 2006; Hussain and Shah 2006). Likewise, some critics claim that Street's account is indistinguishable from the naturalistic realism embraced by many (non-constructivist) Humean hypothetical proceduralists (Enoch 2009: 328, n. 14; Ridge 2012).

Viewing constructivism as a form of realism provides a clear way to understand the objectivity of claims about the applicability of constitutive standards of agency. Moreover, realism restricted to *formal* principles allows for autonomy in the construction of substantive reasons and values, and it may seem less metaphysically mysterious since

it posits normative facts that supervene on or reduce to structural features of agency, not independent facts about substantive reasons. The problem with this interpretation, of course, is that it conflicts with constructivists' explicit rejection of realism (including realism about formal principles) (Korsgaard 1997: 239–244; 2008: 309–310; 2009: 64–67). It also leaves constructivism subject to its own objections to realism, and threatens its global ambitions. (See Wallace 2004; Fitzpatrick 2005, 2013 for related discussion.)

How does an expressivist interpretation of constructivism go? Expressivism claims that there are no normative facts in the world. Instead of analyzing what it is to *be* a reason, we should analyze what it is to *take* something to be a reason, which is to express a motivational state of approval or norm-acceptance toward treating that consideration as counting in favor of acting. Likewise, what it is to take a principle to be a principle of rationality is to endorse conformity with it as non-optional. Thus, an expressivist interpretation views constructivist claims about constitutive standards and the truth conditions of reason statements as normative claims that express attitudes of endorsement.

The features of constructivism thought by critics to favor an expressivist interpretation are the following. First, when speaking generally, constructivists often talk as if normative truth must be the product of volitional endorsement in order to be authoritative for rational agents. Second, they claim that normative truth exists and is detectable only *within* the first-person perspective of agency, and that from the outside, all we can see are creatures valuing things (Korsgaard 1996: 161; 2008: 325 and n. 49; Street 2008: 219–223; 2010: 364–367). Third, they claim that normative judgments are intrinsically motivating (Korsgaard 1986; 1997; Street 2008: 228, n. 37, and 230; 2010: 376) and deny that the primary function of normative judgments and concepts is to represent external normative facts (Korsgaard 1996: 44–47; 2008: 321–324; Street 2006; 2010: 376). If one holds a Humean belief-desire theory of motivation, these commitments imply that normative judgments are pro-attitudes, not beliefs. This, in turn, suggests that an expressivist semantics for normative concepts may be in order (Lehman 2012). It is considerations such as these that lead Gibbard (1999) to interpret Korsgaard's position as a form of expressivism, Hussain and Shah (2013) to argue that it is compatible with expressivism, and Lenman (2012) to read Street as a potential expressivist.

This interpretation, too, has problems. Korsgaard worries that expressivism implies that we cannot genuinely engage in *reasoning* about our attitudes (2008: 325, n. 49). This points to a general concern that expressivism may not have the resources to adequately capture the rational necessity of constitutive standards within a constructivist account. This is too large of a topic to address here, but we can at least get an initial sense of the intuitive worry.

Expressivists take the lesson of Hume's ban on deriving *ought* from *is* to be that no non-normative fact entails endorsement. About any such fact, we can acknowledge that it is a fact but still ask whether it is reason-giving. This argument applies to constitutive features of agency and formal procedures of construction as much as to any other natural facts, leaving the agent free to ask, "Yes, I can see that agency has such and such a structure, but why must I count that as giving me a reason to conclude or do anything?"

Interestingly, R.M. Hare, a well-known prescriptivist, seems to assume that some normative concepts, along with the logical principles that govern their use, are exempt from Hume's argument, for he claims that identifying the logical properties of the normative concept 'ought' reveals clear canons of reasoning for moral thinking that rationally support

utilitarian conclusions (1981). It is unclear, however, why concepts and their logical properties should be exempt from the ban on deriving *ought* from *is*. About any particular normative concepts, we can ask whether they are really reason-giving, and we can presumably adopt alternatives (or use the concepts we have in an idiosyncratic fashion).

In contrast to Hare's willingness to exempt some normative concepts and logical principles from Hume's argument, quasi-realists try to "earn back" the applicability of logical standards to normative discourse by explaining why even non-representational, initially non-truth-apt motivational states of endorsement need to conform to logical structure (e.g., to rule out some commitments, combine with others, and allow for the assessment of sensibilities) (see Blackburn 1984: 171 and 181–221; 1993; 1998: 68–77; Gibbard 1990; 2003a, especially sections II and III; 2008: 167–174). The question is whether this sort of explanation can succeed in earning back logical structure, and its rationally required status, without simply helping itself to what it needs to earn. Many have doubted that it can (e.g., Hale 1986; 1993; 2002; Wright 1988; Broome 2008; Schroeder 2008, chapter 3 [cf. Gibbard 2012, appendix 2]).

To account for a principle's status as rationally required, Gibbard says that expressivists can claim, from within the attitudinal perspective, that its truth is *mind-independent* (i.e., that it would apply even if we did *not* endorse its application). As he puts it, "anyone who takes a norm to constitute a requirement of rationality takes that norm to apply independently of his own accepting it. He thinks that even if he rejected the norm, that norm would still be valid" (1990: 155). This is a familiar maneuver in quasi-realist expressivist accounts (Blackburn 1984: 217–220; 1988; 1998: 74, 307–308, 311–312; Gibbard 1990: 153–170; 1999: 142–143, n. 3; 2003a: 52–53, 183–186). It strikes many, however, as trying to have things both ways. Why is that?

According to an expressivist metaethical account, when we make normative claims we are not describing or representing mind-independent normative facts or truths (since there aren't any). What we are doing is expressing non-representational motivational attitudes of endorsement, the meaning of which derives from their expressive function. If we accept this metaethical theory, then when we claim, normatively, that some principle is mind-independently true, it seems clear that we cannot take ourselves to mean, in a descriptive sense, that the principle is mind-independently true. We must instead take ourselves to be endorsing treating the principle *as if* it were mind-independently true (in a descriptive sense). This, however, severs the link between mind-independence and objectivity, for the intuitive connection derives from the potential to refer successfully to mind-independent facts or truths—a potential which is lost with the expressive meaning. Expressivists might be tempted to invoke minimalism about truth, facts, and mind-independence here to claim that we don't mean anything very metaphysically robust even when we use these words descriptively (e.g., Blackburn 1998: 77–83; Gibbard 2003: *Preface* and chapter 9). This raises a different worry, however, for minimalism makes it difficult for expressivists to articulate an initial contrast between truth-apt representational beliefs and non-truth-apt motivational states, or between facts that do heavy explanatory lifting and those that don't, which is crucial for distinguishing quasi-realist expressivism from realism. (For early articulations of the contrast, see Blackburn 1988 and Gibbard 1990: chapter 6; for doubts that the contrast can be sustained if minimalism is embraced, see Wright 1988 and Rosen 1998 [cf. Blackburn 1998: 77–83 and Gibbard 2003, chapter 9]; see Dreier 2004 for related discussion.) While these points merit more detailed discussion,

they suggest that the expressivist strategy of invoking mind-*independence* to secure the objectivity or rational necessity of principles may face serious obstacles.

The root problem with an expressivist interpretation of constructivism is the expressivist claim that endorsement can in principle attach to anything, for this means that no natural properties, not even structural features of agency or related constitutive principles, directly require endorsement. In contrast, according to constructivists, the activities of willing and deliberating have a structure that is the non-negotiable descriptive starting point for any theorizing about the normative. Normative endorsement necessarily concerns this content. To identify the constitutive standards of agency is to unpack the built-in logic of action and deliberation. These standards are not a function of our attitudes *about* the activity. They are objective features *of* the activity that require endorsement by anyone engaged in it. The quasi-realist project of “earning back” logical structure, in contrast, implies that the structure is a product of our attitudes.

A weakness of the expressivist interpretation of constructivism, then, is its potential inability to capture the content and rational necessity of principles of reasoning in the manner constructivism needs. Moreover, constructivists explicitly reject expressivism (Korsgaard 2008: 325, n. 49; Street 2010: 376–379; 2011). An expressivist interpretation would, however, provide a semantics for normative terms, allow a kind of autonomy in endorsement, and avoid naturalistic worries (although this point is trickier than it seems, as Gibbard’s shifts in view illustrate [see Gibbard 2003a: 191–194, in contrast with 2012]).

This discussion suggests that while certain features of constructivism fit with realism or expressivism, constructivism is not clearly compatible with either. Where does this leave it, metaethically speaking? Is it an alternative metaethical view or should we conclude that it is not a metaethical view at all, despite what its defenders suggest in setting it up as a rival to familiar metaethical views?

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN METAETHICAL AND NORMATIVE THEORIZING

Constructivists have noted in passing that they view metaethical and normative theorizing as inextricably intertwined (Korsgaard 2008: 322, n. 44; Street 2008: 217, n. 22). While they have not articulated a clear position on the interrelationship, this commitment is apparent in the way they approach the metaethical enterprise. They worry that realists and expressivists seek a metaethical basis for objectivity in an alien domain—either external facts (realists) or non-cognitive attitudes (expressivists)—with implausible results. In contrast, they suggest that we start by identifying the essential features of this distinctive subject matter—practical deliberation—in order to arrive at a view about what normative objectivity could be. Metaethical theorizing must take its start from these features. In particular, constructivists seem to take metaethical theorizing to be directly answerable to conditions of coherent deliberation and adequate justification. As we saw in the section “Motivations for Constructivism,” they argue that skepticism and realism should be rejected, among other reasons, because they are incompatible with such conditions.

More generally, Korsgaard argues that an explanation of normative thinking must not only explain *why* we think normatively but enable us to view our thinking as potentially *justified* (1996: 7–18). The content of the explanation, including its metaethical content, must be coherently affirmable by an agent while she is engaged in practical delibera-

tion. While the constructivist explanation is external to the deliberative perspective—it explains how the self-conscious structure of the mind makes normative truth possible and necessary—Korsgaard views this explanation as suited to justify endorsement because it identifies the essential role of normative principles in enabling the functioning of deliberative agency. (See 1996: lecture 3 and 251–258 for related discussion.) In contrast, neither realism nor skepticism, she claims, can be affirmed coherently by a deliberating agent.

For constructivists, conditions of coherent deliberation and adequate justification not only eliminate metaethical rivals, they also provide the only reference points for a positive foundation. In particular, the rational inescapability of a commitment within the deliberative perspective, determined by the incoherence of rejecting it, warrants accepting it as true, indeed is what *makes* it true. In the domain of agency, constructivists argue, it makes little sense to think that we need to accept certain principles to deliberate coherently and function as agents, and yet to deny that they are true. In a real sense, there are reasons and principles with a certain kind of objectivity because we need there to be in order to deliberate coherently.

This leads to a related claim: if we can identify principles of practical reasoning that require certain conclusions, and if we can come to understand the applicability of these principles as rooted in the role they play in enabling our basic functioning as deliberating agents, then all of the necessary foundational work will be done. There will be no need for further grounding from outside of practical reasoning itself. Put otherwise, if metaethics is about the foundations of normative thinking, and normative thinking rests on principles of practical reasoning that are constitutive of the functioning of deliberative agency, then foundational normative theorizing helps to reveal metaethical foundations. Constructivists deny that this amounts to quietism because they attempt to explain what normative truth is, and how it comes onto the scene, by showing its constitutive role in the basic functioning of deliberative agency.

Korsgaard's rejection of the terms of traditional metaethical debates can be understood in this light. She argues that these debates are structured by distinctions—cognitivism versus non-cognitivism, belief versus desire—that leave no space for a theory in which normative truths are conclusions of practical reasoning (2008: 309). Both distinctions have a natural home in a view like Hume's, according to which (1) reason is purely theoretical, (2) the function of concepts is to represent external facts, (3) only beliefs can be true or false (or well reasoned), and (4) motivation is the work of non-representational, non-truth-apt states of desire (Korsgaard 1986; 1997: 220–234). (See Barry 2010 for related discussion.) This way of carving up the terrain, Korsgaard argues, forces constructivists into a choice between realism and expressivism, neither of which can capture genuine rational necessity.

This discussion suggests that the ambiguity concerning constructivism's metaethical implications may stem from its distinctive approach to metaethical theorizing. It is an interesting feature of metaethical theorizing in general that philosophers of different stripes take it to be primarily answerable to different points of reference. Expressivists and reductive naturalists typically take philosophical naturalism to be their primary reference point (see especially Blackburn 1993: 166–181 and 1998; Gibbard 1990; Railton 1986a and 1986b). This leads them to reject objectively prescriptive facts and to develop an account of normative truth that either takes prescriptivity to be the essential element with objectivity earned back (expressivists), or takes facthood to be the essential

element with prescriptivity earned back (reductive naturalists). Non-naturalistic realists, in contrast, take the objective-seeming form and content of normative discourse to be the primary reference point, and they reject philosophical naturalism as a result. While constructivists are concerned to offer a naturalistically acceptable account, they too seem to take features of normative thinking (in particular, conditions of coherent deliberation and adequate justification) to be their primary reference point. In this way, they share with non-naturalistic realists a tendency to take metaethical theorizing to be directly answerable to normative thinking. However, instead of taking this to justify believing in mind-independent normative truths, they take it to license embracing a conception of normative truth that is strongly answerable to conditions of coherent practical reasoning, and indeed, in the end, a function of them. With Kant, they view normative truth as existing within the structure of deliberative agency. This is a way of trying to address metaethical questions, but it views the tasks of metaethics in a distinctive manner.

There are worries, however. First, this approach strikes many as engaging in a questionable form of metaethical bootstrapping, for intuitively, at least, there is an important difference between what agents *need* to be true in order to deliberate coherently and what *is* true. (For related discussion, see Shah 2010; McPherson and Plunkett 2015.) How could truth, even truths of practical reasoning, simply be a function of conditions of coherent deliberation? Further, how, if deliberating agents need to think there are normative truths in order to deliberate coherently, could they at the same time view themselves as constructing these truths through deliberation? (See also Enoch 2009: 333–335.)

Second, there are persistent questions about what objectivity finally amounts to in this account. Objectivity is supposed to inhere in a method of reasoning. Methods of reasoning differ, however, as evidenced by the disagreement between Kantian and Humean constructivists over the content of constitutive standards. If there are no reference points external to the deliberative point of view, what makes one set of principles correct? The official answer—the structure of agency—shifts the question to this structure. What makes one particular structure, or way of exercising agency, best when there are alternatives? Is one structure, or way of functioning, intrinsically normative? In viewing the formal principles of rationality as binding on any rational agent as such, Kant seems to view their correctness as transcending human reasoning. What more this could involve, short of realism, has been a matter of interpretive controversy, with some reading Kant as a realist and others accusing him of psychologism (i.e., of reducing rational necessity to a form of psychological inescapability). Constructivists face a similar challenge: to articulate a conception of objectivity within the deliberative perspective that provides a clear alternative to these positions.

Does understanding the methodological commitments of constructivism this way endanger its goal of explaining how normative truth is *constructed*, not discovered? If an explanation of normative truth must begin with an analysis of conditions of coherent deliberation and adequate justification, does this mean that constructivists must take for granted normative presuppositions that require constructivist defense? This will depend in part on whether the intuitions appealed to are conceptual intuitions *about* the normative, as Street seems to claim, or normative intuitions proper. If the former, the worry may be avoidable, although distinguishing between these two kinds of intuitions is difficult, particularly when what are characterized as conceptual intuitions about the normative are taken to have direct normative implications, as they are within constructivism.

What are the implications if a constructivist explanation of normative truth does need to rely on high-level normative intuitions about what counts as coherent deliberation or adequate justification? Would it ruin the ambitions of constructivism? Not necessarily, but the view would need to recharacterize its aims. I started by noting that any attempt to construct normative truth from the ground up faces an initial puzzle: relying only on non-normative materials threatens to reduce the normative to the non-normative, while relying on normative materials threatens the goal of constructing normative truth from the ground up. It wouldn't be surprising if any form of constructivism had to rely on normative materials to some extent (and so remain a form of *restricted* constructivism) (see Enoch 2009; Barry 2013). The interesting question concerns the extent and nature of appeals to normative starting points. If a constructivist account restricts itself to very general and formal intuitions about conditions of coherent deliberation and adequate justification, and avoids appealing to intuitions about substantive reasons and values, then it might still constitute a distinctive and interesting account of normative truth—one in which all normative substance is derived from normative form, and normative form is derived from an analysis of deliberative agency. But it should acknowledge that the construction cannot be done entirely from the ground up without appealing to some high-level normative intuitions (or conceptual intuitions about the normative that have direct normative implications).

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#### RELATED TOPICS

Chapter 1, “Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics;” Chapter 2, “Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics;” Chapter 3, “Error Theory in Metaethics;” Chapter 5, “Metaethical Expressivism;” Chapter 18, “Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism;” Chapter 22, “Mind-Dependence and Moral Realism;” Chapter 23, “Constitutivism;” Chapter 30, “Intuitionism in Moral Epistemology;” Chapter 40, “Quasi-realism;” Chapter 41, “Metaethical Quietism;” Chapter 42, “Methodological Naturalism in Metaethics;” Chapter 43, “Normative Ethics and Metaethics.”

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