

What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?

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Abstract

Most agree that when it comes to so-called ‘first-order’ normative ethics and political philosophy, constructivist views are a powerful family of positions. When it comes to metaethics, however, there is serious disagreement about what, if anything, constructivism has to contribute. In this paper I argue that constructivist views in ethics include not just a family of substantive normative positions, but also a distinct and highly attractive metaethical view. I argue that the widely accepted ‘proceduralist characterization’ of constructivism in ethics is inadequate, and I propose what I call the ‘practical standpoint characterization’ in its place. I then offer a general taxonomy of constructivist positions in ethics. Since constructivism’s standing as a family of substantive normative positions is relatively uncontested, I devote the remainder of the paper to addressing skeptics’ worries about the distinctiveness of constructivism understood as a metaethical view. I compare and contrast constructivism with three other standard metaethical positions with which it is often confused or mistakenly thought to be compatible: realism; naturalist reductions in terms of an ideal response; and expressivism. In discussing the contrast with expressivism, I explain the sense in which, according to the constructivist, the distinction between substantive normative ethics and metaethics breaks down. I conclude by distinguishing between two importantly different debates about the mind-dependence of value. I argue that a failure to make this distinction is part of what explains why the possibility of constructivism as a metaethical view is often overlooked.

1. Introduction

Constructivist positions in ethics have inspired a great deal of both enthusiasm and skepticism in recent years. Most agree that when it comes to ‘first-order’ or ‘substantive’ normative ethics and political philosophy, constructivist views are a powerful family of positions. Few would question, for example, that Rawls’s theory of justice – a paradigmatic example of constructivism in ethics – is a view to be contended with in political philosophy.¹ In contrast, when it comes to metaethics, there is serious disagreement about what, if anything, constructivist positions have to contribute.² Enthusiasts are convinced that there is a uniquely appealing metaethical position at hand. Skeptics, in contrast, find constructivism puzzling when it is put forward as a metaethical view: they regard it as unclear whether or how the position answers the standard metaethical questions, much less whether it answers them in a distinctive way.³

Both the enthusiasts and the skeptics have a point, in my view. The skeptics, for their part, have raised important and legitimate questions about the nature of constructivism when it is proposed as a metaethical view, and these questions haven’t yet received fully clear answers. But it is also my view that the skeptics’ questions have good answers, and that once these answers are laid out, the enthusiasts are vindicated. Constructivist views in ethics include not just a family of substantive normative positions, but also a distinct and highly attractive metaethical view – a view with a strong claim to have explained the

nature of value and its place in the world more convincingly than any of the other standard metaethical positions.⁴

In this article, I will argue for these points in the following way. In Section 2, I discuss the commonly accepted *proceduralist characterization* of constructivism in ethics and argue that it fails to capture what is philosophically most interesting and distinctive about the view. The influence of this characterization is part of what explains why constructivism's promise as a metaethical position is often overlooked. In Section 3, I propose a characterization that I believe does capture what is most interesting and distinctive about the view; I call it the *practical standpoint characterization*. Working with this characterization, in Section 4 I offer a general taxonomy of constructivist positions in ethics. Then, since constructivism's standing as a family of substantive normative positions is relatively uncontested, I devote the remainder of the article to addressing skeptics' worries about the distinctiveness of constructivism understood as a metaethical view. In Sections 5, 6, and 7, I try to clarify what is unique about metaethical constructivism by comparing and contrasting it with three other standard metaethical positions with which it is often confused or thought to be compatible: realism; naturalist reductions in terms of an ideal response; and expressivism. In discussing the contrast between constructivism and expressivism, I explain the sense in which, on a constructivist view, the distinction between substantive normative ethics and metaethics breaks down. I conclude in Section 8 by distinguishing between two importantly different debates about the mind-dependence of value. I suggest that a failure to make this distinction is another part of what explains why the possibility of constructivism as a metaethical view is often overlooked.

It should be emphasized at the outset that the question to which this article is addressed – 'What is constructivism in ethics and metaethics?' – has no uncontroversial answer at the present time. The most prominent characterizations of constructivism in ethics have important threads in common, but none would command universal assent, even among self-described constructivists.⁵ The goal of this article is therefore not to offer a neutral report on how constructivism is understood, but rather to tell how I think it should be. In undertaking this, I'll of course be strongly governed by existing understandings of the view, but at the same time I'll be trying to locate a position that is both promising and interestingly distinct from other views. The aim is to provide a useful starting point for those new to the topic of constructivism in ethics while at the same putting forward arguments of interest to specialists. For newcomers to the topic of constructivism in ethics, Sections 2, 3, and 4 offer a general overview, and Sections 5 and 6 offer further clarifications. Sections 7 and 8 are aimed at a slightly more advanced audience, although they may be useful to newcomers as well. For specialists, the points of most interest are (1) the argument that we should reject the proceduralist characterization and adopt the practical standpoint characterization (Sections 2–4); (2) the attempt to distinguish metaethical constructivism from realism, naturalist reductions in terms of an ideal response, and expressivism (Sections 5–7); (3) the attempt to clarify the sense in which, on a constructivist view, metaethics and normative ethics collapse into one another (Sections 7 and 8); and (4) the distinction between the two debates about the mind-dependence of value (Section 8).

2. The Inadequacy of the Proceduralist Characterization of Constructivism

In their influential 1992 overview of the state of the debate in metaethics, Darwall, Gibbard and Railton offer the following characterization of constructivism:

[T]he constructivist is a hypothetical proceduralist. He endorses some hypothetical procedure as determining which principles constitute valid standards of morality.... [He] maintains that there are no moral facts independent of the finding that a certain hypothetical procedure would have such and such an upshot. (13)

This characterization of constructivism – call it the *proceduralist characterization* – is common in the metaethical literature; it has even been called the ‘canonical’ characterization.⁶ According to it, what distinguishes constructivist views from other views in ethics is the priority relation they assign between a certain procedure, on the one hand, and the right or true result, on the other. In particular, according to the proceduralist characterization, constructivist views understand normative truth as not merely *uncovered by* or *coinciding with* the outcome of a certain procedure, but as *constituted* by emergence from that procedure. As an example, consider Rawls’s theory of justice. In Rawls’s famous original position ‘procedure,’ parties described as free, equal, and rational select principles of justice from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’.⁷ According to the proceduralist characterization of constructivism, whereas a non-constructivist might regard the original position procedure as a means of *discovering* principles of justice whose truth is independent of that procedure, the constructivist holds, in contrast, that there *is* no truth about justice independent of the procedure; the truth of the principles *consists* in the fact that they are the ones that would be selected by the parties in the original position.

The proceduralist characterization is by no means unmotivated. It finds considerable textual support in the writings of paradigmatic constructivists such as Rawls and Korsgaard. At the same time, however, it gives rise to obvious questions when one seeks to understand constructivism as many constructivists themselves clearly want to understand it – namely, as encompassing not only a family of substantive normative views but also a unique metaethical position. First, the proceduralist characterization makes it hard to see how constructivism could be a metaethical position at all. For example, as Darwall, Gibbard and Railton note, if one constructivist claims that normative truth is constituted by emergence from procedure *A*, and another claims that normative truth is constituted by emergence from some different procedure *B*, then it is difficult to see how this is anything but a substantive normative dispute, entirely compatible with any number of metaethical interpretations – whether realist, expressivist, or otherwise, for example.⁸ Second, the proceduralist characterization makes it hard to see how constructivism – assuming for the sake of argument it *is* a metaethical position – could be a *distinct* metaethical position. For example, as Enoch notes, it is difficult to see how constructivism on this interpretation differs from a well known type of naturalist reduction – in particular, views which seek to reduce normative facts to natural facts about the responses of agents in certain idealized (but naturalistically characterized) circumstances.⁹

These questions are important. In my view, however, they don’t show any problem with constructivism understood as a metaethical view, but rather merely with the proceduralist characterization, which, although widespread, fails to isolate what is genuinely distinctive about constructivism. To see what *is* genuinely distinctive, it is useful to look back at the same passages from Rawls that are often quoted in support of the proceduralist interpretation, for example Rawls’s remark that

Kantian constructivism holds that moral objectivity is to be understood in terms of a suitably constructed point of view that all can accept. Apart from the procedure of constructing the principles of justice, there are no moral facts. Whether certain facts are to be recognized as reasons of right and justice, or how much they are to count, can be ascertained only from within the constructive procedure, that is, from the undertakings of rational agents of construction when suitably represented as free and equal moral persons. (*Collected Papers* 307)

While the notion of *procedure* is prominent here and in many similar passages, another notion is equally prominent, if not more so – namely that of a *point of view*, and in particular the point of view of an agent or set of agents who accept certain values (or whose situation embodies certain values, as in Rawls's original position). While there isn't space to argue for the interpretive point here, in my view the most sympathetic reading of paradigmatic constructivists such as Rawls and Korsgaard shows that the notion of procedure is ultimately merely a heuristic device, whereas the philosophical heart of the position is the notion of the practical point of view and what does or doesn't follow from within it. In Rawls's theory, for example, the original position is ultimately best understood as a heuristic device whose function is to capture, organize, and help us to investigate what follows from a certain evaluative standpoint on the world – in particular, the evaluative standpoint shared by those of us who accept liberal democratic values such as the freedom and equality of persons.¹⁰

On this reading, the bumper sticker slogan of constructivism is not, as the proceduralist characterization would have it, 'no normative truth independent of procedure,' but rather 'no normative truth independent of the practical point of view'. According to constructivism, there are no standards of correctness in the normative domain except, as Rawls puts it, 'from somewhere'¹¹ – that is, from the point of view of someone who already accepts some normative judgments or other – the point of view of a valuing creature. While appeals to procedure can be useful as a means of systematizing and exploring what follows from within a given practical standpoint – whether it be the standpoint of 'valuing as such' or a more specific evaluative standpoint such as that of people who accept certain core democratic values – these appeals to procedure should not be overemphasized, on pain of making it impossible to see what is uniquely promising about constructivism understood as a metaethical view.

3. The Practical Standpoint Characterization of Constructivism

Return to the following two questions: first, whether constructivism is a metaethical view at all, and second, if so, whether it is interestingly different from other standard metaethical views. In what follows, I'll try to clarify why the answer to both questions is 'yes,' starting in this section with a rather bald statement of how I think constructivism is best understood. (Call this the *practical standpoint characterization*, to distinguish it from the proceduralist characterization.)

The broad intuitive picture driving constructivism may be summarized this way. Pre-philosophically, we are puzzled about what value is. What is it that we are investigating when we think and argue about normative matters? To answer this question, start with what we do understand. Even if we aren't sure what value is, we do understand the attitude of *valuing*: the world is full of creatures who value things, after all, and we know the attitude pretty well when we see it.¹² When a creature values something – or, as I will also put it, when he or she *takes* or *judgets* this, that or the other thing to be valuable¹³ – he or she occupies what we may call for convenience the *practical point of view*. More broadly, we may say, the *practical point of view* is the point of view occupied by any creature who takes at least some things in the world to be good or bad, better or worse, required or optional, worthy or worthless, and so on – the standpoint of a being who judges, whether at a reflective or unreflective level, that some things call for, demand, or provide reasons for others.¹⁴ The claim is that we have an understanding of this attitude even if we do not yet understand what value itself is.

In addition to having an understanding of the attitude of valuing and the associated idea of the practical point of view, we also have an understanding of the idea of *entailment* from within the standpoint of any given set of values. Quite apart from whether we think a given set of values is *correct*, in other words – indeed, even if we aren't clear yet on what it *is* for a set of values to be correct – we can nevertheless think about and discuss what *follows*, as a purely logical and instrumental matter, from a given set of values in combination with the non-normative facts. For example, we might say 'Ann is badly mistaken to value counting blades of grass above all else, but it follows from within her (bizarre and mistaken) evaluative point of view that she has reason to buy a calculator'. 'Moreover', we might add, 'this follows even if Ann doesn't recognize that it does'. Due to her ignorance of the non-normative facts or some other cognitive deficiency (perhaps Ann doesn't know or keeps forgetting what calculators do), Ann might never *see* that it is entailed from within her evaluative standpoint that she has reason to buy a calculator; nevertheless it *is* entailed.

While a full discussion of this is impossible here, it is crucial to note that the sense of *entailment* being appealed to here does not itself presuppose any normative notions. To explain this sense of entailment, we needn't make any substantive normative assumptions – for example, about what anyone *should* or *ought* to do or infer, or about what counts as a *normative reason* for what; to make such assumptions would be uselessly question-begging from a metaethical point of view. Instead, as I explain in more depth in Section 6 and elsewhere, to explain this idea of entailment, we need only make observations about what is constitutively involved in the attitude of valuing or normative judgment itself – identifying those things such that if one fails to do them, one is not making a *mistake* of any kind, but rather not recognizably *valuing* at all.¹⁵

Constructivism gathers these materials and then combines them to make the following claim: Normative truth consists in what is entailed from within the practical point of view. The subject matter of ethics is the subject matter of what follows from within the standpoint of creatures who are already taking this, that, or the other thing to be valuable. In response to the question 'What is value?' constructivism answers that value is a 'construction' of the attitude of valuing. What is it, in other words, for something to *be* valuable? It is for that thing's value to be entailed from within the point of view of a creature who is already valuing things. This is a very rough sketch of the position, but it serves as a useful starting point.

4. *Varieties of Constructivism in Ethics*

To summarize the practical standpoint characterization, then, constructivist views in ethics – whether in 'first-order' normative ethics, political philosophy, or metaethics – claim the following:

According to **constructivist views in ethics**, the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view.¹⁶

Working with this most general characterization of constructivism in ethics, we may distinguish between *restricted versions* of the view and *thoroughgoing* or *metaethical versions* of the view.¹⁷ Restricted constructivist views we may characterize this way:

Restricted constructivist views in ethics specify some *restricted* set of normative claims and say that the truth of a claim falling within that set consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view, where the practical point of view is given some *substantive* characterization.

The goal of restricted constructivist views is to give an account of the truth of some limited *subset* of normative claims. To do so, these views appeal to the idea of what is entailed from the standpoint of one who accepts (or whose situation embodies the acceptance of) some *further* set of substantive normative claims, the truth of which is ultimately merely being taken for granted by the restricted constructivist theory. In taking the truth of these further normative claims for granted, restricted constructivist views give the practical point of view what I am calling a *substantive* characterization.

Rawls's theory of justice is the most famous example of a restricted constructivist view. Rawls seeks to give an account of the truth of the restricted set of normative claims concerning social and political justice in a liberal democratic society. We may summarize Rawls's view, understood as a version of restricted constructivism, this way:

According to **Rawls's restricted constructivist view**, the truth of claims concerning social and political justice in a liberal democratic society consists in their being entailed from the point of view of the original position. Embedded in the setup of the original position are certain normative judgments implicit in the public political culture of a liberal democratic society—including, for example, judgments about the nature of fair bargaining conditions, the freedom and equality of persons, and the irrelevance from a moral point of view of individual traits such as race, sex, class, and natural endowment.

Scanlon's contractualism is another prominent example of a restricted constructivist view. Scanlon seeks to give an account of the truth of the restricted set of normative claims concerning right and wrong, or more narrowly, 'what we owe to each other'.¹⁸ We may summarize Scanlon's view this way:

According to **Scanlon's restricted constructivist view**, the truth of claims concerning right and wrong (or 'what we owe to each other') consists in their being entailed from the point of view of a certain contractual situation. Embedded in the setup of this contractual situation is the normative judgment that we have reason to live with others on terms that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement, and judgments concerning what would constitute adequate grounds for such rejection.

As is evident from these characterizations, restricted constructivist views give an account of the truth of one set of normative claims by appeal to what is entailed from within the standpoint of one who accepts (or whose situation embodies the acceptance of) some further set of substantive normative claims. As is also clear, these views say nothing about what the truth of these further substantive normative claims consists in. Because of this, *restricted* constructivist views are ultimately compatible with any metaethical position whatsoever.¹⁹ For example, one might agree with Rawls that the truth of claims concerning social and political justice is constituted by their being entailed from the standpoint of the original position, and yet be a realist, expressivist, or metaethical constructivist when asked about the nature of the reasons and values embedded in the setup of the original position. Similarly, one might agree with Scanlon that the truth of claims about right and wrong is constituted by their being entailed from the standpoint of agents seeking to arrive at principles no one could reasonably reject, but then take one's pick among the usual array of metaethical views when it comes to the nature of reasons in general.²⁰

Restricted constructivist views are thus ultimately best understood as views *within* substantive normative ethics, the principal philosophical interest of which hinges on the way they give a substantive characterization of one part of the normative domain in terms of another. These views may be read as zeroing in on a *particular* practical point of

view – an evaluative point of view that is widely shared, for example, or of special interest for some other reason – and exploring what follows from within that point of view. The aim of Scanlon's view, for example, on this reading, is to offer an informative and unifying characterization of the *moral* point of view as opposed to the practical point of view in general: Scanlon proposes an account of what the moral point of view on the world consists in, taking no position on whether the moral point of view follows from within the practical point of view as such.²¹

While they are not themselves metaethical views, restricted constructivist views nevertheless may be read as giving at least limited expression to a broader metaethical insight.²² According to this broader insight – expressed most explicitly by Rawls in various places²³ – standards of correctness in the normative domain are not set by an 'independent order' that holds apart from the attitudes of valuing creatures, but rather are set by, or from within, the point of view of beings who make some normative judgments or other. *Thoroughgoing* or *metaethical* versions of constructivism seek to give full expression to this idea, and we may characterize them as follows:

According to **thoroughgoing** or **metaethical constructivist views**, the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view, where the practical point of view is given a *formal* characterization.

Unlike restricted constructivist views, metaethical constructivist views seek to give an account of what it is for *any* normative claim to true. To do so, they appeal to the idea of what follows from within the practical point of view given a *formal* characterization. To give the practical point of view a formal characterization is to give an account of the standpoint of valuing or normative judgment *as such*, where this involves giving an account of the attitude of valuing that does not itself presuppose any substantive values but rather merely explicates what is involved in valuing anything at all. Unlike their restricted counterparts, metaethical constructivist views, if successful, do not take the truth of any given substantive normative claim for granted. Instead, they explain what a creature must be doing to count as a valuer at all, and explain how standards of correctness in the normative domain get generated by this attitude. It is clear that to be plausible, the account of what a creature must be doing to count as a valuer at all will have to be very thin indeed, since we think it is compatible with a creature's recognizably being a valuer that that creature value virtually anything at all.²⁴

Among thoroughgoing or metaethical constructivist views, we may distinguish further between *Kantian* and *Humean* versions.²⁵ These two kinds of view agree that the truth of a normative claim consists in its being entailed from within the practical point of view, where the practical point of view is given a formal characterization. Where they disagree is over whether *moral* conclusions follow from within the practical point of view given a formal characterization. According to *Kantian* versions of metaethical constructivism, moral conclusions *do* follow: in other words, we may start with a purely formal understanding of the attitude of valuing, and demonstrate that recognizably moral values are entailed from within the standpoint of any valuer as such; the entailment is presumably non-obvious, otherwise everyone would already have noticed it. Korsgaard's view in *The Sources of Normativity* and Kant's view as interpreted by Korsgaard are examples of such a view. These views try to show how a commitment to the substantive 'value of humanity' – understood as involving a commitment to all of 'Enlightenment morality' – follows, albeit non-obviously, from within the standpoint of valuing, or practical reason, as such.²⁶ According to Korsgaard's view and others like it, in other words, no matter what the particular substantive content of a given agent's starting set of normative judgments, moral

values are entailed from within that agent's standpoint, whether the agent ever recognizes that entailment or not. Referring back to Ann of the previous section, just as it follows from within Ann's evaluative point of view that she has reason to buy a calculator, so it follows from within *anyone's* evaluative point of view that he or she has reason to be moral – regardless of whether the agent in question ever sees that this is so.

Humean versions of metaethical constructivism, in contrast, deny that substantive moral conclusions are entailed from within the standpoint of normative judgment as such. Instead, these views claim, the substantive content of a given agent's reasons is a function of his or her particular, contingently given, evaluative starting points. On this view, 'pure practical reason' – in other words, the standpoint of valuing or normative judgment as such – commits one to no specific substantive values. Instead, that substance must ultimately be supplied by the particular set of values with which one finds oneself alive as an agent – such that had one come alive with an entirely different set of evaluative attitudes, or were mere causes to bring about a radical shift in those attitudes, one's reasons would have been, or would become, entirely different. This is my own view. While it has implications some find deeply counterintuitive, I believe it is what we are forced to by the untenability of realism plus the failure of Kantian versions of metaethical constructivism.²⁷ Kantian versions of metaethical constructivism, if successful, vindicate an extremely strong form of universalism about reasons, and moral reasons in particular. Humean versions, in contrast, deny that the rabbit of substantive reasons can be pulled out of a formalist hat: to get substance out, we need to put substance in.²⁸ According to Humean constructivists, similarities in human beings' reasons – of which there may be many, and very deep ones – ultimately depend for their existence on contingent similarities in people's evaluative starting points and circumstances – on the existence of a shared human nature, for example, to the extent there is such a thing, rather than on anything entailed by the practical point of view as such. Humean versions of metaethical constructivism are crucially different from standard Humean views, however, in that they take an understanding of the nature of the attitude of *valuing* or *normative judgment* – in contrast to that of mere *desire* – to be essential to understand how standards of correctness get generated in the normative domain. In this way, they draw as prominently on the Kantian tradition as they do on the Humean one.²⁹

5. How Metaethical Constructivism Differs from Realism

Let us now turn to examine how *metaethical* constructivism differs from other standard metaethical positions, starting with realism. On one common understanding, realism about morality or normativity more generally is the view that (1) moral or normative claims are capable of being true or false; and (2) some of these claims are true.³⁰ If we understand realism this way, then metaethical constructivism counts as a brand of realism – as indeed do an extremely wide range of views, including even a simple subjectivism according to which what's good for a person is whatever that person thinks is good. But it is also fully in keeping with philosophical tradition to understand the 'realism/anti-realism' debate as concerning more than this, and in particular as concerning the question of *mind-dependence*. Here, I work with this latter understanding. On this understanding, the key point at issue between realists and antirealists is the answer to the central question of Plato's *Euthyphro* (in rough secular paraphrase), namely whether things are valuable ultimately because we value them (antirealism), or whether we value things ultimately because they possess a value independent of us (realism). In the final analysis, in other words, is normativity best understood as conferred or recognized?

Metaethical constructivism falls squarely on the antirealist side of this divide. As the slogan ‘no normative truth independent of the practical point of view’ makes clear, metaethical constructivism asserts a counterfactual dependence of value on the attitudes of valuing creatures; it understands reason-giving status as conferred upon things by us. According to metaethical constructivism, there are no facts about what is valuable apart from facts about a certain point of view on the world and what is entailed from within that point of view. Normative truth, according to the constructivist, does not outrun what follows from within the evaluative standpoint, but rather consists in whatever is entailed from within it.

To clarify the issue, it is useful to consider the hypothetical case of an ideally coherent Caligula.³¹ At least on the face of things, it seems easy to imagine someone who values above all else, and in a way that is utterly consistent with his own other values plus the non-normative facts, torturing others for fun. Before we say anything about realism, however, note that metaethical constructivists of different kinds will disagree about what to say about such a case. *Kantian* versions may be understood as denying the appearances here: they argue that in spite of how it might seem on superficial inspection, anyone who thinks he has overriding reason to torture others for fun is in fact incoherent – presumably non-obviously, again, since otherwise we all would have noticed this already. According to the Kantian constructivist, in other words, it is entailed even from within Caligula’s own evaluative standpoint that torturing others is unacceptable. Caligula is making a mistake by his own lights, even though he may never realize this due to ignorance of the non-normative facts or some other cognitive limitation such as a poor memory. *Humean* constructivists, in contrast, think that things are pretty much as they appear with regard to such a case – in other words, that just as it seems on superficial inspection, one can indeed value torturing others above all else and be entirely coherent in doing so.

This intramural dispute, while very important, does not concern us here. Our concern instead is to clarify what unites Kantian and Humean constructivists against the realist. And what unites them is their conviction that normative truth does not outrun entailment from within the practical point of view. That is to say: *if* (as the Kantian denies) it in no way follows from within Caligula’s own evaluative point of view that he ought not to torture others, then Caligula is not making a mistake; there are no further facts about how there is reason to live that he is failing to recognize. *Realists* about normativity, in contrast, deny this. According to them, normative truth *does* outrun entailment from within the practical point of view. That is to say: even if there were someone who was perfectly coherent in embracing the torture of others as his highest value, for example, that person *would* be making a mistake; there is indeed a fact of the matter about how there is reason to live that Caligula is failing to recognize – one that holds independently of what is entailed from within his practical point of view in combination with the non-normative facts. On the realist view, while the ideally coherent Caligula is making no mistake about *what follows* (as a logical and instrumental matter) from his own set of evaluative commitments, and no mistake about the *non-normative facts*, he *is* nevertheless in error when it comes to his ‘evaluative starting points,’ at least some of which are false. Constructivists, in contrast, reject the idea that there are any standards independent of the evaluative point of view that could make it the case that Caligula’s evaluative starting points are mistaken. There is nothing else in the world (or outside of it) in virtue of which he could be making a mistake. If Caligula is aware of all the non-normative facts and has recognized every normative conclusion that follows from his own values in combination with those facts, then there is nothing he is failing to see.³²

6. *How Metaethical Constructivism Differs from Naturalist Reductions in Terms of an Ideal Response*

Let us next turn to the question of how metaethical constructivism differs from a certain common kind of naturalist reduction – in particular, reductions according to which normative facts are just natural facts about the responses of agents under such-and-such idealized (but naturalistically described) circumstances. It is easy to see why one might think that there is no significant difference.³³ Take Rawls's view, for instance. Doesn't this paradigmatic example of constructivism (albeit a restricted version) just reduce normative facts about social and political justice to natural facts about the responses of agents under the idealized circumstances of the original position? And if so, how does this differ at all in spirit from a paradigmatic naturalist reduction like Railton's, for example, which reduces normative facts about an individual's non-moral good to natural facts about what that person would want himself to want if he were fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances?³⁴ A full discussion of these matters is impossible here. What I want to draw attention to in this section is a critical basic difference between metaethical constructivism and standard ideal response naturalist reductions such as Railton's view.³⁵

To explain the difference, it is useful to start with an analogy. Suppose we are trying to give an account of the nature of 'baseball facts,' for example the fact that Derek Jeter is safe.³⁶ Compare two accounts we might offer. On the first account, Jeter's being safe is constituted by the fact that an umpire with complete knowledge of the rules of baseball and no preference for one team over another would judge Jeter safe if he (the umpire) were fully and vividly informed. On the second account, Jeter's being safe is constituted by the fact that the rules of baseball in combination with the non-normative facts entail that he is safe.

The principal attraction of the first account is that it reduces 'baseball facts' to facts which seem utterly unmythical from a naturalistic point of view. On this account, baseball facts are, at least in principle, discoverable through purely empirical means: we could, at least in principle, find or build an umpire of the specified kind, place him in circumstances of the specified kind, and wait to see what he judged, thereby ascertaining the 'baseball facts' by way of direct scientific observation. As is fairly obvious, however, the account is subject to major worries. First of all, it appears that no matter how much we pack into our naturalistic description of the umpire and the circumstances under which he renders his judgment, there will always be a significant divergence between our intuitions about when Jeter is safe, on the one hand, and facts about what the umpire would judge under the specified conditions, on the other. We said the umpire has complete knowledge of the rules of baseball and no preference for one team over the other, for example, but what if he is easily confused, or what if under conditions of full information he would, due to some quirk of his psychology, conceive a loathing of the game of baseball and want to do whatever he could to undermine it? We may revise our account to specify that the umpire has a high I.Q. and an unshakeable love of baseball, but no matter how many such refinements we add to our description of the umpire or circumstances under which he renders his judgment, it looks as though we will always be able to generate further worries of the same kind.³⁷

A second objection is that even if such extensional problems could be solved without lapsing into question-begging triviality (as an example of the latter, consider an account according to which the fact that Jeter is safe is constituted by the fact that a good umpire – i.e., one who is an *accurate judge of baseball facts such as the fact that Jeter is safe* – would judge Jeter to be safe), it still wouldn't seem right to say that Jeter's being safe is *constituted*

by facts about what an umpire would judge under such-and-such naturalistically described conditions. In other words, even if it somehow turned out to be true that Jeter is safe when and only when an umpire of a certain kind would judge him to be, this still doesn't seem right as an account of *what it is* for him to be safe.

Now compare the second account of baseball facts, according to which Jeter's being safe is constituted by its being entailed by the rules of baseball in combination with the non-normative facts that he is safe. Like the first account, the second account is naturalistically palatable. Not in the same way, however, it is worth noting. Whereas on the first account, baseball facts are potential objects of ordinary empirical investigation, on the second account they are not. This is because facts about what the rules of baseball *entail* are not – not even potentially – objects of empirical inquiry: no amount of scientific experimentation could ever tell you, for example, whether the rules of baseball, in combination with the fact that Jeter arrived at second base before the ball did, *entail* that Jeter is safe. Despite this, however, the second account of baseball facts is also fairly unmysterious from a naturalistic point of view. By this I mean that putting aside deep philosophical worries about the nature of rule-following (no small matter), facts about what a given rule *entails* in combination with the non-normative facts do not seem naturalistically puzzling in at all the same way as do facts about how one *ought* or *has most normative reason* (*full stop*) to live. After all, nowhere in the second account of what it is for Jeter to be safe are we supposing that one *should* play baseball, that one *ought* (*full stop*) to try to be safe, that the rules of baseball are *good* rules, or anything else of the sort: we are, on the contrary, merely pointing to facts of a kind that even an expressivist like Gibbard views as naturalistically unproblematic – namely, facts about what a given rule (whether good or bad or neither) entails in combination with the non-normative facts.³⁸

Moreover, in contrast to the first account, the second account seems both extensionally and intensionally accurate. There is no intuitive divergence between the fact of Jeter's being safe and the fact of its being entailed by the rules of baseball plus the non-normative facts that he is; not only does the proposal get every conceivable case right, it seems accurately to capture *what it is* for Jeter to be safe. Finally, although it is perhaps a little hard to see because it is so obvious, the second account is informative as an explanation of the nature of baseball facts. It is informative to tell someone that Jeter's being safe consists in the rules of baseball in combination with the non-normative facts entailing that he is – in a way that it would *not* be informative, in contrast, to tell someone that the fact that Jeter is safe consists in the fact that Jeter would be judged safe by someone who was an accurate judge of baseball facts such as the fact that Jeter is safe.

Now obviously giving an account of the nature of 'baseball facts' is a far cry from giving an account of the nature of normative facts. But the goal here is merely to clarify a key basic difference between metaethical constructivism and standard ideal response naturalist reductions of the kind represented by Railton's view. Standard ideal response reductions are analogous to the first account of what it is for Jeter to be safe, and as is well known, they are subject to analogous objections.³⁹ Metaethical constructivism, on the other hand, is analogous to the second account of what it is for Jeter to be safe. Indeed, one way to present metaethical constructivism is as claiming that normative facts are constituted by facts about what is entailed by the 'rules of practical reason' in combination with the non-normative facts. The trick, of course, is to give a plausible account of the 'rules of practical reason,' where this is a matter of saying what is involved in playing the 'game' of valuing at all. To do this, we must undertake the task I mentioned earlier in Sections 3 and 4, namely the task of saying what is constitutively involved in the attitude of *valuing*, or *normative judgment*, as such – that is, the task of saying what features a

creature's attitude must possess in order for it recognizably to count as an instance of valuing or normative judgment at all.

It is crucial to note – on pain of being unable to see any room for constructivism as a metaethical position at all – that this task of saying what is constitutive of the attitude of valuing or normative judgment is an exercise in descriptive philosophical analysis as opposed to a substantive normative one. That is to say: in undertaking this task, the intuitions we will be calling upon are intuitions about what is and isn't recognizably a case of valuing – *not* intuitions about whether someone who recognizably values something is making a *mistake* in doing so. To convey the nature of this task, another analogy is useful.⁴⁰ Suppose someone says 'I believe there is life on the moon, and there isn't any'. The paradoxical nature of such statements has persuaded many that there is a sense in which the attitude of belief, as a constitutive matter, 'aims at truth'. Our diagnosis of such a case is not that the person has a *false belief* that there is life on the moon, but rather that he doesn't genuinely *believe* that there is life on the moon at all. Now suppose someone says 'I have all-things-considered reason to get to Rome immediately, and to do so it is necessary that I buy a plane ticket, and I have no reason to buy a plane ticket'. The paradoxical nature of such statements might persuade us that there is a sense in which the attitude of judging something to be a reason, as a constitutive matter, 'aims at means-ends coherence'. Our diagnosis of such a case is not that the person is making a *false judgment about his reasons*, but rather that he doesn't genuinely *judge himself to have all-things-considered reason* to get to Rome (or else doesn't genuinely *judge himself to have no reason* to buy a plane ticket) at all.

The point here isn't to defend such claims; it is merely to give a sense of the kind of work involved in developing a plausible account of what is constitutive of the attitude of *valuing*, as opposed to the attitude of believing or desiring, for example.⁴¹ If the undertaking succeeds, then the rules constitutive of the 'valuing game' will have been identified, and the constructivist will have offered an account of normative facts analogous to the second, and not the first, account of baseball facts. Many questions remain, of course – not the least of which is why we can't ask about our reasons to play the 'valuing game' in exactly the same way we can ask about our reasons to play baseball, thereby demonstrating that the nature of normativity has not really been explained.⁴² My own view is that if the constructivist has done his or her work properly, offering an account of what is constitutively involved in valuing that is thin enough to be plausible (and recall that I said that the account will need to be extremely thin indeed), then he or she will be able to make it clear why questions about one's reasons to play the valuing game are ill-formed in a way that questions about one's reasons to play baseball are not. Again, though, my goal is not to defend such claims here, but rather to explain something that many have found obscure – namely, whether there is any interesting difference between standard ideal response reductions of the kind represented by Railton's view, on the one hand, and metaethical constructivism, on the other. I hope the analogy to the two accounts of baseball facts makes it clear that there is, and is at least suggestive as to how metaethical constructivism may be able to combine accuracy, informativeness, and the elimination of naturalistic mystery in a way that standard ideal response reductions do not. Standard ideal response reductions introduce extraneous elements by making facts about what is valuable hostage to the outcome of irrelevant causal processes. According to constructivism, in contrast, normative questions aren't questions about what would emerge from any *causal process* (whether real or hypothetical), but rather questions about what is *entailed* from within the standpoint of a creature who values things.

7. *How Metaethical Constructivism Differs from Expressivism*

On one common understanding of the contrast between constructivism and expressivism, the basic difference is supposed to be obvious: constructivism is a *cognitivist* view in the sense that it regards normative claims as capable of being true or false; expressivism is a *non-cognitivist* view in the sense that it regards normative claims as incapable of being true or false.⁴³ This understanding of the contrast is inadequate, however, if recent remarks of Gibbard and Korsgaard are any guide, and I think they are. Gibbard, a leading expressivist, has read Korsgaard as a fellow expressivist⁴⁴; Korsgaard has said that expressivism is ‘true,’ but ‘in a way that makes it boring’⁴⁵; and both theorists have recently strongly distanced themselves from the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction, suggesting that it is unhelpful.⁴⁶ A full discussion of these issues is not possible here, but in what follows I sketch a different way of understanding the basic contrast between constructivism and expressivism. On this understanding of the contrast, the two views are in sympathy on a number of crucial points, and yet at the same time each side charges the other with nothing less than having overlooked or lost sight of the central task of metaethics – where this task is characterized broadly, and in a way that both sides would accept, as the task of reconciling our understanding of normativity and normative discourse with a naturalistic understanding of the world.⁴⁷

I’ll begin with this charge as raised from the expressivist side. The basic objection is a version of Moore’s open question argument,⁴⁸ and may be summarized as follows.⁴⁹ So-called ‘metaethical’ constructivism, in spite of its name, is not a metaethical view at all, or at best is a substantially incomplete one. More specifically, the constructivist has failed to discharge the key metaethical task of explaining the *meaning* of normative terms. To see the worry, look again at the core constructivist proposal, according to which a normative claim’s truth consists in its being entailed from within the practical point of view (where the practical point of view is given a formal characterization). It is at the very least *coherent* – so an expressivist will argue – to entertain the thought that this proposal is false. It is at the very least *coherent*, for instance, to think that Caligula ought not to torture others even if that conclusion is in no way entailed from within Caligula’s own practical point of view. But this just shows that the constructivist has left something critical unexplained, namely the *meaning* of normative terms as they appear in debates about how an ideally coherent Caligula ought to live, and more broadly as they appear in debates about the truth of constructivism, the mind-independence of value, and indeed normative matters in general. According to the expressivist, the constructivist is merely *using* normative terms in stating his or her position – saying, in so many words, that we *should* do whatever is entailed by our own practical point of view in combination with the non-normative facts – while failing to explain what the terms in question *mean*. So-called ‘metaethical’ constructivism is thus best understood as a view *within* substantive normative ethics – a highly general one, no doubt, but nevertheless a view that ultimately merely states a substantive (and highly contestable) position on how we should live, without shedding any light on the meaning of such claims.

Expressivism, in contrast – so its defenders argue – *does* explain the meaning of normative terms. According to the expressivist, no accurate and informative ‘straight definition’ of normative terms is possible; that is the lesson of Moore’s open question argument.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the expressivist argues, we may still successfully explain the meaning of normative terms by means of an *indirect* strategy, one that proceeds by explaining the states of mind that normative terms are used to express. These states of mind are characterized, at least to start out, not as beliefs with such-and-such content, but rather psychologically

– for example, as states of approval, preference, norm-acceptance or planning – states one of whose main distinguishing features is that they are motivational.⁵¹ The expressivist then goes on to explain how it is that normative predicates such as *is good* or *is a reason* or *is valuable* – predicates whose most basic linguistic function is to express states of mind different from ordinary belief – nevertheless end up mimicking the behavior of ordinary descriptive predicates such as *is round* or *is ten feet tall*, ultimately allowing for ordinary inference patterns, talk of truth and falsity, and so on. Once this explanatory work is done, the expressivist claims, we will have been given an account of the meaning of normative terms that is both accurate and informative, and which allows us to understand what we are doing when we engage in normative discourse in a way that brings it into full harmony with a naturalistic understanding of the world. Claims such as those made by the so-called ‘metaethical’ constructivist – claims that insist upon the mind-dependence of value – are best understood as substantive normative claims, and deplorable ones at that. The expressivist will deny them when he or she enters into substantive normative debate, understanding himself or herself to have ‘earned the right’ to say things like ‘Even an ideally coherent Caligula would be making a mistake if he thought that torture is acceptable’ and ‘Normative truth outruns entailment from within the practical point of view’.⁵² In making these kinds of claims, the expressivist will understand himself or herself, roughly, as expressing his or her disapproval of sensibilities which make their disapproval of torture contingent on people’s attitudes and on questions about what follows from within the point of view of those attitudes.⁵³

Before turning to the constructivist’s reply, it is important to note that the constructivist agrees with the expressivist on a number of crucial points. First, the constructivist agrees with the expressivist that normative terms are used to express a state of mind that is different from ordinary belief. Moreover, the constructivist agrees with the expressivist on some of the respects in which this state of mind differs from ordinary belief. For example, the constructivist agrees that the state of mind of valuing, or normative judgment, is intrinsically motivational in the following sense: someone who judges something to be good, valuable, or something she has reason to do is thereby at least somewhat motivated to do or pursue that thing. The constructivist may also agree that the state of mind of valuing evolved to serve an importantly different function in the life of the organism than did the attitude of ordinary belief – a biological function that at its most fundamental level is not one of *representation* of the way the world is, but rather one of *getting the organism to respond* to its circumstances (as represented by its ordinary beliefs) with various kinds of behavior.⁵⁴ The constructivist will furthermore agree that these and other such differences between valuing and ordinary belief are important to an adequate metaethical understanding.⁵⁵

In spite of these points of agreement, however, the differences between the two views are stark. To see this, let us turn to the constructivist’s reply. The constructivist’s best reply to the expressivist, in my view, will consist in two main points. The first point is that the expressivist is wrong if he or she thinks that the constructivist has nothing to say about the semantic task with which the expressivist is so preoccupied. While constructivists do not tend to *share* the expressivist’s preoccupation with questions of meaning – and this for reasons to be explained in a moment – there are nevertheless at least four plausible positions open to the constructivist when it comes these questions. Which, if any, is the best position for the constructivist to take I won’t try to settle here.

First, the constructivist may think that the semantic task with which the expressivist is preoccupied is positively misguided. The constructivist may think, for example, that the expressivist’s ‘indirect strategy’ for explaining the meaning of normative terms will

inevitably fail because the state of mind expressed by normative terms cannot accurately be located without implicitly trivially relying on the very normative concepts the expressivist seeks to explain. (The constructivist may think that any other attempt informatively to explain the meaning of normative terms will likewise founder, and that there is instead a sense in which we must take the meaning of normative terms as primitive.⁵⁶) In a second, incompatible position, the constructivist might think that the semantic task isn't misguided, but rather that he or she has discharged it with his or her account of what is constitutive of the attitude of valuing. The thought here would be that in identifying the rules one must be following in order to count as a valuer at all, the constructivist has sketched a so-called 'inferentialist semantics' for normative terms: the meaning of normative terms has been explained by identifying the kinds of inferences (for example, about means and ends) one must be making in order to count as employing normative concepts at all. In a third possible position, the constructivist might claim that his or her central proposal about the mind-dependence of value is not, as the expressivist interprets it, a substantive normative claim, but rather a reforming definition that purges normative concepts of an incoherence. Against the expressivist, for example, the constructivist might argue that it *is* incoherent (albeit non-obviously so) to think that an ideally coherent Caligula (assuming for the sake of argument that such a character is possible) is making a mistake about how there is reason to live; and the constructivist might argue that in order to eliminate this incoherence one must suppose that facts about reasons do after all consist in nothing more than facts about what follows from within the practical point of view.⁵⁷ A fourth and final option is for the constructivist simply to take on board the *expressivist's* account of the meaning of normative terms, but then to argue that this account taken by itself fails to answer the traditional questions of metaethics.

This last remark brings us to the second main point of the constructivist's reply. The second point may be put this way. In the constructivist's view, it isn't the *constructivist* who has failed adequately to discharge a key task of metaethics, but rather the *expressivist* who has failed to do so. More specifically, according to the constructivist, in focusing so intently on questions of meaning, the expressivist has, surprisingly enough, failed to reconcile our normative discourse with a naturalistic understanding of the world, even though this was presumably the original point of the view. To see this, assume for the sake of argument that the expressivist succeeds in giving an informative and accurate account of the meaning of normative terms by means of the 'indirect strategy' of explaining the states of mind those terms are used to express. As we have seen, expressivists believe that at this point they have 'earned the right' to make extremely strong claims about the mind-independence of value. For example, they believe that they are now free to insist, with a clean naturalistic conscience, that there are normative facts that hold independently of what is entailed from within the practical point of view – such that Caligula, for example, *is* making a mistake about what reasons there are even if the conclusion that he is making a mistake in no way follows from within his own evaluative standpoint. (As we have seen, the expressivist views these claims as substantive normative claims that give voice to a certain state of mind of approval, preference, norm-acceptance, or planning.)

The metaethical constructivist denies that the expressivist has earned this right. According to the constructivist, expressivists are wrong to think they can blithely commence with strong mind-independence claims as soon as they are done telling us the states of mind expressed by those claims. For the expressivist has yet to offer these claims any defense against *internal normative challenges*. And for all the expressivist has shown, it might turn out that there are *internal* normative challenges that find their target from within the

standpoint of anyone who values anything at all. For all the expressivist has shown, in other words, it might be entailed from within the practical point of view *as such* that normative truth is constituted by, and does not outrun, entailment from within the practical point of view.⁵⁸ And this is indeed exactly what the metaethical constructivist thinks.

Obviously, this last point is much more than can be argued for here. But the rough idea may be conveyed with an analogy. Suppose someone lays out the expressivist's account of the meaning of normative terms, and then claims that 'All human beings ought to devote their lives to doing somersaults'. In answer to queries about this, it obviously will not do to say that one has 'earned one's right' to say this simply in virtue of the fact that one has explained the state of mind that is expressed by this (and all other) normative claims. As expressivists themselves take great pains to insist, accepting expressivism as one's metaethical view does not commit one to the view that 'Anything goes' when it comes to substantive normative claims. But in that case, just as one has not 'earned one's right' to insist on the somersault claim merely by telling us what state of mind this and other normative claims express, so one has not 'earned one's right' to insist upon robust mind-independence claims merely by telling us what state of mind this and other normative claims express. There are well known objections to the idea that there are independent normative truths, and one needs to say something to address those worries before one has earned the right to insist that there are. Now of course the well known worries in question are metaphysical and epistemological worries, and one might think that given the expressivist's overall strategy, these no longer apply. The trouble is, however, that the expressivists themselves have developed resources rich enough to suggest how these worries may be recast as substantive normative worries.⁵⁹

Constructivists, in any case, will argue (or rather, *should* argue, in my view) that naturalistically motivated metaphysical and epistemological objections to the positing of independent normative facts arise all over again from *within* our substantive normative discourse, even if we understand that discourse in exactly the way the expressivist proposes – namely as expressing certain states of mind that are different from ordinary belief. And if this is so, then one has not earned one's right to insist upon the mind-independence of value until one has addressed these objections – any more than one has earned one's right to the normative claim about somersaults until one has addressed the obvious objections to that view. In sum, the constructivist is willing, at least for the sake of argument, to sign on to the expressivist's point that claims about the mind-dependence and mind-independence of value, including the core constructivist proposal itself, are substantive normative claims. But he or she will then argue that in that case, constructivism is a substantive normative claim that is entailed from within every practical point of view. The expressivist has not earned the right to reject constructivism, then, until he or she has done work to rebut internal normative arguments to the effect that robust claims of mind-independence are untenable.

Expressivists, as we have seen, complain that constructivists have failed to discharge a crucial task of metaethics – namely the task of explaining the meaning of normative terms. As we've now seen, constructivists will answer 'right back at you' with a similar complaint. In particular, constructivists will point out that the major task of metaethics *as expressivists themselves conceive of it* is to reconcile normative discourse with a naturalistic understanding of the world. And then they will argue that it is not sufficient to discharge this task merely to explain what naturalistically comprehensible state of mind is being expressed by normative claims, even assuming there is a sense in which this successfully explains the *meaning* of normative terms (a point which the constructivist may also challenge). One *also* has to show that robust claims about the mind-independence of

normative facts – which may be understood by expressivists and constructivists alike as substantive claims *within* normative discourse – do not fall victim to naturalistically motivated objections raised within that same discourse. In other words, if claims about mind-independence are best understood as substantive normative claims, as the constructivist is willing to grant for the sake of argument, then oddly enough we aren't done with the major task of metaethics until we have done some substantive normative ethics – and in particular until we have shown that these claims of mind-independence are defensible from *within* the standpoint of normative discourse. And the constructivist will argue that they are *not* so defensible – that, instead, it is entailed from within every practical point of view that the truth of a normative claim consists in its being entailed from within the practical point of view.⁶⁰

8. Conclusion

The possibility of constructivism as a metaethical view is often overlooked. Part of what explains this, in my view, is a failure to distinguish between two importantly different debates one might have about the mind-dependence of value. The first debate – what I've called the debate between realists and metaethical constructivists – concerns whether there are any normative facts that hold independently of the practical point of view and what is entailed from within it. To conduct this debate, it is useful to assume for the sake of argument that an ideally coherent Caligula is possible, and then argue about whether there are any facts about how there is reason to live that he is failing to recognize. The realist will say that there are; the metaethical constructivist will say that there are not. The second debate – what I've called the debate between Kantian and Humean metaethical constructivists – concerns whether moral values (or for that matter any other particular substantive values) are entailed from within the practical point of view as such, such that no matter what one's specific starting set of values, it turns out to be entailed by those values, in combination with the non-normative facts, that one has reason to be moral. To conduct this debate, we ask whether every valuing creature has reason to be moral by his or her own lights, or whether, instead, an ideally coherent Caligula is possible after all. The Kantian metaethical constructivist will say that he isn't possible; the Humean metaethical constructivist will say that he is.

To overlook the distinction between these two debates about mind-dependence is to overlook the possibility of metaethical constructivism. Mackie overlooks the distinction in chapter 1 of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* when he concludes that there are no objective values. While his arguments speak to the first debate, offering reasons to think there are no objective values in the realist's sense, Mackie says nothing at all to address the second debate, thereby leaving open the possibility of objective values in the Kantian metaethical constructivist's sense.⁶¹ Similarly, many a person wishing to defend moral objectivity slips into assuming that he or she has no choice but to defend *realism*, with its accompanying metaphysical and epistemological difficulties, failing to notice that perhaps 'all' he or she really needs to defend is Kantian metaethical constructivism. Of course the realist needn't be overlooking this possibility: he or she may have considered it and concluded that the Kantian project is unlikely to succeed, or perhaps that even if it did, it wouldn't be 'enough' to underwrite moral objectivity. However, such views are often tacit and undefended. In this way, implicit assumptions about the outcome of the second debate are often driving people's attitude toward the first. For example, if one is pessimistic about the prospects of the Kantian project and thinks that an ideally coherent Caligula is rather obviously possible, then one is more likely to pin one's hopes for moral

objectivity on trying to make sense of the notion of normative facts that hold independently of what follows from within the practical point of view. If, in contrast, one harbors some optimism that it can be shown that no matter what one's starting set of values, morality is entailed by those values, one is more likely to think that this secures all the moral objectivity one could ever sensibly want or hope for, and is likely to view normative facts of the kind posited by the realist as naturalistically incomprehensible and not to the point anyway.⁶²

This distinction between the two debates about mind-dependence also helps to explain why constructivism is often dismissed, wrongly, as 'merely' a substantive normative position with nothing of interest to say about metaethics. First, the distinction helps us to see why, if one is a metaethical constructivist as opposed to a realist, one will be especially concerned with laying out and assessing arguments that seek to show how morality follows from a person's values no matter what those values are: having rejected realism, one will regard the objectivity of morality as depending on this. Arguments of this type, however, are very naturally formulated and conducted as substantive normative arguments. One way to think of them is as just a more abstract, foundational version of the type of argument involved in Rawls's theory of justice: instead of trying to show how Rawls's two specific principles of justice follow from the broad liberal democratic values of freedom and equality, here we are pursuing the maximally ambitious aim of showing how morality itself follows from *any* set of values. Metaethical constructivists' special interest in the outcome of such arguments is thus part of what explains why it may seem to some that they are always doing substantive normative ethics.

Our consideration of expressivism has made an additional point clear, however, namely that it is possible to view not only the debate between Kantian and Humean metaethical constructivism but also the debate between realism and metaethical constructivism as a substantive normative debate. On this view, the core constructivist proposal – according to which the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view – is itself a substantive normative claim. As we have seen, the constructivist is willing to grant this for the sake of argument, but then will insist that accepting this substantive normative claim is the only way to reconcile our understanding of value with a naturalistic understanding of the world. On this way of seeing things, the traditional metaethical project of reconciling normative discourse with a naturalistic worldview turns out to be a substantive normative one. This, then, is a second reason why it will appear to some (expressivists especially) that constructivists are always doing substantive normative ethics. It is because the constructivist thinks that even if we interpret the debate between realism and constructivism as a substantive normative debate, as the expressivist suggests we should, we *still* must accept constructivism in order to render our understanding of value compatible with a scientific worldview.

This furthermore explains why constructivists appear to some (again, expressivists especially) to be oddly nonchalant about the semantic task of explaining the meaning of normative terms. It is because the constructivist thinks that the debate about mind-dependence – in both of the two senses distinguished – is where the most important philosophical action is. This isn't to say that the semantic task should be ignored. But it is to say that we won't understand the nature of value until we settle the debate between realism and metaethical constructivism, and that we won't understand whether morality is objective until we settle the debate between Kantian and Humean metaethical constructivism. Call it metaethics or not, in other words, these are the questions of greatest philosophical importance.⁶³

Short Biography

Sharon Street is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at New York University. She is the author of a series of articles on how to reconcile our understanding of the nature of value with our best scientific understanding of the world. Her articles include 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value' (*Philosophical Studies* 127, 2006) and 'Constructivism about Reasons' (*Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3, 2008). Street received her BA in philosophy from Amherst College in 1995 and her PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 2003.

Notes

¹ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; *Political Liberalism*; and *Collected Papers*. The locus classicus for a statement of constructivism in ethics is Rawls's 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory', reprinted as ch. 16 in his *Collected Papers*. Other paradigmatic examples of constructivism in ethics are Scanlon's contractualist theory of morality and Korsgaard's theory of practical reason. See especially Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* and 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy'.

² For a summary of the distinction between metaethics and 'first-order' or 'substantive' normative ethics, see Copp. In this paper, I employ this distinction merely as a rough and ready one. As I discuss in Sections 7 and 8, there is a sense in which, on a constructivist view, the distinction breaks down.

³ For expression of these worries, see especially Darwall, Gibbard and Railton 12–15; Enoch, 'Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?'; and Hussain and Shah.

⁴ In this paper, I restrict my attention to constructivism as an account of the nature of reasons for action. While I believe that constructivism also provides the best account of the nature of reasons for belief, I don't discuss that here.

⁵ Virtually everyone would agree that whatever constructivism in ethics is, Rawls's theory of justice, Scanlon's theory of morality (though not his theory of reasons in general), and Korsgaard's theory of practical reason are supposed to be examples of it. (See note 1 for references.) Accordingly, I give these views special weight as ones my characterization of constructivism is intended to capture. In another article, 'Constructivism about Reasons', I make a different but complementary attempt to locate and clarify the core insight of constructivist views in ethics. My characterization of constructivism in that article is couched in 'proceduralist' terms of the kind I explicitly reject here; I regard this as a misleading but superficial feature of that paper's presentation. Other important discussions of constructivism in ethics include, on the sympathetic side, those of Bagnoli and James, and, on the critical side, those of Brink (especially appendix 4); Shafer-Landau (especially ch. 2); Wedgwood; and the articles cited in note 3.

⁶ See Enoch, 'Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?'

⁷ For a description of the original position, see *A Theory of Justice* sections 3–4 and ch. 3.

⁸ See Darwall, Gibbard and Railton 13.

⁹ See Enoch, 'Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?'

¹⁰ See for example Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* 21; *Political Liberalism* 26.

¹¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism* 116.

¹² This is of course not to say that our understanding of the attitude of valuing can't or needn't be refined. On the contrary, since constructivism gives an account of value as something conferred upon the world by the attitude of valuing – with the attitude of valuing being the more fundamental explanatory notion – it is essential to the view's success that we develop a clear, independent understanding of what the attitude in question is. I say more about this below and in 'Constructivism about Reasons'.

¹³ Note that the attitude in question is *not* the attitude of belief, although it has important belief-like characteristics. I say more about this in Section 7 and in 'Constructivism about Reasons'.

¹⁴ Do babies and non-human animals count as occupying the practical point of view? In my view, there is a gradual continuum in the animal kingdom ranging from very rudimentary to highly sophisticated forms of conscious valuing. On the most rudimentary end of the spectrum would be the evaluative 'point of view' of animals who are capable of only the most primitive positive and negative conscious experiences. On the other, full-blown end of the spectrum would be the reflective, emotionally complex, and conceptually and linguistically infused forms of valuing that we see in normal human adults. In my view, then, babies and some non-human animals may be understood as occupying 'proto' versions of the practical point of view.

¹⁵ See 'Constructivism about Reasons', section 7, for a fuller discussion.

¹⁶ One might worry that the appeal to *entailment* here is too strong. After all, suppose we think the following normative claim is true: *Ben has normative reason to add to his stamp collection*. How could such a thing be *entailed* from within the practical point of view, when the reason in question seems so arbitrary and optional? Here it is important not to confuse two thoughts. No one is claiming that it is entailed from within the practical point of view as

such that all valuing creatures, regardless of their particular, contingent starting set of values, have normative reason to collect stamps; this would be a crazy position. Rather – I would argue – what is entailed from within the practical point of view as such is that a valuing creature's normative reasons depend in a certain way on *that creature's* contingent evaluative attitudes. On this view, what is entailed from within the practical point of view as such is that *given a certain set of contingent evaluative attitudes* – one that probably includes, among other things, a love of stamp collecting – an agent has normative reason to add to his stamp collection. In other words, it is the *attitude-dependence of normative reasons* that is entailed from within the practical point of view as such. I do not make the case for this view here, but the basic argument is epistemological (see note 60 for more discussion). I make the case in 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value', 'Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways', and 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It'.

¹⁷ Korsgaard makes a similar distinction in section 6 of 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy'. I discuss the distinction in further depth in 'Constructivism about Reasons'.

¹⁸ For discussion of the domain of 'what we owe to each other' as distinguished from morality more broadly, see *What We Owe to Each Other* ch. 4, section 7.

¹⁹ I discuss this further in 'Constructivism about Reasons'.

²⁰ Indeed, Scanlon himself is a non-naturalist realist about the nature of reasons in general, though he is a constructivist about the nature of reasons of right and wrong. See *What We Owe to Each Other* ch. 1.

²¹ Indeed, Scanlon seems to doubt that it does. See *What We Owe to Each Other* 148.

²² I say more about this in 'Constructivism about Reasons'.

²³ See for example his *Collected Papers* 306–07; 353–56.

²⁴ It seems to me that one reason why constructivism's potential as a metaethical view is sometimes missed is that its supporters don't always distinguish clearly enough between the tasks of (1) offering a purely formal account of what is involved in the attitude of valuing; and (2) arguing that certain substantive normative conclusions are entailed from within the standpoint of every valuer in combination with the non-normative facts. Moreover, I think constructivism's supporters face, and too often give in to, a constant temptation to build too much into their account of what is constitutively involved in the attitude of valuing. The hope of getting morality 'out' lures people into packing implausibly much 'in', and the resulting account of 'pure' practical reason ends up not in fact pure.

²⁵ For other relevant discussions in which the term *Humean constructivism* has been introduced, see Bagnoli 131; D. Dorsey, 'Relativism and Constructivism: A Humean Response' (unpublished manuscript); J. Lenman, 'Humean Constructivism in Moral Theory' (unpublished manuscript); and Tiberius 189. I am introducing the term in my own sense, but there are important ideas shared among all of these discussions.

²⁶ See Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, especially lecture 3.

²⁷ I also think that the implications in question are much less counterintuitive than they may at first seem, with impressions to the contrary depending on a failure to imagine in philosophically sufficient depth the kinds of cases at issue. I say more about this in 'In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters'.

²⁸ Falling somewhere in between these Kantian and Humean views is a position like Velleman's. While Velleman rejects the strong Kantian claim that morality is *entailed* from within the practical point of view as such, he thinks the practical point of view nevertheless generates some rational pressure in morality's direction; in *How We Get Along*, he calls this position 'Kinda Kantian'. While Velleman doesn't use the term, it seems to me that his position counts as a version of metaethical constructivism in the sense I am laying out in this paper.

²⁹ I say more about this in 'Constructivism about Reasons', especially section 9.

³⁰ See, for example, Sayre-McCord and Smith. I am glossing over important complications about whether *truth* here must be understood in some 'non-minimal' sense. See Smith 182–88 for discussion, and Section 7 for further relevant discussion.

³¹ This is a case introduced by Gibbard in 'Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard's Kantian Lectures' 145.

³² The point here isn't to defend or argue for constructivism against realism, of course; it is just to try to make clear that there is an important difference. I argue against realism in 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value'; 'Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About'; and 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It'.

³³ Enoch raises this worry in 'Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?'

³⁴ See Railton, 'Facts and Values' and 'Moral Realism'.

³⁵ The difference I'm going to point to is obscured by some of my own rough characterizations of constructivism elsewhere – for example, my brief mentions of the view in 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value' (110, 152).

³⁶ In what follows I am assuming an understanding of 'baseball facts' according to which there are facts about whether a player was out or safe, whether a pitch was a ball or a strike, and so on, independently of the actual call made by the umpire. As Nishi Shah pointed out to me, there are contexts in which we seem to assume that someone *is* out if he is called out, that a pitch *is* a strike if it is called a strike, etc. But it is clear that we also have a

conception of a player's being out, of a pitch's being a strike, and so on, quite independently of the actual call made; otherwise there would be no such thing as a bad call. I am working with this latter understanding of baseball facts, according to which of course bad calls are possible.

³⁷ For example, what if under conditions of full information the umpire's unshakeable love of baseball would lead him to conclude that what's most important in baseball is suspense and a good narrative, even at the occasional expense of fairness? And so on.

³⁸ See, for example, Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* 87.

³⁹ See especially Velleman, 'Brandt's Definition of "Good"'; and Loeb.

⁴⁰ The analogy that follows is with the case of belief. Analogies of this kind are a focal point of Velleman's *The Possibility of Practical Reason*.

⁴¹ I explain and defend such claims further in 'Constructivism about Reasons', especially section 7.

⁴² See Enoch, 'Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't Come from What is Constitutive of Agency'.

⁴³ For a classic statement of a non-cognitivist view, see Ayer ch. 6.

⁴⁴ Gibbard, 'Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard's Kantian Lectures'.

⁴⁵ Korsgaard, 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy' 325, note 49.

⁴⁶ Gibbard embraces the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction in his earlier *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, but thoroughly distances himself from it in *Thinking How to Live* (see especially 183–84). For Korsgaard's complaints about the distinction, see her 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy', especially 309.

⁴⁷ While my sympathies lie on the constructivist side of the dispute, and this will be reflected in some of my remarks, the goal of this section is not to defend one side or the other, but rather to clarify what is at issue. I lay out my concerns about expressivism in 'Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways'.

⁴⁸ Moore, *Principia Ethica* ch. 1.

⁴⁹ My presentation of the expressivist's objection follows Gibbard's treatment of related matters in *Thinking How to Live* ch. 2.

⁵⁰ Here again see Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* ch. 2.

⁵¹ Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* 180–81.

⁵² For discussion of 'earning our right' to talk about moral truth, see Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* 197.

⁵³ Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* 218–21.

⁵⁴ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* 169; Gibbard *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* 107–08; *Thinking How to Live* ch. 13. I discuss this point about biological function in 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value', especially section 6.

⁵⁵ In 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy', Korsgaard argues that the function, or 'cognitive job,' of normative concepts is crucially different from that of ordinary descriptive concepts, and that this point is key to an adequate metaethical understanding.

⁵⁶ I briefly sketch a position along these lines in 'Constructivism about Reasons' 239–42.

⁵⁷ I outline this position in 'Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways'.

⁵⁸ To put the point in the expressivist's own language – specifically, Gibbard's language in *Thinking How to Live* – it might turn out that any possible way of becoming 'hyperdecided' without changing our mind includes accepting that value is mind-dependent in exactly the way the constructivist claims; hence we are all committed to constructivism. (This is what Gibbard believes is true of the supervenience thesis, and one might think that it is true of the core constructivist thesis as well.) For Gibbard's discussion of supervenience, see *Thinking How to Live* ch. 5.

⁵⁹ I argue for these points in 'Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways'.

⁶⁰ To be clear: I have said virtually nothing in this paper to explain what the arguments for this last claim might be. In my own view, the strongest arguments are epistemological. The rough idea is that (1) anyone who takes anything at all to be valuable must take himself not to be hopeless at recognizing value; (2) if there are normative facts that hold independently of what is entailed from within the practical point of view, then in all likelihood we are hopeless at recognizing them (a point established by further argument); therefore, (3) in order coherently to go on with normative thought, we must conclude that there are no normative facts that hold independently of what is entailed from within the practical point of view. All this can be presented as a substantive normative argument. I defend these claims in 'Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have it Both Ways' and 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It'.

⁶¹ Cf. Williams, 'Ethics and the Fabric of the World' 174–75.

⁶² That the independent normative facts posited by the realist wouldn't be to the point even if they existed is a theme of Korsgaard's work. See, for example, lecture 1 of *The Sources of Normativity* and 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy'.

⁶³ For their helpful comments on earlier drafts, I am indebted to David Enoch, Matt Evans, Thomas Nagel, David Plunkett, Nishi Shah, and David Velleman.

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