

# CONSTITUTIVISM, TELEOLOGY, & KNOWLEDGE

Colin McLear | PHIL 971

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## 1 Capacities

*Core Constitutivist Claim:* The fundamental norms that apply to X are explained by the nature of X.

*Reason-First Constitutivism:* The most fundamental norms that apply to us are grounded in our nature as rational beings or creatures with the capacity of reason.

- Schafer argues that Kant endorses a form of constitutivism—viz. “reason-first” constitutivism<sup>1</sup>
  - Is it right to think of Kant as articulating a form of constitutivism? In what sense are norms derived from the nature of a capacity?
    - \* Is the “necessitation” of the norm based in sensibility?<sup>2,3</sup>
    - \* Why don’t mere sensible capacities have norms if Kant endorses constitutivism?

## 2 Knowledge as a Rational Capacity

*Virtue reliabilism:* knowledge is the result of the successful exercise of an epistemic ability (or virtue)<sup>4,5</sup>

### 2.1 Three Claims of Virtue Reliabilism

1. Believing is an activity, whose end is the truth.
2. Capacities are general properties of subjects that explain the occurrence of acts that fulfill the end in terms of which the capacity is defined.
3. Therefore, capacities that are defined as having the truth as their end make it intelligible how there can be beliefs that are non-accidentally true, i.e., that constitute knowledge.

### 2.2 The Problem with Virtue Reliabilism

- A successful exercise of this capacity for y-ing consists in meeting the following three conditions:
  1. The act agrees with the end of the capacity to y. (“accurate” act)
  2. The act is a manifestation of the capacity to y. (“adroit” act)
  3. (1) is true because (2) is true—i.e., the act agrees with the end of the capacity to y because the act is a manifestation of the capacity to y. (“apt” act)

<sup>1</sup> the normative principles that apply to the activities of *any* rational faculty will, for Kant, be grounded in that faculty’s nature – and, in particular, the nature of its characteristic activity. Or, more precisely, the principles in question will be grounded in the nature of the relevant rational capacity while the status of these principles as *normative* will be grounded in the fact that this rational capacity is *not* free of external hinderance. (Schafer 2019, 187)

<sup>2</sup> if the will is not *in itself* completely in conformity with reason (as is actually the case with human beings), then actions that are cognized as objectively necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will in conformity with objective laws is *necessitation*: that is to say, the relation of objective laws to a will that is not thoroughly good is represented as the determination of the will of a rational being through grounds of reason, indeed, but grounds to which this will is not by its nature necessarily obedient. (GII 4:413)

<sup>3</sup> But freedom of choice cannot be defined – as some have tried to define it – as the capacity to make a choice for or against the law (*libertas indifferentiae*)... Only freedom in relation to the internal lawgiving of reason is really a capacity; the possibility of deviating from it is an incapacity. How can that capacity be defined by [*erklärt aus*] this incapacity? It would be a definition that added to the practical concept the exercise of it, as this is taught by experience, a hybrid definition [*Bastarderklärung*] (*definitio hybrida*) that puts the concept in a false light. (MM 6:226)

<sup>4</sup> knowledge is an instance of a more general normative phenomenon – that of success through ability (or success through excellence, or success through virtue) (Greco 2010, 3)

<sup>5</sup> Belief is a kind of performance, which attains one level of success if it is true (or accurate), a second level if it is competent (or adroit), and a third if its truth manifests the believer’s competence (i.e., if it is apt). (Sosa 2011, 1)

- PROBLEM: According to virtue reliabilism, a capacity for knowledge can be exercised perfectly well yet fail to be an act of knowing<sup>6</sup>

### 2.3 Two Kinds of Causality

*Mechanical Causality:* a connection in which the element that is regarded as the effect cannot also serve as the cause of the element whose effect it is

*Teleological Causality* a causal connection in which the thing that is represented as the cause is logically dependent on the thing that is represented as the effect.

- KERN'S CLAIM: Only a kind of teleological causality can explain how a capacity for knowledge is one whose acts are non-accidentally related to truth<sup>7</sup>
  - To explain the non-accidental nature of (the capacity for) knowledge we need a conception of the capacity that individuates manifestations of the capacity in terms of the end of the capacity (i.e. truth)<sup>8</sup>

### References & Further Reading

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<sup>6</sup> virtue epistemology holds that it is possible for an act to constitute a manifestation of an epistemic capacity in the very same sense that an act of knowing does, yet without itself being an act of knowing (Kern 2017, 245)

<sup>7</sup> any line of thought that seeks to understand a capacity for knowledge as analyzable into two logically independent elements—one that describes the causality of the capacity and another that describes the agreement of its acts with the end of the capacity—will be unable to lay claim to the idea of knowledge as non-accidentally true belief. The idea of a non-accidentally true belief remains unintelligible on such an account because it is impossible, in the context of such an analysis, to explain the truth of a belief through the causality of the capacity in question. (Kern 2017, 244)

<sup>8</sup> Whereas a mechanistic conception of capacities takes it to be possible to describe what it is for an act to constitute a manifestation of a capacity without thereby making reference to the telos of the capacity in question, a teleological conception of capacities demands that one refer to the telos of the capacity in order to so much as describe a given act as a manifestation of the capacity in question. It follows that characterizations of acts as manifestations of capacities that cannot be exercised under all possible circumstances must, accordingly, be understood disjunctively: namely, either as perfect manifestations of the capacity, which would then be identical with the perfect realization of its telos, or as manifestations of the capacity that are faulty in one way or another, which would amount to an imperfect realization of the capacity's telos. (Kern 2017, pp. 245-6)

- Smith, Michael. 2013. "A Constitutivist Theory of Reasons: Its Promise and Parts." *Law, Ethics and Philosophy* 1: 9–30. <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/LEAP/article/download/294565/383080>.
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