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A CRITIQUE OF METAETHICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

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Abstract: Metaethical constructivism, proposed by Sharon Street, has been described as a novel and promising metaethical theory. It is a form of cognitivist anti-realism that purports to be without substantive normative assumptions, while still allowing for the possibility of an agent being mistaken about what is normatively true for them. Here, I present five objections to the theory's purported strengths. I argue primarily that metaethical constructivism cannot do without substantive normative assumptions, that it is not a novel position in metaethics but a kind of relativism, and that the possibility of an agent being mistaken about what is normatively true for them is more limited than it might seem. I also argue that constructivism does not allow us to evaluate distant pasts and futures, and that it blurs the line between normative truth and falsity.

Keywords: metaethical constructivism, normative reason, judgement, value, relativism, formality

Introduction

Metaethical constructivism, also called *Humean constructivism*, has been presented by its author, Sharon Street, as a novel and promising metaethical theory (Street, 2008, 2009, 2010). It is a kind of anti-realism that nonetheless posits the existence of normative facts and moral truths. The theory has several purported strengths. Firstly, it is a form of constructivism in ethics that aims to be distinctly metaethical. Secondly, it makes place for a measure of moral objectivity in that it allows for the possibility of a moral agent's being mistaken about what is normatively true for them. And thirdly, it aims to be a purely formal view in the sense that it is free of substantive normative assumptions.

In this paper, I offer a critique of the theory by challenging its purported strengths. It proceeds as follows. In the first section, *An Overview of Metaethical Constructivism*, I explain the theory in detail. This overview is followed by five objections; in the first of these, the *Formality Objection*, I argue that, contrary to its purported advantage of formality, the theory fails to be sufficiently determinative without substantive normative assumptions. In the *Subjectivity Objection*, I explain that the theory maintains that one can be mistaken about one's reasons by positing two kinds of normative mistakes. I argue that one type of these mistakes – those arising from holding incorrect value judgements – is not identifiable by the theory and, consequently, cannot be posited. In the *Novelty Objection*, I show that the theory portrays moral truths as individually relative and thus reduces to a form of individual relativism. In the *Shortsightedness Objection*, I argue that the

theory is limited in that it does not allow us to normatively evaluate distant past and future selves. In the final objection, *Wrong Makes Right*, I argue that, as a consequence of metaethical constructivism, what is normatively true is dependent on what is normatively false, thereby blurring the line between the two.

An Overview of Metaethical Constructivism

Metaethical constructivism (henceforth "MC") is an anti-realist metaethical theory that is compatible with philosophical naturalism and which posits the existence of normative facts. Street defines constructivism in general:

> *Constructivist views in ethics* understand the correctness or incorrectness of some (specified) set of normative judgments as a question of whether those judgments withstand some (specified) procedure of scrutiny from the standpoint of some (specified) set of further normative judgments. (Street, 2008, 208)

MC is a version of this general view and can be seen as constructed from five main ideas: a Euthyphro-style framing of moral realism/anti-realism debate, reasons fundamentalism, a conception of reasons as taking the "If I were you…" mode articulated by Bernard Williams, John Rawls's pure procedural justice, and Street's idea of the constitutive nature of construction.

The Euthyphro question concerning value asks: *Do we value things because they are valuable, or are things valuable because we value them?* Metaethical constructivists answer clearly that: "Things are valuable ultimately because we value them, not the other way around" (Street, 2012, 41). If metaethical realism is framed as the view that things are valuable independently of our valuing them, then MC is a kind of anti-realism. Street's reason for rejecting realism is a separate issue that has to do with its alleged problem of being evolutionarily debunked (Street, 2006; Vavova, 2014). Nevertheless, proponents of MC believe in and seek to account for normative facts and truths, as well as a measure of moral objectivity.[1] Hence, in MC, normative judgements can be correct or true, and incorrect or false. Since, however, things are valuable because we value them, the truth of a normative judgement depends, in some way, on facts that are internal to the moral subject: "the standards of correctness that determine what counts as an error are ultimately set by our own normative judgments" (Street, 2008, 207). This means that MC is a kind of anti-realist cognitivism and a mind-dependent theory.

The second idea behind MC is reasons fundamentalism. This implicit assumption, underlying much of contemporary metaethical thinking, holds that a normative reason is the fundamental normative concept (Stratton-Lake, 2018). The view is that all normative talk, meaning all talk about what is good, right, just, virtuous, what ought to be done, etc., can be translated into talk about what reasons we have. Once the assumption of reasons fundamentalism is clarified, it becomes clear just how ambitious a theory metaethical constructivism is. Given this assumption, if one fixes all facts about what everyone's reasons are, then one fixes all normative facts. Hence, the primary goal of MC is to define what a normative reason is and to determine what normative reasons we have (Street, 2008, 223). For this reason, MC is first and foremost a theory of reasons.

[1] In assessing MC, moral objectivity is understood both in terms of the kinds of normative mistakes that are possible and the extent to which moral cognizers can agree on what is normatively true. Here, I explicitly differentiate between these two ways moral objectivity will be discussed.

As such, it aims to be a "global" theory of reasons, defining not just some subset of reasons but all normative reasons.

The reason for advancing a global theory of reasons has to do with perceived problems inherent to restricted theories of reasons (Street, 2010). Street argues that the restricted theories, like that of Ralws and Scanlon, fail to constitute a novel or distinct metaethical position, because by being restricted in their scope, they necessarily assume a set of unconstructed normative reasons. What these unconstructed reasons are and where they come from is left for a non-constructivist theory to explain.

The third idea behind MC is Bernard Williams's conception of reasons as taking the "If I were you…" mode (Williams, 1995, 36). On Williams's view, a consideration can be a normative reason for one only if one can recognize its force from one's own point of view. Hence, in MC, "there are no judgement-independent standards of correctness in the normative domain" (Street, 2008, 220), and the only way to determine the correctness of a normative claim for subject *S* is to evaluate it on the basis of *S*'s other judgements. In Street's own words: "the reasons a person has are always *ultimately* a function of the reasons she takes herself to have; any mistakes she makes will, in the end, be on her own terms" (Street, 2008, 208). (For clarification, Street does not differentiate between judgments and values, or between judging and valuing, and I adopt her usage here.)

As the last quote suggests, normative errors are posited to be possible in MC; however, as I just explained, the only way one can commit such an error is *by one's own lights*. Street offers an example of two simple organisms, each with only one consciously held value – while the former values survival, the latter values its own death (Street, 2008, 221–222). It is important to keep in mind that MC is a kind of anti-realism. The death-valuing organism is therefore not making a normative mistake by valuing death, for there are no standards of correctness external to the organism itself. Now, suppose the survival-valuing organism comes upon a plant that, unbeknownst to it, is poisonous. Street claims that although the value of survival is neither correct nor incorrect in itself – as the organism has no other values against which that value can be evaluated – its actions can be evaluated as correct or incorrect on the basis of the value of survival.[2] And so, the value of survival sets a standard of correctness that, together with the non-normative fact that the plant is poisonous, gives the organism a reason not to eat it. If the plant were not poisonous but nutritious, the same standard of correctness would yield a reason to eat the plant. Alternatively, if the death-valuing organism were to come upon the poisonous plant, its value would set the standard of correctness according to which the judgement "I should eat this" would be correct. If the plant were not poisonous but nutritious, then the death-valuing organism would have a reason not to eat it. Whether or not the organism *realizes* that it has these reasons is irrelevant – it would have them nonetheless.

This provides a means for MC to introduce a measure of moral objectivity: our reasons are independent of what we think they are. Let us refer to instances in which a subject is mistaken about their reasons due to (non-normative) factual error as cases of an "instrumental mistake". According to MC, an instrumental mistake is the first way in which one can err in one's judgements of right and wrong.

[2] It is an open question whether it is possible to make an instrumental normative error in relation to a value that itself is neither correct nor incorrect. I wish to acknowledge this problem but I cannot delve into it here.

The fourth and perhaps most distinct idea behind constructivism is Rawls's concept of pure procedural justice (Rawls, 1999, 73–78). According to Rawls's own influential example: "If a number of persons engage in a series of fair bets, the distribution of cash after each bet is fair, or at least not unfair, *whatever this distribution is*" (Rawls, 1999, 75, my emphasis). The point is that "there is no independent criterion for the right result: instead there is a correct or fair procedure such that the outcome is likewise correct or fair, whatever it is, provided that the procedure has been properly followed" (Rawls, 1999, 75). Hence, independent of the procedure, there are no facts about whether the outcome is fair. What matters here is not what the outcome (or the final distribution of goods) is – e.g. whether the final distribution is equitable. Instead, the only thing that matters is whether the correct procedure was followed. If it were, then the outcome is fair by definition, whatever it is.

The way reasons are defined and determined in MC is reminiscent of the idea of pure procedural justice. There is a correct procedure which yields, from a given input, reasons as outputs. The input, in this case, is the sum of all one's judgements and values, or what Street calls a *standpoint* (Street, 2010, 365), and the sum of non-normative facts. To judge/value something is to take some fact to be a reason for some response. The outputs of the procedure, as I mentioned, are reasons.

In Street's conceptual scheme, reasons are to judgements what truths are to beliefs. A reason is a normative claim that is true about me and that I may or may not know about, while a judgement or a value is a normative claim that I believe in, or uphold, and therefore know about. For example, if I have a conclusive reason to be disciplined, then the normative claim that *I should be disciplined* is true, and my judgment that *discipline is valuable* would be correct. (For this reason, I will use the terms "normative reason", "correct judgement", and "true normative claim" interchangeably.)

The procedure itself is where MC gets its distinct theoretical flavour. Apart from acknowledging non-normative facts, it *has to* follow certain rules because it matters that the *correct* procedure is followed. Here, one can already sense a problem arising for MC. If the procedure that yields reasons *has to* follow certain rules, then what are these rules if not independent normative truths or reasons independent of the procedure? Independent normative truths would amount to the denial of MC, for it rejects judgement-independent normative truths and claims that all reasons are the result of the procedure of construction. For example, it cannot be a rule of valuing that only compassionate and kind values can give us reasons, while violent and manipulative ones cannot.

Street's inventive solution is to claim that the rules of valuing are not normative but *constitutive* of valuing itself. They are such that if they are not followed, then one cannot be said to judge at all. Street likens truths about constitutive rules to conceptual truths about the correct application of a concept:

> A "parent" who has no children is not a parent. Similarly, someone who "judges" that she has conclusive reason to *Y*, but who (at the same time, in full consciousness) "judges" that she has no reason whatsoever to take what she recognizes to be the necessary means to *Y*, is not making a normative judgment. (Street, 2008, 227–228)

For example, if Joe judges that he absolutely must come home before midnight but also thinks he has no reason to catch the last train home – without which he will not arrive home in time – then

Joe is not judging. In other words, Joe cannot take himself to have a conclusive reason to *X*, recognize that *Y* is a necessary means to *X*, but at the same time think he has no reason to *Y*. Although he is not making a normative error in thinking this way, he is nevertheless making a conceptual error of misapplying the concept of a normative judgment. Hence, the first rule of valuing concerns a means-end relation: if I judge that I have a (conclusive) reason to *X*, then I have a reason to take the necessary means to *X*.

Another rule of judging is that Joe cannot think he has a reason to *X* and at the same time think he has no reason to *X*. Again, if he were to think this way, he would not be making a normative error; he would simply not be judging or taking something to be a reason at all.

These two rules of judging, together with the incorporation of non-normative facts, are most of what we learn about the procedure of construction. From our standpoint, the non-normative facts and the rules of judging follow our reasons. ("Follow" is explicitly not used here in the sense of logical entailment.)[3] Independent of this procedure of construction, which Street calls "withstanding scrutiny", there are no reasons – or in other words, there are no *unconstructed* reasons or reasons that do not constitutively follow from our own standpoints.

If this seems somewhat uninformative, I am afraid that is the point, for MC is a deceptively light theory that takes a "hands off" approach, as it were. Reminiscent of Williams's idea of the "If I were you…" mode, MC has nothing to say about what goes into the procedure of construction – the values and judgements that comprise our standpoint. We value what we value, and that is our starting point. The death-valuing organism made no mistake in valuing death. No matter what our initial values and judgements are, they create the standards with which we evaluate further normative judgements and the initial values and judgements contained within our standpoint themselves. It is important to reiterate that once we have a multitude of values, any given value from our standpoint can be evaluated and deemed correct or incorrect on the basis of our other values. If a particular value of ours does not withstand scrutiny from the perspective of our other values, then they are deemed incorrect. This is the second way in which one can commit a normative mistake in MC.

Reminiscent of Rawls's idea of procedural justice, MC has nothing to say about what comes out of the procedure – that is, reasons and normative truths. There is nothing in MC that guarantees that the process of construction will yield a particular outcome for everyone, or that it will converge on a single, universal moral system for all. That is why Street calls her view "Humean" as opposed to "Kantian", which in turn aims to show that, from the standpoint of any given valuer, a universally shared set of moral conclusions follows (Street, 2012, 41).

> The Humean constructivist accepts the idea that if one had entered the world with a radically different set of values… then one's normative reasons would have been, or would become, radically different in a corresponding way. (Street, 2012, 41).

Given that nothing guarantees that moral cognizers will converge on a single set of moral truths, MC does not secure moral objectivity in the sense of widespread moral agreement. In the Humean variety, what matters is not a particular outcome but whether the formal procedure was followed. The "formality" here is achieved by basing the rules of judging on what is constitutive

[3] In a later text, however, Street reformulates her view and claims that reasons follow from standpoints "as a logical or instrumental matter" (Street, 2012, 40).

of judging. In a sense, metaethical constructivism strives to say "as little as possible" about the part it focuses on the most: the procedure of construction itself.

As I explained earlier, the primary goal of MC is to define our normative reasons. Hence, according to MC, *a reason X to do Y for subject A is*:

> … constituted by the fact that the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A's other judgments about reasons. (Street, 2008, 223)

A judgement withstands scrutiny from a set of other relevant judgements if it is constitutively entailed by them and by the non-normative facts (Street, 2008, 225–226).

To conclude this overview, it is important to keep in mind that the procedure of construction is not a psychological process that one follows when reflecting on and considering one's reasons; rather, it is meant to be objective. We have the reasons we have, whether we know it or not. It is as if, once we acquire values, the construction procedure "takes place" automatically and yields our reasons. Also, apart from failures to value at all, two kinds of normative mistakes are possible in MC – specifically, when (i) we make instrumental mistake due to being misinformed and (ii) when some of our judgements do not withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of others, i. e. when they are incorrect. These factors allow Street to introduce a kind of objectivity into her theory: "A person does not have a normative reason merely in virtue of taking herself to have it; it's easy to go wrong about one's reasons; and we do so all the time" (Street, 2008, 207).

The Formality Objection

If MC is to remain a purely formal theory that relies only on what is constitutive of valuing, then, I argue, it must leave many common normative questions unanswerable. Street writes that a constitutive condition of judging is what the concept of judging implies, referring to conceptual truths about judging (Street, 2008, 228). Hence, being "constitutive of judging" seems to boil down to being the condition of the proper use of a concept.

Suppose Street is right that taking the necessary means to one's ends is a constitutive condition of judging. Call this particular condition "NM". Street does not state exactly what the test for being a constitutive condition is – from what she does say, it seems that we ought to consider the question: *if not-NM, then is it still judging?* If the answer is "no", then NM is a constitutive condition of judging. Street does not say what the method for arriving at the answer is, but based on her writing, she seems to rely on linguistic intuition. So I will take her view to be this: if it seems to a competent user of the concept of judging/valuing that *if not-NM, then it is not judging*, then NM is a constitutive condition.

One complication for MC – which Street is well aware of – is that depending on the order in which we consider our judgements, we end up with different sets of reasons. For instance, suppose that Joe's standpoint contains two sets of judgements: *K* (achieve long-term health) and *M* (enjoy smoking). These two sets are mutually exclusive, however; from *K* follows not-*M*, and from *M* follows not-*K*. Hence, depending on the order in which we choose to consider our judgements, we end up with a different set of reasons: to live longer or to smoke.

Street believes there is a correct order of consideration: we should start by judging by our most strongly held judgements first. This is because, she claims, our stronger judgements and values

are more "ours" (Street, 2008, 235). If Joe is a typical person, the value he ascribes to living longer may be stronger than the value he ascribes to the enjoyment of smoking. So, Joe should start by assuming *K* and infer not-*M*. Call this rule the prioritization of stronger values (PS).

Is the PS rule constitutive of valuing? Say that Joe decides to reverse the order of consideration; he starts by assuming that he wants to smoke, and from that he correctly infers that he does not need to live longer, even though his value of long-term health is stronger. We might want to say that Joe is thinking irrationally, and this may be so. But, in MC, this is not relevant to determining whether a rule is constitutive. PS is not a constitutive rule of judging by virtue of its seeming to us that *if not-PS, then the subject is irrational* – to say this would be to assume substantive reasons about what is rational and thus to deny MC. PS is a constitutive rule of judging by virtue of its seeming to a competent user of the concept of judging/valuing that *if not-PS, then Joe is not judging*. So the real question is: if Joe assumes a lesser value, is he no longer valuing?

Well, that is a strangely specific question, but I see no reason to deny that Joe would still be valuing – although, in my view, badly. As a *reductio*, suppose PS is constitutive of judging. Suppose that if Joe prefers living longer to the enjoyment of smoking, and yet chooses the enjoyment of smoking, then we cannot say he really prefers living longer to the enjoyment of smoking. He simply ceases to value. Firstly, this would be counterintuitive. Joe continues to smoke, and so he clearly continues to base his decision on valuing *something*. Secondly, if Joe ceases to value in this case, then metaethical constructivism would not allow for the possibility of Joe underestimating or overestimating his values. Joe would not be able to underestimate his valuing of living longer, and he would not be making a normative mistake, but would merely cease to value. But Street strives to account for the possibility of underestimation or overestimation of one's own values.

So it does not seem that PS is a constitutive rule of judging. Without PS, however, MC would be arbitrarily pluralistic, as our reasons would depend crucially on the order of consideration chosen. It would be more in line with the spirit of metaethical constructivism to say that, independent of a given standpoint, there is no correct/incorrect order of consideration for judgements. If it were the case that the correctness of judgements depended on something as arbitrary as the chosen order of consideration, Street thinks there would be no fact of the matter about what *S*'s reasons are (Street, 2008, 236). Then, the spirit of MC would seem to imply that there is no fact of the matter about what anyone's reasons are.

MC could salvage at least someone's reasons if subjects were reflective enough to realize the need for an ordering judgement: J_o, which determines a single order of consideration. However, it does not seem that we normally think about such things as "What should be the order in which I consider my values?" What other reasons do we have to believe that we have these kinds of meta-judgements implicitly in us? If we do not have them, then, according to MC, we do not have any reasons whatsoever.

There are many other questions we could ask about the process of construction, of the sort that we cannot give constitutive or purely formal answers to. One concerns the specifics of prioritizing the stronger value. Suppose a closeted lesbian experiences internal conflict between her sexual orientation and a host of her other values (fear of rejection, moral condemnation of homosexuality, religiosity, etc.). Say that her standpoint contains two mutually exclusive sets:

one with a single strong value *K* (J_1: being gay) and a set of multiple somewhat weaker values *M* (J_1, J_2, …, J_n). What does it mean to prioritize a stronger value set in this case? Is it to assume *K* and infer not-*M*, or, if *M* is collectively a stronger set, is it to assume *M* and infer not-*K*? What does it mean for *M* to be a collectively stronger set than *K*? How does this work?

The answers do not matter, actually; what matters is that we cannot provide them by relying on what is constitutive of valuing alone. The concept of judging/valuing is not rich or precise enough to answer such specific questions clearly. In some linguistic situations, the conditions of a proper use of the concept are vague and imprecise. But without such answers, the theory does not say what our reasons are when our values conflict – which is arguably a common situation. Hence, it leaves basic normative questions unanswerable.

Another strangely specific question concerns circular constitutive entailment. Logically, *P* follows from *P*. In MC, however, a judgment does not constitutively follow from itself. If I consider whether judgement *J* is correct, I cannot ground my evaluation on *J* itself; I must base it on other judgements. For this reason, if I were the kind of creature that only had one value, then it could not be said that my single value is correct or incorrect. Street claims that only with a multiplicity of values/judgements do correct/incorrect values come into existence.

Why can't my value be justified by itself? Again, the question is not whether it is rational to justify values in a circular fashion. The question is whether we cease to value if we value in a circle. So, if I value my life because I value my life, is it true that I cease to value? While it may be strange to value in a circle, and may even be irrational, it is not clear to me that I thereby cease to value, or that I no longer understand what valuing is. Suppose, as a *reductio* again, that if I value my life because I value my life, I cease to value my life. This seems counterintuitive. A person who values his life because he values his life might be irrational, but it seems clear that, in fact, he continues to want to live on! If MC were to persist in claiming that there is no non-circular valuing, it would only become blind to real-life cases of valuing. That would suggest that the concept of valuing MC utilises is revisionist.

Michael Bratman hints at another problem of formality (2012, 89). Going back to the necessary means condition of valuing NM, Bratman notes that it is not clear how, exactly, the principle should be formulated. This is because there have been other authors who defend different versions of the principle and because Street herself offered slightly different versions, some referring to conclusive reasons to an end, others to a reason to an end. If the concept of judging/valuing was rich and precise enough, it should be pretty clear and uncontroversial how the principle ought to be formulated. Hence, it does not seem that relying just on what is constitutive of valuing gives us the answers we need. If the concept of valuing is not rich enough to supplant our answers to such specific questions, where else might we obtain them?

To conclude this objection, using the theory practically requires us to delve into specific questions about the process of construction and the principles it involves. But to answer such questions, the theory cannot make do with what is constitutive of valuing alone. If we rely on what is constitutive of valuing alone, then the theory will leave many common normative questions unanswerable, and thus will become, I am afraid, practically useless. But if we rely on something more than what is constitutive of valuing, the theory will have to rely on substantive normative assumptions and thus deny itself.

The Subjectivity Objection

One of the selling points of MC is that agents are not the final authority on what their reasons are, and thus normative truth may be independent of what we think it is. This is because its proponents stress that what one's reasons are is dependent not on what one thinks they are but on what objectively and constitutively follows from one's standpoint (Hopster, 2017; Street, 2008, 207). Consequently, if, say, other agents have better knowledge of my standpoint or the non-normative facts, they could know better than I what my reasons are. However, I argue here that this advantage of MC is more limited than it would appear.

The way to see this is to start by considering a case of an internal conflict of values. For instance, imagine that Alex is deciding whether to smoke another cigarette. He is in conflict because he values both the enjoyment he gets from smoking and his long-term health. In such a case, Street claims that the conflict may be resolved by another value judgement about trade-offs between the values in conflict. She writes:

> Alex's judgment concerning the proper trade-offs between present pleasures and future health itself stands up to scrutiny in terms of his other normative judgments. And of course, it might not: for instance, it might be that, given the strong reasons he takes himself to have to accomplish certain projects in his seventies, and given the fact that good health is a crucial prerequisite for accomplishing them, he is not placing enough weight (as determined by the standards set by those other normative judgments) on the importance of his future health relative to present pleasures; he may be underestimating how important his future health is to him. (Street, 2008, 234)

Hence, according to Street, one can make the normative mistake of over- or underestimating the importance of one's values, and thus hold incorrect values.

Let us say that, according to MC, the fact that Alex values long-term health and future projects makes his valuing of continuing to smoke incorrect – that he has decisive reason to stop smoking. Nevertheless, suppose that Alex, in full awareness of this, says "To hell with it!" and decides to continue smoking indefinitely.

Now for the crucial question: If Alex does this, is he underestimating the value he places on his health and future projects, or is he changing his standpoint? Before answering, it is important to remember that the fact that one values and judges, i.e. takes oneself to have reasons, is why one has reasons. One can stop valuing and judging at all, in which case one would cease to have any reasons whatsoever (Street, 2008, 237–238). If this is possible in MC, then surely it ought to be possible to change the importance one places on one's values or to completely abandon a given value and adopt a new one. So, when Alex decides to continue smoking, is he making the normative mistake of underestimating his values, or is he changing them?

Street does not say how to determine, operationally, what someone's values are and how strong they are. Therefore, I will suppose the assumption is that the person herself is, under normal circumstances, the authority on the matter. Additionally, we could observe Alex's behaviour and infer his real values that way. But since Alex himself says, "To hell with it!" and continues smoking, can we not legitimately infer that he has changed his values? How else could we know that someone has changed his values?

If by deciding to continue smoking Alex can be said to have changed his values, however, he is not making a normative mistake. Whatever other cases of supposed value under- or overestimation we consider, they may in fact be cases of changing one's values on the fly. The behaviour that supposedly signals the breach of one's values – smoking, in our case – can be viewed as proof of a change of values.

I am not aware of any tool at MC's disposal that distinguishes between these two cases. If the theory is unable, however, to distinguish between a change in value and a breach of value, it cannot posit that a value was breached – for it might have merely changed, in which case no normative mistake would have occurred.

This does not mean that MC precludes the possibility of making normative mistakes, for an instrumental mistake due to misinformation is still possible. It does mean, however, that unless MC can somehow distinguish cases of under/overestimating one's values from cases of changing one's values, without positing substantive normative assumptions, normative mistakes due to value under- or overestimation may not be posited, even by *one's own lights*. As it is less clear that what our reasons are is independent of what we think they are, MC is less normatively objective.

The Novelty Objection

Street defines MC so that it avoids descending into speaker relativism. Speaker relativism is the view that in determining whether "*X* is a reason to do *Y* for agent *A*", the standards of correctness are fixed by the speaker's standpoint. A different speaker means different standards of correctness and possibly different truth values for the statement "*X* is a reason to do *Y* for agent *A*". Instead, in determining whether "*X* is a reason to do *Y* for agent *A*", Street wants the standards of correctness to be fixed by *A*'s standpoint (Street, 2008, 224). This allows us to have a moral disagreement about what *A*'s reasons are, making MC more plausible.

Despite this effort, however, I argue that MC is simply a kind of individual moral relativism, for what reasons we have is determined by our standpoints, and our standpoints individually differ (Westacott, n.d.). Hence, reasons – and with them moral truths – are relative to an individual. There are no reasons that are universally shared by necessity, and any reasons that are shared, or widely shared, are only accidentally so. Street stresses this point herself:

> According to metaethical constructivism, it is a mistake to ask about the correctness of any normative judgment in the utter abstract, without making at least implicit reference to a standpoint constituted by some further set of normative judgments. (Street, 2008, 220)

If MC is correct, it makes no sense to ask "Is it wrong to torture children for fun?" – as if asking about what is morally true for everyone. Instead, all normative truths are relative to an individual. So, if I were to meet a person who was not misinformed and who had a coherent set of values, say an ideally coherent Caligula who tortured children for fun or whose goal was to inflict as much pain on others as possible (Gibbard, 1999, 145), he would have most reason to torture. His actions would follow from his standpoint, and therefore, his conduct would be right.

To illustrate the depth of MC's commitment to relativism, keep in mind that MC is a theory of all normative reasons. In a paper devoted to epistemic normativity, Street commits to the view that

epistemic reasons have to be given the same constructivist treatment as practical reasons (Street, 2009). In her view, epistemic reasons are also standpoint-dependent.

The epistemic reasons we have determine what we should believe, what we are justified in believing, what we know, what is certain, as well as attributions of other kinds of epistemic status to our beliefs. Given that our epistemic reasons stem from our standpoints and that these standpoints differ, the beliefs we should hold will likewise differ. We could ask: "Are there good reasons to believe in MC?" Well, again, this question is not intelligible in MC as it stands. For it to make sense, it would have to be relativized to an individual – just like moral questions. Some people view (some kind of) moral objectivity, compatibility with naturalism, accordance with strongly held particular judgements, and the ability to account for categorical imperatives as non-negotiable desiderata of a metaethical theory – and these views represent their theoretical values and judgements. Others have different theoretical values and judgements. Since we have different sets of epistemic values and judgements, we have different standpoints and thus different sets of epistemic reasons to believe a given metaethical theory. In the end, perhaps I should believe in MC, but you should not.

I assume that Street described her metaethical constructivism as a *novel* position because, in contrast to previous constructivist theories advanced by Rawls and Scanlon, it constitutes a fully-fledged metaethical stance. However, as a form of individual moral relativism, metaethical constructivism inherits the same set of theoretical advantages and disadvantages as other forms of relativism. In what sense, then, is metaethical constructivism a novel and distinct metaethical position?

The Shortsightedness Objection

This objection is inspired by Gary Jaeger's argument against MC based on the wisdom of hindsight (Jaeger, 2015). In his argument, MC cannot accommodate reasons that an agent would discover in hindsight thanks to the fact that his values have changed. Although I think Jaeger touches on an important aspect of MC, I would like to substantially modify his initial objection and formulate a new one. Therefore, what follows is a new objection inspired by Jaeger's work.

Suppose that in the past (t_1), Alex was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Suppose, further, that Alex is currently (t_2) no longer a Klan member and deeply regrets his past membership and racist deeds. Although Alex is deeply regretful at t_2, the object of his regret is his past deeds at t_1, not his present deeds at t_2, for he is no longer a racist. Further, it would be strange to say that one deeply regrets one's past deeds but that one nonetheless thinks they were fine. So if Alex regrets his past racism, then he should think that he should not have been a member, that it was wrong for him to be a member. And if he thinks it was wrong for him to be a member, he now thinks he had a conclusive reason not to be a member. If he lacked this reason then, it would be impossible for him to be correct in being deeply regretful now. The question then is: is it true, according to MC, that Alex had a conclusive reason not to be a member at t_1? And is it possible for Alex to be right in being deeply regretful of his past?

The answer will depend on what reasons followed from Alex's standpoint at t_1 (call this standpoint S_1). If a conclusive reason not to be racist follows from S_1, then this reason existed, and he is correct to be regretful. If, however, a conclusive reason not to be racist does not follow from S_1, then there was no such reason and he is wrong to be regretful.

It is possible, a proponent of MC might say, that this reason did exist at t_1. Perhaps Alex was misinformed about members of other racial groups at t_1. Suppose, however, that he was not misinformed; that during his conversion to being non-racist, he learned no new relevant facts about such people. Even then, it would be possible for there to be this reason at t_1, namely if there is sufficient overlap between Alex's past S_1 and current S_2 standpoints. If, for example, Alex was not really a racist at heart at t_1 but had other strong values, such as equality and kindness, ones that he suppressed but that nonetheless counted decisively against his racism even then, then it may be that he had conclusive reason not to be a racist at t_1.[4]

But what if he really was a racist at heart and had no other sufficiently strong values that counted decisively against racism? In that case, he had no conclusive reason not to be a Klan member at t_1, which means it is false that he should not have been a Klan member and that therefore he cannot be correct in being deeply regretful now, at t_2.

Intuitively, however, one can be right to be deeply regretful about the past and a proper theory of reasons ought to be able to account for this. It seems MC implies that under certain conditions, it is impossible to legitimately evaluate (criticize, blame, or praise) one's past self, because that self was governed by a different set of standards of correctness than one's present self. This is the case when (1) there is no factual misinformation involved, and (2) the person is sufficiently different from his past, such that there is no sufficient overlap between his past and present standpoints.

And what is true of the past ought to be true of the future as well. Suppose conditions (1) and (2) are met in the case of both my present and my future self. Say that my present self makes no relevant factual errors and that my future self will be radically different from me (perhaps I will go through some radical personal changes, so that there is no sufficient overlap between my current and my future standpoints). In that case, I cannot correctly judge my future self, and I also cannot correctly judge whether I want to become that person. Hence, in MC I cannot legitimately set long-term goals for who I want to be. Unless misinformation is involved, I am in effect normatively "locked" between the not-so-distant past and the not-so-distant future.

This is what I call evaluative *shortsightedness*. It is the consequence of MC's claim that correct judgements are dependent on standpoints and the fact that one's standpoint evolves over time.

One way out for proponents of MC may be to re-interpret the initial situation. Perhaps we should say that Alex's deep regrets are not really about the past but about the present. In regretting his past deeds, he is not condemning his past self but merely demonstrating and proving his current anti-racist values to others. The same re-interpretation ought to apply to our normative stance toward our own future.

If this is what we do when we talk about our past and future selves, then we are never really evaluating past and future; rather, we are demonstrating something about our present selves. If that is the case, proponents of such a view of regret/planning owe us an explanation for why it appears that when we regret our past deeds, our regret concerns the past when it actually does not. The same account must explain why what seems to be an evaluation of our future does not actually pertain to the future. Perhaps such a view of past and future evaluation is well-defensible

[4] Let us ignore the problem of changing one's values for a moment.

and correct. In that case, all I have shown in this objection is that MC is committed to such a view.

Wrong Makes Right

I argue here MC blurs the line between normative truth and falsity, for what is right for me may depend on my normative mistakes. In consequence, it is harder to take morality or any other normativity seriously.

Suppose that my standpoint is comprised of five judgements: S_1 (J_1, J_2, J_3, J_4, J_5). Given this standpoint of mine, the non-normative facts, and what is constitutively involved in judging, suppose that some of my judgements do withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of my other judgements, while others do not. Moreover, suppose that it is also a normative fact that there are some reasons that follow from S_1 that I have not recognized before. So, say that the following set of reasons constitutively follows from S_1: R_1 (J_1, J_2, $J_3 + J_6$, J_7). While S_1 is what I judge to be normatively true, R_1 is what is normatively true.

Suppose further that I reflect on what constitutively follows from my values and conclude, mistakenly, that J_1 is incorrect. As a consequence, I abandon J_1 – I no longer have this value. So now, my new standpoint is without J_1: S_2 (J_2, J_3, J_4, J_5). It is reasonable to assume that from a new standpoint, a new set of reasons follows, say: R_2 (J_2, J_3, J_4, $J_5 + J_6$).

I reflect on my values further, and since I am not a very good thinker, I make another mistake; I come to believe that J_2 is incorrect and that another judgement, J_8, is correct. So I abandon J_2 and incorporate J_8. Now my standpoint is: S_3 (J_3, J_4, $J_5 + J_8$). From this new standpoint, a different set of reasons follows, say: R_3 (J_4, $J_5 + J_8$, J_9).

Now compare what would be normatively true without and with these mistakes:

- R_1 (J_1, J_2, $J_3 + J_6$, J_7)
- R_3 (J_4, J_5, $+ J_8$, J_9)

As a consequence of mistaken thinking, a completely different normative ideal would emerge. Therefore, what we should do (our reasons) is dependent on what we should not do (mistakenly abandon correct judgements). For this reason, MC blurs the line between normative truth and falsity.

A similar principle applies to epistemic normativity. If the "logic" of epistemic reasons is the same as the logic of practical reasons, then it may be that factual or evaluative error determines what should be believed. Just as in the *wrong makes right* case above, our epistemic errors can change what we should believe. I do not know if Street would wish to base our epistemic reasons on our standpoint alone or on our existing beliefs as well (Street, 2009). Either way, the outcome of my argument is not affected. For if what epistemic reasons I have is dependent on my standpoint, or on my existing beliefs, then by abandoning a correct value or belief I may change my standpoint, and thus change what epistemic reasons I have. So again, what I should believe is sensitive to what epistemic mistakes I may have made.

What is the upshot of this objection? I think that if what is right for me and what I should believe depends in part on my moral and epistemic mistakes, it is harder to take my moral and epistemic

reasons seriously, for my existing reasons may well be based on my mistakes. What does it matter to strive for and hold correct judgements if their status of correctness is dependent on incorrect judgements? And why should I take seriously my "correct" value judgements if they may be wholly dependent on incorrect value judgements?

It seems to me that at least morality, if not epistemic normativity, is something that must be possible to take seriously. Otherwise, it would not be possible to explain why some people are able to sacrifice their lives for what they believe is right, or accept a painful truth for what they believe is correct. If one cannot take "normativity" seriously, I am not sure we are still talking about genuine normativity. For this reason, I find it morally counterintuitive that MC permits cases in which wrong makes right. It would seem more plausible, in my view, if such cases were avoided; however, there appears to be no clear way to achieve this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my main argument is that metaethical constructivism cannot rely solely on what is constitutive of valuing. This reliance fails to make the theory sufficiently determinative. Since the notion of valuing is not rich enough, the theory must leave many common ethical questions unanswered. There appears to be no viable remedy, as accepting substantive normative assumptions to resolve this issue would be self-defeating for the theory.

I also argued that Street's claim that one can be mistaken about what one's reasons are is more limited than presented. Furthermore, apart from Street's inventive idea of constitutive construction, metaethical constructivism is not a novel metaethical position. In principle, it is no different from individual relativism, inheriting its theoretical advantages and disadvantages. Finally, MC implies evaluative shortsightedness and obscures the distinction between correct and incorrect judgments, further complicating the theory's viability.

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