Constructivism in Ethics
CARLA BAGNOLI (ed.)
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As a metaethical position, constructivism suggests that moral norms are not discovered but instead are somehow constructed by agents. On first blush certain versions of moral relativism can appear constructivist where they suggest that moral norms are just social norms created by groups, and so (legitimate) moral norms could turn out to be different between groups. But more sophisticated versions of constructivism differentiate from relativism by purporting that moral norms issue from the rational processes of agents, a view presented by John Rawls and which he in turn attributed to Kant. On this latter understanding, constructivism avoids obvious relativism by suggesting that moral norms are objective insofar as they apply to all rational agents. The essays collected in this volume focus on debates about constructivism since Rawls's contribution to metaethics.

At the outset Carla Bagnoli offers background on the Kantian themes that the subsequent commentators often draw upon. Bagnoli suggests that two projects frame much of the ensuing discussion: a positive project, insofar as would-be constructivists argue that rational agents have "moral obligations that apply with rational agency and genuine authority," issuing entirely from "the laws of reasons" (7); and a negative project, arguing against robustly realist interpretations of moral norms. The essays are not officially segregated along these lines; indeed, it is at times difficult to discern any definite themes between the essays, aside from the obvious nucleus of constructivism. If one were forced to find something to gripe about with this collection of essays, the perhaps too-broad theme of constructivism *simpliciter* would be it.

The collection begins in earnest with Robert Stern, who, with Christine Korsgaard as his primary target, dissects four key paragraphs from Kant's *Groundwork* in order to show why the Formula of Humanity is best understood on realist rather than constructivist grounds. Stern's essay kicks off a recurring theme that questions the historical support (primarily Kant) that constructivists have used to support their position. In the next essay, William FitzPatrick examines Korsgaard's "neo-Kantian constitutivism", which FitzPatrick sees as a synthesis of Korsgaard's neo-Kantian view (on display in her *Sources of Normativity*, *Kingdom of Ends*, etc.) and her more recent neo-Platonic moral psychology (evidenced in her *Self-Constitution*). FitzPatrick understands Korsgaard as attempting to make normative truths fall out of necessary facts about practical agency, a view that promises robustly real normative truths that are not dependent on contingent facts about a particular agent, yet without the metaphysical costs of other realist enterprises. Ultimately FitzPatrick is suspicious that any appeal to the necessities of practical agency can demonstrate anything about specifically *moral* normative truths.

Oliver Sensen, like Stern, questions whether Kant is actually best understood as a constructivist, arguing instead that Kant is better described as a *transcendental* constitutivist. This view shares with robust realism the view that morality is not constructed by human beings; as well, it shares with constructivism the view that there is no moral domain prior to human reasoning. Instead, Sensen's constitutivism says that morality is somehow created by the principle of reason, but as a matter of necessity. I confess that I do not see precisely what constructivists like Korsgaard are supposed to see Sensen's view as contributing to the discussion. At times, Sensen seems to

understand constructivism as suggesting that we consciously or deliberately create the moral law, and since this is not how Kant understood morality, Kant therefore cannot properly be called a constructivist. Later in the volume, LeBar likewise questions the Kantian constructivist appeal to a purely formal conception of rationality, and LeBar argues for a closer connection between rationality and one's conception of the good life. (LeBar's essay seems better situated at to the outset of the volume, where the discussion of Kantian support for constructivism is a more prominent theme.)

In the fourth essay, Nadeem Hussain and Nishi Shah address Korsgaard's attempt to transcend metaethics. Korsgaard at times suggests that she is not merely providing an alternative metaethical account to realism and anti-realism, nor simply a normative ethical account about what we ought to do, but rather is bridging these domains and thus ultimately offering an account that goes beyond the limits of both. Hussain and Shah argue that this apparent 'discontent' with traditional metaethics rests on a misunderstanding of the merits of that branch of ethics, and more importantly that Korsgaard has not in fact transcended metaethics at all; rather she has in fact offered her own metaethical account. The heart of Hussain and Shah's essay is their stress on the important differences between normative and metaethical projects, highlighting why both are important in their own right.

Half-way through the collection, David Copp's essay marks the first departure from focusing exclusively on Kantian versions of constructivism. Copp is the first to seriously address Sharon Street's specifically Humean constructivist account, and Copp rehearses some of his well-established disagreements with Street's somewhat idiosyncratic constructivism. He positions Street against Kant, Korsgaard, and David Gauthier, showing why Street's constructivism is not broad enough to capture the spirit of these other constructivist accounts. But the essential purpose of Copp's essay is to dispel any suggestion that constructivism is a worthwhile alternative to realist/anti-realist debates in metaethics. He argues that constructivism, when it is plausible, is similar enough to naturalist realism that we ought to be dissuaded from splitting hairs over their differences. Following this, Stephen Engstrom disagrees with Copp's thesis, suggesting instead that constructivism offers a unique and worthwhile alternative to realism/anti-realism debates. Yet Engstrom does not think that constructivism is a new alternative, and his particularly fascinating essay traces a purported lineage that sees constructivism emerging from more ancient debates between Stoics and Epicureans. In her essay, Bagnoli attempts to properly situate constructivism on the metaethical map. Rather than seeing the view fall somewhere between the ontological claims of realism and anti-realism, Bagnoli takes constructivism to be a view about the objectivity of practical knowledge. In this sense, constructivism is not an ontological thesis at all, and so traditional arguments against constructivism (Copp's argument that it adds nothing interesting to naturalism, for example) perhaps miss the mark.

The final two essays concern constructivism and its relation to our normative practices. In general, metaethicists are reluctant to say that their positions prescribe particular normative views (indeed, given the argument earlier in the volume from Hussain and Shah, we should not expect a close connection), and in their respective essays Thomas Baldwin and Henry Richardson do not issue particular normative guidelines. Rather, Baldwin examines how it is that constructivism can indeed influence normative ethics, for which he draws heavily on Rawls and T.M. Scanlon. And

Richardson appeals to the pragmatists for support in attempting to make sense of our changing (or revised) moral norms. Whether intentional or not, it is natural to see the end of this volume of essays as signaling a progression from the purely metaethical towards the normative.

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