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**Kantian Constructivism and the Sources of Normativity[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract:** While it is uncontroversial that Kantian constructivism has implications for normative ethics, its status as a *metaethical* view has been contested. In this article, I provide a characterisation of metaethical Kantian constructivism that withstands these criticisms. I start by offering a partial defence of Sharon Street’s *practical standpoint characterisation*. However, I argue that this characterisation, as presented by Street, is ultimately incomplete because it fails to demonstrate that the claims of Kantian constructivism constitute a distinctive contribution to metaethics. I then try to complete the practical standpoint characterisation by elaborating on Christine Korsgaard’s suggestion that metaethical Kantian constructivism takes up a position on the *source* of morality’s normativity.

# Introduction

John Rawls famously labels his approach to moral theory a “Kantian form of constructivism” (Rawls 1980, 515). “The leading idea” of his Kantian constructivism “is to establish a suitable connection between a particular conception of the person and first principles of justice, by means of a procedure of construction” (Rawls 1980, 516).

Rawls argues that Kantian constructivism is uniquely suited to a central task of modern political philosophy: to find a workable conception of justice for a liberal democratic society (1980, 517-518). Such a conception cannot be based on any particular theory of the good life. Conceiving of themselves as free and equal moral persons, the citizens of a liberal democratic society do not regard themselves as beholden to any such theory and will therefore view a conception of justice based on it as arbitrary (1980, 521-522). Instead, Rawls suggests, a workable conception of justice for a liberal democratic society must be an expression of the liberal democratic conception of the person *itself*. For then its principles will spell out how the social life of free and equal moral persons *as such* ought to be regulated (Rawls 1980, 517).

In order to arrive at such a conception, Rawls argues, we are to devise a procedure for the construction of the principles of justice, and the constraints of this procedure are to express the different elements of the liberal democratic conception of the person. The procedure that Rawls suggests is a hypothetical contract situation, the “original position” (Rawls 1980, 522). It is important to note that the original position does not *track* a set of independently correct principles of justice. Rawls writes:

The parties in the original position do not agree on what the moral facts are, as if there already were such facts. It is not that, being situated impartially, they have a clear and undistorted view of a prior and independent moral order. Rather (for constructivism), there is no such order, and therefore no such facts apart from the procedure of construction as a whole; the facts are identified by the principles that result (Rawls 1980, 565).

Rawls contrasts this aspect of Kantian constructivism with the position he labels “rational intuitionism”, which holds that “first principles of morals […] are self-evident propositions […] fixed by a moral order that is prior to and independent of our conception of the person and the social role of morality” (Rawls 1980, 557).

Although Rawls’s remarks are concerned with his approach to justice in a liberal democratic society, several philosophers have developed theories that extend the basic tenets of his Kantian constructivism to larger parts of morality and normativity (e.g. Bagnoli 2013c; Forst 2011; Hill 1989; Korsgaard 1996; O’Neill 1989; Reath 2006; Schapiro 2001). Indeed, Rawls himself proposes such an extension as an interpretation of Kant’s moral theory (Rawls 2000, 235-252).

It is uncontroversial that Kantian constructivism has implications for *normative ethics*. After all, the notion that substantive moral principles are *constructed* in some specific way places constraints upon the *content* of these principles. However, while some theorists endorse Kantian constructivism as a theory within normative ethics only (e.g. Hill 2012), others want to develop it as a position in *metaethics* as well (e.g. Bagnoli 2016; Korsgaard 2008b; O’Neill 1989). Mirroring Rawls’s distinction between Kantian constructivism and rational intuitionism, the alleged metaethical implications of Kantian constructivism are commonly taken to conflict with *moral realism* (e.g. Bagnoli 2016; Korsgaard 2008b; O’Neill 1989; Shafer-Landau 2003; Sensen 2013; Stern 2013; Street 2010; Wood 2008).

Yet, it is highly controversial whether there can be a genuinely *metaethical* Kantian constructivism. Critics argue that some disagreements among purportedly metaethical Kantian constructivists are disagreements in normative ethics rather than metaethics (e.g. Darwall *et al*. 1992). Others object that it is not clear what metaethical question Kantian constructivism purports to address since it appears to be compatible with a range of answers to traditional metaethical questions, including those given by moral realism (e.g. Hussain and Shah 2006; Hussain and Shah 2013).

In this article, I want to provide a characterisation of metaethical Kantian constructivism that withstands these criticisms. I start by offering a partial defence of Sharon Street’s *practical standpoint characterisation* (Section 2). After defending Street’s argument against recent objections, I point out an advantage of the practical standpoint characterisation which Street does not mention. However, I argue that this characterisation, as presented by Street, is incomplete because it fails to demonstrate that the claims of Kantian constructivism constitute a distinctive contribution to metaethics (Section 3).

I then try to complete the practical standpoint characterisation by elaborating on Christine Korsgaard’s suggestion that metaethical Kantian constructivism takes up a position on the *source* of morality’s normativity (Section 4). I argue that the question of thesource of morality’s normativity is a metaethical question, albeit one that is distinct from the questions that many traditional metaethical theories focus on. In particular, I contend that views about the sources of normativity belong to the *metaphysics* but not to (what I shall call) the *ontology* of normativity. More specifically, following a suggestion made by Ruth Chang in another context, I suggest that such views are concerned with what *grounds* the fact that some consideration has normative force, not with what having normative force amounts to (2009; 2013a; 2013b).

I do not claim that Kantian constructivism somehow *transcends* or *replaces* traditional metaethics. Instead, I argue that Kantian constructivism constitutes a distinctive metaethical view. To be such a view, it suffices that Kantian constructivism give a distinctive answer to *one* genuinely metaethical question about *some* set of normative phenomena. Thus, if the question of the sources of normativity is genuinely metaethical, and Kantian constructivism addresses this question about morality (or some part of it), then it need not present an account of the normative domain *as a whole*, or address the question of, say, the meaning of normative *terms*, to be metaethical.

Since my goal is to characterise *metaethical* Kantian constructivism, I use the labels ‘constructivism’ and ‘Kantian constructivism’ to refer to metaethically ambitious views, unless I explicitly say otherwise.

Although I briefly comment on it in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, the primary topic of this paper is not whether Kant should be read as a constructivist. Instead, I am discussing the position of Kantian constructivism as it features in present-day moral philosophy.

It is often assumed that a satisfying characterisation of metaethical Kantian constructivism must fit into an overall taxonomy of constructivist positions, which also includes non-Kantian and non-metaethical views (e.g. Southwood 2015; Street 2010). I do not share this assumption. Kantian constructivists should not be constrained by how the term ‘constructivism’ happens to be used in other parts of the literature. Indeed, it seems that Rawls introduced ‘Kantian constructivism’ into analytic moral philosophy without invoking any prior connotations of the term.

# 1 The Practical Standpoint Characterisation

In this section, I partially defend Street’s argument in favour of the practical standpoint characterisation. While Street intends this characterisation to capture metaethical constructivism in general, my own arguments are concerned with *Kantian* constructivism in particular and therefore need not generalise to non-Kantian views.

## **1.1 Street’s Argument**

Street starts by discussing the *proceduralist characterisation* of constructivism. The canonical formulation of this characterisation is provided by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton:

[T]he constructivist is a hypothetical proceduralist. He endorses some hypothetical procedure as determining which principles constitute valid standards of morality. […] [He] maintains there are no moral facts independent of the finding that a certain hypothetical procedure would have such and such an upshot (Darwall *et al*. 1992, 140).

The proceduralist characterisation is widely used in the literature (see, e.g. Bagnoli 2013b, 1; Copp 2013; Enoch 2009; Hussain 2012; Ridge 2012). At first glance, it seems to find support in the writings of Kantian constructivists. For example, Rawls states that “[a]part from the procedure of constructing the principles of justice, there are no moral facts” (Rawls 1980, 519).

However, Street gives two reasons why the proceduralist characterisation does not do a good job of capturing *metaethical* constructivism. The first reason is that it “makes it hard to see how constructivism could be a metaethical position at all” (Street 2010, 365). Street follows Darwall *et al.* in noting that, if two or more constructivists disagree on *which* procedure determines morality, their disagreement seems to be about *normative ethics*, not metaethics. This is indicated, according to Darwall *et al*., by the fact that we can raise traditional metaethical questions *about* this very disagreement (Darwall *et al*. 1992, 143). For example, we can ask: “What is at issue between the disputants, and how would either claim be justified?” (Darwall et al. 1992, 143).

I do not regard this argument as decisive. Since the constructive procedure has normative *implications*, any disagreement about this procedure is at least *partly* a normative disagreement (and, as such, raises metaethical questions). But it need not therefore be a *mere* normative disagreement (also see Southwood 2015, n. 5). However, until it is specified in what way such a disagreement goes *beyond* a mere normative disagreement, Darwall *et al*.’s argument gives us *some* reason to doubt that it is a genuinely metaethical disagreement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second reason why, according to Street, the proceduralist characterisation does not capture constructivism’s metaethical dimension is that it fails to distinguish constructivism from views that reduce moral facts to facts about the hypothetical responses of idealised agents (2010, 365; also see Enoch 2009, 328-329). After all, to ask how an idealised agent would respond to a situation *is* to invoke a hypothetical procedure.

In light of these problems, Street proposes her own, *practical standpoint characterisation* of constructivism:

According to [constructivism], 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 (Street 2010, 369).

Street explains that the practical standpoint or 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” (2010, 366). In other words, the practical standpoint is the point of view of someone who makes normative judgments or adopts the attitude of *valuing* (2010, 367). We might also say that it is the standpoint of anyone who *reasons practically*. To give a *formal* characterisation of the practical standpoint is “to give an account of valuing or normative judgment *as such*” (2010, 369). In other words, it is to give an account of what is *constitutively involved* in valuing or normative judgment, and thus in occupying the practical standpoint. A normative claim is *entailed* from within the practical point of view, given a formal characterisation, if it follows from what is constitutively involved in valuing or normative judgment, in conjunction with the non-normative facts (2010, 367).

Street illustrates the relevant notion of entailment with the following example:

[S]uppose that 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.” […] 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 (Street 2010, 374).

Here, Street supposes that some principle of means-end coherence, akin to Kant’s Hypothetical Imperative, is *constitutive* of practical reasoning (also see Korsgaard 2008a). If this is right, then the judgment that one has all-things-considered reason to get to Rome, and to do so one has to buy a plane ticket, *entails* the judgment that one has all-things-considered reason to buy a plane ticket.

According to Street, different versions of constructivism differ in what they take to be constitutively involved in practical reasoning (2010, 369-370). The distinctive claim of *Kantian* constructivism is that the practical standpoint *as such* already entails substantive, recognisably moral standards. More specifically, practical reasoning constitutively involves, not only a principle of means-ends coherence (the Hypothetical Imperative), but also a principle that commands or prohibits the adoption of certain ends (the Categorical Imperative). In other words, Kantian constructivists believe that *pure practical reason* yields substantive normative conclusions *by itself*.

This characterisation finds support in the writings of Kantian constructivists. As far as I can tell, all major defenders of Kantian constructivism regard the Categorical Imperative as the constitutive principle of practical reasoning (e.g. Bagnoli 2016; Engstrom 2013; Korsgaard 2009; O’Neill 2015, 64-67; Rawls 2000, 239-240; Reath 2006; 2013; Schapiro 2001; Schafer 2015).

It seems that the practical standpoint characterisation does not *contradict* the proceduralist characterisation, but rather *complements* or *supersedes* it. Street states that the proceduralist characterisation “fails to isolate what is genuinely distinctive about constructivism” because “the notion of a 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 and doesn’t follow from within it” (Street 2010, 365-366). I take this to mean that, according to constructivism, while morality *can* be seen as the outcome of a procedure of construction, they *need not* be seen that way. Insofar as the notion of a procedure has any place in constructivism, it does so only because it *spells out* or *illustrates* what is constitutively involved in taking up the practical standpoint.

Indeed, this seems to be the role that Rawls himself assigns to the original position. As I noted in the introduction, the original position is devised to *express* the self-conception of the members of liberal democratic societies so that its outputs, the principles of justice, apply to free and equal moral persons *as such*. We might therefore say that the original position spells out what is *constitutively entailed* from within the point of view of such persons. Connectedly, Korsgaard observes that, just as “[t]he categorical imperative is a principle of the *logic* of practical deliberation, a principle that is constitutive of deliberation […] one might also say that Rawls's principles are a development of the *logic* of liberalism” (Korsgaard 2008b, 321).

While my main criticism of Street’s characterisation is formulated in Section 3, two small critical points are in order right away. First, Street seems to imply that there is a single practical standpoint that all Kantian constructivists invoke. However, just as there are disagreements between constructivists about the nature of the constructive procedure, there are disagreements about the nature of the relevant practical standpoint. For example, while Korsgaard appeals to the standpoint of someone who needs to constitute herself as an agent, Onora O’Neill appeals to the standpoint of someone who needs to coordinate with a plurality of reasoners, and Carla Bagnoli appeals to a standpoint marked by “an emotional mode of practical knowledge of oneself as an agent” (Bagnoli 2013c, 155; Korsgaard 2009; O’Neill 1989). Second, and relatedly, Street seems to imply that all Kantian constructivists take the Categorical Imperative to be constitutive of even the minimal kind of practical reasoning that is required to make any normative judgments whatsoever. However, some Kantian constructivists, following Kant (*CPrR*, AA 5:16; *Rel*, AA 6:26-28), distinguish moral (or *pure*) from amoral (or *empirical*) practical reasoning and regard the Categorical Imperative as constitutive of the former, but not the latter (Forst 2011, 35; Rawls 1980, 532; Rawls 2000, 165; Schafer 2015, 693-695). Hence, a charitable reading of the practical standpoint characterisation should take that characterisation to be neutral between these different accounts of the practical standpoint and practical reasoning, contrary to what Street herself seems to imply.

How far does the practical standpoint characterisation do a better job of capturing *metaethical* Kantian constructivism than the proceduralist characterisation? Street does not explicitly say how, in her view, the practical standpoint characterisation deals with Darwall *et al*.’s challenge that disagreements between constructivists look like normative disagreements. Presumably, she thinks that disagreements about how to characterise the form of the practical standpoint cannot be characterised as normative disagreements *as easily* as disagreements about which procedure determines first-order moral facts. Of course, the former sort of disagreement also has implications for normative ethics. But since it involves facts about the nature of the practical standpoint, it is less easily seen as being about normative ethics in the first instance.

Regarding the practical standpoint characterisation’s ability to distinguish metaethical constructivism from views that reduce moral facts to facts about the hypothetical responses of idealised agents, Street argues:

According to constructivism, in contrast [with ideal response reductions], 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 (Street 2010, 374).

Unlike ideal response reductions, then, constructivism does not *reduce* moral facts to the output of some process or procedure. If a procedure plays any role at all, it is the role of spelling out what is *already* entailed from within the practical standpoint.

I return to the question of whether the practical standpoint characterisation dispels all doubts about constructivism’s metaethical credentials in the next section. For now, I observe that this characterisation at least makes it easier to see how constructivism might constitute a distinctive, genuinely metaethical view than the proceduralist characterisation does.

## **1.2 Two Objections**

In this subsection, I want to respond to two objections to Street’s argument. Since I am concerned with *metaethical Kantian* constructivism only, I am ignoring objections to the effect that the practical standpoint characterisation excludes non-Kantian or non-metaethical versions of constructivism (see Copp 2013, 118-119; Southwood 2015, 350-353).

David Copp objects that, according to the practical standpoint characterisation, Kant’s moral theory is not constructivist. Copp writes:

Kant holds roughly that our reasons are determined by the content of the maxims that we could or could not rationally will to be universal laws, not by what is entailed from within the practical point of view as such (Copp 2013, 118).

In reply, I want to raise three points. First, it is highly controversial among Kant scholars whether Kant can and should be understood as a constructivist. Second, it is unclear why Kant could not hold that morality is a matter *both* of what maxims we can rationally will to be universal laws *and* of what is entailed from within the practical point of view. Indeed, it seems plausible to read Kant as arguing that morality is a matter of what maxims we can rationally will to be universal laws *because* the requirement to adopt only maxims that can be so willed, the Categorical Imperative, is the constitutive principle of practical reason (see Reath 2013; Sensen 2013; 2019). Third, as I will argue in the next sub-section, there is at least one respect in which the practical standpoint characterisation makes it more plausible to interpret Kant as a constructivist than the procedural characterisation.

Nicholas Southwood objects that the practical standpoint characterisation “fails to give a plausible account of what is *distinctive* about constructivism” (Southwood 2015, 353). He contends that, on this characterisation, “broadly Humean theories of reasons […] seem to come tantalizingly close to counting as versions of constructivism” (Southwood 2015, 353).

Now, even if the practical standpoint characterisation fails to distinguish non-Kantian constructivism from non-constructivist Humean theories, this need not concern me because it *does* distinguish *Kantian* constructivism from such theories. Presumably, broadly Humean theories of reasons do not claim that the Categorical Imperative is entailed from within the practical standpoint, given a formal characterisation.

However, Southwood insists that his objection highlights a deeper issue: “[w]hat is missing from the standpoint characterization is a proper recognition of the privileged place that constructivists give to reasoning in the explanation of truths about reasons” (Southwood 2015, 353). Consequently, Southwood himself characterises constructivism as the view that “truths about reasons are […] explained in terms of […] reasoning that satisfies standards of correctness that are prior to and independent of reasons of the kind that are being explained” (2015, 354).

Since the practical standpoint characterisation *also* depicts constructivism asexplaining truths about reasons in terms of prior and independent standards of reasoning, the only significant difference between the practical standpoint characterisation and Southwood’s characterisation seems to be that the former regards these standards as *constitutive* of the relevant kind of reasoning. But by abandoning thisaspect of the practical standpoint characterisation, Southwood’s characterisation incurs a similar problem as the proceduralist characterisation.

Southwood agrees with Street that the proceduralist characterisation misses the “philosophical heart” of constructivism because it disregards why the constructive procedure is an apt heuristic in the first place (Southwood 2015, 348; citing Street 2010, 366). Regarding Rawls’s theory, he writes that “[i]t seems very odd to suppose that it is literally being the outcome of the hypothetical procedure described by the original position that is supposed to be explaining truths about the justice of particular social institutions” (Southwood 2015, 348; citing Street 2010, 366). However, it is not clear why it would be any *less* odd to suppose that it is literally *being the outcome of reasoning that follows certain prior and independent standards* that explains these truths. Instead, what explains these truths — the ‘philosophical heart’ of Rawls’s Kantian constructivism — is what *makes* these standards of reasoning correct in the first place.

On Southwood’s characterisation, “[t]he function of the original position is simply to render vivid a certain kind of reasoning from liberal democratic premises” (Southwood 2015, 355). But the distinctive feature of Rawls’s theory is not that it employs reasoning from liberal democratic *premises*, but that it establishes “a suitable connection between a particular conception of the person and first principles of justice, by means of a procedure of construction” (Rawls 1980, 516). More precisely, it lays out in procedural form what is *constitutively* involved in reasoning from within the *standpoint* of free and equal moral persons.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## **1.3 Another Advantage**

I now want to argue that the practical standpoint characterisation has an advantage which Street herself does not mention. In particular, it avoids a common objection to Kantian constructivism.

The objection accuses Kantian constructivism of undermining the *unconditional bindingness* of morality by rendering moral obligation dependent upon a contingent *act* of construction (e.g. Kain 2004, 260; Kleingeld and Willaschek 2019; Sensen 2013; 2019; Wood 1999: 374-75; 2008: 107). For example, Oliver Sensen accuses Kantian constructivism of depicting the moral law as “a result of the conscious deliberation of an individual or group” and concludes that “[c]onstructivism could not explain how morality could be *unconditionally* binding” (Sensen 2013, 65, 80).

This objection can be used to criticise Kantian constructivism both as an interpretation of Kant’s moral theory and as an independent theory. After all, Kant’s assertion that morality binds unconditionally, i.e., independently of our contingent mental states, is endorsed by a wide range of theorists (e.g. Ross 2002, 157-160).

It is not hard to see how this objection arises against the background of the proceduralist characterisation. By emphasising the dependence of morality on a constructive procedure, this characterisation makes it tempting to read Kantian constructivism as rendering moral obligation conditional upon agents’ contingent choice to run the procedure, and thus construct them. One might reply that the procedure is *hypothetical* and need not be *run* to yield valid outputs. However, the objection then becomes that Kantian constructivism renders moral obligations conditional upon our contingent *acceptance* of the procedure.

By contrast, the objection gains no traction against the background of the practical standpoint characterisation. On this characterisation, if Kantian constructivism appeals to a constructive procedure at all, this procedure is merely a heuristic device that spells out what is entailed by the form of the practical standpoint. The resulting moral obligations bind agents, not by virtue of some contingent choice or mental state, but by virtue of their occupying the practical standpoint — or, equivalently, reasoning practically — at all.

Admittedly, this characterisation renders moral obligation conditional in the sense that we are not morally obligated unless we occupy the practical standpoint. However, Kant does not deny that moral obligations are conditional *in this sense*. He clearly thinks that one needs to be a certain type of practical reasoner to be bound by the moral law. For example, one needs to possess the capacities of “moral feeling”, “conscience” and “respect for the law”, by which one “recognize[s] duties” (*MM*, AA 6:399 – 402). Therefore, as Sensen himself notes, although “reason creates the law spontaneously and of its own accord” once we are “prompted to deliberate morally”, we would not be bound by the moral law if we were never so prompted (Sensen 2013, 77).

Of course, the proceduralist characterisation does not *prevent* Kantian constructivists from claiming that the constructive procedure is implicit in the form of the practical standpoint. But the problem with the proceduralist characterisation is that it does not consider this claim to be *part* of Kantian constructivism itself. Consequently, it leaves Kantian constructivists who make this claim vulnerable to the objection that they are saving their theory by appeal to extraneous arguments or, worse, abandoning their theory in favour of another one. In fact, the latter objection seems to be implicit in recent arguments by Kantian theorists who agree that the Categorical Imperative is the constitutive principle of practical reason but reject constructivism (e.g. Pollok 2017, 201-219; Sensen 2013; 2019).

# 2 The Incompleteness of the Practical Standpoint Characterisation

I now want to argue that, despite its advantages over the proceduralist characterisation, the practical standpoint characterisation, as presented by Street, is *incomplete* as a characterisation of *metaethical* Kantian constructivism.

## **2.1 The Threat of Reductivism**

As we have seen, the practical standpoint characterisation helpfully distinguishes constructivism from accounts that reduce moral facts to facts about the hypothetical responses of idealised agents. However, it is doubtful that, as it stands, it also distinguishes constructivism from naturalist reductions more generally.

Street seems to agree that we should avoid characterising constructivism as offering such a reduction. In an earlier paper, she writes:

The idea of one thing’s being a reason for another cannot successfully be reduced to thoroughly non-normative terms. Instead, I would argue, our understanding of this idea is given by our knowledge of what it is like to have a certain unreflective experience—in particular, the experience of various things in the world as ‘‘counting in favor of’’ or ‘‘calling for’’ or ‘‘demanding’’ certain responses on our part (Street 2008, 239-240).

However, it is not easy to see if and how the practical standpoint characterisation avoids characterising constructivism as a naturalist reductivism. It states that “the truth of a normative claim *consists in* that claim’s being entailed from within the practical point of view” (Street 2010, 369, italics added). This might be taken to suggest that constructivism purports to tell us what normative truth, or normativity, *is*. More specifically, it might be taken to suggest that constructivism reduces morality or normativity to a concern with what is entailed from within the practical standpoint as such. Indeed, this is how constructivism is sometimes interpreted by its critics (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2013, 34-44; Parfit 2006, 351-371).

Street denies this reading by stating that, while constructivism offers a *kind* of reduction, it “reduces facts about reasons to facts about what we *judge* or *take* to be reasons” (Street 2008, 242). Apparently, Street thinks that this kind of reduction is unproblematic because it does not invoke “non-normative terms” (Street 2008, 242). However, while facts about what we judge to be reasons involve normative terms in some sense, they are not themselves normative. They seem like ordinary, natural facts.

Characterising constructivism as proposing a naturalist reduction does not only risk rendering the view *implausible*. It also fails to distinguish constructivism as a metaethical view *of its own*; instead, it would relegate constructivism to the larger family of naturalist reductions. Furthermore, such a characterisation would not be faithful to the intentions of Kantian constructivists (e.g. Bagnoli 2016, 1235; Bagnoli 2021, section 7.2; Korsgaard manuscript, 8).

The practical standpoint characterisation should therefore give an account of the *relation of dependence* that constructivism takes to hold between morality and the practical standpoint without thereby committing it to naturalist reductivism. However, as I argue in the remainder of this section, it is not obvious how this might be done while still characterising constructivism as a *metaethical* view.

## **2.2 Stance-Dependence**

Russ Shafer-Landau’s notion of *stance-dependence* might seem like a promising characterization of the relation of dependence between morality and the practical standpoint. It suggests that, according to constructivism, “the moral standards that fix the moral facts are […] *made true* by virtue of their ratification from within” the practical standpoint (Shafer-Landau 2003, 15, italics altered). However, unless the *way* in which moral standards are *made true* by their ratification from within the practical standpoint is specified further, it is not clear in how far the notion of stance-dependence can be used to characterise constructivism as a *metaethical* view.

The problem is that there are at least two ways to understand the relevant relation of *making true* as part of the subject matter of *normative* ethics, not metaethics. First, as Nadeem Hussain and Nishi Shah point out in their discussion of Korsgaard’s constructivism:

[T]he fact that brushing my teeth regularly will reduce plaque may *make* brushing my teeth good […] But [claims of this form] are best understood as first-order normative judgments about what makes brushing one’s teeth good, not as providing a metaethical interpretation of what it means to say that reducing plaque is good, what metaphysical commitments such a judgment involves, or how we come to know that brushing one’s teeth is good (Korsgaard 2006, 270-271).

Thus, if constructivism claims that moral standards are *made true* by the form of the practical standpoint in the sense in which the fact that brushing one’s teeth is good is made true by the fact that it reduces plaque, it is arguably not a metaethical view.

Second, Hussain and Shah argue that normative ethics also encompasses the task “to placemorality within practical reason, explaining whether we have reason to do what morality demands and, if so, whether these reasons are derived from another branch of practical reason” (Hussain & Shah 2006, 267). They acknowledge that some might regard this task as a part of metaethics, but argue that this is not the *kind* of metaethical task with which the “stated adversary” of constructivism, moral realism, is concerned (Hussain & Shah 2006, 267). And, indeed, there is independent reason to include the task of placing morality within practical reason in normative ethics rather than metaethics. After all, this task is concerned with the *content* or *internal structure* of the normative domain. By contrast, metaethics purports to give an account of features that (some set of) normative phenomena have *qua*normative phenomena. Consequently, if constructivism holds that moral standards are *made true* by the form of the practical standpoint in the sense that our reasons to be moral *derive* from our reasons to live up to what is constitutively involved in practical reasoning, then it is not a metaethical view.

## **2.3 The Function of Normative Concepts**

One might argue that Kantian constructivism’s metaethical dimension consists in its account of *normative concepts*. Korsgaard criticizes both realists and expressivists for presupposing that “it is the function of all of our concepts, or anyway all of our authentically cognitive concepts, to describe reality” (Korsgaard 2008b, 306). While this presupposition leads moral realists to conclude that normative concepts must have the role of describing reality, it leads expressivists to conclude that normative concepts are not “authentically cognitive”. However, according to Korsgaard, there is an account of normative concepts on which they are neither assigned the role of describing reality, nor robbed of their status as “authentically cognitive”. She writes:

[A]ccording to constructivism, normative concepts are not […] the names of objects or of facts or of the components of facts that we encounter in the world. They are the names of the solutions of problems, problems to which we give names to mark them out as objects for practical thought (Korsgaard 2008b, 322).

This may seem to suggest a genuinely metaethical and non-reductive way in which morality *depends* on the practical standpoint: it provides the solution to a problem that occupants of this standpoint, *as such*, face. Indeed, Street sometimes comes close to endorsing this characterisation of constructivism (e.g. Street 2016).

One problem with this suggestion is that it does not distinguish constructivism from other metaethical views, including other accounts of normative concepts (also see Ridge 2012, 141). Korsgaard concedes that, even if her account of normative concepts is true, “normative concepts may after all be taken torefer to certain complex facts about the solutions to practical problems faced by self‐conscious rational beings” (Korsgaard 2008b, 325). Accordingly, she concedes that “considered in one way, constructivism and realism are perfectly compatible” (Korsgaard 2008b, 325). And the same goes for expressivism. Korsgaard concedes that “[v]iewed from outside of that [practical] perspective, those who utter these [normative] truths will appear to be simply expressing their values” (Korsgaard 2008b, 325). She adds that viewing normative concepts in these ways is *uninteresting* because it takes up a third-personal point of view and “it is only viewed from the perspective of those who actually *face* those problems in question that these truths will appear normative” (Korsgaard 2008b, 325). However, as Hussain and Shah point out, the third-personal point of view is what moral realists and expressivists, as metaethicists, *are* most interested in (2006; 2013). And the fact that Korsgaard has different interests than these theorists, by itself, does not show that her account offers an alternative to their views.

But the deeper problem is that to say that normative concepts denote the solutions to practical problems is ultimately just another way of saying that normative standards are constitutive of some practical standpoint. To see this, note that Korsgaard’s account of normative concepts entails that “[t]he task of practical philosophy is to move from concepts to conceptions, by constructing an account of the problem reflected in the concept that will point the way to a conception that solves the problem” (Korsgaard 2008b, 322). But how can an account of the problem point to its solution? From Korsgaard’s remarks on Kant and Rawls, it becomes clear that she takes the solution to be entailed by what is *constitutive* of the standpoint of someone who faces the problem. She writes: “Rawls's two principles simply describe what a liberal society must do in order to *be* a liberal society, just as Kant's principle describes what a free will must do in order to *be* a free will” (2008b, 321). Therefore, for our purposes, Korsgaard’s account of normative concepts does not *add* anything to Street’s practical standpoint characterisation.

## **2.4 Darwall *et al.*’s Challenge Revisited**

It is not easy to see how, on the practical standpoint characterisation, constructivism might be a metaethical view, provided it is not a naturalist reductivism. This problem re-invites Darwall *et al*.’s challenge, i.e., that disagreements about the nature of the constructive procedure look like *normative* disagreements because traditional metaethical questions seem to arise *about* such disagreements (Darwall *et al*. 1992, 143). As I suggested on Street’s behalf in Section 1.1, disagreements about the nature of the practical standpoint might be *less easily* characterised as normative disagreements than disagreements about constructive procedures. However, as we saw in Section 2.2, unless it is specified further, the relation of dependence that constructivism takes to hold between morality and the form of the practical standpoint *can* be seen as part of the subject matter of normative ethics. Thus, Darwall *et al*.’s challenge turns out to apply to the practical standpoint characterisation as well.

# 3 Sources of Normativity

To complete the practical standpoint characterisation, we need to give an account of the *relation of dependence* between morality and the practical standpoint in a way that neither renders it a naturalist reduction nor relegates it to normative ethics. I now want to do so by taking up Korsgaard’s suggestion that “Kantian constructivists […] believe that the source of the normativity of moral claims must be found in the agent’s own will” (Korsgaard 1996, 19).

In particular, I want to complete the practical standpoint characterisation by suggesting that, according to Kantian constructivism, morality *depends* on the practical standpoint in the sense that morality’s *normativity* has its *source* in the form of the practical standpoint.[[4]](#footnote-4) I contend that claims about the sources of normativity address a respectable metaethical question, albeit one that carefully needs to be distinguished from other metaethical questions. I largely follow Ruth Chang’s account of the sources of normativity, although she does not apply this account to Kantian constructivism or the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics.

## **3.1 Sources as Grounds**

Following Chang, by a ‘source of normativity’ I will understand “*that in virtue of which* something has normative force” (Chang 2009, 243). Chang also refers to the source of a consideration’s normativity as its metaphysical “fount” or “ground” (Chang 2013a, 165). However, Chang’s account does not depend on the defensibility of any of the specific accounts that have been advanced in the metaphysical debate over “grounding”. For Chang’s notion of grounding to be tenable, it only needs to be plausible that there is an *explanatory* relation that cannot be reduced to three other forms of explanation (Chang 2013a, 164-165).

First of all, the source of something’s normativity provides an explanation of its having normative force, but not by being the *cause* (if there is such a thing) of its having normative force (Chang 2013a, 164).

Second, the relevant explanatory relation is not that of *modal covariance* which is taken to hold between a normative property and its subvening base. The explanation provided by the source of something’s normativity is different and, in a sense, deeper than that provided by a mere subvening base (Chang 2013a, 164).To see this, imagine a version of divine command theory according to which God’s authority is the source of morality’s normativity, but the content of morality is captured by classical utilitarianism.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this view, moral facts supervene on facts about pleasure and pain, but the latter are not the source of the normativity of the former. God’s authority *explains* the normativity of morality in a way in which hedonic facts do not. Arguably, it even explains why there is a supervenience relation between moral facts and hedonic facts in the first place.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Finally, the relevant explanatory relation is not that of one normative consideration’s *subsumption* under a more general, more fundamental normative principle. Instead, when we inquire about the source of a consideration’s normativity we are asking about its *metaphysical* ground (Chang 2013a, 164-65). Therefore, the way in which the source of something’s normativity explains fact that it has normativity is to be distinguished from the way in which the fact that brushing one’s teeth reduces plaque explains the fact that brushing one’s teeth is good. And it is also to be distinguished from the ‘placement’ of something’s normativity within practical reason (see Section 2.2).

## **3.2 The Metaphysics vs. Ontology of Normativity**

We have seen that the question of the sources of normativity is concerned with the *metaphysics* of normativity. More specifically, it is concerned with the metaphysical explanation of something’s having normativity. It is important to distinguish this question from questions about what I shall call the *ontology* of normativity. Partly drawing upon Chang, I distinguish between three separate questions about the ontology of normativity. All three are to be distinguished from the question of the source of something’s normativity.

The first ontological question asks what kinds of *things*, fundamentally, havenormative force. In Chang’s words, it asks about the ultimate “bearers of normativity” (Chang 2009, 243). Chang takes the dominant positions on this question to identify the bearers of normativity as either desires or values (Chang 2009, 243). By contrast, the source question asks what *grounds* the fact that something bears normativity, irrespective of whether it is a desire, value, or something else.

A second ontological question about normativity is concerned with what Chang refers to as “the nature of normativity” or “normativity’s essential features” (Chang 2009, 243). This question is concerned with the ontological status of normativity itself*.* That is, it inquires what *kind* *of force* normativity is. Is it an irreducibly normative, *sui generis* kind of force, or can it ultimately be reduced to something like a motivational or volitional force? The source question, by contrast, asks wherein the fact that something *has* normative force is grounded, whatever the ontological status of that force may be.

A third ontological question, which Chang does not explicitly distinguish, is concerned with whether there are normative *entities* that are instantiated in the external world: are there such things as normative *facts* in the same sense in which there are physical facts, perhaps by virtue of there being normative *properties* in the same sense in which there are physical properties?[[7]](#footnote-7) By contrast, the source question asks *why*, if there are in-the-world normative entities, they have the normative force they have.

Historically, certain combinations of answers to these four questions have been more common than others. For example, consider the position that normativity is an irreducibly normative force, which we might call *non-reductivism*. Next, consider the position that there are in-the-world normative entities, which we might call *realism*. It is quite common to combine non-reductivism with realism, and thus endorse a position we might call *non-reductive realism*. But non-reductivism and realism do not entail one another. One could be a realist and reduce normativity to some natural force that we would not pre-theoretically recognise as normative, endorsing *reductive realism* (see, e.g. Copp 2005).

When it comes to explaining *why* something has normative force, some non-reductive realists deny that there is any meaningful question that is not already answered by their view of ontology of normativity (Parfit 2006; 2011, 415-420; Scanlon 2014, 14). Yet, by arguing that irreducibly normative entities *themselves* provide all the explanation of their normativity that we could possibly hope for, these theorists go beyond non-reductive realism and, additionally, endorse a position we might call *source* *externalism*, which “locate[s] the source of normativity in a realm of external, irreducibly normative facts” (Chang 2009, 244).

To see this, consider that non-reductive realism does not entail source externalism. It could also be combined with what we might call *source internalism*, the view that considerations have normative force in virtue of their relation to our motivational states. Some non-reductive realists seem to assume that source internalists are committed to the view that normativity is reducible to some kind of motivational force (see, e.g. Parfit 2006). However, several theorists whose views I would classify as source internalist explicitly reject this position (e.g. Darwall 1990; 1995; 2017; Street 2017).

Admittedly, these source internalists sometimes describe the disagreement between their position and source externalism as a matter of *substantive* normative theory (e.g. Darwall 2017, 261; Street 2017, 130). However, I do not think that this is the best way of capturing the debate. After all, substantive normative theory is concerned with the question of what we ought (or have reason) to do. And we would usually not regard, ‘only those things that stand in a certain relation to our motivational states’, as a satisfactory answer to that question. Importantly, the issue with this answer is not just that it is uninformative; rather, it entirely misses the point of the question. Even if, say, Street and Parfit completely agreed on what we ought (or have reason) to do, they could still be at odds about whether Street’s internalism is true. I submit that this is because their disagreement is not about substantive normative questions but about the *sources* of normativity.

The distinction between the ontology and the sources of normativity can also be illustrated by considering the position of *source voluntarism*, i.e.,the view that considerations have normative force in virtue of their relation to our volitional acts or states. One might assume that source voluntarists are committed to reducing normativity to a volitional force. However, Chang’s own account of the sources of normativity can serve as a counterexample here (Chang 2009; 2013a; 2013b). Chang holds that we can sometimes give ourselves reasons by exercising the “normative powers” of our will (Chang 2013b, 101-103). While she thus adopts *source voluntarism* about these reasons, which she calls “voluntarist reasons”, she remains neutral about their ontology (Chang 2009, 270-271). That these reasons have their source in our own will does not rule out that their normativity is a matter of irreducibly normative properties. If it is, then Chang’s account implies that our will has the capacity to “create” such properties (Chang 2009, 270-271).

## **3.3 Kantian Constructivism and Metaethics**

I contend that, by virtue of being a view about the sources of normativity, Kantian constructivism is a metaethical view. However, a qualification is in order. If a certain kind of expressivism, such as Simon Blackburn’s *projectivism*, turns out to be true, then the question of the sources of normativity does not belong to metaethics, considered as a discipline separate from normative ethics, after all. On such a view, since there are no in-the-world normative *entities*, and normativity is not really a kind of *force,* there is also no *metaphysical* question of why there are normative entities or why considerations have normative force. Instead, the question of what explains some consideration’s having a certain normative status, and whether it has that status independently of our practical standpoint, is better understood as part of *normative* discourse (Blackburn 1998, 311; also see Street 2010, 375-379). This implies that, insofar as they conceive of their view as metaethical, Kantian constructivists are committed to rejecting the relevant kinds of expressivism.

With this exception being noted, Kantian constructivism is compatible with a range of views on the ontology of normativity. Notably, it is compatible with various versions of the view that there are in-the-world normative entities, which I have called *realism*. Whether it is therefore compatible with the view commonly known as *moral realism* depends on whether this view entails claims about the *sources* of normativity. Some authors seem to think that moral realism entails the view I have called *source externalism*, which is incompatible with Kantian constructivism (e.g. Bagnoli 2016; Korsgaard 2008b; Shafer-Landau 2013; Street 2010). But others seem to think that moral realism is just a view about the *ontology* (and, perhaps, the epistemology and semantics) of normativity (e.g. Copp 2013). Some of these authors use the label ‘robust moral realism’ for the conjunction of moral realism and source externalism (e.g. Enoch 2011; Fitzpatrick 2008). In this terminology, Kantian constructivism is compatible with moral realism, but not with robust moral realism.

While it is clear that Kantian constructivism contradicts source externalism, it might be less obvious if and how it contradicts source voluntarism and source internalism. I would argue that, while it might be possible to characterise Kantian constructivism as a version of either source internalism or source voluntarism, it should be noted that it identifies the *form* rather than the *contents* of the practical standpoint as the source of moral normativity. It thus contradicts versions of source internalism such as Street’s, and versions of source voluntarism such as Chang’s, according to which moral normativity has its source in our contingent motivational or volitional states, respectively (Chang 2009; 2013a; 2013b; Street 2017).[[8]](#footnote-8)

# 4 Conclusion

Despite its advantages over the proceduralist characterisation, Street’s practical standpoint characterisation turned out to be incomplete because it failed to show that the relation between the morality and the practical standpoint belongs to the subject matter of metaethics. I have tried to make up for this by elaborating on the suggestion that the form of the practical standpoint is the *source* of morality’s normativity. According to the thus completed practical standpoint characterisation, Kantian constructivism is the view that the fact that morality has normative force is *grounded* in (i.e. metaphysically explained by) the fact that its supreme principle, the Categorical Imperative, is entailed from within the practical standpoint, given a formal characterisation.

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2. Copp rejects Darwall *et al*.’s argument because the fact “that traditional meta-ethical issues arise in debates between difference versions of constructivism […] does not show that these theories are not meta-ethical theories” (Copp 2013, 120). However, this is beside the point. Darwall *et al*. do not argue that metaethical issues arise *in* debates between different versions of constructivism, but that these issues arise *about* such debates. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For this reason, I read Rawls’s Kantian constructivism as a *metaethical* view (*pace* Street 2010; Southwood 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By morality’s ‘normative force’ or ‘normativity’, I mean what philosophers sometimes circumscribe as the practical ‘oomph’ of moral considerations (e.g. Joyce 2006, 60-63; McPherson 2018, n. 7). These terms attempt to capture the elusive notion that, unlike certain other systems of norms (e.g. etiquette), we cannot ignore morality at our discretion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a slightly altered version of Chang’s example (2013a, 164). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, in this example, there is *also* a supervenience relation between moral facts and God’s commands. My point, however, is that an additional relation holds between these relata, the source relation, which does not hold between moral facts and hedonic facts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Chang seems to subsume this question under the question of the bearers of normativity (see 2009, 243). However, the question of whether normativity is ultimately borne by (say) desires or values seems separate from the question of *what it is* to bear normativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Admittedly, Street’s internalism (or “Humean constructivism”) identifies the form of the practical standpoint as a source of *normativity* (2010, 369-370). However, Street holds that whether *morality* is normative for us depends on the contingent contents of our practical standpoint. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)