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Constructing practical normativity[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. The problem of normativity within reason

One of the more appealing yet puzzling members of the large and heterogeneous moral rationalism family is *meta-ethical constructivism* (henceforth constructivism), which I shall take to be the view that truths about practical reasons are somehow to be constitutively explained in terms of the correct exercise of practical reason (see Korsgaard 1996a; 1996b; 2008; 2009; Street 2008; 2010; O’Neill 1989; Bagnoli 2011).[[2]](#footnote-2) The appeal of constructivism derives from the fact that it promises to synthesize much of what is appealing about other meta-ethical views while avoiding their shortcomings (Street 2010; Enoch 2009; Southwood forthcoming a). Thus, it shares with meta-ethical expressivism the appealing thought that normativity is somehow dependent on certain distinctive mental capacities, but unlike expressivism avoids the need to tell elaborate stories to explain the truth-aptness of our normative talk and thought. Like meta-ethical non-naturalism (and error theory), it has the virtue of taking very seriously the putative autonomy of the normative inasmuch as it denies that normative truths (if they exist) can be fully accounted for in naturalistic terms. Yet, unlike error theory, it avoids the deeply unpalatable conclusion that there are no non-trivial truths about normativity; and unlike non-naturalism, it holds that truths about normativity can be explained rather than simply being brute and primitive. It shares this hostility to the idea that there is a realm of irreducible non-natural normative facts with meta-ethical naturalism, but has greater respect for Hume’s Law. In short, constructivism might appear to offer the desirable prospect of having one’s meta-ethical cake and eating it.

But constructivism is also deeply puzzling. It is natural to suppose that the correct exercise of practical reason involves being appropriately responsive to relevant reasons for and against acting in different ways. Constructivists hold that the order of explanation runs in the other direction. There are certain norms or standards of practical reason such that truths about practical reasons are to be constitutively explained in terms of practical reason that accords with these norms, rather than vice versa. But in what precisely does the *normativity* of the relevant norms of practical reason consist? Of course, there is a minimal sense in which norms of practical reason are clearly normative, namely, that they are norms. They permit and require things of us, and we may (and do) violate them. But it also seems clear that this is not the whole story. The rules of snakes-and-ladders are also normative in the minimal sense. Constructivism derives its plausibility, in part, from the fact that norms of practical reason appear to be normative in a way that the rules of snakes-and-ladders aren’t. From a first-personal perspective, there is a kind of distinctive normative pressure to *comply* with norms of practical reason, whereas we don’t necessarily feel any such pressure in the case of the rules of snakes-and-ladders (say, if we think it would be funny to ascend a snake). Similarly, whenever we violate a norm of practical reason, it seems that we are necessarily *criticisable* in some measure, whereas there need be nothing even *pro tanto* criticisable about ascending a snake (again, say, for comic effect). At the same time, given that constructivists are trying to explain truths about practical reasons in terms of the correct exercise of practical reason, it is not available to the constructivist to hold that the relevant constitutive norms of practical reason are such that, necessarily, we ought or have *reason* to comply with them (see Broome 2005; cf. Southwood 2008). Otherwise, constructivism will be palpably circular.

It would seem, then, that constructivists face a difficult problem. The problem arises because constructivism presupposes that two theses must be true. First, the relevant norms of practical reason must be somehow genuinely normative in a way that goes beyond the minimal normativity of, say, the rules of snakes and ladders. Call this the *normativity-of-reason thesis*. Second, the normative character of the relevant norms of practical reason must be prior to and independent of practical reasons. Call this the *reasons-independence thesis*. From the standpoint of contemporary meta-ethics, this is a surprising combination to say the least. It has come to be widely regarded as a truism among contemporary philosophers of normativity that genuine normativity *just is* robust normativity: that is, that a rule or requirement is genuinely normative just in case, necessarily, we ought or have reason to comply with it (see e.g. Raz 1999, p. 67; Scanlon 1998, ch. 1; Schroeder 2007, p. 81; Way 2010; Kiesewetter 2013, pp. 5-7). Constructivism presupposes that this apparent truism is, in fact, false. But what exactly could these genuinely normative but non-reason-involving truths be? Call this the *problem of normativity within reason*.

There is a familiar response to the problem of normativity within reason – a response that has been embraced by philosophers who endorse otherwise radically different versions of constructivism, such as Christine Korsgaard (1996) and Sharon Street (2008). The response holds that the relevant norms of practical reason possess a special kind of *necessity* that derives from the fact that we only count as occupying the “deliberative standpoint” or as a “deliberative agent” insofar as we comply with or accept the relevant norms (cf. Smith 2013). The special normative status of the relevant norms of practical reason derives from the fact that we cannot help but comply with or accept them insofar as we are deliberating agents. It is plausible that bona fide norms of practical reason *do* possess necessity of this kind – indeed that this is part of what makes them genuine norms of practical reason (see Southwood 2008; 2010, ch. 4). What is not obvious, however, is how this is supposed to help vindicate the normativity-of-reason thesis. It does not seem to follow, for example, from the fact that we are not occupying the deliberative standpoint if we violate or fail to accept a valid norm of practical reason that we are thereby criticisable (cf. Enoch 2006).

My aim in what follows is to explore a radically different response on behalf of the constructivist. The key to the alternative response is that the relevant norms of practical reason exhibit a distinctive kind of *practical* necessity that derives from the fact that they determine what I have called elsewhere truths about *the thing to do* (Southwood 2016a; cf. Gibbard 2003). Claims about the thing for us to do, in the particular sense that I have in mind, are claims about correct answers to the question that confronts us in practical reason, the question of what to do. So the normative status of the relevant norms of practical reason is crucially tied to practical reason but not because we cannot help but accept or comply with them insofar as we are deliberative agents. Rather, the special normative force of the norms of practical reason derives from their determining correct answers to the question that practical reason involves trying to answer, the question of what to do. Understanding the norms of practical reason in these terms vindicates the normativity-of-reason thesis since truths about the thing to do plausibly possess the hallmarks of genuine normativity. And it vindicates the reasons-independence thesis since truths about the thing to do are plausibly prior to and independent of truths about practical reasons. Or so I shall argue.

2. Practical reason and the thing to do

The possibility I want to explore on behalf of the constructivist is that we understand the relevant constitutive norms of practical reason as those norms that determine *the thing to do* (Southwood 2016a). I’m not going to argue directly for the claim that there are truths about the thing to do in the sense I have in mind. Rather, I’m simply going to assume it for the sake of seeing whether understanding relevant norms of practical reason in terms of them provides a plausible solution to the problem of normativity within reason. But I do need to say something more about how I am understanding truths about the thing to do and what sorts of candidate norms might plausibly entail them.

Truths about the thing to do in the specific sense I have in mind are truths about correct answers to the question of what to do. There are two key ideas here: the idea of the *question* of what to do; and the idea of a *correct answer* to the question of what to do. The question of what to do is the question that we undertake to answer insofar as we engage our faculty of practical reason (Owens 2011; Wallace 2013). Practical reason involves precisely undertaking to answer the question of what to do: whether to take up surfing again after a trifling little spinal injury; whether to take an initiative and paint the house lime green while one’s wife is away for the weekend; whether to have yet another Lagavulin; and so on. Moreover, we *succeed* in answering the question of what to do, or so I shall assume, insofar as we form certain *intentions*. Thus, I succeed in answering the question of whether to take up surfing again by forming the intention to take up surfing again or the intention not to take up surfing again. I succeed in answering the question of whether to paint the house lime green by forming the intention to paint the house lime green or the intention not to paint the house lime green.

Though some philosophers have sought to assimilate them (see e.g. Velleman 2000, p. 25), the question of what to do must be distinguished from the question of what we *will* do. Suppose that your boss likes to call you into his office and mock you every time his football team, the Hawthorn Hawks, defeats your beloved team, the Melbourne Demons. Suppose that after a weekend when the Demons have received yet another flogging at the hands of the Hawks, you receive a message asking you to swing by your boss’s office. As you walk the corridor, you find yourself asking what you will do when he starts his insufferable mocking. Will you sit patiently and listen to his drivel yet again? Or will you finally give him a piece of your mind (or, for that matter, fist)? In asking yourself the question of whether you *will* sit patiently and listen to his drivel, you need not be asking yourself the question of *whether* to sit patiently and listen to his drivel.

More importantly for our purposes, the question of what to do must also be distinguished, as I have suggested elsewhere (Southwood 2016a; Southwood forthcoming b), following Pamela Hieronymi (2009; 2011), from the question of *what one ought to do*. It seems that we may ask ourselves and undertake to answer the question of what to do without thereby asking ourselves and undertaking to answer the question of what we ought to do. This may happen if we have *already* answered the question of what we ought to do. (Perhaps I have already determined that I *ought not* to have another Lagavulin and yet I find myself wondering whether to have another one.) Or it may happen if we are incurably *uncertain* about what we ought to do because we lack relevant information or are uncertain about certain normative principles that are needed to resolve the question of what we ought to do. (Perhaps I am incurably uncertain about whether I ought to take up surfing again because I am uncertain about the truth of normative principles that issue in conflicting verdicts. Clearly this doesn’t foreclose the possibility of asking myself the question of whether to take up surfing again.) Again, it seems to me that it can happen if we intractably *disagree* with one another about what we ought to do; in our personal and professional lives, and of course in political life, we constantly face the question of what to do in the face of persistent and irresolvable disagreement. (Perhaps my wife and I disagree about whether we ought to paint the living room lime green; for all that, we may very well grapple with the question of whether to go ahead and do so.) Finally, it can happen if we take there to be *no fact of the matter* about what we ought to do. This might be because it is indeterminate. Or it might be because one is what I have called elsewhere a *consistent normative nihilist*, that is, someone who holds that that there are no truths about what people ought to do, and who is consistent inasmuch as one refrains from having any beliefs about, or even interrogating the question of, what one ought to do (Southwood 2016a). (Being a consistent normative nihilist of this kind doesn’t mean that one is unable to interrogate the question of, say, *whether* to have another Lagavulin, or whether to paint one’s living room lime green.)

So much for the question of what to do. This brings us to the second important idea, the idea of a *correct answer* to the question of what to do. As we have seen, forming an intention is *an* answer to the question of what to do. It is a further question whether a particular intention is *correct*. Even if I answer the question of whether to have to another Lagavulin by deciding to have another one, this may very well be incorrect. If I answer the question of whether to paint my living room lime green by deciding to pain it lime green, it may very well be that the correct answer was not to paint it lime green.

A critic might object that there is no such thing as a correct or incorrectanswer to the question of what to do. To be sure, sometimes we face choices; we have to decide to do something. But this doesn’t mean that there is a correct or incorrect answer to the question that we are aiming at. Rather, it’s simply up to us. Anything goes. We can decide to do whatever we like.

This is certainly plausible in some cases. For example, if we are in a Buridan’s Ass case, it might seem that we simply need to “break the tie” by resolving to do something. But it is far less plausible as a description of what is going on in the other cases – say, in those cases where we are uncertain or disagree about what we ought to do, or where we are consistent normative nihilists. These do not seem to be simply cases where something must be done; and where forming intentions operates like a whimsical decree, or a useful tie-breaking device. When we confront the question of what to do in these other cases, we are not simply in the business of making a decree. Rather, it seems that we are undertaking to come up with a *correct answer* to the question. So, in any case, I am going to assume.

Suppose, then, that there *are* correct and incorrect answers to the question of what to do. What sorts of candidate norms might plausibly determine the correctness of correct answers? One natural thought is that the norms we need are *substantive normative claims*: claims about what we ought and have reason to do (or intend). On this view, correct answers to the question of what to do are made correct by what we ought or have reason to do (or intend). So, for example, the answer to the question of whether to have another Lagavulin is to have one if you ought (or have sufficient or decisive reason) to (intend to) have one, and not to have one if you ought (or have sufficient or decisive reason) not to (intend to) have one.

Clearly this is hopeless for the purposes of solving the problem of normativity within reason for it would make constructivism viciously circular. Furthermore, the examples I provided above, in order to suggest that we can undertake to answer the question of what to do without thereby undertaking to answer the question of what we ought to do should make one skeptical of this suggestion. Someone who is undertaking to answer the question of what to do, I take it, is undertaking to answer a question; and to undertake to answer a question is to undertake to come up with a *correct answer* to the question. But in each of the cases I described above, the agents are transparently *not* undertaking to determine what they ought to do, either because they have *already* determined to their satisfaction what they ought to do, or because they are *uncertain* or *disagree* about what they ought to do, or because they take there to be *no fact of the matter* about what they ought to do (in this instance or perhaps in general). The suggestion that a correct answer to the question of what to do is just given by what we ought to do has the unwelcome implication that each of these agents is massively deluded about the kind of enterprise in which she is engaged.

Another possible view is that the relevant norms are valid *rules of practical reasoning*. The most straightforward version of this view clearly won’t work. Valid rules of practical reasoning plausibly determine what it takes for practical reasoning to be correct. It seems clear that we may reason correctly to an incorrect answer, and reason incorrectly to a correct answer.

Couldn’t there be some more circuitous route by which valid rules of practical reasoning determine correct answers to the question? For example, we might hold that an intention is made correct by the availability of a sound deliberative route from the agent’s actual attitudes to the intention in question, where a deliberative route is sound just in case it accords with valid rules of reasoning. One problem with this suggestion is that it is unclear exactly what it means for a sound deliberative route to be “available” to an agent. But if it means that the agent has the capacities required in order to arrive at the relevant intention by correctly following valid rules of reasoning, then the prospects for such a view seem dim. For it would seem that an agent may potentially be incapable of reasoning correctly to a correct answer to the question of what to do.

I tentatively suggest instead that the relevant norms are (*narrow-scope*) *requirements of structural rationality* (Kolodny 2005; Scanlon 2007; Southwood 2008; Schroeder 2009; cf. Street 2010). Suppose that I intend to go surfing in Fiji this weekend and believe that I can only go surfing in Fiji this weekend if I buy a ticket to Nadi this afternoon. Under these circumstances, deciding to spend the afternoon in bed, say, would be an incorrect answer to the question of what to do. Other things being equal, the correct answer is to decide to buy a plane ticket to Nadi. (Notice that this is so, even if what I *ought* to do is spend the afternoon in bed. Perhaps I have a nasty cold. Perhaps my meagre surfing abilities are really not up to the demands of Fiji’s notorious reef breaks.) I suggest that we explain this verdict as follows: There is a valid requirement of rationality that holds (roughly) that if we intend to X and believe that we can only X insofar as we Y, then we are rationally required to intend to Y. Given that I intend to go surfing in Fiji this weekend and believe that I can only go surfing in Fiji this weekend, the only way to comply with this requirement is to intend to buy a ticket to Nadi this afternoon.

Or suppose that I have received a $100,000 bonus. And suppose that I believe I ought to give the money to Oxfam. Under these circumstances, deciding to spend the money on a new BMW for my wife, say, would seem to be an incorrect answer to the question of what to do. Other things being equal, the correct answer to the question of what to do with one’s bonus seems to be to decide to give it to Oxfam. (This is so, even if what I ought to do with my bonus is to buy my wife a new BMW, rather than to give the money to Oxfam.) Again, I suggest we explain this verdict as follows: There is a valid requirement of rationality that holds (very roughly) that if we believe that we ought to X, then we are rationally required to intend to X. Given my belief that I ought to give my bonus to Oxfam, the only way to comply with this requirement is to intend to give the money to Oxfam.

I have suggested a possible way for constructivists to understand the norms of practical reason in terms of which truths about practical reasons are to be somehow explicated. The relevant norms are those norms that determine truths about the thing to do, namely truths about the correct answer to the question of what to do. Moreover, I have suggested a candidate for the category of norms that are capable of playing this role: requirements of rationality. Let us now consider whether an interpretation of constructivism along these lines might help to solve the problem of normativity within reason.

3. Vindicating the normativity-of-reason thesis

Consider, first, the normativity-of-reason thesis. This holds that the relevant norms of practical reason must be somehow genuinely (and not merely minimally) normative. So, the question is whether certain requirements of rationality are genuinely normative on the supposition that they entail truths about the thing to do. In order to answer this question, I shall adopt the following approach: Identify a list of core features of some class of paradigmatically genuinely normative truths in virtue of which they are genuinely normative, and then consider whether truths about the thing to do possess those features. Mark Schroeder (2011) has recently offered such a list. According to Schroeder, there are a number of core features (or “hallmarks”) of claims involving what he calls the “deliberative ought” which he takes to be the paradigmatic example of genuinely normative claims (cf. Southwood 2016b). First, they “close deliberation”. Second, they “matter directly for advice”. Third, they are such that “it is legitimate criticism of someone that she does not” act in the prescribed way. Fourth, they “imply ‘can’”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Let us consider each of these in turn.

*A) Deliberative closure*

Schroeder’s first hallmark is that genuinely normative claims suffice for deliberative closure. Consider claims involving the deliberative ought. Take the claim that I ought to arrange a nice anniversary dinner for my wife on Thursday evening, the evening of our anniversary. The deliberative ought is at play here only insofar as in taking it to be the case that I ought to arrange such a dinner for my wife I have arrived at a point that suffices for deliberative closure. Suppose that despite my taking it to be the case that I ought to arrange the dinner on Thursday I continue to wonder what to do on Thursday evening: say, whether to organize the anniversary dinner or instead to go to the pub. This would be unnecessary (and indeed inappropriate).

Do requirements of rationality suffice for deliberative closure? Clearly not in the same way as truths about what we deliberatively ought to do. Truths about what we deliberatively ought to do *themselves close* *deliberation* *within deliberation*, as we might say. By contrast, truths about rationality don’t typically show up within deliberation at all. This can be seen by the fact that it would be highly odd and atypical to deliberate by trying to reach a true belief about what I am rationally required to intend to do. That would be, as Kolodny (2005, pp. 547-41) nicely it, to turn rationality into a kind of “fetish.”

Still, there is a different way in which requirements of rationality obviously do suffice for deliberative closure on the supposition that they entail truths about the thing to do. The relevant requirements of rationality determine the correctness of correct intentions, and intentions are precisely those states that bring deliberation to a close. So the relevant requirements of rationality suffice for deliberative closure in the sense that they determine the correctness of *correct* deliberative closure. Suppose that I believe that I ought to arrange a nice anniversary dinner for my wife on Thursday evening. The claim that one is rationally required to intend to do what one believes one ought to do suffices for deliberative closure in the sense that it determines the correctness (other things being equal) of my closing deliberation concerning what to do on Thursday evening by intending to arrange a nice anniversary dinner for my wife.

*B) Matters for advice*

Schroeder’s second hallmark is that claims that are genuinely normative matter directly for advice. Again, claims about how we deliberatively ought to act might seem to pass with flying colours. That’s because there might seem to be a crucial connection between ought claims and advice (though see Southwood 2016b). Ought claims frequently appear in the register of advice as when I tell a student that she ought to structure her paper differently. When we *ask* someone for advice we are typically asking her to tell us (or to help tell us) what we ought to do. So if I come to you for advice about the problems I am having making my baby sleep, what I want you to help me with is to know what steps I ought to be taking, what things I ought to be doing differently, and so on.

If Schroeder is right about the connection between genuine normativity and advice, this means that to vindicate the normativity-of-reason thesis we must show how relevant requirements of rationality are supposed to be capable of figuring in the register of advice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many existing accounts have considerable difficulty explaining (or explaining away) how requirements of rationality are supposed to figure in the register of advice. For example, Niko Kolodny’s “transparency account” of structural requirements of rationality holds that when we advise someone that he is rationally required to have attitude A, this simply involves “making the descriptive, psychological claim that he believes that he has conclusive reason for this attitude. … [W]e are not ourselves offering him a reason to have A. How, then, are we advising him to have A? By drawing his attention to a reason that *he believes* he has” (Kolodny 2005, p. 557). But now suppose that Donald Trump comes to me for advice. Knowing that he believes that he ought to build a huge wall between Mexico and the United States, I say to him: “I would just like to draw your attention to a conclusive reason that you believe you have, namely to build a huge wall between Mexico and the United States” (Bridges 2009; Hussain (ms); Kiesewetter 2013, pp. 160-67). This is clearly not sufficient for anything remotely recognizable as advice.

Or take the kind of “subjective reasons account” defended by Derek Parfit (2001), Mark Schroeder (2009) and Jonathan Way (2010) according to which requirements of (practical) rationality are truths about what we ought to intend to do on the assumption that our actual attitudes our correct. This would have to understand advising someone that she is rationally required to intend to X as involving advising her that she ought to intend to X on the assumption that her attitudes are correct. One thing this might mean is the adviser’s making the assumption that the advisees’ attitudes are correct and then giving her *unconditional* advice about what she ought to intend to do. But this seems irresponsible in the extreme. It would suggest that I should advise you that you ought to intend to drink the liquid in the glass knowing full well that it’s petrol. The other thing it might mean is the adviser’s giving *conditional* advice about what she ought to intend to do if she has certain beliefs about what she ought to do. This is not irresponsible. The problem instead is that it’s vacuous. What would not be vacuous is to give someone advice conditional on the truth of her non-normative beliefs: e.g. if your belief that Malcolm Turnbull will sack 15000 public servants is true, then you ought not to intend to vote for Malcolm Turnbull. At best, this lacks sufficient generality since, at best, it would account for how *one* rather questionable requirement of rationality might figure in the register of advice.

These existing accounts ultimately fail for the same reason, namely they are trying to account for requirements of rationality in the register of advice in terms of *ought*. Suppose instead we understand requirements of rationality as entailing truths about the thing to do. Suppose that I am offering to offering Donald Trump the kind of advice that I might offer insofar as I am in the business of telling him, not what he ought to do, but what is, say, required in order to avoid irrationality. This would be as follows: “Given that you believe that you ought to build a huge wall between Mexico and the United States, building such a wall is the thing to do. Deciding to build the wall would be a correct answer to the question of what to do.” Doubtless there is something a little odd about this. The oddity derives from the oddity of offering him advice about what is rationally required of him rather than advice about what he ought to do. But insofar as you are engaged in this admittedly odd enterprise, then our account captures admirably what is going on. It is recognizable as a kind of advice. It has the virtue of being true. And it would be perfectly compatible with giving this advice that you then continue: “Of course, I would also strongly advise you to reconsider your belief that you ought to build the wall. For it’s just not true that this is what you ought to do.”

*C) Appropriate criticism*

Schroeder’s third hallmark is that truths that are genuinely normative are such that it is appropriate to criticize someone for failing to act in the relevant way. It is plausible to suppose that truths about what we deliberatively ought to do have this feature. If you deliberatively ought to save a drowning child even if this means that you will be five minutes late to a relatively unimportant meeting and yet you fail to save her, then you are criticisable. If you deliberatively ought to sell your shares in Nickel mining given a foreseeable decline in Nickel usage over the next decade and you fail to do so, then you are criticisable.

Once again, if Schroeder is right about the connection between genuine normativity and criticisability, then this means that to vindicate the normativity-of-reason thesis we must show how requirements of rationality are associated with appropriate criticism.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here, too, however, many existing accounts are not up to the task. Kolodny’s transparency account holds that “a second-personal charge of irrationality … says, in effect, ‘Look, from your perspective you ought to believe [that you have sufficient reason to intend to X and yet you don’t intend to X]” (Kolodny 2005, p. 517). Again, it is utterly mysterious how pointing out to someone what they believe amounts to anything remotely like criticism (Bridges 2009; Hussain (ms); Kiesewetter 2013, pp. 160-67). The subjective reasons account holds that a charge of irrationality amounts to telling someone that they are failing to intend to do what they ought to (intend to) do on the assumption that their actual attitudes are correct. If this involves unconditional criticism from a standpoint in which the criticiser is simply assuming that the criticisee’s attitudes are correct, then it seems potentially disingenuous or insincere. Thus, if I criticize Huck by telling him that in failing to turn in Jim he has failed to do what he ought to do, I am guilty of a kind of insincerity. If it involves criticism that is conditional on the correctness of your normative attitudes – i.e. “On the assumption that your belief that you ought to turn in Jim is true, you have failed to do what you ought to do” – then the criticism is utterly vacuous. And if it involves criticism that is conditional on the correctness of your non-normative attitudes – i.e. “On the assumption that your belief that climate change is a left-wing conspiracy is correct, you ought to vote for Tony Abbot” – then, at best, it lacks sufficient generality.

In short, then, these existing accounts do not provide plausible vindicating explanations of the way in which requirements of rationality figure in criticism. Does understanding relevant requirements of rationality as entailing truths about the thing to do fare any better? Yes. For it holds that a charge of, say, practical irrationality amounts to the charge that someone has failed to intend to do what is the thing for her to do. That is, she hqs failed to do what is necessary in order to answer correctly the question of what to do. So, for instance, take the person who has failed to intend to drink the liquid in the glass, which unbeknownst to her is in fact petrol, despite having decided to drink some gin right now and believing that the only way to drink some gin right now is to drink the liquid in this glass. We might celebrate her lucky escape. Still, she is irrational and hence criticisable. The kind of criticism that we would direct towards her should we understood as follows: “Given that you had decided to drink to drink some gin at that moment and believed that the only way to drink some gin at that moment was to drink the liquid in this glass, in failing to decide to drink the liquid in the glass, you failed to intend to do what was the thing for you to do. That is, you failed to answer correctly the question of what to do.” Notice that one might very well go on and say, “Of course, you’ve had a lucky escape. As it turned out, the liquid in the glass was petrol. So it certainly wasn’t true that you *ought* to drink it.”

*D) Implies “can”*

Schroeder’s fourth hallmark – and the last one that I shall consider – is that genuinely normative truths imply “can.” While the idea is by no means uncontroversial, it is at least *plausible* that claims about what we deliberatively ought to do imply “can” (see Southwood 2016b). So, for instance, plausibly it can only be true that I deliberatively ought to scale the precipice to save the injured climber if I can scale the precipice. By contrast, there is absolutely no plausibility to the idea that claims involving the merely evaluative ought imply can. Consider the claim that it ought to be the case that humans can do things that they can’t do.

If Schroeder is right, then to vindicate the normativity-of-reason thesis we must show how requirements of rationality, at least taken together, imply “can.” Fortunately, the idea that requirements of rationality entail truths about the thing to do is particularly well-placed to meet this challenge. I have argued at length elsewhere for what I called the principle that “the thing to do” implies “can” (Southwood 2016a). Let me just very briefly rehearse the argument here. Truths about the thing to do are, of course, truths about the answer to the question of what to do. Now suppose that one were to form an intention to do something that one can’t do – say, an intention to carry an elephant. I don’t say this is impossible. But it wouldn’t be the correct answer to the question of what to do. That’s because the question to which it would be an answer – the question of whether to carry an elephant – involves a false presupposition, namely that I can carry the elephant. But if the question of whether to carry the elephant has a false presupposition, then intending to carry the elephant cannot be the correct answer to the question of what to do. Notice that I don’t say that it is an *incorrect* answer. Whether you think that depends on your account of presupposition. It is enough for my purposes that it is not the case that intending to do something that you are unable to do can be the correct answer to the question of what to do. Since truths about the thing to do just are truths about the correct answer to the question of what to, it follows that it cannot be the case that something that you cannot do is the thing to do.

4. Vindicating the reasons-independence thesis

I have argued that we have good reason to think the normativity-of-reason thesis is correct insofar as we accept that the relevant norms of practical reason entail corresponding truths about the thing to do. How about the reasons-independence thesis? This holds that the normative character of the relevant norms of practical reason must be prior to and independent of practical reasons. Are truths about the thing to do independent of practical reasons?

*A) Fact-dependent reasons*

Yes, if the reasons in question are *fact-dependent* (or objective) reasons. Fact-dependent reasons depend simply on the facts (see Moore 1912; Thomson 1990). Truths about the thing to do, in contrast, depend on our attitudes. So it’s possible that I have no fact-dependent reason to X even though Xing is the thing for me to do, given some relevant attitude of mine. For example, if I intend to commit a murder and believe that I can only commit the murder by putting poison in my victim’s soup, then putting poison in my victim’s soup may be the thing for me to do. This can be so even though I have no fact-dependent reasons to commit the murder.

The only way that one might try to show that truths about the thing to do are such that, necessarily, we have fact-dependent reasons to comply with them is to insist that the relevant facts upon which fact-dependent reasons depend include facts about our attitudes: say, facts about our intentions and beliefs. If this is right, then my intention to commit a murder and my belief that I can only commit the murder by putting poison in my victim’s soup might make it the case that I have fact-dependent reason to put poison in my victim’s soup. Such a view, however, is clearly absurd.

*B) Evidence-dependent reasons*

What about evidence-relative reasons? Evidence-relative reasons are reasons that depend on our (available) evidence (see Dancy 2000; Kiesewetter 2011; 2013). For example, suppose that I have compelling evidence that my next-door neighbour is a psychopath who intends to commit some mass atrocity. In that case it is plausible to suppose that I have a pretty good reason to move house even though, of course, it is possible that the evidence is misleading and, in fact, he’s just a harmless eccentric. Let’s call these kinds of reasons *evidence-dependent reasons*.

As with fact-dependent reasons, however, it is not hard to see how I might have no evidence-dependent reason to X even though Xing is the thing for me to do, given some relevant attitude of mine. The point is that our attitudes are not always based on, or even accompanied by, confirming evidence. A longsuffering boyfriend might believe his girlfriend to be faithful even though there is not a skerrick of evidence in favour of the claim and a wealth of evidence in favour of her infidelity. This is perhaps even clearer in the case of our normative beliefs. Suppose that one has been raised in an extremely isolated community and been indoctrinated into all kinds of bizarre beliefs, such as the belief that ought never to cut one’s hair. Suppose that this is a basic normative belief among members of the community. It’s not as if members of the community take cutting one’s hair to be wrong because it’s harmful, or because God has ordered his creatures not to cut their hair, or whatever. Hair-cutting is just not what one ought to do period. I take it that this belief may be utterly unsupported by any evidence. Finally, it is clearer still in the case of our intentions. Of course, some philosophers hold that our intentions entail beliefs: either non-normative beliefs, such as beliefs about what we will do (Harman 1997; Velleman 2000) or what it is possible for us to do (Wallace 2001); or normative beliefs about what we ought or have reason to do (Schroeder 2009, p. 237; Scanlon 2007). Assuming that these views are wrong (Bratman 2009), there is even less reason to think that our intentions need be necessarily accompanied by confirming evidence. For instance, surely it is possible to intend to commit a mass atrocity and yet to have absolutely no evidence that would make it the case that one has reason to commit a mass atrocity.

What is the upshot? Well, truths about the thing to do are attitude-dependent. Moreover, as we have just seen, the attitudes on which they depend need not be supported or even accompanied by corresponding evidence. So it follows that truths about the thing to do not entail evidence-relative reasons to comply with them.

*C) Attitude-relative reasons*

Finally, what about *attitude-relative* (or *subjective*) reasons? These are considerations that would be (fact-dependent or evidence-dependent) reasons on the assumption that the agent’s attitudes are correct (see Parfit 2001; Schroeder 2009; Way 2010). There are a number of different versions of this idea. I take the standard version to be Derek Parfit’s version that holds that our attitude-relative reasons to X are those *non-normative* considerations P such that (a) we believe P and (b) we would have (fact-dependent) reason to X on the assumption that P is true (Parfit 2001; 2011). It is clear that truths about the thing to do don’t entail Parfit’s kind of attitude-relative reasons. Take the following famous example from Frank Jackson:

Jill is a physician who has to decide on the correct treatment for her patient, John, who has a minor but not trivial skin complaint. She has three drugs to choose from: drug A, drug B, and drug C. Careful consideration of the literature has led her to the following opinions. Drug A is very likely to relieve the condition but will not completely cure it. One of drugs B and C will completely cure the skin condition; the other though will kill the patient, and there is no way that she can tell which of the two is the perfect cure and which the killer drug (Jackson 1991, pp. 462-63).

It might be the case that the thing for Jill to do is to prescribe drug B rather than drug A if she has sufficiently bizarre normative beliefs (e.g. that doctors ought to kill patients when doing so would improve the overall gene pool), without having any attitude-relative reasons of the kind that Parfit has in mind. Let’s suppose that the only belief she has that is relevant is the belief that prescribing drug A is very likely to substantially improve though not completely cure a patient’s symptoms whereas prescribing drug B has a 50% chance of killing one’s patient. Under these circumstances, she has attitude-relative reason to prescribe drug A rather than drug B, since it would be the case that she has (fact-dependent) reason to prescribe drug A rather than drug B on the assumption that her belief is true.

Mark Schroeder (2009) has suggested an alternative way of conceptualising attitude-relative reasons. This holds that our attitude-relative reasons to X are those (non-normative *or normative*) considerations P such that (a’) we believe P (either directly or because we have other attitudes that entail that we believe P) and (b) we would have (fact-dependent) reason to X on the assumption that P is true.

Schroeder’s category of attitude-relative reasons is supposed to be broader than Parfit’s in two ways. First, we have Schroeder-style attitude-relative reasons to X whenever we have normative beliefs that we ought or have reason to X, whereas our normative beliefs do not entail Parfit-style attitude-relative reasons to X. If I believe that I have a reason to pay my parents a visit, then it obviously follows that I would have a (fact-dependent) reason to pay my parents a visit on the assumption that my belief is true, i.e. on the assumption that I have a reason to pay my parents a visit. In this respect, Schroeder-style attitude-relative reasons might seem to resemble the apparent reasons of Kolodny and Scanlon. But they are also quite different. Schroeder is certainly not saying that such normative belief-relative reasons are beliefs about reasons. Rather, they are considerations that would be reasons on the assumption that our beliefs about reasons are true. Second, Schroeder also wants to suggest that the attitudes to which Schroeder-style attitude-relative reasons are relative encompass attitudes other than beliefs. They also encompass intentions. That’s because he holds that intentions entail normative beliefs (Schroeder 2009, p. 237). Indeed, he endorses the strong thesis that intentions entail beliefs about what we *ought* to do. He needs this in order to explain instrumental norms of practical reason. But I shall focus on the weaker claim here.

Once we broaden the category of attitude-relative reasons in these two ways, it might seem that truths about the thing to do will be such that, necessarily, we have attitude-relative reasons to comply with them. Given the inclusion of normative beliefs, even those claims about the thing to do that depend on false and evidence-insensitive normative truths entail attitude-relative reasons to act in the ways we (falsely and evidence-insensitively) believe that we ought or have reason to act. Given the inclusion of intentions, even those claims about the thing to do that depend, in the first instance, on intentions, rather than normative beliefs, entail attitude-relative reasons to act in the relevant ways. It might seem, then, that in Schroeder-style attitude-relative reasons we have a category of reasons that suffices to block our attempt to vindicate the reasons-independence thesis.

Not so fast. There are two reasons to think this is not so. First, even the weaker claim that intentions entail beliefs about reasons is false. Take Lafcadio, who decides to commit a mass atrocity precisely because he intends to perform an act that he has no reason to perform and Meursault, who decides not to have a third cup of coffee despite being a consistent normative nihilist. These possibilities show that it is simply not plausible that intentions entail beliefs about reasons. Given this, it is not the case that truths about the thing to do are such that, necessarily, we have attitude-relative reasons to comply with them.

Second, it seems to me that we should be profoundly sceptical that attitude-relative reasons (either Parfit-style or Schroeder-style) are really *reasons* – at least if reasons are supposed to be genuinely normative (see Kiesewetter 2012). This might sound like a purely terminological point, but its substantive importance is as follows: Schroeder wants to appeal to attitude-relative reasons in order to vindicate the normativity-of-reason thesis. So whatever we *call* them, attitude-relative reasons better be such that if the relevant norms of practical reason are such that, necessarily, we have attitude-relative reasons to comply with them, this is sufficient to establish that requirements of rationality are genuinely normative.

But it is far from obvious that they are. Suppose that we take Schroeder’s own hallmarks of genuine normativity. First, having sufficient attitude-relative reasons to X does not suffice for deliberative closure.[[6]](#footnote-6) Those attitude-relative reasons that we have that are simply relative to our non-normative beliefs clearly don’t suffice to achieve deliberative closure. Suppose that I believe that my prescribing a drug will kill my patient but I don’t believe that I ought not to kill my patient; rather I believe that I ought to kill her. Nor do I have any other normative belief or intention that would make sense of my refraining from killing her. It nonetheless follows that I have an attitude-relative reason to refrain from prescribing the drug since I would have a (fact-dependent) reason not to prescribe the drug on the assumption that my non-normative belief is true. Such an attitude-relative reason plainly won’t suffice for deliberative closure.

Next, attitude-relative reasons are also ill-equipped to figure in the register of advice and criticism. The problem here, as we noted above, is their conditionality. At least the advice and criticism that is conditional on the advisee’s or criticisee’s normative beliefs being true is utterly vacuous.

Finally, it is not the case that attitude-relative reasons – or even attitude-relative oughts – imply “can.” Suppose that I’m massively deluded about my capacities. For example, suppose that I believe that I have the capacity to single-handedly reverse climate change, end world poverty, and solve the Israel-Palestine conflict. It’s surely the case that I would have sufficient and decisive reason to do these things on the assumption that my beliefs are correct. So it follows that I have sufficient and decisive attitude-relative reason to single-handedly reverse man-made climate change, end world poverty, and solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, even though clearly I can’t do these things.

5. Conclusion

Meta-ethical constructivism faces a puzzle. The puzzle is that meta-ethical constructivism seems to presuppose that the relevant constitutive norms of practical reason are genuinely (and not merely minimally) normative and yet that their normativity is independent of the normativity of practical reasons. The solution to the puzzle, I have suggested, is to recognise that the relevant norms of practical reason determine a special class of truths – truths about the thing to do. I have suggested that truths about the thing to do are genuinely normative and also prior to and independent of practical reasons.

Let me close with a couple of observations. First, I have been focusing on just *one problem* that arises for meta-ethical constructivism: the problem of normativity within reason. There are, of course, many other serious problems that I haven’t even touched upon. For example, there is the problem of how to provide a version of meta-ethical constructivism that is capable of delivering plausible substantive verdicts without bootstrapping (Kolodny 2005). For what it’s worth, my view is that the most promising way to do so is to embrace some kind of *contractualist* constructivism: that is, truths about reasons are to be explained, not in terms of the correct exercise of individual practical reason but in terms of the correct exercise of collective practical reason insofar as we confront the task of living together (cf. Southwood 2010). But this is certainly a difficult problem.

Second, it is important to stress that the account of practical reason I have sketched here – and, hence, the solution to the problem of normativity within reason – is, in a crucial way, incomplete. That’s because I have been simply assuming that there are truths about the thing to do – that is, truths about the answer to the question of what to do. I haven’t directly argued that they exist. It seems to me that the only plausible way of doing so will involve showing that we *need* truths about the thing to do: that they are doing important philosophical work. I’ve argued elsewhere that adducing truths about the thing to do can explain the modicum of truth in “ought” implies “can” (Southwood 2016a). Solving the problem of normativity within reason is potentially another important kind of philosophical work that they can do. The strategy here should be familiar because it’s basically David Lewis’s strategy in *On the Plurality of Worlds*. It goes as follows: Here is an eccentric thought. Notice that the eccentric thought, if true, would explain a number of things that are otherwise very hard to explain. Therefore, the eccentric thought is (maybe) true.

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2. For this way of characterizing constructivism, see Southwood forthcoming a. Notice that it is importantly different from the standard *proceduralist* *characterisation*, according to which constructivism is the view that practical reasons are to be explained in terms of the output of an actual or hypothetical procedure (Bagnoli 2011, p. 1; Enoch 2011, p. 322); and also Sharon Street’s more recent standpoint characterisation, according to which constructivism is the view that practical reasons are to be explained in terms of what is “entailed” from within a particular “evaluative standpoint” or “point of view” (Street 2010, p. 367). The main problem with these alternative ways of characterising constructivism, as I see it, is that they are too restrictive. They exclusive many important versions of constructivism. For example, the proceduralist characterisation excludes versions according to which the idea of a procedure is merely a heuristic device. The standpoint characterisation excludes versions that try to explain practical reasons in terms of non-evaluative attitudes; or in terms of a plurality of standpoints; or in terms of rules of deliberation; or in terms of wide-scope requirements of rationality; or that deny that standards of correct practical reason are constitutive of the attitude of valuing as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schroeder also takes there to be a fifth hallmark, namely that there is an important connection between genuinely normative truths and “the notion of obligation”. However, this seems false. Obligations are “directed” in the sense that they are owed to specific others. But many genuinely normative truths (including Schroeder’s own example of truths about the deliberative ought) are not directed. I shall, therefore, ignore Schroeder’s fifth hallmark and simply focus on the first four. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Kolodny (2005, p. 557) takes the plausibility of any account of the nature of requirements of rationality to be dependent on its capacity to make sense of the fact that such requirements figure “in the register of advice”, as when “we tell someone … that he ought rationally to have attitude A, or that it would be irrational of him not to have it”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The idea that there is such an association is widely affirmed in the case of structural requirements of rationality. As Broome (2005, p. 336) puts it, “When we accuse someone of irrationality, we are surely criticizing her”. According to Parfit (2011, p. 33), “We use the word ‘irrational’ to express the kind of criticism that we express with words like ‘senseless’, ‘stupid’, ‘idiotic’, and ‘crazy’”. Similarly, Raz (2005, p. 18) writes: “People who fail to pursue the means to their ends display or manifest a form of malfunctioning criticisable as a form of irrationality”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A fortiori, merely having attitude-relative *reasons* to X does not suffice for deliberative closure. Reasons, as Schroeder himself has noted elsewhere, are “cheap”. I have a reason to eat my car but clearly this doesn’t suffice for deliberation to be closed in favour of deciding to eat my car. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)