

Two Problems for Constructivism and How to Solve Them

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Constructivism—at least as I shall understand it—occupies a unique position in metaethics. Constructivism is anti-realist. Constructivism holds that facts about the domain in question—for my purposes the domain of practical reasons—are not “stance-independent” or independent of the attitudes of moral agents.¹ To put the matter in crude terms, for constructivism, normative facts are made, not found. However, constructivism (or, at least, the form of constructivism I shall discuss here) is anti-realist in a way that holds the promise of capturing much of what is plausible about realism. To note at least two potential advantages here, like realism and unlike expressivism, constructivism is cognitivist, and hence can capture the intuition that normative sentences are “robustly truth-apt”. Expressivism, at best, appears to be able to capture the truth-aptness of normative judgments on some form or other of minimalism or deflationism about the nature of truth. Furthermore, constructivism need not take any particular position with regard to the motivational status of normative judgments. Because expressivism is committed to a conceptual link between an agent’s judgments and her motivations, expressivism appears unable to accommodate motivational externalism in a way both realism and constructivism can.

Constructivism is thus a unique metaethical position that promises to deliver that which is plausible about realism against expressivism without commitment to a bloated moral ontology. However, constructivism’s status as a “middle way” between realism and expressivism leaves it vulnerable to a number of objections. Responding to all the defects of a constructivist view is impossible here. In this paper, I discuss two problems faced by constructivism in comparison to its realist rival. I should note that the problems I discuss here are independent. Some forms of constructivism can avoid one

¹Cf. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

or the other. But my solution purports to solve *both* without accepting realism, or retreating to a position that loses its status as a unique “third way”.

1. *Constructivism: A Few Words*

What constitutes constructivism is even less well-understood than what constitutes realism. And that is saying something. For my purposes here, I discuss a version of constructivism that has three essential features. First, this version of constructivism *cares about truth*. For constructivism, as I understand it, normative judgments are true or false. Second, constructivism outlines the truth *conditions* of any particular normative judgment in terms of its being the product of a certain constructivist *procedure*. For constructivism, a particular normative judgment is true *because* it is the output of the constructivist procedure. Third, constructivism takes as *inputs* to the constructivist procedure the various normative judgments, themselves subject to truth or falsity, of agents or some specified subset of agents (for instance, “rational agents”).

This form of constructivism has been called, among other things, “ambitious” and “unrestricted”.² Various un-ambitious or restricted forms of constructivism might avoid the problems I note here. Nevertheless, there is reason to explore the success of unrestricted or ambitious constructivism. Only the latter position promises to be a thoroughgoing challenger to realism and expressivism. Restricted constructivism requires either some set of normative judgments to be construed realistically,³ or it requires some subset of normative judgments to be given an expressivist analysis,⁴ thereby stripping constructivism of its status as a robust “third way” view. In this paper, I attempt to give unrestricted constructivism a run for its money. Whether it survives is as yet an open question.

2. *A First-Order Challenge: The Asymmetric Authority of Preference*

Call a reason r for an agent x to ϕ “preference-dependent” if a necessary condition of r ’s being a reason for x to ϕ is that ϕ -ing promotes the fulfillment of x ’s preferences. Call a reason r for x to ϕ “preference-independent” if, in order for r to be a reason for x to ϕ , ϕ -ing need not promote the fulfillment of x ’s preferences. Given this terminology, three facts appear

²See, for instance, Nadeem Hussain, this volume.

³See, for instance, Scanlon.

⁴Cf. Lenman, “Constructivism and Expressivism”, this volume.

worthy of note. First, there appears to be an important strain of first-order intuition that declares some reasons preference-dependent. Consider:

Roll Over Beethoven: I have been invited by my friend Jimmy to attend Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which is being performed by a world-renowned orchestra. I have also been invited by my friend Ronald to attend a concert by the blues-rock band ZZ Top. I prefer to skip Beethoven and see ZZ Top.

Roll Over Beethoven seems to indicate that there is at least one preference-dependent reason. In this case, I appear to have reason to accept Ronald’s invitation that I would not have had had I not preferred to see ZZ Top. Second, we also appear to believe that there are preference-independent reasons. Consider:

Roll Over Buford: While working in my garden, I calmly observe Buford Terwilliger walking past with a one-hundred dollar bill. I have a strong preference to murder him and take his money, which, because of our isolation and Buford’s lack of family and friends, would not interfere with any of my other preferences.

In *Roll Over Buford*, I have an option to murder Buford or refrain. Prima facie, in this case, unlike *Roll Over Beethoven*, the fact that killing Buford is manifestly immoral is a strong reason not to do so, and remains a reason even in the absence of any preference not to do so. Thus it appears that the normative authority of preferences is limited. Some reasons are preference-dependent, others are preference-independent. Third, and perhaps most importantly, in the case of at least some preference-dependent reasons, my reason to ϕ need not be ratified by the preference-independent value of ϕ -ing. This is also clear from *Roll Over Beethoven*. I have a reason to accept Ronald’s invitation even if seeing ZZ Top has no preference-independent—or “objective”—value whatever. In explaining why I have a reason to accept Ronald’s invitation, I need not refer to the intrinsic aesthetic value or objective worthiness of ZZ Top; my preference seems to perfectly well explain my reason without reference to any further normative or evaluative facts. Though this will not be true of all preference-dependent reasons, it is true of some, including, for my money, my reason to accept Ronald’s invitation in *Roll Over Beethoven*.

The asymmetry to which I’m pointing has implications for a constructivist metaethic even if the extent to which this asymmetry manifests itself is limited in significant ways (i.e., even if pure preferentialism about the personal good is false). Assume, for instance, that prudential reasons need not

always be preference-dependent. Even if *Roll Over Beethoven* is the only case in which a practical reason is determined by an individual's preferences, there remains an asymmetry. My own view is that all prudential reasons are preference-dependent, all moral reasons are preference-independent—thus the asymmetry should be set at the morality/prudence divide. But one needn't believe that the asymmetry has such broad scope. I will assume for the sake of simplicity, however, that the asymmetry is between preference-independent moral reasons and preference-dependent prudential reasons.

2.1. Realism and Constructivism on the Asymmetry

It will help to focus my discussion of the asymmetric authority of preference by first examining how a realist metaethic might accommodate it. Realist theories, as I understand them, mark a distinction between the reasons we have and our best or most justified understanding of the reasons we have. In this sense, reasons are, in the words of Russ Shafer-Landau, “stance-independent”:

The way I would prefer to characterize the realist position is by reference to its endorsement of the *stance-independence* of moral reality. Realists believe that there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that *the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective.*⁵

Though Shafer-Landau's realism concerns moral facts, a similar position might be held in the domain of practical reasons. A full-blown normative realism holds that all normative facts are independent of the attitudes taken toward them by agents or cognizers. Normative facts, viz., reasons, exist independently of our ratification of them; normative judgments are true or false depending on their correspondence with these independent normative facts.

Some have thought a realist metaethic cannot properly accommodate the asymmetry. The problem runs as follows. One important form of stance-dependence is preference-dependence. If what makes it true that I have a reason to accept Ronald's invitation in *Beethoven* is that I have a preference to see ZZ Top rather than the Ninth, it is hard to see how realism could

⁵Shafer-Landau, 15.

capture the existence of such a reason.⁶ If we trust our intuitions when it comes to the asymmetry, it appears that we have good evidence to believe that realism can possibly be true only of a subset of practical reasons: a more full-blown realism cannot accommodate the asymmetry because a more full-blown realism would invalidate the preference-dependence of prudential reasons.

Scanlon notices something like this problem for a realist view:

It would seem that our choices can affect the reasons we have. If I adopt a certain end, then it would seem that I have reason to do what is required to pursue it, a reason that I otherwise would not have had. On the other hand, many of us believe that we have other reasons that are not dependent on our choices. If accelerating my car and driving straight ahead would seriously injure a pedestrian, this is a reason for me not to do that. And it seems, to me at least, that this is a reason I would have whatever ends I may have chosen. Its being a reason is something I discover rather than create. This gives rise to a puzzle about what it is to be a reason—that is to say, a consideration that counts in favour of some action or attitude. If the normative status of counting in favour of acting a certain way is something that certain considerations can just have, how can it also be something that we can confer on certain considerations by our choice of ends?⁷

The difficulty, as Scanlon notes, appears to be in explaining how it could be that there are at least some reasons (such as the one illustrated by *Roll Over Beethoven*) that are both stance-independent (given realism) *and* dependent on the particular attitudes that agents take (whether choice or preference).

Leaving aside Scanlon's proposed solution, that realism has such a problem is difficult to see. As noted before, stance-independence does not require total independence of all facts about an agent's preferences. Preference-dependence involves only a necessary condition: that without the associated preference, there would be no reason. Reasons are thus *dependent* on the existence of a preference. But being preference-dependent does not mean that reasons are not also dependent on other facts. Hence a theory of reasons

⁶Compare Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999), 116.

⁷T. M. Scanlon, "Reasons: A Puzzling Duality?" in *Reason and Value: These from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. Wallace, Pettit, Sheffler, and Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 231.

can be stance-independent, but also *preference-dependent*, if, for example, what makes it true that r is a reason for x to ϕ is some stance-independent normative fact, one that is discovered not created. A realist might, for instance, accept the existence of a stance-independent fact about the nature of prudential rationality: that ϕ -ing would promote x 's well-being is a reason for x to ϕ , coupled with the stance-independent fact that the fulfillment of x 's preferences is in x 's interest. Furthermore, this can accommodate the third important fact noted above: realism can claim that I have a reason to promote my preferences in cases like *Roll Over Beethoven* even if seeing ZZ Top has no *per se* objective value, given the stance-independent facts about the nature of prudence.

That realism can accommodate the asymmetry straightforwardly should be a mark in its favor. Hence if constructivism is to be a plausible alternative, it must keep pace. But it is not clear that this is possible. Here is why. For constructivism, all normative facts are stance-dependent, constructed by the judgments of agents or some subset thereof. Thus, *a priori*, constructivism has no grounds to claim that it can or cannot accommodate any particular first-order verdict. Whether I have a reason to accept Ronald's invitation or a reason not to murder Buford, on a constructivist view, will appear to await the results of the various constructive procedures. Thus, though it is certainly *possible* that constructivism might accommodate the asymmetry, we simply have no way of knowing whether it does so without knowing the outcome of the constructive procedure, which requires substantial knowledge of the normative judgments of agents.

The constructivist will reply that, given the plausibility of the asymmetry, it is surely the case that *some* agents will hold that they have a preference-independent reason not to murder Buford. But even if this is correct, there is no guarantee, for constructivism, that all agents will have, for instance, preference-independent moral reasons. In other words, there is no guarantee that *relativism* will not prevail, i.e., that I might have a reason not to murder Buford, but that another agent, with a divergent set of normative judgments, might not. Relativism of this sort, it might be claimed, should be avoided. Hence it would appear that constructivism cannot plausibly—without the possibility of widespread normative variation among agents—accommodate the asymmetry.

Traditionally, the strategy for constructivists has been to eliminate the possibility of relativism at the *a priori* level. Doing so requires designing a constructivist procedure to eliminate the possibility of, say, some particular agent might lack a preference-independent reason not to murder Buford. But this response is fatal to the project of asymmetry-accommodation. If

a constructive procedure genuinely guarantees the preference-independence of moral reasons, it is hard to see how the same constructive procedure could allow that prudential reasons are preference-independent. Another way of stating this is as follows: for any constructivist view to guarantee the preference-independence of moral reasons (in a way that is not subject to relativistic divergence), there must be some *a priori* fact about normativity, viz., that moral reasons are preference-independent. But because constructivism cannot simply *declare* that certain first-order facts about reasons hold (without suitable ratification by the constructive procedure), any *a priori* fact about normativity must be implied by a feature of the constructive procedure itself. Call the feature of the constructive procedure that delivers the preference-independence of moral reasons “mechanism *m*”. But once some mechanism *m* has been established, it is difficult to see how it would affect only *moral* reasons, rather than *all* reasons. One might apply mechanism *m* to moral reasons only, but this would appear to make an *ad hoc* distinction between the constructive procedure involved in moral reasons and the constructive procedure involved in prudential reasons.

2.2. An Illustration: Kantian Constructivism

A good illustration of the problem noted in the previous paragraph is provided by so-called Kantian constructivism (KC). Views identified as Kantian forms of constructivism are incredibly diverse, so it is difficult to identify any particular running strand. But for the purposes of my discussion here, KC holds that *r* is a reason for *x* to ϕ if and only if *that* *r* is a reason for *x* to ϕ is something to which a rational agent is committed to judging. Much will ride on what it means to be a “rational agent”. Generally, however, KC holds, at the very least, that a rational agent is an agent that is uninfluenced by “extra-rational” commitments, i.e., commitments that are not shared by *all* rational agents. As Darwall writes,

The central claim is that it is the rationality of the agent or deliberative procedure that determines normative reasons, rather than vice versa. . . On [Kantian] models, rational deliberation involves stepping back from full immersion in the agent’s actual motivations and intuitive normative reason judgments. . . We can step back from any motivational bent we actually have and ask whether the object of this bent is something that there is reason for us to do, or that we should, care about, try to realize, and

so on.⁸

Crucially important for any guarantee that moral reasons are preference-independent, KC insists that reasons are derived from a constructive procedure that abstracts from any particular intuitions, motivations, or judgments of the *particular* agent (call these “extra-rational” commitments), and instead assesses the normative credentials of any judgment from a standpoint shared by all rational agents. As Korsgaard writes: “I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act?”⁹ According to Korsgaard, there are certain things to which all rational agents are committed to valuing, including the value of our “practical identities”, and once’s identity as a moral agent, and hence human being *per se*. These commitments are reason-giving, because, if Korsgaard is correct, they are derived from a constructive procedure that refuses to take as inputs our extra-rational commitments, including preferences and hence represents the standpoint of rational deliberation itself.¹⁰

I will not comment on whether Korsgaard’s claims are correct. Rather, I simply note that *if* Korsgaard is correct, KC does a remarkable job of accommodating the preference-independence of moral reasons. In particular, the rejection of “extra-rational” commitments appears to be just the sort of mechanism *m* that guarantees that moral reasons will be preference-independent: no reason will be defeated by the lack of a corresponding preference. But rejecting “extra-rational” commitments as inputs to the constructive procedure strangles the ability of KC to accommodate the preference-dependence of prudential reasons. For Korsgaard, preferences are simply normatively inert: whether I have reason to ϕ cannot rest on facts about whether ϕ would promote the satisfaction of my preferences. For Korsgaard, the essential feature of practical reasoning is that it provides an external standpoint from which to critique one’s own preferences.

This critique might seem overblown. After all, it is certainly possible

⁸Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 293-4.

⁹Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

¹⁰I will take Korsgaard’s approach as the paradigmatic instance of Kantian constructivism, although John Rawls offers a constructivist project with substantial affinities to the view I will attribute to Korsgaard here. See John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

that a rational agent, from the standpoint of deliberative rationality, insist that I have a reason to promote my preferences. But there are two points worth making about this claim. First, it is not clear that after having been stripped of my extra-rational commitments, I *would* be committed to a reason to, for instance accept Ronald’s invitation in *Beethoven*. In stripping away my extra-rational commitments, normativity is based only on that which makes rational agents rational, not that which promotes preferences. Given that Korsgaard makes no distinction—and is, indeed, not licensed to make a distinction—between the normative status of prudential and moral reasons, any individual is required to value the essential features of his or her rational agency capacity in a way that overrides preferences not just in the moral case, but also in the case of prudential reasoning. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Korsgaard’s theory would seem to commit us to a form of *perfectionism* about the nature of prudential reasons. My prudential reasons are determined by that which is constitutive of myself *qua* rational agent, rather than *qua* individual who has a preference for this or that.¹¹ In the case of *Beethoven*, for instance, it is certainly plausible to say that there is nothing in this form of perfectionism that would entail a reason to headbang to “Sharp Dressed Man”. If so, I seem to have no reason to accept Ronald’s invitation: there is nothing implied by that which is left over after having been stripped of my extra-rational commitments that would provide me a reason to see ZZ Top.

Second, for our preferences to pass Korsgaard’s normative test, we must be committed to the value of that which we have reasons to do independently of our ends simply being preferred: this is explicit in Korsgaard: I must be able to sanction my preferences from a standpoint that strips away my extra-rational commitments.¹² I have argued that our preferences might not be able to withstand such normative scrutiny in cases like *Beethoven*, given that Korsgaard’s view appears to be committed to a preference-independent theory of prudential reasons. But even if they can be normatively authoritative, they are *not* normatively authoritative absent a commitment to the *per se* value of ϕ -ing, violating the third important fact about the asymmetric authority of preference.

This section is not meant as a critique of Korsgaard or KC *per se*, but rather as an illustration of the more general challenge facing constructivism. If we wish to *guarantee* the preference-independence of moral reasons, a

¹¹Compare Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

¹²See, importantly, Korsgaard, “The Reasons We Can Share” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 284-91.

project at which Korsgaard's view succeeds admirably, we appear forced to adopt a constructive procedure that delivers this verdict *a priori*. But doing so appears to rule out the possibility of allowing preference-dependent prudential reasons. Constructivists might refuse to offer any mechanism *m*. But doing so would appear to leave constructivism vulnerable to the possibility that either the preference-independence of moral reasons or the preference-dependence of prudential reasons might in fact fail, or succeed for only a subset of agents, depending on what any particular individual's normative judgments actually turn out to be.

3. *Semantic Circularity*

It would appear that realism can, but constructivism cannot, deliver the asymmetric authority of preference. If so, realism appears to accommodate a first-order fact about normativity that is unavailable to constructivism. The second objection seeks to show that no constructivist procedure can offer what, for realism, is trivial: a coherent semantic analysis of normative judgments. The problem can be seen as follows. When I judge that I have reason to ϕ , what am I judging? Take Korsgaard's analysis. Roughly speaking, when I judge that I have reason to ϕ , I judge that the properly conceived procedure will deliver that I have reason to ϕ . But for Korsgaard, the properly conceived procedure just is the normative judgments of a rational agent, in other words, what a rational agent is committed to treating *as* a reason. But here the crucial term appears in both the analysis and the analysisans. For me to have a judgment about reasons, on this view, is to have a judgment about what a rational agent treats as a reason. Hence it would appear that Korsgaard's Kantian analysis is straightforwardly circular: judgments about reasons are analyzed in terms of judgments about reasons. Hence, it would appear, Kantian constructivism cannot give a non-circular analysis of the nature of normative judgments.¹³

This problem generalizes. Because any constructivist view is committed to what might be called a "normative analysis" of the constructive procedure, e.g., by suggesting that the inputs of the constructive procedure are the normative judgments of particular agents, constructivist views—it would appear—must give an analysis of normative judgments in terms of those normative judgments themselves. But this is unacceptable. This problem is noted by, among others, David Brink.¹⁴ In addressing a constructivist

¹³Cf. Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 1.

¹⁴See, for instance, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cam-

theory of value, Brink writes:

[S]omeone might analyze goodness as a property of objects that tends to elicit in ideal conditions and appraisers the judgment that it is good or valuable. Here we invoke the very value we are analyzing in our analyses. It is true that, on this view, we analyze X, not in terms of X, but in terms of beliefs about X. But if we accept the not unreasonable assumption that any story about what makes a belief a belief about X must eventually advert to X, then it appears that this sort of analysis is ultimately circular.¹⁵

For realism, a non-circular semantics is trivial. Normative facts are stance-independent. So long as these facts are characterized in non-normative terms, realism can provide a semantics of normative judgments that is non-circular. For instance, assume a form of non-naturalist realism. On this view, moral facts will be settled by a non-natural property or collection of non-natural properties. Hence normative judgments will refer to these properties, and normative judgments will be true to the extent that the properties ascribed in the judgment's predicate are displayed by the judgment's subject. But this analysis is not available to the constructivist. The key is the essential connection between the semantic content of a judgment and the truth conditions of that judgment. Though there are many ways of understanding this connection, virtually all theories of truth will accept some biconditional relationship between the meaning or semantic analysis of a particular truth-bearer and extra-linguistic reality, e.g., a sentence, proposition, belief, or judgment (or whatever other potential truth-bearer) is true if and only if that truth-bearer's semantic content bears the "right relation" (such as "correspondence", "representation", "mirroring", "picturing", "satisfaction", etc.) to extra-linguistic facts. Hence constructivism cannot accept a realist's semantics, given that this would entail a realist's truth conditions: normative judgments are true if and only if these judgments properly reflect the stance-independent facts, not on the basis of the constructivist's procedure.

3.1. Primitivism

bridge University Press, 1989), 34-5.

¹⁵Brink, "The Significance of Desire" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. 3, ed. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20-1.

One possibility is worth considering here. Sharon Street offers an unrestricted constructivist metaethic with the following character: “According to *metaethical constructivism*, the fact that X is a reason to Y for agent A is constituted by the fact that the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A ’s other judgments about reasons.”¹⁶ This view differs from Korsgaard’s in identifying the proper stance not as a set of judgments one has *qua* rational agent, but rather by the judgments that one has, period.¹⁷ Thus for Street, the truth conditions of any normative judgment are that judgment’s ability to withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of the speaker’s judgments about reasons.

This view appears to offer a circular semantic analysis of judgments about reasons. My judgment that r is a reason to ϕ just is a judgment that “ r is a reason to ϕ ” withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of my other judgments about reasons. Hence any analysis of what it means to be a judgment about reasons makes essential reference to that which is to be analyzed: judgments about reasons.

Street recognizes that her form of constructivism is open to the charge of circularity. She writes:

There remains at least one important objection to the idea that metaethical constructivism as I’ve presented it is a full-fledged metaethical view. This worry stems from the way in which the view defines reasons in terms of what we *judge* or *take* to be reasons, thereby seeming to invoke in the definiens the very concept the view is meant to explain. According to this objection, in order to understand what it is to *judge* or *take* something to be a reason, one must already understand what it is for something to *be* a reason, so no informative account of the latter can be given in terms of the former.¹⁸

Street’s response is to insist that the concept of “reason” is primitive. Such a suggestion is also offered by Scanlon, who writes: “I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. ‘Counts in favor how?’ one might ask. ‘By providing a reason for it’ seems to be the only answer.”¹⁹ Street embraces this proposal,

¹⁶Street, 223.

¹⁷Sharon Street, “Constructivism about Reasons” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. 3, op. cit., 242-5.

¹⁸Street, 239.

¹⁹Scanlon, 17.

but with one important innovation:

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 “counting in favor of” or “calling for” or “demanding” certain responses on our part... Just as the experience of color cannot adequately be described except by invoking color concepts, so the type of experience in question—what might be called “normative experience”—cannot adequately be described except by invoking normative concepts.²⁰

Street treats the semantic analysis of the term “reason” as primitive. So far so good. I am perfectly willing to admit that Street's account of “reason” may very well avoid circularity, given that we are to understand the notion of a reason in terms of this particular, and hopefully familiar, experience. But the circularity objection to which I point is different. I claim that constructivism fails to give us a non-circular understanding, not of *reason*, but rather of what it means to be a *judgment* about reasons.

Street's view about the nature of normative judgments is complex, and it will not serve our purposes here to investigate her understanding of them fully.²¹ But one point is worth dwelling upon. Most importantly, Street believes that normative judgments can be assessed for their truth or falsity.²² Hence, according to Street, they must have a *content* or *meaning*. They must be, after all, *about* something; they must assert that something or other *is the case*. Given standard platitudes about the nature of truth, a truth-bearer is or can be true if and only if its meaning bears the “right relation” to extra-linguistic reality. Hence for these primitive normative judgments to be adequately described as true or false, they must have some semantic content or meaning.

But what content? What do these judgments mean? How do we pick out the judgments that are *about reasons* versus those judgments that are about, say, *light bulbs* or *Neil Diamond*? If we are to avoid a vicious form of semantic circularity, we cannot accept the claim that these judgments *refer* to our other “judgments about reasons”. This would be to give a viciously

²⁰Street, 239-240.

²¹See, for instance, Michael Ridge's helpful discussion in “Kantian Constructivism: Something Old, Something New”, this volume.

²²Street, 223.

circular account of the content of these judgments. Given Street’s analysis of “reason”, it would appear that Street’s proposal is to understand the content of these various judgments (“ r is a reason to ϕ ”) in terms of the particular, and hopefully familiar, normative *experience*. In other words, when I judge that r is a reason to ϕ , I am judging something *about* my experience. Street herself suggests this reading in drawing an analogy with judgments of color. What characterizes my belief that the fire engine is red is not some unanalyzable fact. Though this analysis of color judgments is certainly controversial, it is plausible to hold that color judgments are, in some way, *about* my experience, or *about* what my experience is or would be under certain specified conditions, e.g., were I to view it (under the right conditions), it would appear to me as red, where no further analysis of “red” can be given.

But if the semantic content of judgments about reasons makes reference only to the *experience* of something “counting in favor of” something else, it would appear that judgments *about* reasons can be true if and only if I really *do* have the referred-to experience. To put this point another way, if the content of normative judgments are *about my normative experiences*, it would appear that the *truth conditions* of these judgments are not fixed by the judgment’s conformity or “scrutiny-withstandingness” of other judgments, but rather by whether the asserted quality of my experience *genuinely holds*. For instance, assume that the content of a judgment about reasons, given Street’s analysis of “reason” just is that, upon contemplation of r , I experience r as counting in favor of ϕ -ing. But if normative judgments are analyzed in this way, these judgments will be true if and only if, upon contemplation of r , I experience r as counting in favor of ϕ -ing : *the constructivist truth condition is simply moot*. The truth conditions of a judgment, on any standard theory of truth, will insist on a conceptual link between the semantics or meaning of the judgment and extra-linguistic reality. Thus for any judgment of the form “ r is a reason to ϕ ”, this judgment will be true if and only if I *experience* r as counting in favor of ϕ -ing.

Street might respond to this objection by claiming that I have taken the color analogy too seriously. We *understand* the idea of a “reason” in terms of a particular normative experience, but when it comes to the truth conditions of normative *judgments*, the experience drops out: we assign the truth conditions of normative judgments on the basis of the scrutiny-withstandingness of these judgments. This move might very well be open to Street, but notice that making it would require a radical revision in our understanding of truth. As Aristotle writes, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it

is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”²³ If we are to accept Aristotle’s plausible dictum, Street must be committed to rejecting the semantic analysis of normative judgments in terms of a particular normative experience. She must, rather, accept a semantic analysis of normative judgments that makes essential reference to these normative judgments (given that her constructivism explicitly insists that the truth of normative judgments is determined by whether they withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of *normative judgments*). To accept Aristotle’s dictum, Street must commit herself to a circular semantic analysis of normative judgments.

The problem for Street’s view generalizes. Recall what constructivism, as I define it, amounts to. Most importantly, constructivism takes the truth conditions of normative judgments to be the outcome of a constructive procedure that takes as inputs other normative judgments. But a constructivist is not licensed to simply *decide* what the truth conditions of a particular normative judgment will be. The reason involves a crucial distinction between *truth conditions*, on the one hand, and *truth predicates* on the other. The truth condition of any particular sentence just *is* what which must occur for the sentence to be true. Street’s view insists on a certain truth condition: that the normative judgment survive scrutiny from the standpoint of other normative judgments. A *truth predicate*, on the other hand, is a theory of the relationship between a truth-bearer and its truth conditions; a theory of what, for any truth-bearer, will make that truth-bearer true. However, the standard (Aristotelian) truth predicate declares that, for any truth-bearer, its truth conditions are determined by the *meaning* or *semantic content* of the judgment, i.e., a truth-bearer is true if and only if its meaning bears the “right relation” to the world. Hence no constructivist can simply *decide* on the truth conditions of normative judgments without also giving them a corresponding semantic analysis. But in so doing, we either accept the constructivist truth conditions along with a viciously circular analysis of normative judgments, or we insist on a non-circular semantics, which eliminates any reference to the constructive procedure in the truth conditions of normative judgments.

4. A Solution

Let’s take stock. Realism can, where constructivism apparently cannot, accommodate the asymmetric normative authority of preference. Second, realism can, where constructivism apparently cannot, provide a non-circular

²³Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b.

semantic analysis of normative judgments. These are serious advantages.

I hold, however, that these advantages can be deflated. As might have been gathered from my discussion of the problem of semantic circularity, constructivism must, I claim, commit not only to its unique set of truth conditions for normative claims, but must also commit to an alternative *truth predicate* for normative claims. Why? A standard, Aristotelian, theory of truth requires that a set of truth conditions be accompanied by a corresponding analysis of normative judgments. But this constructivism cannot provide. We must, then, reject the requirement that true normative sentences bear the “right relation” to extra-linguistic reality. We must, in other words, reject any theory that respects Aristotle’s link between semantics and truth. (Call any theory of truth that accepts such a link an “Aristotelian” theory of truth.)

Rejecting an Aristotelian theory of truth leaves a number of options open. But I wish to explore one in detail, especially given its striking similarity to constructivism itself. I am tempted to believe that constructivism is best construed as replacing an Aristotelian theory of truth for normative judgments with a *coherence theory of truth* for normative judgments. On this view, normative judgments are true if and only if they are coherent with the other normative judgments to which an agent is committed—the “constructive procedure” is thus characterized as the process of finding coherence among an agent’s normative judgments. Furthermore, replacing a standard truth predicate with a coherence truth predicate for normative claims guarantees an *unrestricted* constructivism: *all* normative judgments are true if and only if they are coherent with an agent’s other normative judgments.

4.1. Semantic Circularity Avoided

To see the advantages of selecting a coherence truth predicate for the normative domain, a few words must first be said about the coherence theory itself. First, and most obviously, such a view would define truth for normative sentences in terms of their coherence. However, an adequate explanation of coherence has been a classic sticking point for coherence theories in all domains. First, it should be noted that coherence is stronger than consistency. Coherence will require more than that a belief set avoids contradiction; it will require that a belief set display a web of explanatory support for individual beliefs; in this way, a coherent belief set must be systematic.²⁴

²⁴For a more thorough description of how to make one’s actual set of normative judgments into a coherent set, see Dale Dorsey, “A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics” in

Furthermore, it is likely that no actually *believed* system of normative beliefs is genuinely coherent: hence in order to give a proper account of the truth conditions of a particular judgment, we must understand what it means to render a perfectly ordinary system of belief a coherent system. I do not wish to give a full account of the process of making belief sets coherent here, but a form of conservatism seems appropriate; the key is the Quinean doctrine of minimal mutilation. In making a belief set coherent, we attempt to keep as much of our belief set as possible, rejecting only those—hopefully peripheral—beliefs that we are required to in order to maintain coherence. Of course, some belief sets may be more deeply incoherent than others. This might require more wholesale revision of the set. But the key principle is the same: hold on to those beliefs one believes most strongly: reject beliefs about reasons only when one has to, and only when more peripheral beliefs have been rejected first.

This account of coherence seems to me plausible, but more needs to be said. In particular, it has long been alleged that a coherence theory of truth cannot provide a non-circular analysis of coherence.²⁵ The problem runs as follows. Surely any plausible account of coherence is going to be put in terms of the entailment relations between judgments. For instance, assume—contrary to fact—that the proper account of coherence is simply consistency. But the notion of consistency will make essential reference to the notion of truth: whether particular sentences can be *true* together. Hence it would appear that coherence is defined in terms of truth. But because truth is defined in terms of coherence, any account of coherence will be viciously circular.

However, this problem only arises if we assume a coherence theory of truth for *all* domains of discourse. But a constructivist about normativity is not committed to being a constructivist about all domains, including, say, the domain of physics. Hence it would appear that the proper move for the constructivist would be to adopt a form of truth *pluralism*: a standard truth predicate for non-normative domains, a coherence truth predicate for normative domains.²⁶ Accepting pluralism about truth, however, allows us

Philosophical Studies 117 (2006). See also Dale Dorsey “Truth and Error in Morality” in *New Waves in Truth*, ed. Wright and Pedersen (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010). Systematicity is reflected in my requirement that in a coherent system of belief, every belief in the system must be justified by the rest of the system taken as a whole.

²⁵Cf. Richard Kirkham, *Theories of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 107.

²⁶For further discussion of truth pluralism, see Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Michael Lynch, *Truth as One and Many* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to get a better handle on the notion of coherence. In particular, whether any given set of judgments is coherent is *not* a question that is properly evaluated in a normative domain: the coherence of a belief set is surely a purely factual question. However, because non-normative domains make use of a non-coherence truth predicate, the coherence of any particular belief set is evaluated given a non-coherence understanding of truth. Hence coherence is understood in terms of truth, but not “coherence truth”. Rather, truth, for normative sentences, is understood in terms of coherence, which is thereby understood in terms of the ability of particular sentences to be true together assuming a non-coherence, or Aristotelian, truth predicate.

Of course, in order to evaluate the truth of any particular normative claim according to a *non-coherence* truth predicate, we must be given a semantics: what normative judgments *mean*. But here the constructivist should remain perfectly neutral. Though certain semantic programs might work better than others (e.g., some might be circular, some might be self-defeating, etc.), *nothing about constructivism stands or falls on the semantic content of normative judgments*. Constructivism is thus “semantically flexible”. So long as this analysis allows such judgments to be evaluated on a non-coherence truth predicate, constructivism can select *any* semantic analysis of normative judgments. Because normative judgments are true or false only on the basis of their coherence with other normative judgments, the semantic analysis of normative judgments has no impact on the truth or falsity of such judgments. Hence, in selecting a coherence theory of truth for the normative domain, constructivism can avoid semantic circularity.

Because constructivism is semantically flexible, we are free to select an analysis of normative judgments of the kind suggested by Street, i.e., that normative judgments make assertions about particular normative experiences, and also hold that these judgments are true if and only if they cohere. Another possibility, which I find more plausible, is to co-opt a straightforwardly realist semantics. One might tweak the “metaphysically queer” moral semantics insisted upon by Mackie, among others.²⁷ For instance, one could hold that “*r* is a reason to ϕ ” means that a certain property, say, “property *p*” holds of *r*, where property *p* is “objectively prescriptive” of ϕ . This property could be understood naturally or non-naturally, perhaps as a form of *sui generis* normative property. I find this alternative plausible, but nothing about constructivism stands or falls on the particular semantic program selected. (Assuming, of course, that the semantic program selected

²⁷See Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 30-35.

can be meaningfully evaluated on a non-coherence truth predicate to allow the overall system to be evaluated for its coherence without circularity.)

4.2. *Asymmetry Accommodated*

Accepting a coherence theory of truth for normative sentences does not, by itself, accommodate the asymmetric authority of preference. Indeed, there can be *many* different “coherence theories of truth” for the normative domain. Indeed, someone fully committed to KC might define the proper truth predicate for the normative domain as follows:

Kantian Coherentism: The judgment “ r is a reason to ϕ ” is true if and only if “ r is a reason to ϕ ” is a member of belief set L , where L is the set of judgments held by an ideally rational agent, and L is coherent.

This truth predicate is compatible with the structure of KC; in particular no system of beliefs is truth-yielding unless it is both coherent *and* is believed by a perfectly rational agent, i.e., an agent stripped of “extra-rational” commitments. This view would also avoid semantic circularity. Because the truth of any normative judgment is not assessed on the basis of whether its meaning bears the “right relation” to extra-linguistic reality, but rather by whether it is coherent and would be believed by a perfectly rational agent, the semantics of these normative claims are neither here nor there when it comes to their truth conditions. Furthermore, this view would allow KC to maintain its *a priori* commitment to the preference-independence of moral reasons, i.e., to maintain its characteristic mechanism m , assuming that a perfectly rational agent’s normative judgments abstracted from any commitments that are “extra-rational”.

Of course, this view would inherit the defects of KC as concerns the asymmetry. But a coherence theory of truth for normative sentences can be designed that accommodates the asymmetric normative authority of preference and is, incidentally, the most straightforward account of such a truth predicate. Indeed, I refer to this view as:

Standard Coherentism (SC): The sentence (proposition, etc.) “ r is a reason to ϕ ” is true in a system L , believed by x , if and only if either “ r is a reason to ϕ ” is a member of L and L is coherent, or “ r is a reason to ϕ ” is a member of L^* where L made coherent yields L^* .²⁸

²⁸For a thorough defense of this theory of truth for normative claims, see Dale Dorsey,

SC rejects an explicit mechanism m , and can better accommodate the asymmetric authority of preference than views that insist on the *a priori* preference-independence of moral reasons. The general thought runs as follows. SC claims that the reasons we have are those reasons we would believe we have, following a conservative rubric of belief revision toward coherence. However, I believe that, generally speaking, my preference for your murder is not dispositive: I have a moral reason, not dependent on preference, not to murder. Furthermore I believe that I have a reason to accept Ronald's invitation in *Roll Over Beethoven*. This reason is preference-dependent: my belief in a reason to accept Ronald's invitation is explained by my preference to see ZZ Top. If I did not prefer to see ZZ Top, I would not believe that I have a prudential reason to accept Ronald's invitation. If so, on SC, the asymmetry is delivered: given the actual structure of my beliefs about reasons, my having a preference to ϕ will, on occasion at least, be a necessary condition for my having a reason to ϕ .

In essence, SC relies on the fact—though *a posteriori* and contingent—that one feature of our normative beliefs is a belief in the asymmetry itself: the belief that some reasons will be preference-dependent, some will be preference-independent. If so, this fact will be reflected in our normative belief set, made coherent. Thus SC does not commit itself to any *per se* mechanism m when it comes to delivering the preference-independence of moral reasons. Because the preference-independence of moral reasons is such a considered judgment, one can expect that any coherent set of judgments about reasons will include the preference-independence of moral reasons even without a commitment to this preference-independence as a matter of concept.

Furthermore, SC can accept the preference-dependence of prudential reasons. Under SC, preferences have no direct normative authority. But SC can allow that prudential reasons are preference-dependent in the way defined here because the existence of preferences functions in a psychological explanation for the existence of certain normative beliefs. Without my preference to see ZZ Top, I would not judge that I have reason to accept Ronald's invitation. The authority of preference is thus psychological: because the belief that I have such a reason is dependent on my preference, the reason is also dependent on the existence of the relevant preference.

SC can accommodate the asymmetric authority of preference. But it cannot do so *a priori*, or without opening the possibility normative relativism, including the possibility that some agents will not have a preference-

“A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics” in *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006).

independent reason not to murder Buford. This might be thought unsatisfying, *given* that much of the motivation for adopting a mechanism m was to guarantee, *a priori*, without the possibility of relativistic variation, the preference-independence of moral reasons. So it would appear that constructivism can either accept a mechanism m , in which case it cannot accommodate the asymmetry, or it can reject such a mechanism, leaving open the possibility that normative truths, including the preference-independence of moral reasons, will be subject to relativistic variation.

But note that this is only a problem for constructivism if its competitor views can do better. But by accepting SC, it becomes clear that constructivism can accommodate the normative authority of preference with no *additional* worries about relativism than are faced by realism. Two crucial points are worth noting. First, though it is rarely admitted, normative realism is fully compatible with normative relativism. It might simply be true that, as a matter that is independent of stance, Group A has reason to ϕ under conditions c , whereas Group B has reason to $\neg\phi$ under conditions c . Merely insisting that moral truths are stance-independent is no shelter against the possibility of normative relativism (if we mean, by normative relativism, that different normative principles hold of different persons, e.g., that moral reasons are preference-independent for some, preference-dependent for others).²⁹ Whether relativism is true on a realist view is a matter for investigation using standard realist epistemological methods. Second, *many* forms of realism will accept an *epistemological* program that is structurally identical to SC. Many versions of realism commit to a coherentist epistemological program, and will hence treat SC's constructivist procedure as the proper *epistemic* procedure for determining normative truths.³⁰ But given the use of a coherentist epistemological program, rampant disagreement among persons or groups concerning whether they have reason to ϕ appears to leave us with little choice but to believe in normative relativism. Assume that Group A is justified in believing that they have reason to ϕ , and Group B

²⁹Brink seems to characterize moral realism and moral relativism as competing positions (cf. Brink, 53). In addition, Shafer-Landau also appears to believe that the truth of moral relativism would defeat moral realism. Cf. Shafer-Landau, 68: “[S]ince these judgments may differ from speaker to speaker, or community to community, we have a kind of relativism, one that is not compatible with moral realism.” However, according to the definition of realism accepted by Brink (cf., Brink 20) and Shafer-Landau (cf. Shafer-Landau, 15), moral relativism is simply an open question. It could be, for instance, that moral obligations vary from person to person in a way that is, as it were, discovered, not made.

³⁰See, for instance, Brink, ch. 5; Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics” in *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979).

is justified in believing that they have reason not to ϕ (because, according to the coherent belief set of Group B, everyone has a reason to $\neg\phi$). Of course, if Group A has made some mistake, or if Group B is ill-placed to discover the truth about morality we might maintain that rampant disagreement is no reason to believe in moral relativism. But, *ex hypothesi*, we are assuming that neither group has made any epistemic mistake: both Groups have coherent beliefs—both groups follow through on the epistemic procedure insisted upon by, at least many, versions of realism. In this scenario, what should we conclude, according to realism? We might conclude, for instance, that neither group is justified in believing that they have a reason to ϕ or $\neg\phi$. But it seems to me we would conclude this if and only if we are already committed to rejecting relativism as an open possibility. But because relativism *is* an open possibility, it would appear that the best explanation of this divergence in our coherent set of normative beliefs is the stance-independent fact of normative relativism.

Hence if our coherent belief sets diverge, on SC, normativity is relative. Under a realist view coupled to a coherentist epistemological program, if our coherent belief sets diverge, *for all we know* normativity is relative. Indeed, David Brink is careful to argue that, once sets of moral beliefs are made coherent, the likely result will be a form of moral universalism: “The fact that we disagree about some moral issues at the beginning of this process of adjustment [toward the goal of coherence] gives no compelling reason to suppose that this process of adjustment will not, in the limit, resolve our disagreement.”³¹ It thus appears that SC is in precisely the same boat as a realist view that accepts—as it is plausible to do—a coherentist epistemic program. Thus the rejection of a mechanism *m* that allows constructivism to accommodate the asymmetric authority of preference does allow the possibility of relativism. But only under precisely the same conditions that realism would allow the possibility of relativism, viz., the circumstances in which our coherent beliefs wildly diverge. Accepting SC puts constructivism in precisely the same boat as realism *vis-a-vis* relativism.

Of course, not all realist views insist on a coherentist epistemological program. For instance, some accept a form of foundationalism, holding that certain moral beliefs are self-evident.³² I find this view worse than dubious, but I shall not argue for its falsity here. But even if we hold that a moral foundationalism is acceptable, it is hard to see how it could provide any better bulwark against relativism than SC. After all, assuming that the method

³¹Brink, 204.

³²See, for instance, Shafer-Landau, ch. 11.

by which one renders a particular belief set coherent follows the plausible constraint of minimal mutilation, it is hard to believe that any belief p , passing the test of “self-evidence”, and given an affirmative epistemic status by moral foundationalism, will not also be given an affirmative status by SC. In other words, it is difficult to believe that those beliefs that are likely to survive the process of minimal mutilation will not be those selfsame beliefs that are treated as epistemically self-evident under a version of moral foundationalism. Hence, it would appear that we have every reason to believe that whenever coherent belief sets diverge, those beliefs that are treated as self-evident by different groups *will also* diverge. If so, given that relativism is an open question, relativism would appear to be the most plausible explanation for this divergence. Hence it would appear that any way you slice it, SC is no *worse off* when it comes to relativism than realism. Hence it would appear that SC can accommodate the asymmetric normative authority of preference without commitment to any more unsavory results than realism.

5. *Objection: Truth Pluralism*

The take-home lesson of this paper is this. Any constructivist theory must reject the standard, Aristotelian conception of truth for normative judgments. Constructivists thus have choices about how to construe truth in, at the very least, the normative domain. Given the structure of their view, however, it seems most plausible to insist on a coherentist truth predicate for normative sentences. Doing so, at least in its standard formulation, also allows constructivism to accommodate the asymmetric normative authority of preference while making it clear that constructivism faces no greater challenge of normative relativism than its realist alternative.

The problem, however, is that pluralism about truth is an essential part of the solution to the problems I present here. But truth-pluralism has been criticized as unworkable. For instance, it is unclear that pluralism about truth can plausibly accommodate inferences involving sentences permitting of different truth predicates,³³ pluralism cannot seem to provide a coherent analysis of complex sentences, especially those involving connectives, in which, for instance, one side of a conditional permits of one truth predicate, the other side of the conditional permits of another, and pluralism would seem to leave open the possibility that semantically identical sentences can be evaluated according to different truth predicates, yielding different truth-

³³Cf. Christine Tappolet, “Mixed Inferences: A Problem for Pluralism about Truth Predicates”, *Analysis* 57 (1997).

values of semantically identical sentences. This result is problematic: how are we to determine when a particular sentence is to be evaluated by a coherence or Aristotelian truth predicate? Suffice it to say, any possible solution to these problems will surely complicate our understanding of truth, if they can be solved at all.

Though I have discussed my solutions to these problems elsewhere, it is worth outlining my solutions in at least rough detail here.³⁴ Take the problem of mixed inferences. Mixed inferences appear to be a problem for truth pluralism because truth pluralism appears to be unable to accommodate the sense in which valid inference is “truth preserving”. After all, if an inference starts from a normative and a non-normative premise, and results in a normative conclusion, what is it preserving? Certainly not Aristotelian truth, because the conclusion is evaluated according to a coherence truth predicate. Certainly not coherence truth, either. One of the premises is evaluated according to the Aristotelian truth predicate.

My solution begins by introducing a new truth-like predicate. Call this predicate “truth*”. A truth-bearer is true* if and only if that judgment is true *as evaluated by the truth predicate appropriate for its domain*. A non-normative truth-bearer is true* if and only if extra-linguistic reality is as the truth-bearer says it is. A normative judgment is true* if and only if that judgment coheres properly with the rest of the speaker’s normative judgments.

Now consider the problem of mixed connectives. Given that there are many truth predicates, we cannot rest with a semantic analysis of mixed connectives that is designed to work only with a single truth predicate. Hence we must make a slight adjustment in our understanding of the meanings of, e.g., conjunctions, conditionals, etc. Instead of claiming that a conjunction *means* that both conjuncts are *true*, we say that a conjunction *means* that both conjuncts are *true**. Hence if we are to evaluate the conjunction “I have reason not to murder Buford and grass is green”, this conjunction is true if and only if each conjunct is true*, i.e., if each conjunct is true given the truth predicate appropriate to its domain. Given *this* analysis of conditionals, conditionals themselves permit of a standard, Aristotelian truth predicate. Whether any particular sentence is true* is a non-normative question, i.e., whether “I have reason not to murder Buford” coheres with my other judgments about reasons is not *itself* a judgment about reasons. Hence it would appear that a slight alteration in the semantic analysis of connectives allows us to accommodate mixed connectives, and allows us to plausible

³⁴See, for instance, my “Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics”.

assign *any* connectives to the proper, Aristotelian, domain. Though, on an Aristotelian theory of truth, “I have reason not to murder Buford” might very well be false (depending on its semantic analysis), this says little about the conjunction “I have reason not to murder Buford and grass is green” because the conjunction is not true if and only if each conjunct is true. Rather, the conjunction is true if and only if each conjunct is true*.

If we accept this account of mixed connectives, the proper account of mixed inferences is trivial. We can perfectly preserve the claim that valid inferences are truth preserving if we understand that which inferences preserve to be *truth** rather than truth. Indeed, doing so well-motivated given the semantic analysis of connectives given above: any particular connective will preserve only truth*. However, given the definition of truth*, this guarantees that, for valid mixed inferences, whenever the premises are true, the conclusion is true as well (as evaluated by the truth predicate appropriate for its domain).³⁵

Semantically identical, but alethically distinct, judgments are a more serious problem, and I can gesture only at a very schematic solution. Consider, for instance, the judgment “*r* is a reason to ϕ ”. If this judgment has, e.g., a “metaphysically queer” semantic content, as urged above, it would appear that this judgment really is the judgment that *r* displays a certain property, that of being a reason, to ϕ . But it would appear that we can evaluate this sentence not just in the normative domain, but *also* in the non-normative domain! In one domain, this sentence might turn out true (i.e., the normative domain) given its coherence, but because there are no such metaphysically queer properties, it is false in the *non*-normative domain, given the Aristotelian truth predicate appropriate for the non-normative domain. How, then, are we to assign truth predicates to specific judgments, given that some judgments will have contents that permit of more than one?

My, once again very sketchy, solution to this problem is to appeal to a form of contextualism. In particular, there appears to be a context in which a particular sentence of the form “*r* is a reason to ϕ ” is clearly normative, a context that explicitly evaluates this claim with reference to its coherence with other normative beliefs. In addition, however, we appear to use this term in a metaphysical, or ontological, context: the extent to which, in the world, *r* displays a metaphysically queer property. Most importantly, however, different truth predicates will be appropriate for each use: it would

³⁵It is important to note here that this way of understanding mixed inferences puts constraints on a proper understanding of coherence. In particular, it must be the case that coherent normative sentences must also be consistent with true non-normative claims. But I take this to be an uncontroversial requirement.

be inappropriate to subscribe to a coherence theory of truth for ontological claims, or claims about the world. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to substitute the metaphysical judgment for the normative one, despite their semantic identity.

This form of contextualism might seem *ad hoc*. But it need not be so. Indeed, we appear to evaluate semantically identical sentences in different ways all the time. Consider, for instance, the case of fiction. “Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street” is, at first glance, true. But one might also say, quite sensibly, that Sherlock Holmes didn’t *really* live at 221b Baker Street. Here we appear to shift domains from a fictional to a non-fictional domain. (The term “really” appears to mark the shift in context in the previous sentence.) I will not pretend to give any account of the fictional case, but it seems to me not to be wholly distinct from the form of contextual domain-shifting that is permitted by SC’s pluralism about truth.

The mechanisms required for SC to solve these problems is to some degree complex. Its complexity is surely one reason to avoid it if we can do so. One alternative might be to seek out an alternative truth predicate for normative claims that could serve as a *universal* truth predicate; one that can accommodate normative and non-normative truth without the demand for truth pluralism.³⁶ However, I doubt very much whether such a view might be found. Because it is plausible to say, of non-normative sentences, that there is an essential link between *meaning* and *truth conditions*, where constructivism about ethics must deny this, any constructivist view appears to be committed to a cleavage in the truth predicates for normative and non-normative claims. In no other way can constructivists satisfy the Aristotelian intuition for non-normative sentences, while rejecting it for normative sentences.³⁷ Hence it seems to me that the best way to capture

³⁶I want to thank Michael Bratman for putting this question to me.

³⁷One further possibility arises. One might be a “minimalist” about the meaning or content of normative judgments. On this view, one refuses to give a substantive analysis of what it means for a judgment about reasons to be a judgment *about reasons*. In other words, one denies that a judgment about reasons is a judgment about, say, a normative experience or a judgment about that which would withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of other judgments about reasons. Rather, the judgment is about reasons if and only if that which is judged refers to reasons. The righthand side of the previous biconditional is given a minimalist analysis: the judgment “*r* is a reason to ϕ ” means *r* is a reason to ϕ , where this is simply an instantiation of the meaning-constitutive biconditional: “a judgment that ‘*p*’ means *p*”. This would allow us to set truth *conditions* for a normative judgment without committing ourselves to any substantive analysis of the content of such judgments. They are simply judgments about reasons if they refer to reasons. The problem with this view is that it would appear to commit us not only to a non-substantive analysis of meaning, but a non-substantive analysis of truth as well. Because an Aristotelian

a constructivist view about the nature of practical reasons is to insist on a form of truth pluralism: one predicate for the normative domain, another (or possibly several others) for non-normative domains.

One further objection should be dealt with here. As we have so far seen, for constructivism to work, we must muck about with truth. We must adopt a form of truth pluralism that carries its own conceptual baggage, some of which is unusual or complex in non-standard ways. But surely the following thought is pertinent. Why should we accept constructivism if constructivism requires us to rethink something as fundamental as *truth*? Isn't this far too high a cost against realism?

This is a serious worry. But I think the best answer runs as follows. The conceptual, linguistic, or logical apparatus required by any domain is only as acceptable as its ability to allow us to say things we wish to say about the domain in question. In other words, if we find constructivism in ethics a more plausible alternative than realism or expressivism, this should be all the evidence we require to reject a simpler picture of truth or a simpler picture of normative semantics. It remains to be seen whether constructivism is a winner of the all-things-considered plausibility sweepstakes. But we should not reject constructivism simply on the grounds that it requires a non-standard understanding of truth. If a standard understanding of truth does not allow us to accept the truth of a theory we find plausible, this understanding of truth should simply be replaced, if doing so is at all possible. I have argued here that not only is doing so possible, it requires only a slight rethinking of the semantic analysis of connectives, along with a slight rethinking of the nature of truth-preservation when it comes to logical inference. If constructivism is an otherwise plausible metaethical theory, the

theory *requires* an analysis of the meaning of terms to determine the truth conditions of any particular sentence, a minimalist semantic program will fail to provide that which such a view requires. Hence we must, apparently, accept a minimalist theory of truth. But doing so is itself an ill-fit for constructivism as I understand it here. Part of the original motivation for constructivism was to mirror realism's ability to sustain a robust conception of truth, without recourse to a form of minimalism seemingly required by expressivism. Accepting minimalism of this form would thus seem to dissolve this important advantage.

Furthermore, minimalism is less than plausible for non-normative domains. As has been argued at length, minimalism about truth has difficulty capturing the "correspondence intuition", or, as it were, Aristotle's dictum that sentences are true *because* their semantics conform to extra-linguistic reality. (For a concise introduction to this objection to truth minimalism, see Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, "The Deflationary Theory of Truth", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/truth-deflationary/>>, §7.2.) I leave minimalism open as a possibility, but note that its costs are unlikely to be any less substantial than the acceptance of truth pluralism, advocated here.

price of acceptance is well worth paying.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have done the following. I have argued that standard versions of constructivism face two challenges. First, these accounts face a first-order challenge—constructivism, especially Kantian constructivism, cannot adequately accommodate the asymmetric normative authority of preference. Second, they face a second-order challenge—they are committed to a circular analysis of normative judgments. I have also argued that both challenges can be overcome by adopting SC. In the case of the asymmetry, SC places constructivism on precisely the same footing *vis-a-vis* the asymmetry as realism. SC also allows constructivism to maintain a non-circular analysis of judgments about reasons without rejecting constructivism itself.

I have left many of the subtler features of SC aside for the purposes of this essay. SC is a complex view, and its acceptance of pluralism about truth leaves it vulnerable to standard objections to a pluralist approach. Nevertheless, though SC might require some complexities at the level of truth predicates and their relationship to normative and non-normative terms, we should accept such complexity as the price of the most plausible account of normative constructivism. I leave it aside whether constructivism can survive *all things considered*.