Review of James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (eds.) Constructivism in Practical Ethics

Suikkanen, Jussi

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There is a rough match between what is good and what we value. The question then is how we should explain this overlap. Realists believe that we value good things because our evaluations manage to track how good things are independently. In contrast, according to constructivists, that we value things confers value upon them.

At the moment, there are two main ways in which the constructivist position has been developed further. Sadly, neither one of these is very explicit about the conferring element of constructivism. Rather, they mainly focus on how we should understand valuing in such a way that it would help us to see how the value of objects depends on our evaluations.

The Kantian, rationalist form of constructivism has recently been defended by Christine Korsgaard (see, for instance, the essays collected in her *The Constitution of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)). According to this view, valuing an object is understood in terms of free willing where this consists of the will conforming to certain structural requirements specified by the Categorical Imperative. Furthermore, that one's will has the appropriate universalised form is both constitutive of acting and what makes one an agent. Thus, on this view, insofar as you are an agent, you cannot even begin to ask why you should will in accordance to the categorical imperative.

One traditional worry about constructivism has been that, given that we are able to value anything really, almost anything could turn out to be valuable. Korsgaard attempts to avoid this problem by arguing that the formal constraints on willing also commit us to value certain substantial things – namely, our own humanity. Thus, in so far as we conform to them, there are certain substantial things we must value and others we cannot value. Korsgaard's argument to this conclusion is sophisticated and difficult. It is based on the idea that, insofar as we consider the things we value to be worth pursuing, we must consider our ability to value objects – what we can call our 'humanity' – to be valuable in itself. And, given that I must consider my humanity to be an end in itself and given that you and everyone else have this very same ability, then in order to be consistent I must value everyone's humanity in the same way.

The second way of developing the basic idea of constructivism further is both more Humean and more relativist. Sharon Street has recently become famous for defending this alternative (see her "Constructivism about Reasons," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3 (2008): 204–45). Street formulates her view by using the notion of reasons but it is easy to translate her view to value-talk. On this view, the kind of valuing that is able to confer value upon objects is valuing that can withstand scrutiny from the perspective of one's other evaluative judgments. That is, according to Street, we first come to make judgments about how good things are. These judgments, which Street assumes to be basic, are neither standard beliefs (because they are motivational) nor desires (because certain stricter normative standards such as if you value a goal you must also value the means to it apply to them). If a given judgment about the value of an object then coheres with an agent's other evaluative judgments, then this makes the object good relative to that agent. The same story can be then told about the

value of every valuable object. In each case, the value of the object consists of the fact that the judgment about that object's value is supported by the agent's other evaluative judgments.

Street offers various motivations for this view, but two of the arguments are most significant. The first claims that we cannot give up our evaluative perspectives and ask whether the objects of our evaluative judgments really are valuable. If we gave up our evaluative perspectives, then no standards would remain that we could use to answer this question. Street's second argument provides an evolutionary explanation for our realist evaluative intuitions according to which the value of certain things is not based on what we value. However, if our realist intuitions are based on the way in which we have been hardwired biologically and not on evidence, then we have no reason to believe in independent objective values.

In one way or another, the thirteen essays in *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy* defend, criticize, and develop both the general idea of constructivism and the two Kantian and Humean forms of constructivism, which I just briefly sketched above. In the following, I will quickly summarise the main cruxes of these essay. I will then make few overall observations about the book.

R. Jay Wallace investigates three problems of Korsgaard's constructivism. The main one of these is based on how constructivists could accommodate the fact that we sometimes make mistaken evaluative judgments. The traditional answer to this question is that, in these cases, we fail to satisfy the procedural standards for making judgments of the given constructivist view. However, we can then ask what makes those standards authorative for us? If it is our own endorsement, then we could avoid error by simply endorsing different standards. If it is something else, then it is not clear how constitutive the view is in the end. Finally, Wallace also suggests that the procedural norms constitutive of agency cannot create any interesting substantial evaluative conclusions (35).

Sharon Street's article criticizes Korsgaard's argument to the conclusion that the constitutive standards of valuing commit us to valuing certain particular things. Her main argument is based on the idea that, when at the crucial stage of her argument Korsgaard asks whether there are any reasons to value anything at all, she is trying to ask this question from a perspective which abstracts away from all our evaluative attitudes. However, Street argues that, from this perspective, this question no longer makes sense. We can only ask what there is reason to value from the standpoint of what we value. Thus, for Street, practical enquiry is always an attempt to make our evaluative judgments coherent. This leads to a certain degree of contingency and relativism which is both unavoidable and benign.

Aaron James begins by helpfully explaining certain distinguishing features of constructivism. He then argues that the activity of making reasoned practical judgments (that is, of making choices) is governed by certain constitutive norms that specify when this activity is done well or poorly. You understand these norms when you understand what the activity in question is. According to James' constructivism, we can then use the output of good reasoned practical judgments to understand what is good.

Michael Bratman focuses on developing Street's constructivism further from the perspective of action theory. He argues that the truth of a given evaluative judgment cannot only depend on whether it withstands scrutiny from the perspective of the agent's evaluative judgments. Firstly, some of our evaluative judgments fail to be part of our practical

standpoints. Secondly, we should also take into account our other commitments to treat certain things as reasons. These commitments are based on what we love and intend.

Dale Dorsey too attacks Street's view. Dorsey first observes that Street fails to give an account of the content of evaluative judgments – what it is to judge that something is good. This is because she explicitly relies on evaluative judgments that already must have content when specifying which of these judgments are true. However, on standard views about meaning, there is a correlation between what content judgments have and when they are true. This means that, according to Dorsey, Street must accept an unorthodox, non-semantic theory of truth such as the coherence theory.

Robert Stern investigates different ways in which Kantian constructivists have tried to use the notion of autonomy to argue for their position. The idea is that, if value were not conferred upon things by us, this would undermine autonomy, that is, our ability to govern ourselves. Thus, the requirements based on value of things that bind us must be our own making, or so the constructivists have argued. Stern argues that, when we study closely what moves realists and constructivists can make here, we will see that there is more common ground between these positions than often assumed.

Michael Ridge focuses on whether Street's constructivism is a distinct metaethical position. According to him, this depends on just how Street understands the evaluative judgments that are used to test whether a given target-judgment withstands scrutiny. These judgments cannot be mere sensations, beliefs (what would be their content?), or so-called 'besires' (there just aren't any). The only option then is that these judgments are desire-like attitudes. The problem is that this alternative collapses the view into familiar form of subjectivism. What is good ultimately turns out to be a function of what the agent wants on this view.

Yonatan Shemmer's article attempts to show how we can come to have reasons to be more coherent on the basis of our contingent desires and the constitutive requirements of consistency. He then uses the analogy of constitutional democracy to illuminate what role these reasons for coherence can have in our planning.

Nadeem Hussain argues that ambitious forms of metanormative constructivism suffer from a souped up version of Russell's Bishop Stubbs objection to coherentism. The problem is that constructivism leads to a vicious regress. This is based on the thought the fact that a certain normative proposition is an outcome of a normatively specified procedure is itself a normative proposition. If true, it too is then required to be an outcome of a further normative procedure, which itself is a further normative proposition which too must be a result of a normative proposition, and so on. The problem is that we can construct equally good infinite chains of procedures for the negation of the original normative proposition. Thus, it's not clear whether constructivism can support any normative proposition over its negation.

Valerie Tiberius argues that evaluative properties are conferred upon things on the basis of wise evaluative judgments. Furthermore, we can understand these judgments on the basis of the common-sensical goals of wisdom: to decide well, to help well, and to develop skills required for wisdom. Achieving these goals requires overcoming biases, humility, openmindedness, empathy, reflectiveness and so on.

James Lenman's article attempts to show that Street's constructivism becomes more plausible when it is combined with metaethical expressivism. Street makes the valuable

observation that we can evaluate our evaluative judgments from the perspective of our other evaluative judgments. However, according to Lenman, saying this does not require claiming that evaluative judgments are unanalysable and basic. Rather, we can understand them as desire-like attitudes to treat certain considerations as action-guiding in the familiar expressivist way.

In the last article of the collection, T.M. Scanlon investigates what is distinctive about constructivism by considering constructivist views in mathematics. In this domain, first-order judgments about what the subject matter is often leave no interesting questions about the truth of these judgments or how we can know them to be true. Oftentimes, these first-order judgments specify a procedure that can be used to construct the objects of the domain. Scanlon argues that such views do not work when it comes to what reasons we have. The suggested procedures for determining what reasons we have either fail to give us substantive enough answers or their practical significance becomes questionable. However, once reasons are on the scene, there is room for constructivist views about justice and morality that begin from the first-order views about reasons.

Let me first emphasise that all these articles are of the highest possible quality. They are all state of the art papers by a group of leading metaethicists who have already made significant contributions to debates about constructivism. In the foreseeable future, anyone writing on constructivism will need to study these articles closely in the same way as anyone writing on practical reason still needs to use the articles in Garrett Cullity's and Berys Gaut's wonderful *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) collection.

Despite this, I can also offer few minor criticisms. Firstly, the title of the collection is misleading. The articles do not discuss constructivism in practical philosophy more generally. There are no articles on constructivism in ethical theory, political philosophy, aesthetics, and so on. Rather, the articles narrowly focus on constructivism in the theory of metanormativity – that is, in the investigation of what it is for a consideration to be a reason.

Secondly, many of the articles are written in an unnecessarily complicated, abstract and technical way. Let me just give one example from James Lenman's article "Expressivism and Constructivism", which by no means is the worst in this respect. Lenman states his view in the following way (218):

> REASON: To think of a consideration C a reason in favour of someone's φ-ing is to favour that consideration guiding deliberation and action in furtherance of concerns, desires, and aims to which it speaks in virtue of it and they being able to withstand scrutiny in the light of reasons.

No matter how many times I read this, I still fail to grasp the view. When Lenman himself asks 'What does [REASON] tell us?', his own answer is 'I think what it tells us is a bit complicated (221).' Indeed.

Joking aside, I worry that the complexity and technicality of the writing in this collection is a symptom of a deeper problem. It has become evident that it is not clear what constructivism is and how it differs from other metaethical views. After all, this is the whole raison d'être of this collection. However, if there is no real clear fact of the matter of what constructivism is, then we cannot blame the authors for expressing their thoughts on the topic

in such a complex and opaque ways. There just wasn't anything to be more clear about, which itself is a problem for constructivism. On the other hand, if there is a clear alternative in ethics which we can call constructivism, the authors could have put a little more effort to describing this position in simpler terms.

My final negative comment about the collection concerns the way in which the articles of the collection are related to one another. Perhaps this is a reason for why I prefer articles to be published in general philosophical journals over a longer period of time rather than a large number of articles on the same topic appearing at the same time in a single collection. For one, there is significant overlap between the articles. A number of articles explain that Street, for example, fails to account for the content of our judgments about reasons. Secondly, some of the articles seem to me to provide knock-down arguments against the views put forward in the other articles. For example, Hussain's critical discussion of coherentism in the theory of truth seems to present a decisive problem for Dorsey's coherentist constructivism.

However, despite these minor issues, I can wholeheartedly recommend this collection for everyone who is interested in constructivism and the nature of normativity more generally.

Jussi Suikkanen
University of Birmingham