Ideally Coherent Plato: A Challenge to Metaethical Constructivism

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Metaethical Constructivism: Necessarily, all practically normative facts for an agent depend on what follows, logically and instrumentally, from that agent's evaluative perspective together with the non-normative facts.

Not The Targets: Ideal Observer Theory (Firth 1952), Justice as Fairness (Rawls 1971), Contractualism (Scanlon 1998), Moral Relativism (Harman 1975), Divine Command Theory (Adams 1979)

The Targets: Humean Constructivism (Williams 1979; Street 2008; Dorsey 2018; Dyke 2020; Engel 2022)
Kantian Metaethical Constructivism (Korsgaard 1996; Smith 1994; O'Neill 1990; Markovits 2014; Bagnoli 2022)

The Question: What *explains* Constructivism's metaphysical necessity? Does it hold necessarily in virtue of facts about evaluative perspectives or independently of them?

The Challenge: Either answer commits constructivists, by their own lights, to a contradiction.

Ideally Coherent Plato: Plato judges that virtue alone is non-instrumentally good and vice alone is non-instrumentally bad—each because of their intrinsic nature. His evaluative attitudes are ideally coherent and therefore perfectly reflect these judgments. He rejects Constructivism entirely—cognitively, conatively, affectively, and otherwise. He *judges* it false, *wants* it to be false, and is *repulsed* by the suggestion that goofballs like you and me are the source of all value. When he considers Constructivism—and constructivism *about* Constructivism, and so on—he adopts ideally coherent attitudes of rejection, aversion, and disapproval, along with a settled resolve never to comply with its verdicts about how to live. His evaluative perspective thus entails that evaluative perspectives *never* generate normative facts for him.

Metaphorical Conversation:

> **Constructivism:** Hey, Plato! Your evaluative perspective determines the normative facts for you. Form some evaluative attitudes, and I'll set the normative facts accordingly.
>
> **Plato:** OK, attitudes all set. They entail that evaluative perspectives are *completely* normatively irrelevant. Make it so!
>
> **Constructivism:** Oh no! If I fulfill your request, I'll make myself false because I say evaluative attitudes are normatively relevant. If I refuse, I'll make myself false because you're ideally coherent, so there are normative facts for you. (By my own lights, there's nothing wrong with the structure of your attitudes.) I'm false either way!
>
> **Plato:** Yep. It's a pickle!

The Contradiction

1. **Constructivism:** Necessarily, all practically normative facts for an agent depend on what follows, logically and instrumentally, from that agent's evaluative perspective together with the non-normative facts, and
2. **Not Constructivism:** *It's not the case that*, necessarily, all practically normative facts for an agent depend on what follows, logically and instrumentally, from that agent's evaluative perspective together with the non-normative facts.

The Contradiction's Source: Constructivism's essential *content*—normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives—combined with the *content* of Plato's evaluative perspective, which says they don't.

The Contradiction's Perspective Neutrality: If Plato is possible, The Contradiction arises whether Constructivism holds perspective-dependently or independently. Constructivism's *content*, not its grounds, generates the problem.

The Core Conflict: Constructivism vs. Evaluative Attitudes. By their nature, evaluative attitudes can target an agent's values, their grounds, and even (meta)normative principles such as Constructivism itself. So, agents can always adopt (ideally coherent) evaluative attitudes toward these objects that render Constructivism false by its own lights.

Plato's Challenge

1. If Ideally Coherent Plato is possible, Constructivism entails a contradiction and is necessarily false.
2. Ideally Coherent Plato is possible.
3. Therefore, Constructivism entails a contradiction and is necessarily false.

Reject (1): Even if Plato is possible, The Contradiction doesn't follow.

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1. **LEVEL CONFUSION:** Constructivism is true as a *metaethical* thesis, false as a *first-order normative* one—no contradiction.

   Constructivism's truth at the metaethical level entails that all first-order normative facts for Plato hold in virtue of their following from his evaluative perspective. So, for Plato, virtue is good, and vice is bad because of their intrinsic natures—not because of anyone's attitudes. This first-order attitude-independence entails that Constructivism is false as a *first-order normative* thesis. But the *metaethical* explanation for this fact is that Constructivism is true at the metaethical level, and Plato's evaluative perspective entails that Constructivism is false at the first-order normative level. So, Constructivism is true at one level, false at another—no contradiction, no problem.

   PROBLEM

   i. **Agents can adopt evaluative attitudes toward objects at any metaphysical level.**

      Plato's evaluative perspective *entails* that virtue is good and vice is bad in virtue of their intrinsic nature *and nothing else*. Moreover, he judges that normative facts *never* depend on evaluative perspectives *at any metaphysical level.*

      Constructivism as a metaethical thesis can make this true for Plato only by making evaluative perspectives *completely* normatively irrelevant. But if Constructivism did this, it would thereby render itself false.

2. **GOING SOCIAL:** The argument assumes that the normative facts are grounded solely in the agent's *individual* evaluative perspective. They aren't. They're at least partly grounded in the evaluative perspective of some *social group* to which the agent belongs—a community, society, culture, or species. Once we incorporate the relevant group's evaluative perspective, The Contradiction doesn't follow.

   PROBLEM

   i. **Doesn't Help**

      If an individual ideally coherent realist is possible, an entire social group is, too—community, society, or species. The group's evaluative perspective would then mirror Plato's. So, the same problem arises at the group level.

      Realist Species: Imagine a planet with a Great Realist Filter eliminating any intelligent creature whose attitudes are insufficiently realist. Evolutionary pressures shape every feature of creatures' evaluative perspectives so decisively toward realism that all embrace realism as naturally as we embrace food, drink, sex, and sleep.

      This is possible. So, an entire species (community, culture, or society) of realists is possible.

Reject (2): Plato is *impossible.*

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3. **UNIVERSAL CONSTRUCTIVISM:** Constructivism follows from every possible evaluative perspective.

   Street (2016, 2025): Every possible agent must face the *practical–theoretical puzzle*: how to reconcile our knowledge of the causal origins of our normative judgments with our commitment to their correctness. Faced with this puzzle, *every possible agent must see that realism implies normative skepticism*. But every possible agent, insofar as they make normative judgments at all, is committed to denying normative skepticism. Since only Constructivism can vindicate this conclusion, every possible agent is committed to embracing Constructivism and rejecting realism.

   PROBLEMS

   i. **Constructivism doesn't follow from every *possible* evaluative perspective.**

      Demon World Derek (possible): A demon wants Derek to (ideally coherently) endorse realism and reject Constructivism. He engineers all Derek's experiences to support these commitments. For Derek, the practical/theoretical puzzle is solved. He can ideally coherently endorse realism and reject Constructivism.

ii. Constructivism doesn't even follow from every *actual* evaluative perspective.

Pre-Darwin Abrahamic Theists (actual): Before Darwin, at least *some* people rationally believed Abrahamic theism. And at least *some* of them rationally believed that God designed our faculties to grasp perspective-independent normative facts: puzzle solved. They could rationally and coherently reject Constructivism.

4. CONSTRUCTIVISM AS A NON-NORMATIVE CLAIM: The argument assumes that Constructivism is a normative claim, but it isn't. It's a non-normative claim about what grounds normative facts—a metaphysical law. Constructivism is a claim *about* practical normativity, but not *within* it—it's *normatively relevant*, but not normative.

Idealizing views: Ideal agents have full *non-normative* information. So, ideal agents know Constructivism is true. So, none accepts realism. Ideally Coherent Plato—an ideal agent who accepts realism—is therefore *impossible*.

Non-idealizing views: Normative facts depend on evaluative attitudes *in combination with the non-normative facts*. Constructivism is a non-normative fact. So, Plato's mistaken realist attitudes are normatively irrelevant. Ideally Coherent Plato may be possible, but Ideally-Coherent-Plato-with-normatively-relevant-evaluative-attitudes is not.

PROBLEMS

i. Constructivism *is* Normative: Relabeling it as a non-normative metaphysical law doesn't make it so.

a. Both metaethical claims and metaphysical laws can be normative.

Cultural Relativism

Metaethical Claim: An act is morally right iff your culture approves of it; morally wrong iff your culture disapproves.
Metaphysical Law: *Rightness* is grounded in *being approved by your culture*; *wrongness* in *being disapproved*.
Normative Claim: You morally ought to do what your culture approves of and avoid what it disapproves.

Divine Command Theory

Metaethical Claim: An act is morally right iff God commands it; morally wrong iff he forbids it.
Metaphysical Law: *Rightness* is grounded in *being commanded by God*; *wrongness* in *being forbidden by God*.
Normative Claim: You morally ought to do what God commands and avoid what he forbids.

The Principle of Utility

Normative Claim: You morally ought to maximize utility and avoid failing to.
Metaphysical Law: *Rightness* is grounded in *being optimific*; *wrongness* in *failing to be optimific*.

The Categorical Imperative

Normative Claim: You morally ought to respect humanity and avoid using humanity as a mere means.
Metaphysical Law: *Rightness* is grounded in *respecting humanity*; *wrongness* in *using humanity as a mere means*.

Constructivism

Normative claim: X is valuable for an agent iff valuing X follows from that agent's evaluative perspective.
Metaphysical Law: X's *being valuable for an agent* is grounded in X's *being valued from that agent's evaluative perspective*.
Normative Claim: X is a reason for A to Y iff judging that X is a reason to Y follows from A's evaluative perspective.
Metaphysical Claim: X's *being a reason for A to Y* is grounded in X's *being judged a reason to Y from A's evaluative perspective*.

Question: What makes Constructivism alone non-normative?
Answer: Nothing.

b. Constructivism has a feature sufficient to make it normative: Combined with non-normative facts about an agent's evaluative perspective, it implies how that agent ought to live. No further normative claims needed.

Question: Where'd the normativity come from?
Answer: Constructivism

ii. **Dilemma for Non-normative Constructivism:** Is it made true by agents' evaluative perspectives, or not? If so, The Contradiction follows. If not, The Contradiction follows, *and* Constructivism collapses into realism.

a. **Perspective-dependent non-normative Constructivism:** The Contradiction follows.

If Constructivism is perspective-dependent, Plato can form his usual evaluative attitudes and combine with Constructivism to generate The Contradiction—even with full non-normative information. He knows its truth or falsity depends on him.

b. **Perspective-independent non-normative Constructivism:** The Contradiction *still* follows.

Constructivism must retain its essential content: normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives. Plato can recognize this and combine his usual evaluative attitudes with Constructivism to generate The Contradiction—even with full non-normative information.

Question: How can this be? We construed Constructivism as a perspective-independent claim to avoid this!

Answer: This removed perspective-dependence from Constructivism's *grounds*, not its *content*. Plato exploits Constructivism's *content*: normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives. This generates the Contradiction.

(If this sounds incoherent, it's because perspective-independent Constructivism—a perspective-independent metaphysical law with perspective-involving content—*is* incoherent. Plato demonstrates this.)

Core Insight: Constructivism's core problem is its perspective-involving *content*. Even its non-normative, perspective-independent construal is vulnerable to Plato's attitudes. This is why Constructivism *cannot* be true.

c. **Perspective-independent non-normative Constructivism:** Collapses into realism or something equally problematic, by constructivist lights.

- **Forfeits Completeness:** Evaluative perspectives receive their normative authority from a perspective-independent metaphysical law. If we ask, "Why is *this* non-normative metaphysical law—the one with Constructivism's content—the fundamental explanation of all practical normativity rather than some other?" defenders can only shrug and say, "Just a perspective-independent truth." So, Constructivism fails to explain the *fundamental grounds of practical normativity* and thus to provide a *complete* explanation of it.
- **Forfeits First-Personal Authority:** The metaphysical law grounding all practical normativity and its normative implications does not arise "from within" the practical point of view. It's imposed on agents "from without." It holds independently of their values or concerns. Agents thus do not *give* themselves the normative law; they *receive* it from an alien source—the universe.
- **Forfeits Naturalistic Respectability:** How do we explain our *knowledge* of the metaphysical law grounding all practical normativity? By hypothesis, it's not discoverable from within the practical point of view. Examining our values and their entailments is futile. We therefore need a more mysterious means: rational intuition, divine revelation, or something equally problematic, by constructivist lights.

Question: Why is this construal vulnerable to standard constructivist objections to realism?

Answer: It *is* realism—or something equally problematic, by constructivist lights.

Conclusion: Ideally Coherent Plato reveals why Constructivism cannot be true: Constructivism must be true for agents to author the normative law and false for it to honor the law ideally coherent realists author. That's a contradiction. Since contradictions *cannot* be true, neither can Constructivism.