Ideally Coherent Plato: A Challenge to Metaethical Constructivism

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According to Metaethical Constructivism, necessarily, all practically normative facts depend on facts about agents' evaluative perspectives. But what explains Constructivism's necessity? Is it necessary in virtue of facts about evaluative perspectives or independently of them? I argue that either answer commits constructivists, by their own lights, to a contradiction. Occupying center stage in the argument is Ideally Coherent Plato: an ideally coherent normative realist. Plato's evaluative perspective entails that evaluative perspectives never generate normative facts for him. So, if Constructivism were true, Plato's evaluative perspective would determine the normative facts for him. But, given the content of his evaluative perspective, Constructivism would entail that evaluative perspectives never determine the normative facts for Plato—that Constructivism is false for him. So, if Constructivism were true, it would also be false for Plato, at the same time and in the same respect: a textbook contradiction. Since contradictions are necessarily false, Constructivism would be false for Plato. It therefore can't be the necessary truth about practical normativity it purports to be. So, if Plato is possible (as I argue he plainly is), Constructivism is necessarily false—false for you and me, as much as for him. Ideally Coherent Plato thus poses a new, powerful, and almost entirely *internal* challenge to Metaethical Constructivism in both its Kantian and Humean forms.

1. Introduction

Constructivist views in ethics and metaethics hold that some set of normative facts—evaluative, deontic, aretaic, or otherwise—depend on facts about what withstands scrutiny from some practical standpoint. Rawls's (1971) theory of justice is a classic example. On his view, facts about justice depend on which principles agents would select behind the Veil of Ignorance—that is, which principles withstand scrutiny from that standpoint. To invoke the construction metaphor, Rawls holds that justice facts are constructed from selection-behind-the-veil facts.

Restricted constructivist views seek to characterize and explain only a limited range of normative facts. Rawls's theory is restricted in this sense because it concerns political justice, not all practical

reasons, values, and duties. Euthyphro's account of value provides another example: something is good just in case the gods love it and bad just in case they hate it. Evaluative facts thus arise from the standpoint of what the gods love and hate. A final example is Scanlon's (1998) contractualism, according to which rightness and wrongness—specifically, facts about "what we owe to each other"—depend on facts about which principles for the general regulation of behavior no one could reasonably reject. Right and wrong are thus constructed from facts about what withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of agents considering such principles for acceptance or rejection. Each view is constructivist because it grounds some normative facts in what withstands scrutiny from a practical standpoint. Each is restricted because it explains only a subset of all normative facts.

Metaethical constructivists, by contrast, hold that all practically normative facts depend on what withstands scrutiny from some practical standpoint. Which standpoint? Typically, an agent's own evaluative perspective: their complete set of attitudes about what is good, bad, frightening, funny, ugly, beautiful, and so on. Two prominent versions are Christine Korsgaard's Kantian constructivism and Sharon Street's Humean constructivism. Despite their substantial differences, both endorse the following core thesis:

> **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.

In slogan form: what's valuable for you depends on what you value. That's the nature of practical normativity—what it consists in. Metaethical Constructivism ("Constructivism" hereafter) thus purports to be a metaphysically necessary truth about practical normativity, one that holds for every possible agent. But how can this be? If normative facts arise from agents' evaluative perspectives, and those perspectives can vary radically—consider Achilles, Mother Teresa, Voltaire, Kim Kardashian, Osama bin Laden, Stalin, and a toddler—what grounds Constructivism's necessity? Does it hold necessarily in virtue of facts about evaluative perspectives, or independently of them? In other words,

is the Constructivist thesis *itself* entailed by every possible evaluative perspective, or does it require no such ratification because it holds entirely apart from them? I argue that either answer commits constructivists, by their own lights, to a contradiction.

Occupying center stage in the argument is a figure I call Ideally Coherent Plato ("Plato" for short): an ideally coherent normative realist. Plato's evaluative perspective entails that evaluative perspectives never generate normative facts—that, for him, Constructivism is false. So, if Constructivism is true, then Plato's evaluative perspective determines the normative facts for him. But, given the content of Plato's evaluative perspective—specifically, his commitment to the complete normative irrelevance of evaluative perspectives—Constructivism must be false for him. So, if Constructivism is true, it's also false for Plato at the same time and in the same respect: a textbook contradiction. Since contradictions are necessarily false, Constructivism must be false for Plato. It therefore cannot be the necessary truth about practical normativity it purports to be. Thus, if Plato is possible (as I argue he plainly is), Constructivism is necessarily false: false not only for Plato, but for you, me, and everyone else, too.

Ideally Coherent Plato thus poses a new, powerful, and almost entirely *internal* challenge to Constructivism in both its Kantian and Humean forms. This distinguishes it from many prominent *external* critiques of Constructivism whose crucial premises directly contradict core constructivist commitments. Parfit, for example, presents a battery of arguments against various strands of Constructivism, each invoking claims about perspective-independent normative facts. His Agony Argument (2011a: 73-82) assumes agents have perspective-independent reasons to avoid future agony; his Future Tuesday Indifference Argument assumes there are perspective-independent constraints on rational preferences (2011a: 121); and his critique of Street's Humean Constructivism assumes there are perspective-independent better and worse ways to live (2011b: 284). Dworkin (1996: 117-18) similarly argues that we should reject any normative view on which an agent could have most reason

to torture or enslave someone for apparently trivial reasons. And David Enoch (2006) argues that constitutivist forms of Constructivism fail because they require, but do not supply, an agency-independent reason to engage in agency rather than shmagency, even as constitutivists reject this requirement or report difficulty understanding it from within their framework (Silverstein 2015, Smith 2015). My argument, by contrast, assumes only one claim beyond Constructivism itself—namely, that Plato is metaphysically possible—and that claim does not, on its own, conflict with any core constructivist commitments. Trouble arises only when it's combined with Constructivism itself.[1]

I defend Plato's possibility at length below. For now, however, note how modest a claim it is. To say that Plato is possible is simply to say that there could be an ideally coherent agent who

(i) values things (e.g., pleasure, virtue, achievement, friendship),

(ii) denies that they're valuable *because* valuing them follows from their own evaluative perspective, and

(iii) makes no mistake from their own evaluative perspective in doing so.

Assessing whether such an agent is possible strikes me as far more tractable than assessing the deeply theory-laden claims about the existence of perspective-independent or agency-independent normative facts raised above. If I'm right about Plato's significance, realists and constructivists can declare a cease-fire in their stalemate over those questions and focus instead on a sharper one: Is Plato possible?[2]

A further benefit of my argument is that it's theoretically illuminating. It doesn't merely show *that* Constructivism is false. It reveals why it must be—why practical normativity *could not* have the character constructivists claim it has. Even those persuaded by external critiques that normative facts

[1] Here, I am merely *distinguishing* my critique from external ones. I do not mean to criticize external critiques or claim they're inferior. Indeed, I'm on record as a big fan of external critiques (Sampson 2023). However, I recognize that some find them unsatisfying and prefer arguments that show a view fails by its own standards. I understand the appeal. Internal-critique fans: this one's for you.

[2] Yes, I know how philosophy works: plenty more stalemates lie ahead. But perhaps they lie a bit further down the road to understanding than we are now?

are perspective-independent may still wonder why this must be so. Why *couldn't* practical normativity be as constructivists claim? Ideally Coherent Plato supplies the answer. He exposes an ineliminable conflict between Constructivism's core claim—that normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives—and the very attitudes Constructivism identifies as the source of practical normativity: evaluative attitudes. This conflict is not obvious, but focusing our attention on Plato brings it clearly into view. Once we see it, we'll see—we'll *understand*—why normative reality couldn't be constructivist.

2. Clarifying the Targets

Before developing the argument, let me clarify its targets with five remarks.

First, I target only global constructivist views, which seek to characterize and explain all practical normativity: all reasons, values, obligations, virtues, fittingness relations, and the like.

Second, although specifying precise necessary and sufficient conditions for an evaluative perspective is difficult, the basic idea is clear enough. An agent's evaluative perspective is, roughly, their total evaluative outlook—their normative "take" on the world. It includes their entire web of evaluative attitudes: likes, dislikes, desires, aversions, intentions, plans, ideals, and normative judgments, including those implicit judgments underlying reactive attitudes such as guilt, shame, and resentment, and emotions such as joy, hope, fear, anxiety, admiration, envy, and pride.

Third, the views I target disagree about which evaluative perspective(s) determine the normative facts for an agent. Some appeal solely to the agent's individual perspective. Others appeal to a complex interaction between the individual perspective and that of some group to which the agent belongs—a community, society, culture, or species (Dorsey 2018; Dyke 2020; Engel 2022). I argue below that little hangs on this difference because my challenge applies with equal force to both views. For ease of presentation, then, I will continue to speak as though every constructivist holds that the normative facts for an agent depend solely on that agent's individual evaluative perspective.

Fourth, my targets disagree about which elements of an agent's evaluative perspective generate normative facts. On some views, it's the agent's *actual* evaluative attitudes (Street 2008, 2009a, 2025). On others, it's the agent's *idealized* attitudes: those the agent "reflectively endorses" (Korsgaard 1996), those that are "systematically justifiable" (Smith 1994), or those the agent's ideal self would have after acquiring full non-normative information and being purged of false beliefs, compulsions, and other defects (Williams 1979). Both approaches, however, include attitude-laundering provisions that prevent at least some actual attitudes from generating normative facts. For instance, both exclude attitudes rooted in non-normative errors, such as false beliefs, and structural incoherence, such as akrasia, means–end incoherence, and cyclical preferences. Actual-attitude views like Street's explain this by holding that false beliefs conflict with the non-normative facts, while incoherent attitudes fail the requisite standards of logical or instrumental entailment. Idealizing views like Williams's and Smith's instead hold that such attitudes would not survive idealization. Because ideal agents would lack them, and ideal agents' attitudes determine the normative facts, no normative fact could depend on such errors. Either way, constructivists can plausibly explain how agents can make normative mistakes, despite the tight connection Constructivism posits between agents' psychologies and normative facts. On both approaches, agents err normatively when they judge, act, or feel on the basis of false information, faulty instrumental reasoning, or evaluative attitudes that fail to cohere appropriately with the rest of their evaluative outlook.

Fifth and finally, my targets come in two varieties—Kantian and Humean—and it's worth keeping the difference in mind as we proceed. Both reject normative realism and, with it, perspective-independent normative facts. Both therefore hold that normative facts must arise "from within" the practical point of view. They disagree, however, about whether the practical point of view as such entails any substantive value or judgment, such as the value of rational agency or the wrongness of torture. Kantians say it does. Humeans say it doesn't.

The distinctive Kantian claim is that immorality necessarily involves incoherence: whenever an agent acts immorally, they thereby violate some commitment entailed by their own evaluative perspective. If so, every possible agent has at least one powerful reason to comply with morality, namely, that doing so follows from their own values. One argument for this ambitious conclusion holds that agency as such (non-obviously) entails a commitment to the value of humanity, which immoral action necessarily violates (Korsgaard 1996; Markovits 2014). A related argument holds that agency as such commits agents to acting only on universalizable maxims, and immoral action necessarily violates that commitment, too (Kant 1993, on one common interpretation). If either argument succeeds, immoral action *cannot* withstand scrutiny from an ideally coherent evaluative perspective. Constructivists in this broad Kantian tradition include Onora O'Neill (1990), Michael Smith (1994, 2015)—on my interpretation, at least—Julia Markovits (2014), and Carla Bagnoli (2022).

Humean constructivists reject the distinctive Kantian claim by accepting the possibility of ideally coherent immorality. Famously, Humeans accept the possibility of an ideally coherent Caligula: an agent who values torturing above all else and makes no mistake, by his own lights, in doing so. Caligula therefore has excellent reason to torture and none to refrain. Humeans hasten to add, however, that *our* evaluative perspectives likely give us powerful reasons to stop him. We may even wish to tell Caligula that he has no reason to torture and excellent reason to stop. Our claims would be false, of course, since refraining doesn't follow from *Caligula's* evaluative perspective—the one that determines the normative facts *for him*. But making such claims follows from *our* evaluative perspectives, so it makes sense for us to make such claims all the same. Other defenders of similar Humean views include Bernard Williams (1979), Dale Dorsey (2018), and Michelle Dyke (2020).

To sum up, then, my targets are unified in holding that, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, every practically normative fact depends on what follows (logically and instrumentally) from some individual or collective evaluative perspective together with the non-normative facts. This includes

views on which every such perspective supports a commitment to morality (Kantian constructivist) and views on which some do not (Humean constructivist).

With the targets now a bit more clearly in view, it's time to take aim.

3. Plato's Challenge

Constructivists of all stripes accept:

> **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.

What grounds this necessity? Is Constructivism itself made true by evaluative perspectives, or does it hold independently of them? I'll now argue that either answer commits constructivists, by their own lights, to a contradiction.

To see this, consider:

> **Ideally Coherent Plato:** Plato's evaluative attitudes are ideally coherent. He judges that virtue, and nothing else, is non-instrumentally good, while vice, and nothing else, is non-instrumentally bad. Virtue is good and vice is bad because of their intrinsic natures. On his conception, virtue consists in psychic harmony produced by each part of the soul performing its characteristic function well, where nothing about harmony, functions, or excellent performance depends on anyone's attitudes *about* those things. Vice, correspondingly, consists in psychic disharmony. His valuing attitudes perfectly reflect these judgments. He rejects Constructivism with his whole being—cognitively, conatively, affectively, and otherwise. He *judges* that it is false, *wants* it to be false, and is *repulsed* by the constructivist suggestion that goofballs like you and me are the source of all value. When he considers Constructivism—and constructivism *about* Constructivism, and constructivism *about* constructivism about Constructivism—he adopts ideally coherent attitudes of rejection, aversion, disapproval, and a settled resolve never to comply with its verdicts about how to live. Plato's evaluative perspective therefore entails that evaluative perspectives never generate normative facts for him. Plato knows, of course, that he has an evaluative perspective, but he regards its function as *tracking* normative facts, not *grounding* them. He also knows that his evaluative perspective entails that only virtue is good for its own sake, and only vice is bad, but he denies that this entailment explains why these value facts obtain or why he holds these values.

I've fleshed out Plato's psychology a bit more than is necessary for him to play the argumentative role I've cast him in. What's crucial about him is this: his ideally coherent evaluative perspective entails that

evaluative perspectives never generate normative facts—that nothing about how he ought to live depends *in any way* on his evaluative attitudes.[3] I've provided the additional psychological details to help you see that, although Plato may be a bit of a weirdo,[4] he's not a round square. He's perfectly conceivable. A flesh-and-blood human—or certainly some non-human agent—could have an evaluative perspective like his. And although conceivability is not an infallible guide to possibility, it is a reliable one. Indeed, our (in)ability to conceive, with due care, *p* is among our best guides to whether it's possible that *p*. The more easily, clearly, vividly, and stably we can conceive of some state of affairs, the stronger the evidence for its possibility—in general. And Plato is, as best I can tell, easily, clearly, vividly, and stably conceivable. This is hardly the final word on his possibility—plenty more to come. But it is, I think, an evidentially powerful first word.

Suppose, for now, that Plato is possible and Constructivism is true. Together, these assumptions entail a contradiction. If Constructivism is true, Plato's evaluative perspective determines the normative facts for him. But given the content of his evaluative perspective ("Evaluative perspectives never determine normative facts for me!"), Constructivism entails that evaluative perspectives never determine normative facts for Plato. In other words, Plato's evaluative perspective entails that Constructivism is false. So, if Constructivism is true, then Constructivism is false for Plato at the same time and in the same respect—contradiction. Since contradictions are necessarily false, Constructivism must be false for Plato. But if Constructivism is false for Plato, then it is not the necessary truth about practical normativity it purports to be. So, if Plato is possible, Constructivism is necessarily false—not only for Plato, but for you, me, and everyone else, too.

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[3] The specific values I assigned to Plato are not crucial to his argumentative role. He could just as easily be an ideally coherent realist hedonist, realist Kantian, realist Rossian, or any of countless other kinds of realist. Nor must he self-consciously endorse normative realism. All that matters is that realism follows from his ideally coherent evaluative attitudes together with the non-normative facts.

[4] He wouldn't be an ideally coherent eccentric without a few quirks!

To make the contradiction maximally explicit: if we assume that Constructivism is true and Plato is possible, we get

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.
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.

(1) just is Constructivism. (2) follows from Constructivism together with the content of Plato's evaluative perspective, which entails that Constructivism is false.

Note that Constructivism and Plato's possibility jointly entail The Contradiction, regardless of what grounds or explains Constructivism's truth—whether facts about evaluative perspectives or something else. The Contradiction is generated by Constructivism's *content* together with the *content* of Plato's evaluative perspective. More specifically, it's generated by the core constructivist claim that normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives and the fact that Plato's evaluative perspective entails that they don't. Thus, constructivists cannot meet Plato's challenge by revising their metaphysical account of Constructivism's perspective-dependence or independence. (I nevertheless consider several such attempts below to show why they fail.) They must address the problem at the level of *content*—either by revising Constructivism's content or Plato's evaluative perspective. But here's the trouble: The Contradiction stems from the core constructivist claim that normative facts depend on evaluative perspectives. So, Constructivists cannot abandon that claim without abandoning Constructivism altogether.

Here's another way to see the problem: Plato exposes an ineliminable conflict between the core constructivist thesis that evaluative perspectives determine normative facts and the nature of evaluative attitudes themselves. Evaluative attitudes can take as their objects an agent's values, the grounds of those values, and even normative and metanormative principles, including Constructivism.

Thus, agents can always adopt (ideally coherent) evaluative attitudes toward these objects—including Constructivism itself—that render Constructivism false by its own standards. Plato does precisely this in at least two ways.

First, he judges that virtue is non-instrumentally good because of its intrinsic nature *and for no other reason* and holds the corresponding evaluative attitudes. But to ground this normative fact for Plato, Constructivism would have to do two things simultaneously:

(i) ground the fact that, for Plato, virtue is non-instrumentally good because of its intrinsic nature, and

(ii) play no role in explaining why, for Plato, virtue is non-instrumentally good because of its intrinsic nature.

This is impossible. Constructivism can satisfy (i) only if it is true, since it claims to ground every normative fact, and the fact that virtue is non-instrumentally good because of its intrinsic nature is one such fact. But Constructivism can satisfy (ii) only if it's false because (ii) is satisfied only if virtue is non-instrumentally good because of its intrinsic nature and no other reason, including the fact that valuing virtue is entailed by Plato's evaluative perspective. In other words, (ii) is satisfied only if Constructivism is false. But since Constructivism can't be true and false at the same time, it can't simultaneously satisfy (i) and (ii). So, it can't ground the normative facts for Plato. So, it can't be true for him. So, it can't be the necessary truth about practical normativity it purports to be.

The second way Plato exposes an ineliminable conflict between Constructivism and evaluative attitudes is more direct. Plato explicitly judges that evaluative perspectives are normatively irrelevant—that they don't explain any normative facts at all. Constructivism's normative irrelevance is therefore not merely a distant implication of Plato's evaluative commitments (as in the previous paragraph); it is itself one of those commitments. Constructivism can thus determine the normative facts for Plato in accordance with his evaluative perspective only by rendering itself false for him. It must be true to

ground *any* normative facts for Plato, yet false to ground those facts as his perspective specifies. Again, this is impossible.

And there's nothing unique about Plato. Given the nature of agency and evaluative attitudes, agents can always follow Plato's lead by adopting ideally coherent attitudes of rejection, revulsion, or noncompliance toward Constructivism and its normative entailments. In doing so, they strip Constructivism of its normative authority over them by Constructivism's own lights. No superpowers or esoteric knowledge necessary, only a core component of agency: an evaluative perspective. Plato's challenge therefore cuts deep, right to the heart of Constructivism and the attitudes it identifies as the source of normativity.

That's the argument. It can be represented as follows:

Plato's Challenge

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

4. Rejecting Premise (1)

Let's now consider how constructivists might respond. The argument has only two premises and is plainly valid, so it looks like there are only two options: reject the claim that, if Plato is possible, Constructivism entails The Contradiction (premise one) or reject Plato's possibility altogether (premise two). This section examines the most promising versions of the first response. The next section examines the most promising versions of the second.

4.1 Level Confusion

One might try to rebut the argument by carefully distinguishing metaphysical "levels"—specifically, the first-order normative level from the metaethical level. If Constructivism is true at the metaethical level but false at the first-order level, no contradiction arises: it wouldn't be true and false at the same time and *in the same respect*. Constructivists might therefore respond as follows. At the metaethical level, Constructivism entails that all first-order normative facts for Plato hold in virtue of following from his evaluative perspective. At the first-order level, then, virtue is good and vice is bad for their own sake—and not because of anyone's attitudes—precisely as Plato's evaluative perspective specifies. Yet the metaethical explanation of why these first-order facts obtain is that Constructivism is true and Plato's evaluative perspective entails them. Once we distinguish the levels, the objection goes, Constructivism's problems disappear. Constructivism can be true at the metaethical level, thereby determining the first-order normative facts in accordance with Plato's evaluative perspective, while false at the first-order level, where nothing is good, bad, virtuous, or anything else because of evaluative perspectives—no contradiction, total victory.

Unfortunately, this reply overlooks a crucial fact about Plato and agents generally. Plato can, and does, hold evaluative attitudes about value and its grounds *at every metaphysical level*, including the metaethical. He has attitudes about what's valuable: virtue and nothing else. He has attitudes about what grounds that value: it's good for its own sake (non-instrumental value) and because of its intrinsic nature (intrinsic value), and for no other reason. And he has attitudes about the ultimate, or most fundamental, grounds of value: evaluative perspectives explain no normative fact at any level, period. Plato's evaluative perspective therefore entails the complete normative irrelevance of evaluative perspectives, including at the metaethical level. To the extent that the level-confusion reply outlined above enjoys any initial plausibility, it's only by ignoring this fact about Plato, agents, and evaluative attitudes generally.

Again, we see the conflict Plato reveals between Constructivism and evaluative attitudes. Agents can direct their evaluative attitudes at virtually anything: objects, properties, principles, metaphysical relations, metaphysical laws—you name it. These attitudes can ascend or descend effortlessly to any metaphysical level an agent pleases. Perspective-dependent or perspective-independent truth? Doesn't matter. Agents can adopt attitudes toward such truths. You cannot hide from evaluative attitudes. They will find you. This is why Plato's challenge is so formidable. It can't be solved by tinkering with the metaphysics of Constructivism—its metaphysical level, grounds, or perspective-(in)dependence. So long as Constructivism says that normative facts depend on evaluative attitudes—and it always will, because that's the core constructivist claim—its defenders will have to contend with the fact that agents can adopt evaluative attitudes toward Constructivism and its normative entailments that threaten to render the view false by its own lights.

4.2 Going Social

As I presented the argument, Plato's evaluative perspective—and no one else's—determines the normative facts for him. This makes it easy to see how Plato's realist perspective, combined with Constructivism, entails The Contradiction. Some constructivists, however, deny that an agent's evaluative perspective alone determines the normative facts for that agent (Dorsey 2018; Dyke 2020; Engel 2022). Instead, they hold that these facts depend partly on the evaluative perspective of some social group to which the agent belongs—perhaps a community, society, culture, or species. The relevant perspective might be the group's collective outlook, an amalgam of its members' individual perspectives, or some complex interaction between individual and collective perspectives. So, one may object that my argument wrongly assumes that Plato's perspective alone determines the normative facts for him. Once we correct that assumption by incorporating the group's perspective—or the perspectives of all its members—we will see that, although Plato is possible and his individual perspective entails The Contradiction, the correct formulation of Constructivism does not.

The problem with this response is that, if Plato's psychology can be instantiated by an individual, then his psychology (at least the normatively relevant features of it) can be instantiated by every member of his social group—whether a community, society, culture, or species. The group's evaluative perspective would then mirror Plato's. So, the group's ideally coherent collective evaluative perspective—along with every individual member's—would entail that Constructivism is false, precisely as Plato's does. Combined with Constructivism, that would entail that Constructivism is false. So, yet again, Constructivism would be true and false at the same time and in the same respect. The problem we described at the individual level simply reasserts itself at the group level.

One may doubt that an entire community, society, culture, or species could exhibit the normatively relevant aspects of Plato's psychology that generate the problem—his realism. But it could. To show this, I'll defend the possibility of a realist species: one whose every member has an evaluative perspective entailing that realism is true and Constructivism is false. If an entire species of realists is possible, then surely a realist community, society, or culture—any group you like—is too.

Imagine a planet outfitted shortly after its formation with a Great Realist Filter: a giant ray gun in the sky installed by zealous normative realist aliens. Whenever an intelligent creature comes into existence and develops evaluative attitudes insufficiently realist for the aliens' tastes, the filter exterminates it. The result: on this planet, only hardcore realists survive. Over billions of years, many intelligent species emerge, each as zealously realist as the Great Realist Filter's inventors. Evolutionary pressures have shaped their impulses, emotions, judgments—every feature involved in forming an evaluative perspective—so decisively toward realism that they embrace it as naturally as we embrace food, drink, sex, and sleep. Such a world is possible. Thus, an entire species—or community, culture, society, or any other group—could share Plato's zealously realist attitudes. If so, the problem for Constructivism at the individual level reappears fully intact at the group level.

I don't see a plausible way for constructivists to deny that, if Plato is possible, Constructivism entails The Contradiction. That leaves only one strategy: deny his possibility.

5. Rejecting Premise (2)

Denying Plato's possibility is easier said than done. Return to the description of him in section 3. Where's the incoherence? What could explain his (alleged) impossibility? In this section, I'll consider some proposals. But I hope you'll agree that, if Plato is impossible or his attitudes incoherent, it's far from obvious why.

The task of identifying grounds for his impossibility becomes still more daunting once we consider the staggering variety of agents whose possibility many constructivists (especially Humeans) already accept. Street's work alone presents the following agents as possible: an ideally coherent Caligula, anorexic, and grass-counter; a man who prefers the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger; agents with Future Tuesday Indifference or indifference to future agony (2009a); someone who treats an object's being purple as a reason to scream at it (2006); a reflective insect who cares nothing for her own rational agency and values herself only instrumentally, as a means to her queen's welfare—the sole object of her concern (2012); an agent who values only its own destruction (2008); and human-eating aliens (2016). For what it's worth, I agree that each of these agents is possible. But once we admit the possibility of agents this exotic, it's difficult to see why Plato should be the odd man out. He is strange, no doubt, but positively boring beside this cast of characters.

Kantian constructivists may argue that Plato must be incoherent because he rejects the correct Kantian first-order normative ethics. They may therefore locate his incoherence wherever his evaluative attitudes depart from the Kantian ideal. But Plato need not hold the quasi-Stoic values I assigned him. He could just as easily be an ideally coherent Kantian normative realist, endorsing views many Kant scholars attribute to Kant himself (Wood 1999; Guyer 2000; Ameriks 2003; Kain 2006;

Langton 2007; Hills 2008). On these realist interpretations of Kant, his ethics rests on the absolute, stance-independent value of a good will, humanity, or autonomy. So, if Kantian constructivists hope to find an incoherence in the idea of an ideally coherent realist, they must locate it in the agent's *realism*—not in their first-order normative commitments, as the present proposal suggests.

5.1 Street's Universal Humeanism

Street's strategy for rejecting Plato's possibility is to defend what I'll call *Universal Humeanism*: the ambitious claim that Humean Constructivism follows from every possible evaluative perspective. Street considers an argument resembling Plato's Challenge by imagining Ann, who judges that *X* is a reason for her to *Y* even if she judged otherwise—and even if that contrary judgment withstood scrutiny from the standpoint of all her other evaluative attitudes. Ann thus judges that *X* is a perspective-independent reason for her to *Y*. Street calls this judgment "*J*" and stipulates that *J* withstands scrutiny from Ann's evaluative perspective. Recognizing that the possibility of such a judgment would devastate Constructivism for roughly the reasons I've outlined, Street writes:

> My reply to this is to deny that *J* stands up to scrutiny from the standpoint of Ann's other normative commitments. My claim is that no matter what starting set of normative judgments one begins with—no matter how causes shaped one's initial set of normative commitments—it follows from those commitments that constructivism is true. In other words, constructivism withstands scrutiny, and realism does not, from the standpoint of *every agent's* normative commitments, including Ann's, even though she does not recognize this. The argument for this is just the argument of this chapter. Every agent is capable of viewing herself from both the practical and the theoretical point of view. But this means that the practical/theoretical puzzle arises for her. And no matter what her set of normative judgments, it will follow from those judgments that realism is an unacceptable solution to this puzzle (2016: 331).

The "practical/theoretical puzzle," as Street understands it, is the puzzle of how to reconcile our theoretical knowledge of the causal origins of our normative judgments with our commitment to their correctness. On the one hand, we recognize that these judgments are products of causal forces wholly insensitive to any perspective-independent normative facts. On the other, insofar as we make normative judgments at all, we seem committed to their general correctness. How can we square the

two? That's the puzzle. Those familiar with Street's work will immediately recognize it—it's a generalized version of her Darwinian Dilemma (2006)—and likely anticipate her solution.

Street argues that Constructivism elegantly solves the puzzle, while realism has no shot. According to Constructivism, our normative judgments can be generally correct even if they are causally insensitive to perspective-independent normative facts because their correctness consists in their coherence with our other evaluative attitudes, not in tracking perspective-independent facts. Realism, by contrast, has no resources to assure us that our normative judgments reliably track anything. Street's argument for Universal Humeanism, then, is that every possible agent must confront the practical/theoretical puzzle and, upon doing so, will (or, if coherent, should) conclude that realism entails normative skepticism. Yet insofar as agents make normative judgments at all, they're committed to rejecting such skepticism. So, every possible agent is committed to rejecting realism and embracing Constructivism. If Street's right, ideally coherent realists—including Plato—are impossible.

This argument depends crucially on the claim that *every possible agent* must face the practical/theoretical puzzle. (This is the supposed first step on every possible agent's hypothetical path from realism to Constructivism.) But this claim is false. The practical/theoretical puzzle is contingent. Countless possible agents never face it. To see this, consider a variant of the familiar evil-demon scenario. A demon wants you to (ideally coherently) endorse realism and reject Constructivism, so he engineers all your experiences to provide decisive evidence for both commitments. Perhaps he gives you conclusive evidence that God exists, wants your normative judgments to track perspective-independent facts, and designed your faculties to do precisely that. For you, the practical/theoretical puzzle is solved. Indeed, it never arises. You have excellent reason to believe that your normative judgments track perspective-independent normative facts and can therefore coherently endorse realism while rejecting Constructivism. In fact, given your evidence, failing to do so would be irrational

on virtually any plausible epistemology, including Street's own (2009b). Under these conditions, you positively *must* embrace realism and reject Constructivism by Street's own lights.

The demon case may seem far-fetched, but bear in mind that Street's Universal Humeanism is an extraordinarily strong claim: ideally coherent realism is *metaphysically impossible*. To refute it, we need only one metaphysically possible case in which the practical/theoretical puzzle is solved for an agent and endorsing realism is rational. Yet we have many. Structurally similar cases are easy to construct. Realist-friendly scientists might stimulate your envatted brain, or world simulators might construct your reality, so that endorsing realism and rejecting Constructivism is maximally justified by any plausible evidential standard. We have all of modal space at our disposal!

There are more realistic examples, too. Before Darwin—when the origins of the universe, life, our apparently exquisitely designed bodies, and many other such phenomena seemed otherwise inexplicable—*at least some* people rationally believed in Abrahamic theism. And *at least some* of them rationally believed that God designed our cognitive faculties to grasp perspective-independent normative facts. If even one such person existed, the practical/theoretical puzzle was solved for them, and neither realism's falsity nor Constructivism's truth followed—logically or instrumentally—from their evaluative perspective. One person would suffice. But plausibly hundreds of thousands, even millions, of *actual*, real-life, living-on-planet-Earth agents met this description.[5]

In sum, Street's argument for Universal Humeanism (and therefore Plato's impossibility) depends on the claim that every possible agent will confront the practical/theoretical puzzle, but they won't. Whether an agent faces it is (highly) contingent. (Note that Street's favored incarnation of the puzzle, the Darwinian Dilemma, was unthinkable for all human history up until about 175 years ago.)

[5] None of these examples requires that God exists, only that it's possible to rationally believe in him in some (perhaps modally distant) circumstances. Nor do they require the concept of God to be coherent. I've assumed it is, but if it isn't, we can instead imagine the agent has excellent evidence of God*: the most powerful, knowledgeable, and good being whose properties are jointly coherent and who is therefore metaphysically possible.

We seem to be swimming in examples of possible agents who can rationally and coherently embrace realism and reject Constructivism. If even one example succeeds, Universal Humeanism is false, and Street has given us no reason to deny Plato's possibility.

Recall what's at stake: if Plato is possible, Constructivism entails a contradiction. Street (broadly) agrees, which is why she defends Universal Humeanism—a thesis that otherwise sits uneasily with her broader Humean constructivist commitments. But Plato seems clearly possible. So, we need excellent reason to think he's not. Street admirably attempts to provide it but comes up short.

5.2 Constructivism as a Non-Normative Claim

Up to now, I have treated Constructivism as a normative claim—one whose truth depends on whether it follows from agents' evaluative perspectives. More specifically, I have treated it as a normative principle much like the Principle of Utility or the Categorical Imperative, but broader in scope. Street treats it this way, too. Indeed, she is explicit and emphatic that Constructivism is a substantive normative claim (2016: 330-333; 2025: 104-10). Again, that's why she goes to such lengths to defend its universality, despite the tension between that claim and her Humeanism. But constructivists may wish to part ways with Street and treat Constructivism as a non-normative claim about what grounds normative facts—something like a metaphysical law. On this view, Constructivism is *about* normative facts but is not itself one. It's *normatively relevant* but not normative. Here's the intended payoff: if Constructivism is non-normative, Plato's evaluative attitudes cannot affect its truth. He therefore cannot generate The Contradiction and undermine Constructivism. The strategy, in short, is to insulate Constructivism from Plato's evaluative attitudes by placing it outside normative reality—as a claim *about*, but not *within*, that reality.

The strategy works differently for idealizing and non-idealizing forms of Constructivism, but the payoff is the same. On idealizing views, ideal agents are ideally coherent and have *full non-normative information*. If Constructivism is a non-normative truth, then every ideal agent knows that

Constructivism is true and realism is false. So, every ideal agent accepts Constructivism; none accepts realism. Ideally Coherent Plato (a supposedly realist ideal agent) is therefore impossible.

On non-idealizing views, normative facts depend on what follows from an agent's actual evaluative attitudes *together with the non-normative facts*. The italicized clause prevents false beliefs from generating normative facts. If Constructivism is a non-normative truth, Plato's realist beliefs, and the evaluative attitudes based on them, are mistaken and therefore normatively irrelevant. They cannot generate any normative facts, so they cannot combine with Constructivism to generate The Contradiction. This wouldn't quite establish that Ideally Coherent Plato is impossible, but it would establish that Ideally-Coherent-Plato-with-normatively-relevant-evaluative-attitudes is. And that's sufficient to meet Plato's Challenge, since it prevents Plato's realist beliefs and attitudes from generating normative facts that threaten Constructivism.

Unfortunately, the attempt to defend Constructivism by construing it as a non-normative claim fails twice over. First, Constructivism *is* a normative claim. Merely redescribing it as non-normative doesn't make it so. Second, even if Constructivism is non-normative, this construal faces a dilemma: either non-normative Constructivism is perspective-dependent or perspective-independent. If perspective-dependent, Plato's evaluative perspective can still combine with Constructivism to generate The Contradiction. If perspective-independent, Constructivism collapses into realism—or something close enough to inherit the standard metaphysical, epistemological, and normative-authority objections constructivists routinely press against realism. Either way, construing Constructivism as a non-normative claim won't help constructivists meet Plato's Challenge.

Start with the proposal that Constructivism is a non-normative claim. What does this reinterpretation amount to? It had better not be a mere relabeling: yesterday we called Constructivism "normative"; today we call it "non-normative." Plato's Challenge can't be met by swapping labels. We need a positive account of what makes Constructivism non-normative. Unfortunately, I have no such

account and don't know where to find one. Street makes the point forcefully in responding to a hypothetical interlocutor who asks why she treats her Constructivism as a substantive normative claim rather than a non-normative metaethical one:

> First, merely insisting that there is a difference between "first-order claims" and "metaethical claims," in the absence of further explanation or argument, is not an *answer* to worries about self-underminingness, but a mere placeholder for an answer. It is a way of insisting that there is a relevant difference between the two kinds of claims without shedding light on what that difference is, and why it would put to rest worries about self-underminingness. Second, if one tries to say more by claiming, for example, that the metaethical thesis is a "synthetic property identity claim," it is not clear how this really helps in the end. In particular, it is not clear why a thesis according to which the good is N, where N is some natural property, and the identity is construed by analogy with the water/H^2O case, doesn't nevertheless have direct implications concerning how to act. In what sense, then, is it *not* a normative claim? (2025: 106-06).

Two points from this passage deserve emphasis.

First, as Street hints, the natural place to look for an account of non-normative Constructivism is the distinction between first-order and metaethical claims. One might hope that this distinction maps neatly onto the normative/non-normative distinction: all first-order claims are normative; all metaethical claims are non-normative. Reinterpreting Constructivism as non-normative would then amount to shifting from a first-order normative interpretation to a non-normative metaethical one. But there is little reason to expect such a neat mapping. What prevents a metaethical claim from also being normative? Why, for instance, could Constructivism not be *both* metaethical and normative, just as Cultural Relativism and Divine Command Theory appear to be? These latter two theories straddle the boundary between first-order ethics and metaethics, yet both seem plainly normative. Divine Command Theory says, in effect, "Discover what God commands and act accordingly." Cultural Relativism says, "Discover what your culture (dis)approves of and act accordingly." And Constructivism says, "Discover your values and live out their entailments." I see no relevant difference that makes Constructivism uniquely non-normative. The attempt to draw a sharp boundary between first-order normative claims and metaethical non-normative claims thus looks hopeless. And without

such a sharp boundary, it remains unclear what reinterpreting Constructivism as a non-normative claim could amount to other than mere relabeling, which solves nothing.

Second, as Street notes, Constructivism has a feature more than sufficient to make it normative: combined with few empirical facts, it has direct implications for how one should live. Again, Constructivism says, in effect, "Discover your values and live out their entailments." If that doesn't count as normative, it's hard to see what would. We could just as easily insist that paradigmatically normative principles such as the Principle of Utility or the Categorical Imperative are not normative claims either—only metaphysical laws. But this is silly. Even if they are metaphysical laws, they're plainly *normative* metaphysical laws.

But suppose I'm wrong and constructivists can make sense of construing Constructivism as non-normative. We can then ask: Is non-normative Constructivism true in virtue of following from agents' evaluative perspectives, or not?

If it is, Plato (or his social group) can adopt ideally coherent attitudes of rejection, revulsion, and noncompliance toward non-normative Constructivism and its normative implications, thereby generating The Contradiction just as before. After all, what made Constructivism vulnerable to Plato's attitudes was its perspective-dependence, not its status as a normative claim.

Perhaps, then, constructivists should say that non-normative Constructivism holds perspective-independently. But this route fares no better. On this interpretation, Constructivism is a non-normative perspective-independent metaphysical law determining the grounds of all practical reasons, requirements, permissions, and the like. Being a metaphysical law, it therefore fully specifies, or entails a full specification, of all facts about how agents ought to live. This law is metaphysically necessary and holds regardless of whether it's consistent with any agent's evaluative perspective. But wait a second: this sounds suspiciously like realism! Indeed, it either *is* realism, or it's so close to it that

it inherits all the standard metaphysical, epistemological, and normative-authority problems that constructivists routinely press against realism.

To see why, note that Metaethical Constructivism promised a *complete*, *first-personally authoritative*, and *naturalistically respectable* account of practical normativity. But Constructivism's non-normative perspective-independent interpretation forfeits all three attractions.

If evaluative perspectives generate normative facts only because a further, perspective-independent metaphysical law gives those perspectives their authority, then one crucial, *normatively relevant* (not normative!) truth remains unexplained by evaluative perspectives or anything else: Constructivism itself. This truth explains every normative fact but is itself unexplained by anything. If we ask, "Why is *this* non-normative metaphysical law—the one with Constructivism's content— the fundamental explanation of all normative reality?" the present proposal can only shrug and say, "Just a perspective-independent truth, I guess." If a deeper answer exists, it lies "out there," wholly apart from any agent's practical point of view, awaiting discovery by metaphysical inquirers. The non-normative perspective-independent construal of Constructivism thus fails in its ambition to provide a *complete* explanation of practical normativity.

Second, on Constructivism's non-normative perspective-independent interpretation, the fundamental truth grounding all facts about how agents ought to live does not arise "from within" the practical point of view. It and its normative implications are imposed on agents "from without." Even if every agent would choose to live as Constructivism prescribes, the *explanation for why* they ought to do so has nothing to do with their values and everything to do with the content of some perspective-independent metaphysical law awaiting discovery. Thus, agents would not *give themselves* the normative law. They'd *receive* it from an alien, perspective-independent source. Constructivism would thereby forfeit its claim to *first-personal authority*.

Third, treating Constructivism as a non-normative perspective-independent metaphysical law grounding all normative facts invites a familiar constructivist challenge—now turned against constructivists themselves. How can we plausibly explain our *knowledge* of this metaphysical law, given its perspective-independence, and evolutionary forces' complete indifference to whether we grasp metaphysical laws *about*, but not *within*, practical normativity? By hypothesis, Constructivism does not hold in virtue of anything about our evaluative perspectives. So, examining our values and their entailments cannot reveal this metaphysical law to us. We would therefore need some more mysterious way of detecting it: rational intuition, divine revelation, or some comparably strange (by constructivist lights) faculty. But this would forfeit Constructivism's claim to *naturalistic respectability*, as they see it.

These are classic constructivist complaints against realism, but they apply seamlessly to the non-normative perspective-independent construal of Constructivism. I submit that this is because, on that construal, Constructivism just *is* a kind of realism. It says, in effect, "Discover your values and live out their entailments, not because living that way follows from your values (maybe it does, maybe it doesn't, it doesn't really matter) but because the universe—the metaphysical law—says so!" But even if this isn't realism, it saddles Constructivism with all of realism's alleged metaphysical, epistemological, and normative-authority baggage. So, constructivists hoping the non-normative construal of Constructivism will help them meet Plato's Challenge face a dilemma: hold that Constructivism is perspective-dependent, in which case Plato generates The Contradiction as before, or fully insulate Constructivism from Plato's evaluative attitudes but only by embracing realism or something equally problematic, by constructivists' own lights. Either way, construing Constructivism as a non-normative claim won't help constructivists meet Plato's Challenge.

6. Conclusion

According to Metaethical Constructivism, necessarily, all practically normative facts depend on agents' evaluative perspectives. Agents are, in this sense, the source of practical normativity—the authors of the normative law. But Ideally Coherent Plato shows why this cannot be. If agents could author the entire normative law, they could adopt evaluative attitudes that write themselves and their evaluative perspectives completely out of it. And if they did, Constructivism would have to honor their verdict: by its own lights, their word is normative law. But this is impossible. For then Constructivism would have to be true (for agents to author the normative law) and false (to honor the law they've authored) at the same time and in the same respect. That's a contradiction. And since neither contradictions nor the views that entail them can be true, neither can Constructivism.

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