Chapter 7

Hegelian Constructivism in Ethical Theory?

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Abstract: This paper discusses three takes on constructivism and realism in Hegelian ethical theory. Each sees Hegel as socializing Kant's moral theory, but they locate the role of social constructions differently. The straight social constructivist position is the so-called 'standard story' (Pippin, Pinkard, Brandom). The second is Stern's hybrid of command view of obligatoriness with realism concerning rightness, and the third is so-called 'mediated realism' or 'sublated constructivism' formulated here. The first has problems in accounting for fallibility and progress, the second with coherence and Hegelian credentials, whereas the third is arguably Hegelian and avoids the problems of the first two.

1 Introduction

Rawls's influential essay “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” brought constructivism to the ethical and metaethical debates, especially in the Kantian variant. Recently also e.g. Humean, Aristotelian and Society-based constructivisms have been formulated. Hegel has not figured very centrally in the broader debates on ethical constructivism and realism, but among Hegel-scholars, the issue has received some attention. In this paper I discuss three

3 There is no discussion of Hegel for example in Bagnoli, Ethics, or Lenman and Shemmer (eds.), Constructivism, although Robert Stern, whose views are discussed in this paper, has contributed to both. In addition to Stern, and the representatives of the 'standard story' (Pinkard, Pippin, Brandom), constructivism has been discussed e.g. by Kenneth Westphal, in his "Normative Constructivism: Hegel's Radical Social Philosophy", Sats—Nordic Journal of Philosophy 8, 2 (2007): 7–41; "Hegel", in The Routledge Companion to Ethics, ed. J. Skorupski (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 168–180; "Rational Justification &
approaches to the issue of constructivism and realism in Hegelian ethical theory. Each of them sees Hegel as socializing Kant’s moral theory, but they see the place of sociality and the role of social constructions differently.

Constructivism and (non-constructivist) realism are defined here in terms of the Euthyphro-question, while both agree that there are normative truths. In the general form, the Euthyphro-question asks whether something is good, right, obligatory because some X says so, or whether the X says so because it is good, right, obligatory. The X can be God as in divine command theory; or the X can be a suitably defined moral subject as in Kantian constructivism, or the X can be the society or collectivity as in Hegelian social constructivism. As I use the terms, a theory is a form of constructivism if it takes some such X to be the constitutive source of goodness, rightness, reasons, and obligations, and it is a form of realism, if it needs no such X. What will be

Mutual Recognition in Substantive Domains”, Dialogue: Canadian Journal of Philosophy 52 (2013): 1–40. It is not clear whether Hegel, had an “ethical theory” at all (for discussion, see Allen Wood, Hegel’s Ethical Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, and Dean Moyar, Hegel’s Conscience, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Hegel did not present a specific ethical theory for individual’s action as opposed to normative social and political philosophy. Hegel’s political philosophy has been thoroughly discussed and the main aspects of his position are well known, while rival interpretations of course stress different aspects. Hegel is a historicist of sorts, with the idea of reason progressing in history; Hegel does not reject Kantian stress on freedom, and sees freedom as the main criterion of progress; Hegel combines Ancient communal life with Modern individualism or autonomy, he issues warnings against Utopian imagination and fancy etc. He clearly does give a standard for evaluating societies (degree of actualization of freedom; well-being or self-realization in and through social roles; a society should be worth reconciling with).

Russ Shafer-Landau, Moral Realism: A Defence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Cf. Bagnoli, “Metaethics”, 1: “As a ‘metaethical account’—an account of whether there are any normative truths and, if so, what they are like—constructivism holds that there are normative truths. These truths are not fixed by facts that are independent of the practical standpoint, however characterized; rather, they are constituted by what agents would agree to under some specified conditions of choice”. Or see, Christopher Halbig, “Review of Constructivism in Practical Philosophy, edited by James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer”, European Journal of Philosophy 21, online first September 15, 2013: “Constructivism about some domain of normative facts understands these facts as the outcome of some procedure which in turn plays a constitutive role: It is not meant to track independent normative facts; rather being the outcome of some procedure is what constitutes those facts in the first place”.

Sometimes realism is conceived as appealing to some such X as well, maybe ‘nature’, ‘non-natural normative structure of the universe’, or ‘Reason’. This, however, obscures the difference between constructivism and realism, as these candidates are not literally agents, and what constructivism stresses is literal construction or ‘norm-instituting’ or ‘law-giving’ or