James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer, eds.


For the last thirty years, constructivist views have been important contenders among both first-order and metaethical theories seeking to explain the normativity of morality or of practical reasons more broadly. While details vary, two general features characterize constructivism. First is the claim that normative facts are not to be understood as existing independently of human action and judgment. Rather, normative facts are determined by the outcomes of some procedure that can be followed by humans—for example, being such that all reasonable agents would agree to it, or withstanding scrutiny from the perspective of an agent’s other normative judgments. Second, constructivist theories are grounded in the practical point of view held by a deliberating agent; the judgments stemming from this point of view are the “raw material” for construction. For many constructivists, these raw materials are themselves normative.

The twelve original essays in Constructivism in Practical Philosophy prove that constructivism remains an influential philosophical view that is currently subject to lively and productive debate. Some are critical, while some defend constructivist theories of one type or another. Others offer various constraints on a plausible constructivist theory. Several themes, best framed as questions, recur throughout various essays. First, can we coherently be constructivists about all practical reasons, or only about some subset of such reasons (such as morality or political obligation?) Second, is constructivism truly a metaethical theory, or is it better suited to address first-order questions? If it is metaethical, does it offer a genuine alternative to (or transcending of) traditional metaethical theories? Of particular interest is the relationship between constructivism and expressivism, since both views oppose realism and share prima facie similarities. Finally, can a constructivist theory be objective, such that there is a possible gap between what an agent’s normative commitments are and what they should be? Would the lack of such a gap be an insurmountable problem?

I can only briefly mention some of the answers provided to these questions. Multiple essays focus on the plausibility of a global constructivist view applying to all practical reasons. Dale Dorsey raises a worry for constructivism, cleverly arguing that “given its inability to provide a substantive semantic analysis” global constructivism seems “unable to provide any determinate answer to the question of what reasons one has” (p. 105). He offers a radical and surprising solution: the worry presupposes a standard semantic theory of truth, so Dorsey
suggests that constructivists reject a semantic theory in the normative domain in favor of a coherence theory of truth (while remaining committed to semantic truth in other domains.) While many would take this to be a reductio against constructivism, Dorsey finds the strategy promising, although noting that the plausibility of his proposal depends entirely “on the strength of the metaethical argument for constructivism” (p. 117).

Michael Bratman and T. M. Scanlon raise problems for global constructivism that they do not believe have solutions. With characteristic insight and clarity, Bratman outlines what he calls the “problem of alignment,” or a worry “whether the pressures from the general constructivism will align with the pressures from the theory of agency” (p. 81). He convincingly argues that a global constructivist like Sharon Street must be committed to understanding the standpoint of the agent exclusively in terms of the agent’s normative judgments, while a plausible theory of agency requires that the agent’s standpoint contain more than this, including “intention-like commitments to treating as a reason, commitments that are not themselves judgments about reasons” (95). Scanlon argues that only first-order, limited constructivist theories are plausible, because the procedure of construction must be grounded in judgments whose validity must be established by a non-constructivist process of reflective equilibrium.

Several essays focus on whether constructivism is a unique metaethical theory. Michael Ridge argues in painstaking detail that neither a Kantian global constructivist view like that of Korsgaard nor a Humean global constructivist view like that of Street is “a new and entirely freestanding approach,” claiming instead that constructivism is best understood “as providing an interesting sort of species of each of the familiar genera of metaethics” (p. 138). He argues that Korsgaard’s view fails to completely transcend the traditional questions of metaethics because the Kantian explanation it appeals to is itself normative, and that Street’s view when properly understood “is a form of sophisticated subjectivism” that is a “riff on a familiar tune rather than a whole new song” (p. 156). Ultimately, Ridge claims that constructivism is best construed as a useful supplement to traditional metaethics.

Nadeem J. Z. Hussain argues in a similar spirit, claiming that global constructivist views purporting to offer unique metaethical theories fall prey to an objection analogous to Bertrand Russell’s “Bishop Stubbs” objection to coherence theories of truth. Hussain’s core worry is that “at the most fundamental level there is nothing to make it the case that one normative claim is correct rather than another” (p. 192). We can construct similar justificatory sequences for the claim ‘Bishop Stubbs is rational’ as we can for the claim ‘Bishop Stubbs is irrational’. Since “all there is for each member in the sequence to be the case