

Applications in Metaethics: Is Normativity Mind-Dependent? (Pt. 1)

I. Street on Realism vs. Antirealism

Let “evaluative attitudes” cover at least the following: “desires,” “attitudes of approval or disapproval,” “unreflective evaluative tendencies” (such as the tendency to experience *F as counting in favor of ϕ -ing*), and “consciously or unconsciously held normative judgments” (such as the judgment *that F is a reason for A to ϕ*).

Street characterizes the realism vs. antirealism distinction in metaethics as follows:

normative realism = there are *at least some* normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes;

normative antirealism = there are *no* normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes.

What sort of dependence is at issue here?

Sometimes (e.g. in her articles arguing against realism) Street seems to be picking out *the grounding relation*, and other times (e.g. in her articles defending her own version of antirealism) she seems to be picking out *the constitution relation*.

Maybe these are the same relation, or maybe they’re a different relation, but for our purposes this won’t matter, as long as what is at issue is a non-casual form of determination. (For ease of exposition I formulate everything in terms of grounding on this handout and the next one.)

There are two main varieties of normative realism:

naturalist normative realism = normative realism + all normative facts are either *identical to* or *entirely grounded in* natural facts;

non-naturalist normative realism = normative realism + at least some normative facts are *non-natural* and *ungrounded*.

There are two varieties of normative antirealism:

nihilist normative antirealism = there *no* normative facts;

non-nihilist normative antirealism = there are *at least some* normative facts, and *all* of these normative facts are *at least partially grounded in* facts about our evaluative attitudes.

You might think that this is a very puzzling way of drawing the realism vs. antirealism distinction:

- *worry #1*: Using the label “antirealist” for mind-dependent non-nihilist views is only apt if we think that grounded facts are not real (or are less real than their grounds). But why think that?
- *worry #2*: It seems that *preference utilitarianism* and *ethical egoism + a desire-based theory of well-being* both count as antirealist by this definition. But shouldn’t these views be compatible with realism?

reply: Even if, according to these two views, *the fact that I ought to ϕ* is grounded in *facts about our attitudes*, this grounding fact is itself normative, so whether such views count as realist or antirealist depends on whether that grounding fact is itself grounded in facts about our attitudes.

Thus on this way of conceiving of antirealism, antirealists are committed to an infinite hierarchy of grounding facts, each of which is partially grounded in a fact about our evaluative attitudes, like so:

$$[N \leftarrow A_1], \quad [[N \leftarrow A_1] \leftarrow A_2], \quad [[[N \leftarrow A_1] \leftarrow A_2] \leftarrow A_3], \quad \dots$$

sub-worry #1: It's unclear that grounding-facts-with-normative-relata are normative.

(But even if they aren't, Street's Darwinian dilemma will still apply to them, so we will still have an argument that these facts must be grounded in attitudinal facts.)

sub-worry #2: Are there enough evaluative attitudes to ground everything in this infinite hierarchy?

(A partial answer: since we are dealing with groundings "all the way out" and not "all the way down," some of the grounding facts in our hierarchy might be grounded in *the same* attitudinal fact.)

sub-worry #3: Now Bernard Williams and David Lewis, two of Street's canonical examples of antirealists, no longer count as antirealists.

- *worry #3:* Presumably *the attitudinal facts* are grounded in *the microphysical facts*. By transitivity, it follows that, for non-nihilist normative antirealists, *the normative facts* are grounded in *the microphysical facts*. Doesn't this turn *non-nihilist normative antirealism* into a variety of *naturalist normative realism*?

reply #1: Deny that the sort of dependency between the normative facts and the attitudinal facts is the same as the sort of dependency between the attitudinal facts and the microphysical facts.

reply #2: Strictly speaking, all that is required for normative antirealism is that every normative fact have *at least one* full ground that includes *at least one* attitudinal fact; this is compatible with normative facts having other full grounds that do not include any attitudinal facts. So even if every normative fact is fully grounded in the microphysical facts, it doesn't follow that normative realism is true.

(Still, given this reply, either Street needs to take back her frequent claim that, on her view, all value "ultimately" depends on our taking things to be valuable, or she needs to reinterpret "ultimately" to mean "eventually" rather than "at bottom.")

In the end, it doesn't matter too much if Street is using "antirealist" in an idiosyncratic manner. She is certainly right that the class of views she picks out with that term are interesting and important.

II. Interlude: Diatribe about the Word "Judgment"

Street's preferred version of antirealism, so-called "Humean constructivism," grounds all normative facts in facts about our normative judgments.

Controversially, Street assumes the following:

valuing X = judging (or taking) X to be valuable
 = judging (or taking) oneself to have reason to promote X

It is always good to be wary of the word "judgment," since it is ambiguous along at least three dimensions:

- judgment as *judging* (the act of making a judgment) vs. *judged* (the content of what is judged);
- judgment as mental entity vs. utterance;
- judgment as occurrent vs. dispositional.

I find properly interpreting Street's work on constructivism maddeningly difficult because of her lack of attention to the first of these ambiguities.

She also insists that normative judgments are not beliefs, because unlike beliefs they are "by their nature motivating" ("Constructivism about Reasons," p. 230; see also "What Is..." p. 381, n. 13).

I think she's better off saying that normative judgments are a non-ordinary type of belief (see "What Is..." p. 376). Otherwise she must either deny that normative judgments can constitute knowledge or deny that knowledge entails belief.

III. Street on Restricted vs. Thoroughgoing Constructivism

Street distinguishes between two types of constructivist views, only the second of which is supposed to be a genuine metaethical position:

restricted constructivism: The correctness of a normative judgment falling within some (specified) set is grounded in the judgment's withstanding a certain (specified) procedure of scrutiny from the standpoint of some (specified) set of *correct* further normative judgments.

thoroughgoing (or *metaethical*) *constructivism*: The fact that X is a reason for agent A to ϕ is grounded in the fact that the judgment $\langle X$ is a reason for A to $\phi \rangle$ withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of all of A's other normative judgments.

Street presents things as if *thoroughgoing constructivism* is the limiting case of *restricted constructivism*, when *correctness* is taken to be *truth* and when *the set of further normative judgments* is taken to be *all of one's other normative judgments*.

I think this is a mistake.

Notice that I've added the italicized "correct" to my formulation of restricted constructivism.

Street doesn't include that "correct" in her official formulation of restricted constructivism on pp. 209-210 of "Constructivism about Reasons," but her subsequent discussion makes it clear that it is needed (see pp. 217, 220).

Once this change is made, restricted and thoroughgoing constructivism become very different beasts.

Street also presents things as if both she and Korsgaard endorse thoroughgoing constructivism, the only difference being that Korsgaard thinks the Categorical Imperative and its various first-order implications withstand scrutiny from every perspective, whereas Street denies this.

I also think this is a mistake: it rests, I believe, on an inaccurate interpretation of Korsgaard.

In what follows I shall use "Humean constructivism" to refer to thoroughgoing constructivism together with Street's particular way of understanding what "withstanding scrutiny" comes to.

One issue that will be crucial to our discussion next week of Street's arguments against realism: does Street, when defending Humean constructivism, appeal to *substantive normative intuitions* anywhere?

Street denies that she does. She insists that she is engaged in "an exercise in descriptive philosophical analysis as opposed to a substantive normative one" in which all she is appealing to are "intuitions about what is and isn't recognizably a case of valuing" ("What Is...", p. 374).

Street sometimes frames this issue as whether Humean constructivism "smuggles in a substantive value" ("Constructivism about Reasons," p. 235, n. 45), but that's the wrong way of putting things. The intuition *that facts about value determine facts about oughtness* is a substantive normative intuition, but it is not itself a substantive value.

IV. Street on Withstanding Scrutiny: First Pass

What does it mean for one normative judgment to "withstand scrutiny" from the standpoint of another normative judgment? In §7 of "Constructivism about Reasons," Street approaches this issue by focusing on cases involving (judgments about) instrumental reasons.

According to Street, the following combination of attitudes is impossible when held "at the same time, in full consciousness":

- I judge $\langle I$ have conclusive reason to get to Rome immediately \rangle ;
- I judge \langle Getting on a plane is the only way to do so \rangle ;
- I judge $\langle I$ have no reason at all to get on a plane \rangle .

Street infers from this that the following holds as a matter of “analytic or conceptual” necessity:

- (C₁) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ >, judges < ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing>, and attends to the matter in full awareness, then A judges <I have a reason to ψ >.

(I don’t actually think this is true, because <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > is compatible with <I don’t have a reason to ϕ > in cases in which one has tons of reasons against every alternative to ϕ -ing, but let me ignore this concern, since at most it shows that the details of (C₁) need to be tinkered with.)

Street thinks that a similar claim holds in cases in which our agent A does not realize that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing, although it in fact is:

- (C₂) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then *by A’s own lights* A has a reason to ψ .

But for Street, talk of *what one has reason to do by one’s own lights* is the same as talk of *what one has reason to do according to the standards “legislated” by one’s own normative judgments*, so (C₂) entails:

- (C₃) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then the judgment <A has a reason to ψ > withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A’s other normative judgments.

Given the truth of thoroughgoing constructivism, this in turn entails:

- (C₄) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then A has a reason to ψ .

Have we relied on any substantive normative intuitions in arriving at this point? Street thinks we have not: “Metaethical constructivism smuggles no substantive normative assumptions into its definiens” (“Constructivism about Reasons,” p. 232).

I think this is mistaken. Even if no substantive normative assumptions are relied on in glossing what it takes for a normative judgment to “withstand scrutiny” from the standpoint of other normative judgments, the claim *that withstanding scrutiny in this sense is what grounds normative truth* is a substantive assumption.

In other words, even if (C₁), (C₂), and (C₃) are all true as a matter of conceptual necessity, the inference from these to (C₄) requires the backing of substantive intuition.

We can see this by considering analogues of these four claims in which A’s normative judgment is in the third-person:

- (C₁*) If A judges <B has conclusive reason to ϕ >, judges < ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing>, and attends to the matter in full awareness, then A judges <B has a reason to ψ >.
- (C₂*) If A judges <B has conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then *by A’s own lights* B has a reason to ψ .
- (C₃*) If A judges <B has conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then the judgment <B has a reason to ψ > withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A’s other normative judgments.
- (C₄*) If A judges <B has conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then B has a reason to ψ .

(C₁*), (C₂*), and (C₃*) may well be true as a matter of conceptual necessity, but (C₄*) is definitely false.

(Note: I am not here denying the truth of (C₄); I am simply denying that we can get to (C₄) without relying on substantive normative intuitions.)

V. Street on Withstanding Scrutiny: Second Pass

(C₄) only specifies one ground for facts of the form [A has a reason to ψ]. What might the Humean constructivist say about the grounds of facts of the form [A has conclusive reason to ψ]?

It is tempting to think that the Humean constructivist should endorse the following variant of (C₄):

- (C₅) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ > and it is true that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing (whether or not A is aware of this), then A has conclusive reason to ψ .

But (C₅) runs into problems with cases like the following:

Beth judges <I have conclusive reason to eat this bowl of chili in front of me> and judges <I have conclusive reason to live a long, healthy life>. She also has a fatal allergy to peanuts, which unbeknownst to her the bowl of chili in front of her contains.

In this case, (C₅) yields the contradictory verdict that Beth both has conclusive reason to eat the bowl of chili and has conclusive reason to not eat the bowl of chili.

(Notice that (C₄) does not face a similar problem in this case, since there is nothing contradictory about Beth having one *pro tanto* reason to eat the chili and another *pro tanto* reason to not eat the chili.)

Street propose the following fix to handle such cases:

- (C₆) If A judges <I have conclusive reason to ϕ >, if ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing, and if A's ψ -ing does not conflict with anything else she more deeply judges that she has reason to do, then A has conclusive reason to ψ .

How do we determine which of A's two conflicting normative judgments is most deeply hers? "...this is a function of how strongly she holds the normative judgments in question and how close to the center of her total web of normative judgments they lie" ("Constructivism about Reasons," p. 235).

This is no small fix; it involves radically changing the nature of Humean constructivism. Three implications:

1. Now Street is appealing to substantive normative intuitions even when determining what "withstanding scrutiny" comes to.

Both the judgment *that we should resolve the Beth case by figuring out which conclusive-reason judgment is more deeply hers* and the judgment *that we should measure the depth of a judgment in the way Street proposes* do not follow merely from "intuitions about what is and isn't recognizably a case of valuing."

Street's reply: "...the priority accorded these normative judgments [i.e. the deepest ones] doesn't reflect a substantive value, but rather reflects the fact that we are asking about *agent A's* reasons, not someone else's reasons, and agent A is, in an important sense, to be identified with her most strongly and centrally values" (ibid., n. 45).

But this reply is not convincing: it ignores the fact that the judgment *that A's reasons are determined by A's identity* itself requires the backing of substantive intuition.

2. Now that whether or not a normative judgment withstands scrutiny is partially determined by the strength and centrality *of that judgment*, in our definition of *thoroughgoing constructivism* we should remove the "other" from "the standpoint of all of A's other normative judgments."
3. Once conflicts are handled in this way—in terms of *weighing* the depth of various judgments—talk of "entailment" from within the standpoint constituted by an agent's values is awkward and misleading.

Moreover, this is just the tip of the iceberg: a variety of other changes to the details of Humean constructivism are going to be needed to handle *conflicts between three or more conclusive-reason judgments*, *conflicts between higher- and lower-order normative judgments*, and *conflicts between judgments employing different normative categories*.