

Kantian Constructivism and the Sources of Normativity

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According to Kantian constructivism, moral principles are derived (or ‘constructed’) from a formal characterisation of the practical standpoint (or ‘will’) of ordinary agents. It is relatively uncontroversial that this view has implications for first-order normative theory. But some Kantian constructivists argue that their view also entails a position in metaethics (e.g., Bagnoli 2013b, Korsgaard 1996, O’Neill 1989, Reath 2006). According to these theorists, one of the major attractions of Kantian constructivism is that it offers an alternative to moral realism without rendering morality objectionably subjective.

Kantian constructivism’s contribution to metaethics is usually made out to consist in its advancing a distinct view of the sources of moral normativity (e.g., Korsgaard 1996). However, it is unclear which metaethical question such a view might answer. Metaethics is traditionally considered to be concerned with questions of the semantic, epistemological, and ontological status of morality. On many natural interpretations of talk of the sources of normativity, it does not address these questions at all. For example, if we interpret talk of the sources of morality’s normativity as attempting “to place morality within practical reason”, it seems to address questions of the internal structure of the normative domain rather than questions of the ontology, semantics, and epistemology of that domain (Hussain and Shah 2006: 267). On this reading, a view of the sources of normativity is not a metaethical position—at least not in the sense in which moral realism is.

Kantian constructivism’s stance on the sources of normativity thus appears to be compatible with traditional positions in metaethics, including moral realism. Some authors conclude that Kantian constructivism is just a position in first-order normative theory which can be combined with any position in metaethics (e.g., Darwall et al. 1993, Hussain and Shah 2006, 2013, Scanlon 2012, Timmons 2003).

I defend Kantian constructivism against the charge that it does not provide any distinct answers to metaethical questions by clarifying the notion of sources of normativity. I argue

that the question of the source of something's normativity is a respectable metanormative enquiry, albeit one that has not received much attention from contemporary theorists.

Following Ruth Chang, I suggest that the source of something's normativity is that which grounds its having normative force (2009, 2013, cf. Väyrynen 2013). On this construal, the question of the source of something's normativity forms part of the metaphysics of normativity. It asks for an explanation of something's having normative force which does not proceed by (i) pointing out the cause of its having normative force, (ii) identifying the subvenience base of its normativity, or (iii) subsuming it under a more basic, or more general normative truth or principle.

As a question about the metaphysics of normativity, the source question is to be distinguished from questions about the semantics or epistemology of normativity. Less obviously, it is also distinct from questions about the ontology of normativity. Following Chang, I distinguish between two separate, albeit closely related, questions about the ontology of normativity. The first ontological question asks what kinds of things, fundamentally, have normative force. In Chang's words, it asks about the ultimate "bearers of normativity" (2009: 243). In contrast with this question, the source question enquires about the source of some bearer's normativity, whatever that bearer's ontology.

A second ontological question about normativity is concerned with what Chang refers to as "the nature of normativity" or "normativity's essential features" (ibid.). Unlike the question of the bearers of normativity, this type of question is concerned with the ontological status of normativity itself. That is, it inquires what kind of force normativity is. The source question, by contrast, asks wherein something's having normative force is grounded, whatever the ontological status of that force.

To show how this characterisation of the source question illuminates Kantian constructivism's contribution to metaethics, I briefly outline the particular claim that Kantian constructivism makes about the source of moral normativity. This claim is motivated by the observation that morality purports to have a distinct kind of normative force: that of obligation. According to a Kantian analysis of obligation, we are obligated to ϕ only if we can ϕ from the motive of respect for the law. This analysis has two important implications. First, the content of our moral obligations is determined by the formal principle of the will, i.e., the Categorical Imperative. Second, the fact that morality is normative for us is grounded in the

fact that we possess a will that is capable of being guided by that principle. In short, the source of moral normativity lies in our autonomy.

I conclude that Kantian constructivism takes up a position within metaethics, albeit one that is orthogonal to traditional metaethical positions such as moral realism. While these positions are preoccupied with questions of the ontology, semantics, and epistemology of normativity, Kantian constructivism is concerned with what grounds morality's having normative force. Nevertheless, Kantian constructivism is opposed to a position that happens to be popular with many defenders of moral realism, source externalism, according to which morality's normativity has no source in our will or motivational states but resides entirely in irreducibly normative properties.

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