

Review - Constructivism in Practical Philosophy

Written by James Wakefield

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JAMES WAKEFIELD, JUL 14 2013

Constructivism in Practical Philosophy
Edited by: James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

Constructivism in Practical Philosophy (hereafter *CiPP*) comprises twelve essays on a thoroughly interesting but possibly unfamiliar topic. Since it may reasonably be expected that readers of *e-International Relations* are chiefly interested in one or another branch of political studies, I will begin my review with a short *précis* of what constructivism is about, before turning to the volume itself. At the end I will comment very briefly on the political implications of the book.

1. Introducing 'constructivism'

Normative political theorists are likely to know the word 'constructivism' from the works of John Rawls, who identified it with the interpretation of Immanuel Kant underlying of his enormously influential book *A Theory of Justice* (1971). This Kantian mechanism was laid bare in a series of articles and lectures in the 1980s, and enabled moral philosophers to engage more directly with Rawls's political project, which until then had sometimes appeared

Review - Constructivism in Practical Philosophy

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frustrating narrow in scope, concerning *justice*, or the principles governing the setup of the best scheme of social co-operation, rather than *morality*, which Rawls considered too controversial to be subjected to a decisive and systematic treatment.[1]

The first major feature of Rawls's constructivism is a rejection of any *relativism* according to which claims about justice, morality or reasons of other kinds are just matters of opinion. The second feature is a commitment to a variety of *anti-realism*, according to which normative claims, or at least normative claims of certain kinds, such as claims about what principles of justice are best, are not independently true moral facts. The choice between different possible conceptions of justice is not a choice of one among the many and various conceptions that people already happen to endorse; the principles of justice are instead *constructed* by means of a procedure, which in Rawls's theory consists of the business famously conducted behind the veil of ignorance and subsequently as people try to establish reflective equilibrium. An appropriately constructed principle has *objective value*, meaning that it can be normatively significant for persons and to that extent able to generate obligations *even if they do not yet realise it*.

For more than thirty years there has been a steady trickle of books and articles challenging or developing Rawls's constructivist position. Some authors, like Onora O'Neill, Thomas E. Hill, T.M. Scanlon and Christine Korsgaard, have pushed Kant further into the foreground, devising moral theories applicable to the decisions made by individuals faced with ordinary, personal decisions. As they set out their distinctive positions and their relations to each other, these authors were able to give a fuller account of a 'constructivism' over and above Rawls's specific version of it. Kantian constructivism is characterised by a commitment to the idea of 'universality,' or the thought that a properly constructed moral claim – a claim derived from or sanctioned by an appropriate constructive procedure – should apply equally to *all possible rational moral agents*, simply by virtue of being the kinds of creatures they are. This universalising principle, rooted in Kant's categorical imperative, is handled in different ways by different theorists. These include Rawls's original position thought experiment, designed to generate principles of justice, but no more than that; Scanlon's negative test for proposed actions, according to which an action is morally wrong if it could be reasonably rejected; and O'Neill's ambitious version in which *reason as a whole* is constructed by a jury of free and equal thinkers.

Since the millennium there have been other contenders for Kant's special role as the common touchstone of the constructivists. Authors like Sharon Street and James Lenman have championed versions of constructivism drawing not on Kant but on David Hume. Their Humean versions of constructivism are intended to avoid reliance on the idealisation through which Kantians reach their tests of universality – the idea of people as free, equal, reasonable and rational, for example – and instead embrace the contingent dispositions and desires that persons actually possess. Humeans do not need to imagine moral agents without these features in order to make meaningful normative claims about them. They may even think, *contra* Kantian constructivists, that these contingent characteristics are required for us to make sense of normative claims, since without them, reasoning could never get started. To this Kantians may object that accounts of normativity that keep these unreliable factors in place is bound to end up too flimsy to produce firm answers to questions of what we ought to do or what principles we should use to govern our personal actions and social institutions.

Constructivist theories remain controversial. Its critics sometimes argue that, despite the language of 'constructing' moral claims, constructivists are bound to presuppose the existence of some kind of moral facts in order to prevent their theories from collapsing into relativism, or even that such facts are *needed* to generate any substantive conclusions whatsoever. (A standard criticism of Rawls is that he smuggles presuppositions into his original position thought experiment in order to force it toward a predetermined, liberal-democratic conclusion.) The theory is also subject to extensive internal debate as its supporters try to work out the fine details of the most plausible version of constructivism. *CiPP* is primarily concerned with issues of the latter kind.

2. On Constructivism in Practical Philosophy

The contributors to *CiPP* include several of the most prestigious authors presently writing about constructivism and theories of agency, ethics and meta-ethics. The essays themselves represent a wide range of different positions in the extended debate as things presently stand. The book will be primarily of interest to specialists in constructivism,

Review - Constructivism in Practical Philosophy

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but not without value for those interested in other areas of normative theory.

The editors offer a lucid and useful introduction in which the core tenets of constructivism are laid out, along with the theory's genealogy, affiliations and some of the most salient points of disagreement among its adherents. Even in these few pages it is clear that constructivism is still very much a project in development. For example, it is telling that the editors associate constructivism with Harry G. Frankfurt's work on agency, the will and reasons, despite the fact that he does not apply the term to his own theory.^[2] Nonetheless the decision to recruit him as a sort of honorary 'Humean constructivist' makes sense in light of his commitment to a conception of practical reason with emotional commitments, and specifically love, as its most basic feature. The recognition of this family resemblance is instructive in itself, and will give readers who have hitherto thought of constructivism as a narrowly Rawlsian or Kantian project a reason to return to some of these long-established theorists to see what they can bring to this emerging field of study.

This kind of co-option is characteristic of constructivism, which does not, or does not yet, have a fixed and uncontroversial definition. After all, neither Kant nor Hume, the major intellectual antecedents of the tradition, used the word, and it is often argued that each of these theorists is a moral realist of one kind or another.^[3] Lenman points out in his essay that the term is 'a slippery one[,] with considerable variation in how various moral philosophers characterise and understand it,' while Dale Dorsey begins his essay with the observation that the word is 'promiscuous,' and for that reason needs to be defined carefully before anything can be said about it.^[4] The unsettled nature of *CiPP*'s subject matter makes it all the more rewarding for careful readers prepared to engage with it: this territory has yet to be fully explored, and as a result there are still rich veins of theory to be mined.

In the absence of familiar theoretical landmarks, *CiPP*'s contributors are forced to define their positions at the same time as defending them. The book's overall project, if it has one, is as much exploratory as it is corrective. Given the intricacy of the arguments and the somewhat non-standard terms in which they are presented, I have not the space to survey all of the papers in detail. Let it suffice for me to pick out a handful of themes to suggest the variety of ideas under discussion.

Represented here are Kantian constructivists (Scanlon), Humean constructivists (Street, Lenman, Dorsey), believers in constructivist or non-constructivist varieties of objectivism (James and Stern, respectively) and supporters of the view that constructivism should be limited to some exclusive normative domain (Dorsey, Scanlon) and those who favour more 'ambitious' or metaethical versions (e.g. Street, Tiberius). There are some insightful interpretations of the mechanisms underlying constructivism: Michael E. Bratman examines the role of the agent in the construction of judgements, while Valerie Tiberius elaborates a version of constructivism based on a conception of wisdom.

Several authors criticise constructivism, and especially the more ambitious varieties defended by Korsgaard and Street, on the grounds that it cannot explain *normativity* without resorting to circular reasoning or presupposition. This objection is cashed out in different ways: Scanlon follows it to the conclusion that a more limited kind of constructivism is the most we can appropriately defend, while Hussain thinks it a more serious problem for constructivism as a whole. After an illuminating discussion of the analogy between constructivism and epistemological coherentism, Shemmer offers a partial answer to this criticism, but finds that the process of construction can never be brought to a decisive conclusion.

We can afford to look more closely at just a few of the papers. In recent years Sharon Street has emerged as one of the most perspicacious and widely-cited champions of constructivism,^[5] and her contribution to *CiPP*, entitled 'Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reasoning,' exemplifies both her lucid style and her sophisticated command of the material. She argues against Christine Korsgaard's Kantian theory of normativity, objecting that *it does not follow from the fact that an agent values something that she herself* – that is, the agent – *is valuable*. This is one of the fundamental differences between Kantian and Humean varieties of constructivism, and no doubt it would be interesting to see the political implications of the lesser-known Humean version elaborated in some future paper.

It is worth noting in passing that Korsgaard is so often cited as to count as practically a contributor in her own right. As at least one other reviewer has noted, it is regrettable that there is no new article from her in the volume,^[6] since

Review - Constructivism in Practical Philosophy

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although the bulk of *CiPP*'s readership will most likely be familiar with her work, it would be instructive to see what she makes of her opponents, and useful for the uninitiated to have some first-hand account of her overall position.

We are lucky to have a new article from Scanlon, since his version of constructivism has also been enormously influential.[7] Here, in 'The Appeal and Limits of Constructivism,' he extends on some of the themes of his much-discussed *What We Owe to Each Other*, and especially the idea that the idea of a reason in favour of something – whatever that something might be – cannot be constructed. In this he differs from theorists like Korsgaard and Onora O'Neill, for whom construction really does run 'all the way down,'[8] including not only the familiar domain of explicitly normative judgements about morality and justice, but also reason itself. The question of the proper scope of construction is an old perennial of the constructivist debate, but in this case Scanlon uses the contrasts between mathematics and moral theory to illustrate why, at bottom, our constructions need to have *some* foundation in something other than construction itself. His article is also notable for its engagement with Rawls's theory, which, as I have already noted, is elsewhere cited less often than we might expect.

Each of the essays in this collection is illuminating and well argued, although some are, perhaps inevitably, bound to be of more parochial appeal than others. Even the most critical of *CiPP*'s contributors concede that constructivism is an interesting and suggestive branch of normative theory, and as a result we never see the most forceful arguments that have and could be brought to bear against it. (For example, Derek Parfit's engagements with Korsgaard and Frankfurt in the first volume of *On What Matters* would help a would-be constructivist to see more clearly what she is up against.)[9] To that it may be replied that there are plenty of long-established varieties of realism, and their advocates have their own books in which to defend their positions. While the narrow focus of *CiPP* will delight specialists, making it all the more valuable a compendium of work on practical constructivism, it is likely to prove daunting to the uninitiated.

3. The Political Significance of *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*

This review began with the acknowledgment that the readers of *e-International Relations* are more likely to be specialists in politics than in ethics and adjacent philosophical fields. To finish, and with those readers in mind, I will now comment on what *CiPP* has to say about politics, or, at least, why normative political theorists might be interested in assaying it.

CiPP is not an explicitly political book. Its contributors rarely refer to political problems, and even then at a high level of abstraction. Even Rawls, probably the most widely-known constructivist, is cited less often than might be expected; this suggests, if nothing else, that the bright star of Rawlsianism is gradually descending. One role for the book is to show that, even while Rawls's Kantian constructivism is no longer the dominant force it used to be, his controversial arguments concerning the principles of justice are not, as some critics have charged, just academic parlour games without real significance for the ways we really live. Instead they belong to a family of theories concerned with some of the most basic problems of normative theory. That none of the contributors to *CiPP* is an out-and-out Rawlsian shows how far constructivism has advanced in the three decades since 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,' and if liberal political theorists are to avoid complacency, they need to attend to the foundations of their arguments and see whether, in light of the criticisms and cases for amendment put forward by the inheritors of Rawls's tradition, they still appear sound.

Constructivism represents, first and foremost, a position in *meta-ethics*, concerning knotty issues that underlie any other normative enquiry – any questions within the compass of 'practical philosophy' – even if we most often take their solutions for granted. For example: What do we mean when we say that we 'ought' to perform one action rather than another? What, if anything, counts as an *objective* justification for a claim about justice, fairness or rationality? What is the status of our reasons for action: do they have *authority* over us, and if so, why? These are difficult questions, and constructivism gives us just one among several sets of answers to them. Politics is, at most, at the book's periphery, but for political theorists prepared to extrapolate from these deeper problems of practical philosophy, *CiPP* will prove illuminating, challenging and absolutely worth the effort.

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[1] See Rawls (1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Original edition). London: Harvard University Press; Rawls (1980) 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,' in *Journal of Philosophy* 77:9, pp.515-72; and Rawls (2000) *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Edited by Barbara Herman), [esp. 235-252]

[2] James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (2012) 'Introduction,' in *CiPP* [4]

[3] This claim is more often made of Kant than of Hume, but there are some, like David Fate Norton, who think that Hume is a moral realist. See Norton (1984) 'Hume's Moral Ontology,' in *Hume Studies*, 10th Anniversary Issue, pp. 189-214 [esp. 190-192].

[4] Lenman (2012) 'Expressivism and Constructivism,' in *CiPP* [216]; and Dorsey (2012) 'A Puzzle for Constructivism and How to Solve It,' in *CiPP* [99]

[5] The other contributors refer regularly not only to Street's article in *CiPP*, but also earlier articles in which she extended and refined the definition of constructivism. See especially Street (2008) 'Constructivism about Reasons,' in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, 5, pp.207-245 (Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau); and Street (2010) 'What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics,' in *Philosophy Compass* 5, pp.263-85

[6] Ben Laurence (2013) 'Constructivism in Practical Philosophy' (review), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: an Electronic Journal*. Published 11th March 2013 and available at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/38207-constructivism-in-practical-philosophy/>

[7] The fullest account of Scanlon's position is given in his (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

[8] This is Korsgaard's useful phrase, which appears in (2003) 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy,' in *Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century* (APA Centennial Supplement to Journal of Philosophical Research), pp.99-122 [117-18]. It is notable that Aaron James applies the term to Korsgaard and Rawls, whereas Korsgaard herself, with Street's support, thinks that Rawls's constructivism *does not* run all the way down. See James (2012) 'Constructing Protagorean Objectivity,' in *CiPP*, pp. 60-80 [60]

[9] Parfit (2011) *On What Matters*. (Volume 1). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Edited by Samuel Scheffler)

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