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Could Morality be a Social Construction?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify and evaluate some of the most serious objections to the view that morality is a social construction. Among the objections considered are the claims that this view is incoherent; that it over-generates moral truths; that it under-generates moral truths; that it fails to capture the modal status of some moral truths; and that it fails to account for the phenomenology of moral experience. In each case, the objections are found wanting. During the course of the paper, the social constructivist view is critically compared with a range of other metaethical views, including moral realism and other forms of constructivism.

Key Words

Metaethical Constructivism; Social Construction; Moral Relativism; Moral Realism

The term ‘constructivism’ denotes a well-established family of views in contemporary metaethics (see e.g. Lenman & Shemmer 2012; Bagnoli 2013). Yet most constructivist views in the recent literature are strongly individualist (see e.g. Korsgaard 2009; Street 2012). This is a puzzling fact, for at least four reasons. First, as the meaning word suggests, construction is something that individuals often do together. Second, as the perennial issue of moral relativism shows, one of the ways in which morality has been thought to be relative is with respect to social groups, societies, or cultural norms. Third, there has long been a critical interest shown in what is in effect the idea of social construction in political philosophy (see e.g. Rawls 1993). Fourth, there has in recent years been an explosion in attention paid to the question whether key aspects of human

reality are socially constructed; some of these aspects having obvious ethical and metaethical significance (see e.g. Hacking 2000; Haslanger 2012). So, could morality be a social construction? That is the question I explore in this paper.ⁱ In doing so, aim to identify and evaluate some of the most serious objections to a social constructivist view in metaethics. I shall conclude that none of these arguments are successful and therefore that, based on the evidence presented here, morality could indeed be a social construction.

According to constructivism in metaethics, morality is something constructed, invented, or made. According to social constructivism in metaethics, morality is something constructed, invented or made by people acting collectively, or in groups. In other words, morality is a social artefact. The core of the social constructivist view can be captured by what I shall refer to as ‘The Modal Existence Claim,’ which states that *all moral norms and values exist only because there are, or have been, conceptually articulated social practices that express, recognize or otherwise sustain them; either in an actually existing, or in a potentially enhanced form.*ⁱⁱ For the purposes of this paper, the Modal Existence Claim will be regarded as a working definition of the social constructivist view and as containing the basic resources provided by that view for giving an account of the subject matter of moral thought; moral reasons; moral reality; moral knowledge; and the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims.ⁱⁱⁱ The aim of this paper is to identify and evaluate five of the most serious objections to the social constructivist view and to give a general outline of how the social constructivist view could be interpreted in response to those objections.

1. The problem of incoherence

One of the most common objection to metaethical constructivism is that constructivist accounts are inherently unstable: when considered on their own terms they have unacceptable implications; when corrected for these implications they cease to be constructivist views. There are many variations of this objection, some of which are targeted either at constructivist views about the normative domain as a whole, or at practical normativity in general. By the same token, responses to this objection sometimes take a highly general form, as exemplified by work in the Kantian tradition, according to which the objectivity of all norms and values is said to be vindicated either in terms of what is constitutive of rational agency (see e.g. Korsgaard 2009); or in terms of the idea that reason as such is essentially ‘critical’, with all norms and values being constructed by way of internal or ‘immanent’ critique (see e.g. O’Neill 1989). The best response to this objection on behalf of the social constructivist view is different from both of these traditional responses.

One poignant way of stating the problem of incoherence is to say that it attempts to conjure something out of nothing. The result of construction is supposed to be a set of objective norms and values that apply to agents regardless of their contingently given commitments, or ends. At the same time, there is not supposed to be any normative constraints on the process of construction external to those contingently given commitments, or ends. The upshot is the following dilemma. Absent the existence of normative constraints external to the contingently given commitments or ends of agents, the result of construction could be anything. Yet (as we learn from Wittgenstein)

if anything can be made to accord with a rule, there is no rule to accord with. In other words, there has to be some normative constraints on the process of construction external to the contingently given commitments or ends of agents. If there are such constraints, these constraints are not the result of the relevant construction; in which case constructivism gives an incomplete account of the norms and values in question. On standard assumptions, only two options remain on the table: robust normative realism, or normative scepticism.

The social constructivist view is an account of *moral* norms and values, not of norms and values in general. It is therefore consistent with the failure of constructivism as a universal theory of the normative domain. Moral norms and values could in principle be social constructions, even if – as a matter of necessity – some norms and values are not. The social construction of moral norms and values could be explicable partly in terms of non-moral norms and values assumed to have some kind of ‘external’ or mind independent source or sanction. There will be no attempt to defend such a ‘hybrid’ meta-normative view in this paper. Even so, it is important to register the availability of this view in order to get the ‘dialectical’ facts straight (see e.g. Shemmer 2012; Hussain 2012).

In *Moral Realism: a Defense*, Russ Shafer-Landau provides a canonical articulation of the problem of incoherence as it is faced by standard versions of metaethical constructivism. In a revealing passage, Shafer-Landau writes:

‘Either the initial conditions of choice and attitude formation are moralized or they are not. In other words, we are to envision the initial conditions as already incorporating moral constraints, or as operating free of such constraints. The problem with the latter option is that there is no reason to expect that the principles that emerge from such a construction process will capture our deepest ethical convictions, or respect the various platitudes that fix our understanding of ethical concepts... Alternatively, if constructivists import moralized constraints... then they effectively abandon constructivism, because this acknowledges the existence of moral constraints that are conceptually and explanatorily prior to the edicts of the agents doing the construction... and so there would be moral facts or reasons that obtain independently of constructive functions. This is realism, not constructivism.’ (Shafer-Landau 2003, 42)

A social constructivist view needs to explain why the argument in this passage is unsound. On the first horn of the dilemma, the norms and values resulting from moral construction are said to be arbitrary, implausible, or failing to coincide with common moral convictions (except by accident). This claim is unfounded. First, a social constructivist view of moral norms and values should construe those norms and values as being constrained by substantial requirements of social co-ordination and the interests of at least some of the agents involved in the practices thus co-ordinated. Although this fact does not itself have many interestingly controversial or determinate implications for how social co-ordination is better pursued, it does rule out the possibility that the content of moral norms and values could be just about anything. Second, the social constructivist view gives a non-reductive account of a historically existing domain of moral thought to which theorists of that discourse have some degree

of first-personal and normatively engaged access. Theorists of that discourse are therefore entitled to make use of their best moral judgment in order to identify the limits of what should be classified as an acceptable morality (as opposed to, for example, some self-defeating moral practice of mutual destruction). It is therefore consistent with the social constructivist view that theorists make use of what Shafer-Landau and Cuneo have called ‘the moral fixed points’ in order to give an account of moral norms and values, in much the same way that theorists of causation make use of basic insights about the nature of causal relations in the course of developing an account of causation. To think otherwise is to make the same mistake as that made by someone who infers that robust realism about the constitutive norms of Ping-Pong must be true because not just every kind of ball game could possibly count as Ping-Pong.

On the second horn of the dilemma, the existence of substantial constraints on the process of moral construction is said to undermine the claim that morality is a construction. This claim is also unfounded.^{iv} First, the social constructivist view is an account of moral thought that explains the existence of moral norms and values in terms of a set of actual facts about social practices and not in terms of a set of modal facts about possible social practices. According to the social constructivist view, the process of construction is constrained by facts about the potential for enhancement of those very practices, as opposed to the potential for enhancement of any possible social practice that could possibly be described or imagined. Second, the existence of substantial constraints on moral construction does not entail the collapse of constructivism into robust moral realism. Any sustainable social practice will embody a core set of norms from which it follows that there are ways for that system to fail on its own terms. A purported morality could fail on its own terms by not delivering consistent answers to

moral questions; by not offering a coherent way to think about moral problems; or by being structured so as to undermine the very norms and values its participants purport to accept. To be internally self-defeating in this sense is a defect that the social constructivist view can consistently account for without presupposing some external or mind independent source of moral norms and values. Having said that, it could still be reasonably objected that the social constructivist view fails to ‘capture our deepest ethical convictions’ (Shafer-Landau 2003, 42). I address this objection in the following sections.

2. The too many truths problem

What I shall refer to as the ‘too many truths’ and the ‘too few truths’ problems are instances of the same general issue, namely that of a metaethical theory having unacceptable implications for the content of true, valid or otherwise correct moral claims. One way to respond to this problem is to deny that metaethical theories have substantially moral implications. According to this response, all ‘external’ or ‘second order’ claims about the nature of moral thought are said to be logically independent of the content of the substantially moral claims the epistemological, metaphysical or semantic features of which they purport to describe or explain (see e.g. Blackburn 1993; 1998). This argumentative strategy is not available on the social constructivist view as interpreted here. During the course of expounding the social constructivist view, explicit use has been made of substantial moral claims in order to explicate, motivate and evaluate that view. The social constructivist view is therefore vulnerable to

criticism on substantially moral terms (see e.g. Kramer 2010; Dworkin 2011; Lillehammer 2013).

Even if the problem of incoherence can be solved, that solution leaves a problem of ‘residue’ relating to ‘our deepest ethical convictions’ (Shafer-Landau 2003, 42). This problem has two aspects. In its first aspect, the problem is that the social constructivist view is too *permissive* with respect to the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims. In its second aspect, the problem is that the social constructivist view is too *restrictive* with respect to the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims. In each case, the social constructivist response relies on drawing a distinction between the contingency of moral thought implied by the claim that moral norms and values are social constructions on the one hand and the contingency of moral thought implied by the claim that the content of those norms and values depends on what any given morality actually happens to approve of on the other. The social constructivist view entails the first of these claims. It does not entail the second. The key idea behind the social constructivist view as interpreted here is that a contingently evolved social practice can consistently endorse a set of moral norms and values that are taken to hold without restriction; or in all actual, likely, conceivable or possible circumstances.

The following three counterfactuals illustrate the too many truths problem faced by the social constructivist view. The first states that (a) *for any possible morality, if that morality approves of some set of norms or values, then those norms or values are true, valid, or otherwise correct*. The second states that (b) *for any actual morality, if that morality approves of some set of norms or values, then those norms or values are true,*

valid, or otherwise correct. The third states that (c) *for any actual morality, if that morality were to approve of some set of norms and values, then those norms and values would be true, valid, or otherwise correct.* Given the vast range of actual and possible moralities, the truth of either (a), (b) or (c) would entail that the set of true, valid, or otherwise correct moral norms and values extends beyond the limits of moral and epistemic credibility.

This objection to the social constructivist view overshoots. With respect to (a), the social constructivist view implies that morality is a contingently evolved historical artefact with an internal set of norms and values for the evaluation and criticism of those moral norms and values. It is therefore not compelled to treat merely possible moralities as on a par with actual moralities with respect to the generation of true, valid or otherwise correct moral claims. That being said, any acceptable morality will embody norms and values that encourage the counterfactual consideration of different ways that morality could be. For example, the consideration that introducing a plebiscitarian democracy would be likely to result in the reintroduction of the death penalty would be of epistemic and moral relevance to citizens of a modern liberal democracy; more so than the consideration that were human beings to have evolved more like insects they would be more likely to eat their parents. It is possible that by considering these and similar possibilities people would end up endorsing norms and values that prior to this process they would find surprising, bizarre or outright unacceptable. This in itself is not an objection to the social constructivist view.

With respect to (b), the social constructivist view implies that moral claims are true, valid or otherwise correct to the extent that their endorsement would survive the enhancement of the morality in which they are embodied in light of experience, reflection or confrontation with new circumstances. It is therefore not compelled to endorse as true, valid or otherwise correct any morality just as it is. Actual moral norms and values could in principle be rejected as they stand in virtue of having been shown to be inherently self-defeating; to rely on a misguided conception of the natural world; or on similar grounds. Having said that, the social constructivist view is consistent with the existence of substantial restrictions on the scope of determinately true, valid or otherwise correct moral claims to the extent that different sets of enhanced moral judgments could stubbornly fail to converge. Yet the moral and epistemic significance of this fact should not be exaggerated. First, even robust forms of moral realism are consistent with some degree of objective indeterminacy in the truth-conditions of moral claims (see e.g. Kramer 2010; Putnam 2004). Second, it is a controversial question to what extent the enhanced moral judgments of actual moral thinkers would, in fact, converge. Third, what to make of the lack of convergence in enhanced moral judgments is itself in part a substantially moral question about which there is reasonable disagreement across a wide range of the metaethical spectrum (see e.g. Rawls 1971; Blackburn 1985; Williams 1985; Wong 2007; Dworkin 2011).

With respect to (c), the social constructivist view implies that any actual set of moral claims are true, valid or otherwise correct to the extent that their endorsement would survive the enhancement of *the morality in which they are embedded*. It is therefore not compelled to endorse as true, valid or otherwise correct any possible variation of those claims as embodied in any possible development of that morality, as opposed to the

moral claims embodied in this morality that would survive in light of experience, reflective improvement or responsiveness to circumstantial change. Of course, in working out which moral claims these are, it is necessary to consider a range of relevant possibilities. Yet what to count as a relevant possibility is itself in part a substantially moral question, and one that is therefore itself a possible object of moral contestation (see e.g. McDowell 1998). While the natural and social history of human moralities has given different people the moral norms and values they actually have, it has also given those people the capacity to grasp that this is a contingent and potentially variable fact about them to which it is reasonable to adopt a critical and potentially transformative attitude (see e.g. Williams 1985). This fact does not itself supply a moral licence for fanaticism, scepticism or any other form of moral or epistemic irresponsibility.

3. The too few truths problem

The Too Few Truths Problem is the dialectical flipside of the too many truths problem. The challenge to explain how the social constructivist view can handle a sufficiently wide range of issues about which any plausible morality ought to have a view arises for at least three different kinds of case, namely: (a) *past* events prior to the existence of a morality; (b) *future* events not yet conceptualized or considered by a given morality; and (c) *merely possible* events not conceptualized or considered by a given morality.

One strategy for handling these cases on a social constructivist view is to stipulate that a maximally enhanced morality would, by definition, speak to every actual and possible eventuality. It would be wrong to deny the coherence of this strategy. Yet to rely on it

exclusively has the air of a conjuring trick. It is therefore incumbent on defenders of this view to address the too few truths problem head-on.

The first kind of case, (a), relates to past events prior to the construction of a given morality. The problem is that a social constructivist view seems committed to endorse a series of implausible moral claims, such as that prior to the existence of a given morality, no action or state of affairs could truly be said to be wrong or bad. This is not a serious challenge to the social constructivist view. It is true that this view entails that moralities are contingent historical artefacts on the existence of which the truth, validity or correctness of all moral claims depend. Yet it is consistent with this claim that the scope of moral claims made from within a given moral practice is temporally unrestricted, in the sense that the moral norms of that practice entail that *if* a given kind of act is wrong or bad at some time, *then* this kind of act is wrong or bad at all times, given that the material circumstances are *relevantly similar*. Thus, it is consistent to think that the gratuitous wiping out of some tribe among our pre-humanoid ancestors was bad, or that the way some of these ancestors behaved towards each other was wrong, even though these pre-humanoid ancestors were yet to develop the capacity to think in what human beings would currently recognize as fully developed moral concepts. It is also consistent to think that although there are some moral concepts it makes good sense to apply to our pre-humanoid ancestors, there are other moral concepts that we should stop short of applying to them; either because it is impossible to make sense of how those terms would apply (e.g. because their instantiation presupposes the possession of the relevant conceptual capacities on the part of those to whom they are applied, as in the breaking of oaths); or because applying these concepts would have no point beyond the satisfaction of some idiosyncratic aspiration on the

part of those who consider applying them (e.g. an obsession about being able to morally categorize absolutely everything (see e.g. Williams 1985)). Either way, the question whether to extend the application of a given set of moral concepts across some arbitrarily large temporal distance is itself in part a substantially moral question about the morality of *classifying things morally*, as opposed to classifying them in some of the other ways that our conceptual repertoire permits, or not classifying them at all.^v Beyond a certain point, this is question about the ethics of classificatory house keeping, and therefore as much an issue *about the morality of those who do the classifying* as about *the morality of those who are being classified*.

Analogous points can be made about hitherto yet to be actualized future events, (b), subject to the following two caveats. The first caveat is that how people decide to morally categorize acts and states of affairs in the present can, and sometimes does, affect even distant future events; sometimes to the extent of making a decisive difference to whether or not these events actually take place. The second caveat is that in contrast to historical events, the best way to interpret some future events may be conditioned by future changes to the moral concepts, taxonomies, terms or vocabularies that will be in play, the precise character of which it is not easy to describe or predict in advance. Bearing in mind these caveats, the situation is relevantly parallel to the case of distantly past events. The question of what to say about future events (or what people instantiating those future events should say about present events) is in part a substantially moral question about which the social constructivist view can admit a comparable range of coherent and contestable answers.

Similar points apply to the case of merely possible acts and events, (c)). Any social practice recognizable as a morality will include at least some norms and values for thinking about merely possible events. The extent to which people insist on morally categorizing various unrealized possibilities, as well as the manner in which they do so, is a matter of substantial moral significance. Yet it is a matter of substantial moral significance at least partly in virtue of what it says about *them* and their own aspirations to comprehensively and systematically order their own moral judgments. What to say about merely possible events (or what people inhabiting those merely possible events should say about actual events) is itself in part a substantially moral question about which the social constructivist view can admit a wide range of coherent and contestable answers.

4. The modal status problem

The Modal Status Problem is a special instance of the too many truths/too few truths problems. The problem arises because it might be thought that the social constructivist view implies the implausible conclusion that some moral claims we ought to think of as *necessary* are merely contingent or hostage to accident, such as who happens to approve of what, and so whichever practice we happen to consider (see e.g. Blackburn 1998; Kramer 2010; Dworkin 2011). The wrongness of arbitrary violence, social exclusion, or structural oppression, for example, should not be thought of as subject to the fortunes of arbitrary sets of accidental, parochial or transient attitudes to human life or sentience. To the extent that the social constructivist view implies that they are, this view should be rejected on substantially moral grounds. The actual *truth* of such

unacceptable moral claims being entailed by the social constructivist view is not a necessary condition for this problem to arise. In the case of some unacceptable moral claims, the mere fact that a metaethical theory is *consistent* with those claims could be enough to condemn that theory on moral terms, so long as there are some moral claims that any acceptable metaethical theory should rule it out as unacceptable even to *consider*.

Which moral claims, if any, it is unacceptable even to consider is itself a substantially moral question. The most promising response to the modal status problem on behalf of the social constructivist view is therefore a version of its response to the too many truths/too few truths problems. There is no need to repeat the description of that response here. Yet there are further considerations that speak in favour of this line of response to the modal status problem on the part of the social constructivist view. Here I shall mention five.

First, although the social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that the plausibility of a metaethical theory is hostage to the moral acceptability of its substantially moral implications, it does not assign asymmetric epistemic privilege to every substantially moral claim with which that metaethical theory might conflict. To insist otherwise would be to let philosophical inquiry be hostage to wishful moral thinking. It is consistent with the social constructivist view to think that the most reasonable way to respond to such a conflict is to modify one's moral beliefs. One possible case in point is the insistence that we should always argue as though the moral truth is single or fully determinate (see e.g. Blackburn 1985; Dworkin 2011;

Lillehammer 2018). This is an issue on which moral and metaethical beliefs could be mutually adjusted in a way that does not accord asymmetric privilege to either side. Thus, one might question a moral adversary's dogmatic insistence that people should always argue as though the moral truth is single by pointing to the coherent application of the idea of objective indeterminacy in other areas of human thought (see e.g. Putnam 2004). On the other hand, one might question a metaethical theory that implies an extensive lack of determinacy in moral truth by pointing to cases where people are obviously entitled to have the courage of their highly determinate moral convictions.

Second, not all the apparently problematic implications of a metaethical theory are best interpreted as genuine implications of that view. Thus, if a metaethical theory implies that gratuitous murder was morally indifferent prior to the existence of moralities that conceptualized it as wrong, that would be a significant problem for this metaethical theory. Yet as interpreted here, the social constructivist view is not committed to this kind of radical asymmetry in the cross-temporal judgment of acts, persons, or states of affairs. On the contrary, when suitably interpreted the social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that moral norms and values can coherently aspire to maximal temporal symmetry in their moral classification of acts, persons and states of affairs.^{vi}

Third, not all the apparently problematic moral implications of a metaethical theory are morally significant to the same degree. Whether or not to endorse those implications could sometimes be a case of 'spoils to the victor' (the 'victor' in question being the more plausible metaethical theory). On the one hand, if some metaethical theory implies that gratuitous murder would have been perfectly OK if the progress of history had

made human beings just a tiny bit more bloodthirsty than they actually are, that would be a significant problem for this metaethical theory. On the other hand, if a metaethical theory implies that there are no moral facts because the most parsimonious semantics of ‘fact’ implies the existence of something called ‘properties’; and the most parsimonious semantics of ‘property’ is a sparsely naturalistic one according to which nothing above what is quantified over by physical science X will count as a property ‘strictly speaking’; then it is hard to see this as presenting a serious problem for that view so long as it remains consistent with there being ‘less strict’ ways to speak about the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims (see e.g. Davidson 2004; Lewis 1989; Korsgaard 2009; Eklund 2014).

Fourth, some apparently problematic moral implications of metaethical theories are subject to more than one consistent interpretation, on at least one of which their morally problematic aspects are either mitigated or cancelled outright. Thus, it would be in issue if a metaethical theory were to deny people the linguistic licence to talk about their deepest moral convictions as ‘true’ and the state of reflectively stable moral convictions being ‘knowledge’; as though the best one could hope for in moral thought were a state of cluelessness or uncertainty. Yet if claims to ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ can be coherently re-interpreted in terms of some alternative vocabulary, such as that of ‘solutions to problems’; ‘virtues of social understanding’ or the like, the price of trading in one taxonomy for another need not be such as to threaten the plausibility of either our deepest moral convictions or of the metaethical theory that re-describes those convictions in other than conventionally cognitivist terms (see e.g. Blackburn 1998; Korsgaard 2008; 2009; Lillehammer 2013).

Fifth, the extent to which a metaethical theory is vulnerable to the modal status problem is partly question of whether that view is arbitrarily stipulative or gerrymandered. Thus, it would be a problem if every time it were confronted with a disputed counterfactual (e.g. ‘Murder would not have been OK even if we had approved of it’), a metaethical theory were to just stipulate that moral truths are rigorously indexed to the norms and values endorsed by some local, current or actually existing moral code. Likewise, it would be a problem if every time it were confronted with an apparently ‘hard case’ (e.g. ‘Gratuitous murder is wrong: it always has been wrong, and it always will be wrong, in all times and places’), a metaethical theory were to make an *ad hoc* adjustment of its description of how the truth conditions of moral claims are constructed in order to capture that particular case.

A prevalent sense of doubt about whether these problems are ultimately avoidable is arguably one reason why metaethical constructivism has historically been subject to so much hostility and scepticism. Given the fundamental nature of the challenge, there is unlikely to be a single argument that will decide the issue either way. Even so, it is possible to offer the following three observations by way of mitigation on behalf of the social constructivist view. First, the social constructivist view as interpreted here is an account of *moral* norms and values in particular, not of norms and values in general. It follows that there are substantial constraints on what could count as true, valid or otherwise correct moral claims that follow from the nature of moralities as the kind of social practices they are, and which imply that the correct way to address at least some of the allegedly problematic counterfactuals will neither be arbitrarily stipulative nor

gerrymandered. Second, the social constructivist view as interpreted here is a *non-reductive* account of moral norms and values. It follows that there is no incoherence involved in making use of substantial moral judgments when describing the constructivist response to the ‘hard cases’ in question. Third, the mutual adjustment of the metaethical description of moralities as socially constructed human artefacts and the classification of the allegedly problematic cases in substantially moral terms is itself a project of theoretically systematic, empirically tractable and normatively guided construction of an explanatorily coherent worldview. Far from being subject to some basic theoretical defect of arbitrariness or gerrymandering, the social constructivist view as interpreted here is consistent with an attitude of taking moral thought as seriously as anyone could reasonably demand while retaining a robust sense of its natural and historical embodiment. Having said that, any residual suspicion of arbitrariness or gerrymandering can only be fully addressed by engaging in substantial moral thought, whether this takes place by means of the development and defence of a moral theory or by means of some alternative practical exercise of one’s moral sensibility. This is a task that falls outside the limited remit of this paper.

5. The phenomenology of content problem

The social constructivist view implies that the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims is a function of the moral norms and values embodied in actual moralities, subject to enhancement in the light of informed critical reflection and changing circumstances. To this claim, it might be objected that the lived experience of moral thought is not the lived experience of a process of construction, social or otherwise.

One place where this problem arises is in describing of *the limits* of everyday moral reflection. Serious moral thought does not seem to generally proceed on the assumption that true, valid or otherwise correct moral claims are whichever claims would be endorsed as a result of a process of social construction, *whatever the content of those claims may be*. On the contrary, some restrictions on the content of moral norms and values may seem follow directly from ‘the moral fixed points’.

A second place where this issue arises is in the description of *the focus* of everyday moral reflection. Serious moral thought does not generally proceed on the assumption that people are calibrating their moral judgments against some hypothesized set of moral claims made in ideal, or otherwise favourable, circumstances in which the endorsement of those judgments would fix their truth. People engage in moral reflection as they do in other areas of thought, with their eyes directed outward to the facts of their circumstances, and not with one eye permanently ‘looking sideways’ at their own responses to those facts, whether actual or counterfactual. It is therefore reasonable to think that the morally salient features of a situation will normally reside in the facts of that situation itself; and not in whatever different people, as morality’s alleged ‘architects’, would decide to make of them.

The social constructivist view is consistent with the moral phenomenology described in the previous two paragraphs. With respect to the *limits* of moral reflection, the social constructivist view is consistent with the existence of ‘moral fixed points’ in virtue of the fact that the content of anything recognizable as a morality is substantially

constrained by the kind of social practices moralities are. There is no reason why the existence of these constraints should not present themselves as such in the experience of everyday moral reflection even if neither the *explanation* of those limits (e.g. exactly why they are what they are), nor their *manner of appearance* (e.g. their psychosocial causes) is immediately transparent to that experience itself.

With respect to the *focus* of everyday moral reflection, the situation is arguably not quite so straightforward. First, the question whether a moral claim would be endorsed in some favourable circumstance of reflection is a perfectly recognizable question from within the experience of everyday moral reflection and one that is sometimes actually used as a critical resource during the course of moral reflection itself (e.g. ‘You would never have sent that ‘tweet’ if you had thought about the hurt it would cause’). There is no reason why an awareness of this focus should not be present in the experience of everyday moral reflection, even if the role of that focus in giving content to the truth, validity or correctness of moral claims is not immediately transparent to that experience itself.^{vii}

There are good reasons on social constructivist terms to expect those engaged in moral reflection to focus outwards on the facts of their situation when making up their mind about moral questions. After all, it is those very facts that would normally be regarded as morally probative in the relevantly favourable circumstances. An agent who finds herself in a situation approaching some ideal, or otherwise favourable, circumstance for making moral claims will have no obvious business in doing anything else than respond to the facts of their situation as they see them (unless, perhaps, they are calibrating their own responsiveness for ‘safety’). After all, the moral features of the case will, by

hypothesis, be exactly as they see them in those circumstances. It follows that the closer agents find themselves to conditions favourable for moral judgment, and the more confident they are that they are approaching those conditions, the less cause they will have to engage in a 'sideways' glance during the course of their moral reflection.

To what extent people should direct their glance outwards or calibrate that view against a conception of favourable circumstances for making moral claims is partly a substantially moral question about how to best proceed in the course of moral reflection. It is conceivable that most human beings in most normal circumstances would make better moral judgments by bracketing the issue of whether their spontaneously made moral judgements would survive in more favourable circumstances for making moral judgments. The issue is context sensitive; empirically tractable; normatively contestable, and not one that is likely to be either fully or immediately transparent to the lived experience of moral reflection.

No plausible metaethical theory implies that the phenomenology of everyday moral reflection is sacrosanct. There might be good explanations, consistent with the social constructivist view, why the phenomenology of moral thought is systematically misleading with respect to at least some metaethical questions. For example, some proponents of so-called 'fictionalist' accounts of morality have argued that the practical efficacy of moral thought would be substantially enhanced if its participants falsely believe that the facts of their circumstances have categorical and mind independent normative properties (see e.g. Joyce 2001). The social constructivist view as interpreted here is consistent with the dynamic, or functional, aspect of this kind of fictionalist

analysis when applied to restricted domains of moral thought (see e.g. Lillehammer 2018). Yet the social constructivist view as interpreted here stops far short of the universally error-theoretic aspect of the fictionalist view. On the social constructivist view as interpreted here, the question of how to employ, extend or interpret moral thought is partly a substantially moral question, and therefore one that is partly decidable on substantially moral grounds.^{viii}

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ⁱ For a recent attempt to address this question, although not with respect to the objections discussed in this paper, see Mähringer (2022). For evidence of a recent trend to move beyond a narrowly individualistic conception of metaethics, see e.g. Moland (2011); Manne (2013); Walden (2019); Samuel (forthcoming).

ⁱⁱ The Modal Existence Claim is formulated here using ‘only because’, as opposed to ‘only if’, because it is not being claimed, nor is it being denied, that something classifiable as ‘morality’ could not possibly have come into existence any other way. This latter claim is not an implication of the social constructivist view, although it is consistent with that view. Critics of the social constructivist view might immediately object that as thus formulated the Modal Existence Claim confuses the existence of norms and values understood as evaluative or normative commitments and practices on the one hand, with norms and values as the ‘ontological’ correlates that make those values and norms and ‘correct’ or ‘true’ on the other. Given that it is the reconfiguration of this distinction on which the viability of the social constructivist view depends, this potentially misleading definition will be retained in what follows.

ⁱⁱⁱ I take the Modal Existence claim to be consistent with the following generic definition of normative constructivism given in Lenman (2012): ‘Constructivist views understand correct normative views as... those which are the upshot of some procedure or criterion, where a) that procedure or criterion is one followable or applicable by human beings, where b) that procedure or criterion is *itself characterized in normative terms* [my italics]... and c) applying the procedure or criterion is taken as determining or constitutive of that correctness rather than tracking correctness conceived as prior to and independent of it, and d) where the rationale for our taking an interest in what the

procedure or criterion in question delivers is conceived of as speaking to distinctively practical as opposed to theoretical concerns.’ (Lenman 2012, 216; c.f. Street 2008, 223; Harman 2000; Prinz 2007; Wong 2007).

^{iv} On this point there are significant parallels between the social constructivist response to the problem of incoherence for moral thought in particular and some of the Kantian responses to that problem for normativity in general mentioned previously.

^vIn contrast to the moral classification of distant future events, the moral classification distant past events will not materially affect those events themselves (e.g. by making the perpetrators of pre-humanoid massacres feel bad about themselves; become more likely to repent; or try harder to become like their descendants in response to their distantly future acts of retrospective disapproval, and so on).

^{vi} As a matter of historical fact, the issue of temporal neutrality is a morally disputed matter, and a metaethical view will be more plausible to the extent that it is able to recognise that fact. See e.g. Williams (1985); Moody Adams (1997).

^{vii} See e.g. Lillehammer (2002) for an attempt to address some of the issues discussed in this and previous paragraphs. The terms of that discussion would need to be substantially revised in order to be consistent with the social constructivist view as interpreted in this paper, in particular with respect to the substantially normative status of a wide range of apparently meta-ethical claims.

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