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# How (not) to Speak of Morality as a Social Construction

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to articulate a distinctive version of the view that morality is a social construction. The social constructivist view is critically located with respect to other metaethical views, including expressivism; error theory; robust moral realism, and other forms of constructivism. During this discussion, several potential misunderstandings which would stand in the way of a fair evaluation of the social constructivist view are identified and diagnosed.

**Keywords** Constructivism · Error theory · Expressivism · Moral relativism · Pragmatism · Robust moral realism · Social construction

Constructivism is a well-known and widely influential view in contemporary metaethics. What is less well-known and less widely influential in contemporary metaethics is the view that morality is a distinctively *social* construction.<sup>1</sup> This feature is in some ways a puzzling feature of the contemporary theoretical landscape, given the wide currency that the term ‘social construction’ has recently had elsewhere in philosophy, as well as in contemporary culture more widely. One possible explanation for the relative scarcity of explicit discussion of social constructivism in contemporary metaethics is the contested and often poorly understood idea of ‘social construction’ itself. This paper is an effort to address this issue insofar as the idea of social construction is applied to moral thought and practice. The principal aim of the paper is to articulate and a distinctive version of the claim that morality is a social

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent attempt to address this topic, see Mähringer [34].

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construction, and to explain why anyone might think this.<sup>2</sup> A secondary aim of the paper is to explain how the social constructivist view is related to some of its key metaethical competitors, including expressivism; robust realism; error theory, and certain other forms of constructivism. During the course of the exposition, several potential misunderstandings which would stand in the way of a fair evaluation of the social constructivist view are identified and diagnosed. What this paper does not include, however, is a substantial argument for the plausibility of the social constructivist view or any substantial arguments against the plausibility of its rivals.

## 1 Morality as a Social Construction

To say that *morality* (in the singular) is a social construction is to say at least two things. The first is that *morality* (in the plural) are the conceptually articulated products of a social process undertaken by multiple participants working on a given construction base to generate a distinctive body of evaluative or normative thought.<sup>3</sup> The second is that *morality* (in the singular); the ‘object’ of the resulting body of normative thought; what moral thought is ‘about’; or what morality ‘is’, etc. is the causal, conceptual, epistemological and metaphysical function of a process of social construction.

The former claim is comparatively innocuous and does not distinguish morality from other areas of human thought that are best interpreted ‘realistically’ (see e.g. [14]). The latter claim, in contrast, is a highly controversial claim, and one that is inconsistent with standard formulations of robust moral realism that construe the object of moral thought as existing independently of any process of social construction, or—indeed—of any activity or responsiveness on the part of human beings who are either actually or potentially engaged in moral thought or practice at all (see e.g. [6, 9, 46]). To this extent, it might be tempting to classify the social constructivist view as an antirealist view in metaethics. However, the extent to which the social constructivist view is accurately classified as antirealist is subject to several

<sup>2</sup> Some discussions of the idea of social construction, both in relation to morality and elsewhere, have been focused on the question of whether, and if so how, the relevant body of thought can be said to be ‘innate’; a negative answer to which it is argued is implied by the claim that morality is a social construction (see e.g. [22, 39]). I make no attempt in this paper to address this debate, nor do I address the relevance to that debate of the related debate about the innateness question as applied to the human language capacity and different natural languages. Finally, I do not attempt to address any of the most well-known objections to the claim that morality is a social construction; although attempts have been made to address some of these elsewhere (see e.g. [30, 31, 32]).

<sup>3</sup> I shall henceforth be using the terms ‘evaluative’ and ‘normative’ interchangeably. Nothing of substance in what follows will depend on this choice of terminology, even if the issue of how the two terms should be understood in relation to the ideas of *construction* and *social construction*, respectively, is a topic worthy of independent investigation.

important qualifications that undermine the case for excluding the social constructivist view from the class of realist views altogether.<sup>4</sup>

I shall return to some of these details in due course; but before proceeding any further it may be useful to locate the social constructivist view with respect to one recently influential and highly distinctive argument in favour of moral realism; namely the argument for robust moral realism defended in Enoch [9]. The interest of Enoch's argument for present purposes derives from the way in which his argument is generated from a set of claims internal to moral and other normative thought and practice in a way that raises the obvious question of how Enoch's argument and the robustly realist view it is said to establish is related to the social constructivist view I go on to explicate below.

Enoch argues that if something is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then we are justified in believing that that thing exists. He then argues that practical deliberation (or 'the deliberative project') is intrinsically indispensable, and that the postulation of irreducibly normative truths (in the sense of there being correct answers to deliberative questions) is instrumentally indispensable to practical deliberation; from which it is said to follow that we are justified (or indeed compelled) to believe in irreducibly normative truths. If some of the normative truths in question are moral truths, then we are justified (or indeed compelled) to believe in irreducibly normative moral truths.

There are at least three points to be made about this argument with respect to its relevance to the social constructivist view developed in this paper.

First, although there are significant similarities between the social constructivist view and Enoch's robust moral realism (both views deliver the conclusion that moral claims are irreducibly normative, for example), there are also significant differences between the two views. First, the social constructivist view is a view about moral deliberation in particular; not about practical deliberation as such. This view is therefore consistent with a robust realist view of some normative truths (e.g. truths about basic rationality) even if it goes on to reject a robust realist view of distinctively moral truths (e.g. truths about universal rights and duties). A social constructivist view would imply this combination of claims if, as some social constructivist views (e.g. certain versions of moral relativism) do, it rejects either the claim that there is such a thing as a 'moral deliberative project' that is intrinsically indispensable or that the postulation of moral truths is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project. Less strongly put, there is nothing in the social constructivist view that *entails* that there is such a thing as a moral deliberative project that is intrinsically indispensable or that the postulation of moral truths is instrumentally indispensable to such a project. Hence, the social constructivist view is logically distinct from the robust moral realist view.

Second, it is a disputed question what follows about the metaphysics of morality even if it is accepted that there is such a thing as a moral deliberative project that is

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<sup>4</sup>See e.g. David Wiggins, who writes: 'A particular ethical property, we might say, is to be identified or singled out as the property which the reasonable exercise of the grasp of such and such a concept, as regulated by criticism, hunts down' [56, p. 35]). If this is a form of realism about moral properties, then the social constructivist view articulated in this paper is consistent with some form of moral realism. See also Smith [50].

intrinsically indispensable or that the postulation of moral truths is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable deliberative project. The suggestion on the table is that this implies a version of robust moral realism. Another suggestion is that although *deliberative* indispensability in some form implies one kind of objective validity or truth (and therefore the rebuttal of universal moral or normative skepticism), this is not the same kind of objective validity or truth implied by the kind of *explanatory* indispensability that has traditionally been at issue between moral realists and their critics (see e.g. Worsnip [58]). One way of marking the difference would be to call the first kind of objective validity or truth ‘constructed’ (indeed ‘constitutively’ so) and the second kind of objective validity or truth ‘realist’ (indeed ‘robustly’ so). Either way, the two ‘sources’ of objective validity or truth are clearly different in at least one interesting way. Does the choice of terminology matter from the point of view of the social constructivist view? Not necessarily. The social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that there are moral truths, that morality is ‘real’, and so on, as long as these claims are interpreted in accordance with the Modal Existence Claim, as that thesis will be explained below. And there are diminishing returns to be gained in arguing about the ownership of labels (See also [28]).

Third, the aim of the present paper is to produce a perspicuous description of the social constructivist view for the purposes of establishing it as a metaethical position of independent interest, not to produce a substantial argument for the plausibility of that view over its rivals. Thus, although it does fall within the remit of this paper to locate the social constructivist view with respect to its main rivals, including robust moral realism, it does not fall within that remit to show what, if anything, is wrong with these rivals, including robust moral realism.<sup>5</sup> The social constructivist view could be false and robust realism could be true, while the account given of the social constructivist view provided in this paper is an adequate statement of the social constructivist view for the purposes of motivating it as a serious approach to metaethics. To this extent at least, no questions are being begged in any direction.

The distinctive and controversial aspect of the social constructivist view follows from 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.*<sup>6</sup> The Modal Existence claim applies to all *moral* norms and values in particular; not all norms and values that could possibly be imagined. Any norm or value the status of which is not captured by the Modal Existence claim is therefore not classified as a ‘moral’ norm or

<sup>5</sup> For one response to Enoch’s indispensability argument in favour of robust moral realism that might be pursued in defence of the social constructivist view, see e.g. [27].

<sup>6</sup> I call this the ‘Modal’ Existence Claim because of the way in which this formulation of social constructivism goes further than versions of social constructivism that constrain morality by the norms and values that are *actually* endorsed by individuals or groups of individuals (c.f. [39]). This modal aspect of the social constructivist view is intended to capture the extent to which at least some human moralities are importantly aspirational, or open to their own critical enhancement or transformation. In the—non-standard—case of a non-aspirational morality, the modal aspect of the above definition would be vacuously satisfied. I ignore this complication in what follows.

value on the social constructivist view.<sup>7</sup> It follows that there are no moral norms or values (including norms against the torture of innocents for fun or the intrinsic value of what is ‘natural’ for human beings) that exist independently of the social practices that have historically given rise to or sustained them. I shall henceforth regard The Modal Existence Claim as a working definition of the social constructivist view, and therefore as capturing the basic elements required on that view for giving an account of the subject matter of moral thought; moral reasons; moral reality; moral knowledge; and the correctness, truth, or validity of moral claims.<sup>8</sup>

Why should anyone want to even consider this view? As we shall see below, the social constructivist view presents a distinctive and ecumenical position in metaethics, which combines some of the attractive features of a range of competing metaethical views. More specifically, the social constructivist view shares a number of features with some of its main competitors in metaethics that have historically not been classified as constructivist. First, the social constructivist view shares with recent formulations of moral cognitivism the claim that moral judgments have *non-trivial success conditions* (see e.g. [45, 49]). Yet it also shares with canonical formulations of moral expressivism the claim that *moral judgments are fundamentally practical* (see e.g. [1, 13]). Second, the social constructivist view shares with recent formulations of non-naturalist moral realism the claim that *questions about moral truth and reality have irreducibly normative, ontologically substantial and non-skeptical answers* (see e.g. [9, 37, 45, 46]). Yet it also shares with moral error theories the claim that *the objective status of moral thought is not phenomenologically transparent and is potentially vulnerable to certain forms of deflationary debunking* (see e.g. [21, 22, 33]). Third, the social constructivist view shares with recent formulations of pragmatism the claim that a wide range of apparently metaethical questions are best interpreted either as *first-order moral questions*, or as *descriptive questions of a broadly anthropological kind* (see e.g. [38]). Yet it also shares with non-pragmatist theories the claim that *at least some metaethical claims escape reduction to first-order moral or descriptive anthropological claims* (see e.g. [29, 32]). Where the social constructivist view departs from these competing metaethical views is in the distinctive way in which it interprets these views as capturing certain *aspects* of moral thought, as opposed to providing the key to understanding its uniquely explanatory ‘basis’; ‘core’; ‘foundation’; ‘ground’; ‘nature’, or ‘essence’.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>C.f. Shemmer [47], who provides a taxonomy of different constructivist views, which helpfully distinguishes between the downstream questions whether a given process of construction is ‘guided by any non-constructed norms’, and so is ‘independent’, on the one hand, and whether the constructivism about norms in question goes ‘all the way down’, and so is ‘global’, on the other (see e.g. [47, p. 161], see also [10]).

<sup>8</sup>C.f. [10, 26, p. 216, 51, p. 223]).

<sup>9</sup>In response, it might be asked if the social constructivist view can itself be diagnosed as suffering from similar limitations when considered from the perspective of these alternative metaethical views. Indeed, it is a recognizable philosophical hypothesis that all standard metaethical theories are the result of a metaphorical over-extension of what is a literal truth about certain aspects of moral thought, and that they are therefore all bound to fail on the same grounds. Although further reflection on this hypothesis is an interesting pursuit, it is not a task that will be attempted here.

## 2 How to Interpret the Social Constructivist View

The Modal Existence claim says that moral norms and values depend for their existence on a set of conceptually articulated social practices. This claim is vulnerable to being misunderstood along at least three dimensions; insofar as the practices in question are said to be either: (a) *conceptually articulated*; (b) *social*; or (c) *plural*.

With respect their *conceptual articulation* (a)), the social constructivist view provides a picture of moralities as dependent on a set of social practices that embody the grasp and employment of recognizably moral concepts (such as ‘virtue’, ‘good’, or ‘duty’) in a *critically contestable* form.<sup>10</sup> To say that moral concepts are employed in a critically contestable form is to say that they are defined and interpreted in a way that lends itself to evaluation and criticism as reasonable or unreasonable; sound or unsound; correct or incorrect, etc. To say this is not itself to take a stand on the issue of cognitivism versus expressivism in metaethics, but is to record the fact that moralities involve individuals and groups who make moral claims for the *definition and interpretation of which* they give what they take to be good and bad arguments, justifications, or reasons (c.f. [1, 13]).

The social constructivist view describes moral thought as variously *expressing, sustaining or recognizing* the existence of moral norms and values. Apart from requiring that some moral thinkers have employed some of the relevant moral concepts at some point in history, this claim is neutral with respect to the precise way these concepts are either *grasped* or *employed*. With respect to their *grasp*, the social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that the grasp of moral concepts is multiply realized in the psychological economy of different thinkers. Thus, it could be a universal feature of human moralities that the grasp of moral concepts involves the presence and activation of a distinctive set of affective psychological states or dispositions, including anger, shame, empathy, or disgust. To this extent, the social constructivist view is consistent with expressivist theories in metaethics that account for the content of moral claims in terms of the expression of emotional states.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is consistent with the social constructivist view that the defining aspects of moral claims could be realized by beings whose psychological economy is made up in a very different way, such as the emotionally dry and calculating capacities of the theoretical invention ‘Homo Economicus’ (see e.g. [11]), or some synthetic or computational surrogate designed or invented by future humanoid beings.

With respect to their *employment*, the social constructivist view is consistent with social behaviors involving moral concepts being multiply realized across different moralities, including explicit and self-conscious judgments variously employing those concepts; speech and action implicitly making the application of those concepts appropriate; laws, institutions and religious practices explicitly regulated by these concepts, and the introduction or re-introduction of normative categories (such as blame and blameworthiness) picked out by these concepts, and so on (see e.g. [3, 23, 54]). At one extreme, some instantiation of moral thought and practice could include

<sup>10</sup>The social constructivist view does not entail an account of which, if any, of these notions has the best claim to be conceptually, normatively, or otherwise theoretically basic. For discussion, see e.g. [44, 49].

<sup>11</sup>Accounts along these lines have recently been proposed by [1, 12, 15, 36, 39, 48].

individuals all of whom explicitly attempt to legislate the moral norms and values for their social group, for the whole of humanity, or even for all rational beings (such as a society inhabited by pretenders to the title of ‘Philosopher Kings’). At the other extreme, an instantiation of moral thought and practice could involve norms and values the exact contours of which are beyond the understanding of most of its members, or where a substantial amount of moral thought is taken up interpreting what the norms and values in question actually are (e.g. in a deeply religious society in which some moral norms and values are explicitly recorded in a language that most of its members do not understand).<sup>12</sup>

It might reasonably be asked at this point what the connection is between the claim that moral thought is *conceptually articulated* on the one hand, and that it is subject to *critical contestation* on the other; and whether these claims can be clearly separated. As understood here, the idea of conceptual articulation involves a capacity for behavioural guidance by means of the application of normative (and in this case, moral) concepts; a capacity that might (or might not) involve a higher-order capacity to reflect on these concepts or their application; and which might (or might not) be distinctive to human animals. The core idea behind the use of the term ‘concept’ in this connection is the idea of some kind of distinctive and psychologically embodied discriminating capacity. The idea of critical contestation, on the other hand, entails a capacity for higher-order reflection on concepts and their application; including a capacity to develop, extend, revise or even invent new concepts (see e.g. [4]). This capacity might well be one that is distinctive to human animals, or be otherwise scarcely distributed. It is the combination of conceptual articulation and critical contestation that makes possible the distinctively *aspirational* aspect of moral thought and practice implied by the social constructivist view. And it is the extent to which any such aspirations are actually realizable that determines the extent to which moral claims can be said to achieve the status of being ‘authoritative’, ‘objective’ or ‘universal’, as traditionally debated in metaethical discussion.

This interpretation of the Modal Existence claim has three further implications for the social constructivist view. First, and as correctly pointed out by moral realists, the standard phenomenology of making moral judgments is at least partly one of ‘receptively’ responding to an existing (and therefore *de facto* constraining) system of norms and values, as opposed to the self-conscious invention of something one ‘spontaneously’ wills, or otherwise creates.<sup>13</sup> Yet, second, the standard phenomenology of moral judgments also includes a spontaneous or creative aspect, which derives partly from the fact that individuals and groups have the ability to assign different interpretations to existing moral concepts; to extend the use of those concepts in ways beyond what has already been done; and to introduce new moral concepts, or varia-

<sup>12</sup>C.f. David Wong, who writes: ‘Those who are capable of a reflective articulation and justification of a sophisticated set of moral values and norms and who moreover possess a firm commitment to these values and norms would have to emerge as the *outcome* of a long developmental process, rather than the *initiators*... Such practices need not have grown out of any sophisticated or self-conscious reflection’ [57, p. 41].

<sup>13</sup>In this respect, the social constructivist view arguably departs from some constructivist accounts of the ‘autonomous’ moral self as ‘self-constituting’ (see e.g. [25]). For a discussion of the contrast between ‘receptivity’ and ‘spontaneity’, see [49]).

tions of existing ones.<sup>14</sup> What does *not* follow from the Modal Existence claim is that the most reasonable interpretation of moral concepts is one that assigns their application conditions in such a way as to make the correctness, truth, or validity of their application depend entirely on how those who employ that concept *actually* happen to think or feel (c.f. [39]).<sup>15</sup> Even if the most reasonable interpretation of some moral concept could in principle connect its correct application very closely to how its users actually happen to think or feel (consider, for example, the term ‘upsetting’), it will standardly be the case that the moral norms and values embodied in a given social practice include norms and values for the reflective enhancement of that practice to the extent of leaving itself open to the repudiation of the immediate, instinctive, intuitive or untutored responses that its actual participants happen to display (consider, for example, the term ‘outrageous’). On the social constructivist view, this is part and parcel of what it means to say that moral thought is aspirational.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to their being *social* (b), the social constructivist view identifies moralities as depending on a set of practices that are irreducibly collective. First, moralities are characterized by being articulated in concepts the nature of which is to be socially transmitted or shared. Second, the extent to which the idea of an individual or personal morality makes sense, it does so only against the background of shared social practices and ways of thinking about those practices from which an individual might go on to develop a new and potentially idiosyncratic interpretation (such as a deluded egoist who forms the conviction that their individual interests are the only ones that count.) According to the social constructivist view, the idea of a wholly individualistic or personal system of moral norms or values, created *ab initio* (for example by engaging in a purely first personal process of self-constitution; or the articulation of a purely first personal practical identity) is one that is at best an explanatorily derivative, secondary, or ‘limiting’ case.

With respect to their being *plural* (c), the social constructivist view describes moralities as collectively constructed and conceptually articulated ‘technologies’ of social co-ordination that, even though they will necessarily have a number of generic features in common, have historically developed at different times and places; sometimes in complete isolation from each other (e.g. on different continents); and sometimes in conflict, competition or otherwise adversarial circumstances (such as historical interactions between different world religions (see e.g. [57])). The plurality of actual or historical moralities thus understood presents a distinctive explanatory

<sup>14</sup> Examples of such spontaneity might include: idiosyncratic conceptions of moral norms and values on the part of unusual individuals; extensions of existing concepts in response to trauma, conflict or social change, or systematic reflection and theorizing on large bodies of moral concepts as exemplified by moral philosophers (e.g. in discussions of people variously described as ‘disabled’; ‘incompetent’; ‘mentally ill’; ‘white’; ‘black’; ‘male’, or ‘female.’ (C.f. [18])).

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. David Wong, who writes: ‘It... does not follow [from pluralistic moral relativism]... that people are simply saying what follows from their adopted moral norms when they make a moral statement. They can be aware that they might have mistakenly adopted the moral norms they happen to have, and they can be aware that others may be mistaken in adopting the moral norms these others have. Having a morality in a reflective and self-critical way means the readiness to be critical about established or accepted norms, whether they are one’s own or others’ [57, p. 75]).

<sup>16</sup> This is one respect in which the social constructivist view arguably departs from the views put forward in Harman [16] and Prinz [39].

challenge for the social constructivist view; not considered as an anthropological, historical or sociological hypothesis, but with respect to the question of whether it is possible, even in principle, to map the content of different instantiations of moral thought and practice onto some interestingly unified set of converging, or otherwise shared, moral claims in such a way as to make sense of the idea that there is something worthy of the title of a ‘single true morality’ (see e.g. [16]). The social constructivist view is consistent with this possibility, both as a theoretical hypothesis and as a substantially moral aspiration. It does not, however, entail it. In this respect, the social constructivist view differs in substance from at least some paradigmatic forms of robust moral realism, as well as certain forms of ‘constitutivist’ constructivism (c.f. [5, 16, 50], c.f. [19, 25, 39, 57]). What the social constructivist view does share with both standard forms of robust moral realism and constitutive constructivism is the assignment of a certain degree of determinacy with respect to what any morality must be like; with the distinctive twist that on the social constructivist view the correctness, truth, or validity of moral claims is a function of the content of historically existing moralities; either as actually manifested, or as critically enhanced in the light of discovery, reflection, or historical and environmental change. Arguably, there are some—even if only minimally determinate—moral norms and values (such as basic norms of social coordination applied to at least some of morality’s participants) that any recognizable morality is bound to embody, on pains of practical or theoretical self-defeat (see e.g. [25, 52, 57]). One corollary of this fact is that the social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that moralities can be subject to ‘brute error’ (c.f. [20]). The social constructivist view can therefore also make sense of the claim that any plausible metaethical theory should account for the existence of at least some among what Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau have called ‘the moral fixed points’; although on the social constructivist view, there is room for substantial (whether first-order moral, or second-order conceptual) disagreement about what those fixed points are, and how they are to be interpreted (see e.g. [7]).

As formulated above, the Modal Existence Claim is neutral on the question of what the scope of ‘the moral fixed points’ is, and therefore also neutral on the extent to which morality should be thought of as essentially ‘local’ or ‘relative’ in some way. The social constructivist view is therefore consistent with at least some versions of moral relativism that have been defended in the recent literature, including the anthropologically informed account of ‘natural’ moralities articulated in Wong [57], and which Wong labels ‘pluralistic relativism’. The social constructivist view is not, however, equivalent to Wong’s pluralistic relativism, for the following reasons.

First, the social constructivist view is consistent with the claim that the ‘truth values’ of claims beyond the domain of any universal moral core (or ‘fixed points’) is *indeterminate* as opposed to (culturally) *relative*. (Wong favours the latter view.) Whether the assignment of indeterminacy or culturally relative truth is the more reasonable path for a social constructivist version of relativism to take is an important but substantially moral question the exploration of which I shall not attempt here.

Second, the social constructivist view is consistent with forms of moral relativism that are either more moderate or more extreme than the pluralistic relativism articulated in Wong [57]. As it happens, Wong’s view has a good claim to be one of the more plausible forms of moral relativism that can be defended on social construc-

tivist terms, although in Wong's formulation the relativist view does not explicitly endorse the constitutive element of irreducible normativity that is distinctive of the social constructivist view as explicated in this paper.<sup>17</sup> Having said that, and given that the main remit of this paper is to produce a perspicuous description of what is distinctive and interesting about the social constructivist view, no comparative evaluation of different forms of moral relativism will be attempted here .

As explicitly articulated in the Modal Existence Claim, it is a distinctive commitment of the social constructivist view that the task of articulating a set of determinate correctness, truth, or validity conditions for moral claims is one that is itself a project of social construction, and to that extent a substantially normative - and moral- project. This is obviously a project to which abstract and systematic moral philosophy can contribute. Yet for all its historical influence, the commitment shared by standard versions of robust moral realism or constitutivist constructivism that 'the business' of any morality is necessarily the 'business' of every other morality (for example with respect to maximal determinacy, universal application, or counterfactual robustness) is not one that follows from the social constructivist view.

The social constructivist view agrees with robust moral realism that morality is an actual, and therefore genuinely real and existent aspect of reality. Yet according to the social constructivist view, morality is also an object of thought that would not have existed were it not for the contingent social practices of which moralities are a function. Therefore, even if some moral claims are counterfactually robust to an arbitrarily high degree (Consider 'Ecological diversity would have been good even if human beings had never thought about it'), the relevant counterfactuals are intelligible only as fixed with reference to some historically actual and conceptually articulated social practice. Even so, the Modal Existence claim does not imply that the application of moral terms is restricted by the temporal limits of the social practices on which their intelligibility depends (see e.g. [32]). It is consistent with the social constructivist view to hold that it can truly be said that some things would be morally significant even in the absence of anyone to appreciate or judge their moral significance. A social practice could develop to include a commitment to the moral significance of some aspect of reality, where the value-grounding or normatively significant features of that aspect of reality are not taken to depend on the continued persistence of the relevant social practice of which that moral significance is a function.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if a social practice develops to think that ecological diversity is morally significant it could be correct to say, within that social practice, that ecological diversity would be morally significant even if that social practice were to go extinct (consider 'Our post-humanoid descendants should ideally find the planet as ecologically diverse as we found it'). Likewise, a social practice could develop to include a reflectively stable commitment to the moral significance of a given aspect of reality, where the value-grounding or normatively significant features of that aspect of reality are not taken to depend on the prior existence of the relevant social practice of which the

<sup>17</sup>This aspect of Wong's view is shared by the even more radical version of naturalistic moral relativism defended in Prinz [39].

<sup>18</sup>Of course, the practical interest of those norms or values would in most cases depend on the continued existence of the social practice that initially allowed for an interest to be taken in them.

relevant moral significance is a function.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if a social practice evolves to think that ecological diversity is morally significant, then it could be correct to say, within that social practice, that ecological diversity was morally valuable prior to that social practice existing (consider ‘It was a good thing that our pre-humanoid ancestors left the planet as ecologically diverse as we found it’). The social constructivist view is consistent with the possibility of correct, true, or valid moral claims made about post-humanoid societies; pre-humanoid societies, and other actual or possible societies described in robust moral counterfactuals.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 How not to Interpret the Social Constructivist View

Moral thoughts and practices actually exist, and there is a wide range of determinate truths to be known or discovered about their history, structure, content and functional role; in much the same way that there is a wide range of determinate truths to be known or discovered about ant-hills; the reproductive patterns of salmon; the kinship behavior of monkeys; money markets, or the gaming behavior of Scrabble enthusiasts. The application of terms such as ‘truth’, ‘validity’, ‘fact’, ‘property’, ‘existence’ and the like are fully at home at this, broadly descriptive level of social construction, for which comparably few distinctively problematic epistemological or metaphysical issues arise. Relative to any given parameter against which actual behavior can be morally classified, there are no distinctively problematic issues for moral thought and practice about how to make sense of behavior as measuring up to the relevant standards in play. In this respect, moralities are analogous to legal systems; norms of politeness, or the rules and regulations of a social club.

Yet at least some moralities embody ambitious norms and values pertaining to their own reflective or substantial enhancement (charitably interpreted, perhaps all do). This is one of the respects in which it is commonly agreed that distinctively moral systems differ substantially in their critical aspirations from at least some narrowly conventional systems. Yet there is a plurality of contested and conflicting ways in which such enhancements either have been, or could be, conceived; and between which resulting moral claims may therefore conflict. This fact about moral thought

<sup>19</sup>Of course, the point of so judging them would in most cases depend on there being some contact or continuity between the past and present that permits an interest in making the judgments in question. This point is relevant to the question of how much truth there is in what Bernard Williams called ‘the relativism of distance’ [53], and also for Williams’s criticism of Joseph Raz’s ‘social dependence thesis’ [40], according to which there is an irreducible asymmetry between the *existence* of values after the extinction of the practices that sustain them and the *non-existence* of the same values prior to the emergence of these practices. This issue is one that complicates the interpretation of the distinction made in Raz [40] between what he calls ‘practice dependent’ and ‘practice independent’ values.

<sup>20</sup>Although its consistency with claims such as ‘Some things would have been morally significant even if there were no human beings to value them’ is a point in favor of the social constructivist view, this does not entail that a reflectively robust morality must be committed to make such claims about the application of moral terms in general. Consider, by analogy, cases where the truth of a certain normative claim is taken to presuppose the actual instantiation of the social practice which has given sense to it in the very context where the relevant terms are said to apply (e.g. the legal status of breaching municipal parking restrictions; or the permitted geographical distribution of pieces on a given playing surface of a sports field).

and practice presents a distinctive challenge with respect to how the success conditions of moral claims are best characterized on a social constructivist view. Thus, there could be a determinate fact about the content of the moral norms and values that two or more societies would endorse in response to some systematically reflective procedure based on their basic knowledge of the economic and material facts of their social world. Yet barring some miracle, these two or more reflectively enhanced instantiations of moral thought might end up judging at least some cases differently (c.f. [37]). The insistence on applying terms such as ‘correctness’, ‘truth’ or ‘validity’ to describe the success conditions of moral judgments in this kind of scenario would arguably imply a form of moral relativism. Because all critically robust instantiations of moral thought and practice are likely to have some core of norms and values in common in virtue of which they can be interpreted as ‘moralities’ at all, this is likely to be a restricted form of relativism. Yet it would, inevitably, still be a form of moral relativism (see above, and [57]). This is another respect in which the social constructivist view differs importantly from some of its main competitors, including certain forms of robust moral realism and constitutivist constructivism.

This relativist conclusion could in principle be avoided by building into the definition of ‘morality’ an *a priori* constraint of consistency or uniqueness, according to which all moral questions are postulated as having a uniquely determinate answer, possibly at some arbitrary level of abstraction or generality. One way to achieve this result is to give an account of the success conditions of moral claims in terms of the norms or values on which all suitably enhanced moralities would converge.<sup>21</sup> A potential consequence of adopting this convention is that for a wide range of moral claims there will be no moral truths because the relevant convergence in judgments would not be forthcoming. In that case, the social constructivist view would have to agree with standard forms of error theory in classifying at least some participants in the relevant social practices as being committed to some kind of illusion (c.f. [21]). There could still be some moral claims classifiable as determinately true in virtue of the necessary overlap between all reflectively robust moralities. Yet the fact that a significant number of moral thinkers would not know which moral claims these are implies that the epistemological status of those thinkers would be significantly impugned for a wide range of moral claims; potentially to the point of licensing a restricted form of moral skepticism (c.f. [22]). Even though the social constructivist view is consistent with such a possibility, this view does not entail that either this error theoretic view, nor its skeptical cousin, is the best way to interpret substantial differences embodied in different instantiations of moral thought and practice, either in their actual, or in some arbitrarily enhanced, form. As previously noted, the aspiration to universal convergence on moral claims, even in ideal or otherwise favorable circumstances, is an historically contingent human aspiration; and one that could be, and sometimes has been, the intelligible target of serious and intelligent contestation.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Ronald Dworkin, who writes: ‘Value judgements are true, when they are true, not in virtue of any matching but in virtue of the substantive case that can be made for them. The moral realm is a realm of argument, not brute, raw fact. Then it is not implausible... that any conflicts we find intractable show not disunity but a more fundamental unity of value that produces these conflicts as substantive results...’ (59, 11. See also [8, 35, 37]).

What, then, are the prospects on the social constructivist view for making sense of the thought that there is such a thing as speaking either *truly* or *falsely* when making moral judgments? It has recently been suggested that one way to explicate the success conditions of at least some normative claims is to describe them as having the function of presenting solutions to practical problems, among which the moral problem of how to collectively organize one's social environment is one paradigmatic example (see e.g. [25]).<sup>22</sup> This proposal is consistent with the social constructivist view. Not only is it consistent with that view to say that the most plausible way to understand talk of 'truth' or 'falsity' as predicated of moral judgments is as ostensibly picking out successfully identified solutions to practical problems (including solutions to the problem of what the practical problem is); it is also consistent with this view to say that the solutions to practical problems can vary across different contexts, including across different instantiations of moral thought and practice. This is one respect in which the social constructivist view agrees with expressivism, at least in some of its manifestations.<sup>23</sup> Yet the social constructivist view is equally consistent with the claim that there is a sense of 'true' or 'false' that is not explicable in this way, and that in at least some instantiations of moral thought and practice (e.g. in some of its philosophically, theologically, or otherwise theoretically more ambitious, instantiations) this 'non-practical' sense of 'truth' or 'falsity' is operative in a non-eliminable way. Hence, the social constructivist view does not deny that a fully comprehensive interpretation of moral thought and practice will have to include some traditional philosophical explication of 'truth' and 'falsity' along conventional lines, even if these terms are taken to apply only to certain instantiations of moral thought and practice and not others.

This potential bifurcation in how the pre-theoretical idea of what makes moral claims correct or successful might initially be thought of as theoretically undesirable, or even incoherent. Yet on the social constructivist view, the question how terms such as 'truth' or 'falsity' should be understood as applied to moral thought and practice is at least partly a substantially normative - and moral - question about the definition and application of the 'higher' order interpretational terms (which also include terms such as 'validity' and 'fact') by means of which one sets out to evaluate the definition and application of 'lower' order moral terms (such as 'good', 'right', and 'virtuous') as these are manifested in moral thought and practice. One corollary of this feature of the social constructivist view is that this view should be judged as more or less attractive partly depending on the extent to which it has the resources to interpret a wide range of what may superficially look like non-moral questions about the nature and status of moral claims (such as their 'objectivity', 'truth-aptness' or 'facticity')

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Korsgaard [24], who writes: 'According to constructivism, normative concepts are not (in the first instance...) the names of objects or facts... that we encounter in the world. They are the names of the solutions of problems, problems to which we give names to mark them out as objects for practical thought' [24, p. 322]). As I read her view, Korsgaard would reject the social constructivist view articulated in this paper, although she does in some places explicitly identify as a constructivist in a more generic sense (see e.g. [26]).

<sup>23</sup> That is, at least prior to the development of the 'quasi-realist' project, according to which it is a desideratum of an expressivist theory that the expressivist be able to say 'everything' that a robust realist can say (see e.g. [1]. See also [38]).

in terms of substantially normative - and moral -questions about the terms in which moral thought and practice is best conducted (c.f. [1], 60, 59). At the same time, to be internally consistent, the social constructivist view must retain the taxonomical resources at the higher-order interpretational level to informatively describe moralities as *socially constructed artefacts*. It is therefore not a viable option on this view to hold that *all* talk of correctness, truth, validity, facticity, reality, and so on is to be analyzed without remainder in terms of the idea of solutions to practical problems, or in some other deflationary way. The social constructivist view is not a blanket form of universal deflationary pragmatism. To this extent, the social constructivist view stops short of the general rejection of all traditional ‘bifurcation’ theses in metaethics associated with the global version of expressivism defended by Huw Price and others (see e.g. [38], c.f. [42, 43]).<sup>24</sup> The question at issue between the social constructivist view and its metaethical competitors is where the interesting points of bifurcation are; not whether they exist.

#### 4 Moralities: Actual or Possible?

Any actual morality is a possible morality. Any possible morality could have been an actual morality. It follows that there are possible moralities corresponding to all the ways that moralities could be, or could have been; regardless of whether they actually are that way, and even whether they ever came to exist. In response to these modal facts, it might be tempting to describe moral thought and practice as operating within some mind-independently given possibility space, the presence in which of different moralities, and the status in which of some moralities as potential enhancements of other moralities, obtains as a matter of necessity. If so, it might be thought that questions of moral truth or enhancement are ultimately explicable in terms of the modal truths that characterize this mind independent possibility space; and hence that the correctness, truth or validity of moral claims is ultimately explicable in terms of facts that obtain independently of the historical contingencies of any given social practice, the socially constructive activities of which are best interpreted in epistemic terms (see e.g. [2] for an epistemic reading of some constructivist claims). One possible conclusion to draw from this is that what has been presented in the previous sections as a *social constructivist* metaethics is better interpreted as the misguided presentation of *robust moral realism* in disguise (see e.g. [32]).

There are at least three considerations that argue against this interpretation of the social constructivist view. First, whereas paradigmatic forms of robust moral realism draw no fundamental distinction between actual or merely possible moralities with respect to the existence of at least basic, or fundamental, moral norms and values, the social constructivist view does. According to the social constructivist view, morality is a function of actual, historically embodied, social practices, or enhancements

<sup>24</sup> On closer inspection, even philosophers who seem to endorse a blanket form of pragmatism have interesting and substantial things to say about the distinctive ways in which the truth predicate is applied to negotiate disagreements across different forms of descriptive and normative discourse, as well as about different forms of (e.g. ‘e’ and ‘i’) representation (see e.g. [38]).

thereof. Paradigmatic forms of robust moral realism imply the possibility of moral norms and values not embodied in any existing body of moral thought or practice, or any enhancement thereof.<sup>25</sup> The social constructivist view rejects this implication of the robust realist view. To put the point in a different way, while paradigmatic forms of robust moral realism are fundamentally indifferent with respect to the historical actualization of morality interpreted as a social construction, the social constructivist view is committed to fix the domain of moral norms and values with reference to social constructions that are historically actual, or real.

Second, whereas paradigmatic forms of robust moral realism could in principle describe all the possible transformations of one set of moral norms and values into another (and thereby describe all possible forms of moral change in robust realist terms), their classification of any such transformation as one of moral enhancement is ultimately independent of the actualized content of those norms and values (including any associated higher order norms and values of sound or valid moral deliberation, discussion, or reflection) as historically embodied in moral thought and practice.<sup>26</sup> This claim to independence is inconsistent with the social constructivist view. According to the social constructivist view, the classification of any moral transformation as a moral enhancement is ultimately explicable in terms of the norms and values of some social practice that is historically actual, or real; as opposed, for example, to its achievement of correspondence with some independently specified domain of moral facts or truths.<sup>27</sup>

Third, although talk of merely possible moralities is perfectly intelligible as far as it goes, it also draws attention away from some of the most distinctive features of moral thought and practice as interpreted on the social constructivist view. Among the most central of these features is that actual moral thought and practice involves a set of creative, critical and dynamic processes the continuous development of which is open-ended and—at least in some cases—conceptually transformative (see e.g. [32]). One problem with descriptions of complete possibility spaces is that they give the misleading impression that the modal reality they purportedly describe is conceptually stable, a-temporally accessible, or a-historically fixed, thereby drawing attention away from the normative significance of historical contingency, change and development. Another such feature is that how to think about merely possible moralities (or even distant actual moralities) and potential enhancements thereof is, on the social constructivist view, itself in part a substantially moral question of how to respond, improve, expand on, and thereby socially construct morality considered as a historically actual and continually developing entity, or idea.<sup>28</sup> By analogy,

<sup>25</sup> That is, unless trivially stipulated as any enhancement corresponding to a somehow independently fixed set of moral facts or truths.

<sup>26</sup> This is a truth with qualifications even on a robust realist view, insofar as any plausible account of moral progress should obviously be sensitive to the contextual (e.g. conceptual, intellectual, psychological; technological) parameters in which moral agents necessarily operate (see e.g. [53, 55]).

<sup>27</sup> Compare Korsgaard, who writes: ‘What makes the conception correct is that it solves the problem, not that it describes some piece of external reality’ [24, p. 324].

<sup>28</sup> Of course, the practical interest of any set of merely possible moral norms or values would in most cases depend on the continued existence of some social practice that has at some point either allowed, encouraged, or required is participants to take an interest in them.

although there may be an indefinite number of possible games that constitute variants of Scrabble, the evaluation of the various moves of Scrabble players is by default hostage to the norms and values that characterize Scrabble as it actually exists, even though it is perfectly consistent to suggest both that the rules of Scrabble ought to be changed and that people would be better off inventing or playing a different game altogether. As with Scrabble, so—according to the social constructivist view—with moralities; with the important caveat that moral norms and values have historically been characterized by an ambition to regulate a much larger part of the social domain, and to do so without being asymmetrically deferential or subsidiary to most (and in some cases any) of the other normatively regulated practices within the moral domain (including, or so one might dare to hope, the rules of Scrabble). Yet even if these universalizing ambitions to embody asymmetric regulative authority across a wide range of normative domains is capable of withstanding rigorous and counterfactual scrutiny, it does not follow that the social constructivist view must thereby collapse into a conventional form of robust moral realism.<sup>29</sup>

## 5 The Limits of Social Constructivism

The social constructivist view is a form of *constructivist* metaethics. It is reasonable to expect this view to deliver some of the alleged explanatory advantages that have historically been associated with other forms of metaethical constructivism. It is therefore incumbent on anyone who seeks to defend a social constructivist view to register the extent to which at least some of these alleged explanatory advantages do *not* straightforwardly transfer to the social constructivist view.

Constructivist views in metaethics have traditionally been thought to have the following explanatory advantages. First, constructivism has been held to offer a metaphysically modest account of moral objectivity that yields at least some of the objectivist commitments of robust moral realism while avoiding the most heavily contested epistemological and metaphysical commitments implied by robust realist views. To the extent that such concerns have historically been a motivation to look for alternatives to robust moral realism, what constructivism purports to offer is a relative advantage on the assumption that the more ambitious epistemology and metaphysics implied by robust moral realism is correspondingly less parsimonious. Yet without wishing to underplay the significance of this point, considerations of epistemological and metaphysical modesty have been at most a secondary consideration in the articulation of the social constructivist view discussed in this paper. It is not the (distinctively negative) epistemological or metaphysical sparseness or modesty of the social constructivist view, as much as its (distinctively positive) claim to make sense of the idea that morality is a social construction, technology, or artifact, that constitutes its main claim to be of metaethical interest.

<sup>29</sup>This claim is subject to the qualifications noted in the discussion of Enoch's indispensability argument above. On a related point, see also Korsgaard, who writes: 'Constructivism makes moral concepts like concepts of artefacts. This doesn't make them arbitrary or relative, for there are kinds of artefacts... that all human beings in all human cultures have some version of, and that they have to have certain features given the problems that they solve' [24, p. 323].

Of course, the claim that morality is a kind of construction, technology or artefact does not settle the question about the ontology of moral claims; the latter question being a matter of how to interpret the Modal Existence Claim in the light of wider theoretical commitments. Nevertheless, the description of morality as a social construction, technology or artifact does have the additional explanatory virtue of making explicit a connection between the core commitments of the social constructivist view and analogous claims that are sometimes made about other social norms, including legal norms and systems.<sup>30</sup> What drawing an explicit connection between the social constructivist view of moral norms and analogous claims about legal norms and systems helps to bring out is a distinctive approach to questions about the ‘sources of normativity’ (in Korsgaard’s terminology) of certain areas of practical human thought as *explicably natural* on the one hand, and *normatively irreducible* on the other. This combination of explicable naturalness and normative irreducibility is provocatively captured by H. L. A. Hart in the following passage, in which the reader may imagine a challenge from a skeptic about the authority, normativity or objectivity of law; a skeptic who is asking for an account of the normative grounds of our commitment to legal norms; and to whom Hart responds:

‘We are committed to it [i.e. the normative interest of law] as something presupposed by the terms of our discussion, for our concern is with social arrangements for continued existence, not with those of a suicide club’ [17]

Although it does not entail this response, the social constructivist view is consistent with taking an analogous line when addressing a comparably radical skeptical challenge to the authority, normativity or objectivity of moral thought and practice. For just as Hart can be read as making a substantially normative claim in dismissing the imagined representatives of a suicide club, a defender of the social constructivist view could be read as making a substantially normative- and moral - claim in dismissing the imagined representatives of the same club, or any comparable skeptic or ‘nay-sayer’ about the authority, normativity or objectivity of moral claims; namely that the appropriate response to the challenge in question is to reject it as misguided.

Second, constructivist views in metaethics have been thought to provide a naturalistically respectable account of how moral claims can be true or false, insofar as the truth-conditions of these claims can be interpreted as a function of the psychophysically embodied activities of the relevantly minded human beings who instantiate moral thought and practice. This claim is consistent with the social constructivist view, with the following caveat: the social constructivist view is not committed to specify the success conditions of moral claims in reductively naturalistic terms. On the contrary, as implied by the Modal Existence claim, the social constructivist view is most plausibly understood as implying that the only way to informatively specify the success conditions of moral claims is in substantially normative or moral, and so

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Hart [17], and the Introduction by Leslie Green therein. A detailed comparison between Hart’s philosophy of law and the social constructivist view would require an explication of Hart’s legal positivism, and therefore a discussion of contested claims about the relationship between moral and legal norms that falls outside the remit of the present paper (see e.g. 59).

in *non-reductive* terms. Any explanatory advantage claimed on behalf of the social constructivist view from the perspective of a reductively naturalistic research programme is one that is at most of secondary interest in motivating this view.

Third, some forms of metaethical constructivism have been thought to offer an account of moral normativity that explains the authoritative, reason-giving, or rationally inescapable status of moral norms and values. In its most ambitious form, certain versions of constitutivist constructivism claim that agents who fail to favorably respond to moral considerations are necessarily failing on their own terms qua rational or self-constituting agents (see e.g. [24, 25]). Although this feature of metaethical constructivism is an explanatory advantage claimed by a subset of its possible versions, it is not an advantage that should be associated with the social constructivist view. Not only does the social constructivist view stop short of endorsing any kind of rational inescapability claim on the behalf of moral norms and values. On its most plausible interpretation, this view is inconsistent with standard formulations of the rational inescapability claim. This is not to imply that a social constructivist view could have nothing to say about why some moral norms and values should be thought of as authoritative, reason-giving, or rationally inescapable for some human beings in some historically specific circumstances. Yet if the social constructivist view is even minimally plausible, it is a mistake to think that the authoritative, reason-giving, or rationally inescapable status of moral norms and values is a constitutive feature of morality as such.

Fourth, and as noted above, metaethical constructivism has been thought to avoid some difficult problems about the interpretation of moral claims by being comparatively neutral with respect to the cognitive status or semantic content of the mental states they normally express. This claim to neutrality has led some commentators to deny that a constructivist metaethics is a genuine *metaethics* at all, as opposed to a highly abstract but substantially normative contribution to moral thought and practice (see e.g. [41], c.f. 60). This dispute is partly a terminological issue about the ownership of key theoretical terms. Yet even if it were more than that, it is true that the social constructivist view is consistent with a wide variety of claims about the psychology and semantics of moral claims. It follows that the social constructivist view does, indeed, have relatively little to contribute to some of the most heavily contested issues in contemporary metaethics. There is, however, one important exception to this claim. The claim that morality (in the singular) is a social construction, technology or artifact is a metaethical claim on most recognizable ways of drawing the boundaries of that philosophical sub-discipline. Moreover, this metaethical claim is located at the heart of the social constructivist view and is therefore among the key implications of both understanding it and taking it seriously.<sup>31</sup>

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