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Two Essays on Constructivism: Lessons from Semantic Theory

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TWO ESSAYS ON CONSTRUCTIVISM: LESSONS FROM SEMANTIC THEORY

BY

Kirun Kumar Sankaran

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ABSTRACT
TWO ESSAYS ON CONSTRUCTIVISM: LESSONS FROM
SEMANTIC THEORY

by

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This thesis consists of two loosely-connected essays about Street’s “Humean” metanormative constructivism. In the first chapter, I examine a lacuna in Street’s account—namely, that she owes us a semantic theory as a necessary condition for getting her metanormative theory off the ground—and argue that Brandom’s inferentialist semantic theory is the best option for filling the lacuna. I then show that Ridge’s reading of Street as a reductive realist is mistaken. In the second chapter, I examine the vulnerability of Street’s account to certain epistemic “reliability challenges,” including one she herself makes against realist theories of value. I then argue, using Davidson’s strategy, that the coherentist impulses in Street’s theory are sufficient to answer the challenges in question.

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“TODAY...WE DO OUR DUTY. AND THERE ARE FIFTY
THOUSAND FROGS DOING THEIRS, AND SOMEWHERE
OVER THAT HILL...THEIR DUTY AND OUR DUTY WILL
GET BLOODY CONTRADICTORY.”

—RICHARD SHARPE, *Sharpe's Battle*, BY BERNARD CORNWELL

Chapter 1

A Semantics for Metanormative Constructivism

1.1 Introduction

I'll argue that three of the commitments about normative judgments¹ that Sharon Street defends in “Constructivism About Reasons”² leave an argumentative burden about the semantics of normative judgments unaddressed,³ and that certain strategies for addressing that burden place the three commitments in tension. I briefly examine one purported resolution of the tension, then argue for another—that understanding normative judgments as attributions of normative warrants and obligations, irreducible to any sort of mental state, whose content is determined by the deliberative activity of the normative community of which the agent is a member, resolves the tension in question. Finally, I raise an objection against another interpretation of Street—that of Michael Ridge, who reads Street as a sort of reductive realist. That objection is that Ridge's account fails to make sense of all three of the constructivist commitments I outline in Section I, and thus lacks

¹Street uses various terms—“judgments about reasons” and “normative judgments” are the most prominent—to refer to the components of the first-person evaluative perspective to which practical normative truths are, on her view, relativized. I will use the phrases “normative judgments” and “first-person evaluative standpoint” for the sake of consistency.

²Street (2008)

³Dorsey (2012)

certain theoretical virtues had by my account.

1.2 Three Commitments of Constructivism

Street is committed to three theses about normative judgments: First, “Thoroughgoing Constructivism,” the view that the truth of every one of an agent’s normative judgments—and, thus, its status as a normatively-binding reason—is constituted by its entailment from a further set of normative judgments; second, “Agent-Relativism,” the view that the set of normative judgments that entail the normative judgment under scrutiny must be that agent’s set of normative judgments. They can’t be someone else’s judgments. Third, Street’s committed to what I’ll call “Constitutive Inferential Articulation,” the thesis that normative judgments constitutively stand in normatively-binding inferential relationships of incompatibility and entailment with each other. Here’s some textual evidence:

1.2.1 Thoroughgoing Constructivism

Street contrasts her view with what she calls “restricted” constructivism, on which the truth or correctness of a given practical normative claim—and, thus, its normative, deontic status as conferring upon an agent an obligation to act one way rather than another—is constituted by its being entailed from a certain practical standpoint that is “given some substantive characterization,”⁴ but whose elements are left as unanalyzed primitives, in that they are not themselves taken to be entailed from the practical standpoint. One paradigmatic example of such views is Rawls’s, which holds that the correctness of the two principles of justice is entailed from the standpoint of the original position, built into which is (among other things) a certain, substantive understanding of citizens of a liberal society as free and equal. That the substantive commitment to citizens’ freedom and equality plays a role in underwriting substantive judgments about the basic structure of

⁴Street (2010), 367

society is, however, left unanalyzed and not subject to normative appraisal from the standpoint of the original position.⁵

By contrast, on Street’s view, the truth of each of an agent’s practical normative judgments—and, thus, its having the status of reasonhood—is constituted by its entailment from the agent’s “practical point of view, where the practical point of view is given a formal characterization”⁶—specifically, “...the set of all of the relevant agent’s normative judgments, minus the normative judgment whose correctness is in question.”⁷ There will be no unanalyzed primitives here. For Street, whether a stance is “primitive” or a “result of construction” is relative to what’s under consideration on the reflective project in question. It’s not that Street’s account is a conceptual analysis of some set of privileged normative judgments that are taken as primitive by restricted versions of constructivism. The important innovation of Street’s project is the commitment that the primitiveness of those judgments is relative to the chunk of discourse under consideration and the further commitment to the in-principle evaluability of each of an agent’s normative judgments, and, thus, deontic statuses, from the standpoint of all the agent’s other normative judgments.

1.2.2 Agent-Relativism

There is, for Street, a question about “whose further normative judgment set the standards of correctness for which other judgments?”⁸ whose answer is that “the standards of correctness determining what reasons a person has are understood to be set by that person’s set of judgments about her reasons.”⁹ So the practical standpoint from which an agent’s reasons are determined is, on Street’s view, that agent’s. Which isn’t to say that interlocutors have no role in norma-

⁵Ibid. 368. This is obviously a vast oversimplification of Rawls’s view, and that he leaves the freedom and equality of citizens as an unanalyzed primitive is in no way a criticism of Rawls’s project. The example merely serves to distinguish Rawls’s “restricted” constructivist project from Street’s more thoroughgoing one.

⁶Ibid. 369

⁷Street (2008), 226

⁸Ibid. 224

⁹Ibid.

tive practice—morality is clearly a social achievement on which interlocutors hold agents accountable to what those agents are committed to. But it seems, at least at first blush, that the institution of normative reasons is an individual matter of ensuring coherence among an agent’s commitments.

1.2.3 Constitutive Inferential Articulation

Street takes normative judgments to be the sort of attitude that “constitutively involves other attitudes of the same kind in a way that ‘sets standards’ when combined with the non-normative facts.”¹⁰ Some salient features of the account from “Constructivism About Reasons”:

1. “If someone ‘judges’ that she has conclusive reason to Y, while simultaneously and in full awareness also ‘judging’ that she has no reason to take what she recognizes to be the necessary means to Y....She’s not doing what’s constitutively involved in taking oneself to have a reason.”¹¹ At least one component of “withstanding scrutiny,” then, involves acknowledging that one’s practical reason is bound by a certain sort of material entailment. That entailment relation—some Y entailing some X, in that accomplishing Y requires accomplishing X—is at least part of what constitutes being a component of the first-person evaluative standpoint. Acknowledging that entailment relation as binding on one’s practical reasoning is part of taking oneself to have a reason to Y.
2. Street also suggests that being bound by some sort of incompatibility is constitutive of being a component of the first-person evaluative standpoint. For example “...someone who judges that X is a reason to Y cannot also (simultaneously, in full awareness) judge that X is not a reason to Y.”¹² One cannot take oneself to have a reason to Y while taking oneself not to have a

¹⁰Ibid. 231

¹¹Ibid. 228

¹²Ibid. 229

reason to Y. Holding incompatible normative commitments is not allowed. There also seems to be a norm of justificatory appropriateness: “...someone who judges that only facts of kind X are reasons to Y, and who recognizes that Z is not a fact of kind X, cannot also (simultaneously, in full awareness) judge that Z is a reason to Y.”¹³

3. Perhaps the most interesting and important characteristic of “judgments about reasons” is that one need not have any sort of epistemic access to them, despite the fact that they help constitute one’s first-person evaluative perspective. In fact, it’s not clear that anybody need have any sort of epistemic access to them. It’s entirely possible, at least in certain cases, for everyone to be in error about whether some claim gets to count as a reason. If “...one genuinely judges oneself to have conclusive reason to Y, and it is a fact (of which one is not aware) that Z is a necessary means to Y, then by one’s own lights as someone who genuinely judges herself to have conclusive reason to Y, one has a reason to Z, even though one is not currently aware of this.”¹⁴ Street is very clearly comfortable with the ascription of *de re* (though not *de dicto*) commitments about reasons to agents who don’t know they have those reasons. As she helpfully reiterates, “...even if you don’t know that Z is a means to Y, and think you have no reason whatsoever to Z, you do have a reason to Z—according to you. Your very own normative judgment says so.”¹⁵
4. While Street doesn’t explicitly say it in (2008), I take it to follow pretty intuitively that taking oneself to have a reason to Y requires, *ceteris paribus*, (again, constitutively) that one take oneself to do whatever Y entails, again, even if one doesn’t know what Y entails. For example, it’s constitutive of having a reason to drink water (e.g. its potability, the agent’s thirst, et al.) that one has a reason to drink H₂O. I imagine an agent unaware that water

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

is H₂O—and, thus, that H₂O is drinkable—might deny the claim “I have a reason to drink H₂O,” despite her parched throat. Nevertheless, she is committed, *de re*, to the drinkability of H₂O, and, *ceteris paribus*, to her having reason to drink it according to her own evaluative standpoint. Thus the possibility of ignorance of our reasons can be cashed out in terms of the *de re/de dicto* distinction in that the set of our reasons of which we are ignorant are those to which we are committed *de re* but not *de dicto*.

According to Street, then, normative judgments—the components of the first-person evaluative standpoint—constitutively stand in certain logical relations of incompatibility and entailment with each other; and even if agents don’t know those relations hold, they’re still *de re* committed to those relations’ conferring upon the relevant claims the status of reasons. In short, I think Street is committed to an account of reasons that requires, as constitutive of taking some claim C to be a reason, that an agent situate herself within an entire network of practical obligations—commitments entailed by C—and entitlements—commitments judged materially compatible with C. Claims are at least partially, given Street’s desiderata laid out above, given their deontic status as a reason and individuated as such in terms of their inferential articulation in relation to—their being materially compatible with or entailed by—other reasons. To paraphrase Sellars, there is an important sense in which one has no practical reasons unless one has them all.¹⁶ These relations constrain agents in certain ways—what they’re committed to isn’t just a matter of what they think they’re committed to. They underwrite a certain fallibilism about agents’ reasons, allowing for things like blindness to the reasons we have, which Street rightly thinks is a feature of our practice.

¹⁶Sellars (1953), §19

1.3 A Lacuna in Street's Account

There is a further question Street must answer. In virtue of what does my practical normative judgment that I ought to pet Hastings determinately normatively bind me in the way it does? Surely my commitment to “I ought to pet Hastings”¹⁷ is determinately normatively efficacious. It commits me to doing certain things rather than others (that’s the determinacy bit), and by doing things that my commitment to “I ought to pet Hastings” precludes me from doing, I’m in a certain sort of error (that’s the normative efficacy bit). Street thinks that a normative judgment like “I ought to pet Hastings” has its status as a reason or a normative truth “in virtue of” its withstanding scrutiny from the standpoint of all my other normative commitments. The normative efficacy of “I ought to pet Hastings” is a consequence of its being compatible with the other normative judgments I’ve got (and perhaps my not petting Hastings is incompatible with those other normative judgments).

But there’s a further question to be answered about what is required for us to be able to say that my holding true “I ought to pet Hastings” commits me to exactly what it commits me to, rather than something else—we’ve still got to answer a question about determinacy. If “I ought to pet Hastings” is supposed to withstand scrutiny, if what it requires me to do is compatible with the other requirements thrust upon me by my other normative judgments, then there’s something about “I ought to pet Hastings” that explains why it is compatible with (and perhaps required by) my other normative commitments. Street owes us a story. We have to give a theory of how the *de dicto* commitments match up to the *de re* ones. I’m just going to use the terms “meaning” and “content” as a placeholder for the relevant “something”. So the task at hand is to answer the question of what determines that “I ought to pet Hastings” bears the relations it does to my other commitments. If, for example, you think there’s a thing called a “meaning” that performs the relevant governance function, you’ve got to explain

¹⁷Hastings is my dog

what determines that “I ought to pet Hastings” means what it means. In other words, we’ve got to give a semantic theory compatible with Street’s metaethics, especially because her theory holds that content is a constitutive, distinguishing¹⁸ feature of normative judgments.

One possible answer to this question is that the logical relations between normative judgments are stance-independent semantic properties. So while the truths of practical normative judgments are constituted by their withstanding scrutiny from the first-person practical standpoint, facts about scrutiny-withstandingness might be constituted by judgment-independent entities. Though there is a long, rich tradition of argument against the existence of stance-independent normative facts,¹⁹ I think that the best way to rule out this route for the constructivist is to note that such a strategy violates the Thoroughgoing Constructivism and Agent Relativism conditions. If entailment from a practical standpoint doesn’t constitute the truth of normative judgments about content, then a particularly vital component of the constructivist apparatus—one with significant normative weight in generating the commitments agents undertake by making normative judgments—seems to conflict with Street’s broadly anti-foundationalist project. She can’t very well claim that entailment from an agent’s practical point of view entails the truth of each of that agent’s normative judgments—and, thus, its status as a reason—if a significant chunk of those commitments—the ones about what entails what—are justified from outside that point of view. Only a restricted constructivist not committed to the Agent Relativism thesis could accept this. Street can’t.

Given that constructivists can’t appeal to stance-independent normative facts, it’s not clear how they can earn the right to talk about inferential relations between judgments. Dale Dorsey characterizes the problem in terms of a regress worry. The

¹⁸Street (2008), 245

¹⁹One particularly powerful exploration of the problem with taking certain normatively-binding normative statuses (in this case, logical ones) as authoritative independently of the stances of agents is Hegel’s critique of the “natural” or “traditional” account of the will, especially as articulated (briefly) in Patten (1999), 49-50 and (in a more detailed fashion) Brandom (MS), Part V, 13-36. See also Ch.1 of Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*; the “Wittgenstein’s Regress of Rules” argument from Brandom (1994), 20-26; Korsgaard (2003); and Street (2006).

thesis that what “makes a particular normative judgment n_j true is n_j ’s bearing of a favored relation to other normative judgments”²⁰ seems to commit us to the worrying semantic analysis that what makes a given normative judgment true just is the fact that it withstands scrutiny. So the truth of “I should pet Hastings” seems to be constituted by the proposition “‘I should pet Hastings’ withstands scrutiny by my other normative judgments,” whose truth is itself constituted by the further proposition “‘I should pet Hastings’ withstands scrutiny by my other normative judgments’ withstands scrutiny by my other normative judgments.”²¹ This is bad.

Dorsey thus concludes that Street’s account cannot make sense of representation or reference—the relation between a claim and whatever it is that makes it true.²² And because the constructivist account can make no sense of the representational and referential content of normative judgments in terms of their truth-conditions, it can underwrite no inferential moves like ruling one normative judgment incompatible with or entailed by another. This seems to throw the Thoroughgoing Constructivism condition into tension with Constitutive Inferential Articulation.

To take the Agent Relativism commitment seriously, an agent’s normative judgments must be the tribunal by which the truth of a judgment about an entailment relation is constituted. But embracing agent-relativism about the content of normative judgments has the unattractive consequence of not allowing us to make any sense of normativity at all. If the only thing that determines what is incompatible with a normative judgment n_j is the agent’s judgment about what’s incompatible with n_j , there is no sense in which the agent answers to a normative standard that isn’t just her own attitudes. The Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition is supposed to avoid normative anarchy by giving us a standard outside the agent herself that normatively constrains her, and to which she an-

²⁰Dorsey (2012), 99

²¹Ibid. 101-102

²²Ibid.

swers by making normative judgments. Agent Relativism seems to undermine this. As Brandom notes, “If whatever I acknowledge as correct—as fulfilling the obligation I have undertaken—is correct, then in what sense is what I did in the first place intelligible as binding myself?”²³ The inferential relations between normative judgments can’t just answer to the agent in question’s judgments, for fear of lapsing into an “equation of performance and correctness”²⁴ by eliminating any standard by which to judge an agent’s performance as incorrect. So it seems that commitment to Thoroughgoing Constructivism combined with viewing Constitutive Inferential Articulation as a normatively binding condition on agents requires rejecting Agent-relativism.

Dorsey’s solution to this problem requires the substantial philosophical baggage of rejecting what he calls a “semantic” theory of truth—the view that “a truth-bearer is true if and only if that truth-bearer’s meaning bears ‘the right relation’ to that bit of the world, or state of affairs, that would make it true”²⁵—and adopting a coherence theory of truth. While I lack the space to argue against Dorsey’s analysis, I think a certain understanding of the semantics of normative judgments will allow constructivists to avoid having to adopt particularly controversial theories of truth.

1.4 A Semantics for Metanormative Constructivism

Street’s account relies heavily on the inferential relations constitutive of normative judgments, both to distinguish itself from reductive realism and to underwrite its account of the relationship between normative judgments and normative reasons. I think that making sense of the semantic side of things will allow us to make sense of the practical side. If we can show that the inferential relations between normative

²³Brandom (2002), 219

²⁴Kripke (1982), 24

²⁵Dorsey (2012), 101

judgments are themselves entailed by the first-person practical standpoint, in a way that avoids Dorsey’s regress worry, then we can show that the entailment from the first-person practical standpoint can underwrite the determinate content of a practical normative judgment. This is because an agent’s being normatively bound by a semantic judgment (in virtue of its being entailed from her first-person normative standpoint) just is for that agent to acknowledge and be bound by the inferential relations constitutive of her practical normative judgments. Which is just what it is for the practical normative judgment to be contentful.

The fundamental move I want to make is recognizing that normative facts are social facts. What allows us to make sense of semantic truths as both determinately contentful—as normatively committing us to some course of action rather than another—and entailed from the standpoint of an agent’s other normative judgments is “Hegel’s idea...that the determinacy of the content of what you have committed yourself to...is secured by the attitudes of others, to whom one has at least implicitly granted that authority.”²⁶ The institution of conceptual content depends on a difference in perspective between an agent who undertakes a commitment and the other members of a normative community. Interpretation (in Davidson’s sense),²⁷ also institutes conceptual content. In other words, taking or treating another as a creature caught up in a normative practice, capable of taking up normative commitments and entitlements, determines what, specifically, agents are committed and entitled to in virtue of their making moves in the game of giving and asking for (practical) reasons. So the inferential articulation that is constitutive of a normative judgment—its determinate conceptual content—is “the product of a process of negotiation involving the reciprocal attitudes, and the reciprocal authority, of those who attribute the commitment and the one who acknowledges it.”²⁸

Here’s what that negotiation looks like. When I make a practical norma-

²⁶Brandom (2002), 220. See also FN20

²⁷Davidson (1973)

²⁸Brandom (2002), 221

tive judgment like “I ought to pet Hastings,” I attribute to myself a normative status—an obligation to pet Hastings—and acknowledge myself as making that self-attribution. I also invite interlocutors to take up what Brandom calls the “stance stance,”²⁹ taking or treating me as a normative being who’s responsive to reasons, and thereby attribute to me a practical commitment, as well as acknowledge themselves as attributing that commitment to me. Davidson calls this process interpretation, and it involves taking or treating another to be in roughly the same sort of normative business that we’re in by attributing to them a set of holdings-true that more or less maps onto our own holdings-true.³⁰ In doing so, we engage in what Brandom calls “deontic scorekeeping”—attributing a set of commitments to our fellows and another set to ourselves. That others are responsible for determining what I’m committed to by making an assertion or taking an action accounts for the fact that “my commitments (normative statuses) outrun those I acknowledge (normative attitudes)”³¹ such that agents are answerable to something other than their own attitudes. The key feature of this account that allows us to satisfactorily fill the lacuna in Street’s argument—what makes-true a semantic normative judgment about the inferential relations between practical normative judgments?—is that interpreters can’t just be engaged in the passive uptake of agents’ commitments. They must have some kind of authority over what the agent is committed to by asserting something or acting in a certain way. It’s the authority of the normative attitudes of interlocutors over the content of an agent’s judgments that allows us to avoid being unable to make sense of normativity at all.

Inconsistency and self-contradiction are the normative frictions that drive adjustments by agents and interlocutors in how they attribute normative commitments and entitlements to themselves and to one another. It turns out that what

²⁹Brandom (1994), 55, citing Dennett (1971)

³⁰Davidson(1973a), 323-325. The whole story is a bit more complicated than this, but the point of the exercise is to show that the interpretive exercise allows us to make sense of the institution of conceptual content. If I can show that, I think I’ll have succeeded.

³¹Brandom (1994), 627

an agent takes herself to be committed to having made a given move and what interlocutors take her to be committed to sometimes come into conflict, and where they come into conflict is where indeterminacies about content are made determinate, and the authority of interlocutors asserts itself in instituting normativity. Brandom notes that “[Making] an adjustment of one’s conceptual commitments in the light of such a collision is what is meant by negotiating between the two dimensions of authority. The process of adjusting one’s dispositions to make...judgments in response to actual conflicts arising from exercising them...drives the development of concepts.”³²

Interlocutors can assert their authority by making explicit the inconsistency between what an agent does and what, by the interlocutor’s lights, she’s committed to doing, by using a certain sort of normative-expressive vocabulary (“wrong,” “evil,” et al.) and/or by sanctioning the agent in some way. That sanction can either be purely normative—a stern talking-to, or a prohibition from taking some further action—or interpreted naturalistically—a slap across the face, for example.³³ What matters is that both parties in the negotiation—the agent and the interlocutor—can articulate their disagreement by making explicit their “deontic scorecards” for the agent, and thereby offer reasons why the particular action in question is or is not authorized, given the agent’s inferential commitments. The “negotiation” is the resolution of such conflicts via adjustment by agents and interlocutors of their understandings of the normative, deontic relationship between the particular action the agent takes and the practical commitments the participants in the negotiation *attribute* to the agent. The determinate conceptual contents of the agent’s normative statuses are instituted by the *use* of the concepts in question in making normative judgments. Participants in such a negotiation—say, moral practice—*ought* to adjust their attributions of normative commitments to agents and dispositions to take particular actions in response to the relevant frictions. Claims about the conceptual content of normative judgments are claims about

³²Brandom (2002), 225

³³See Brandom (1994), 34-36 and 42-46

how they ought to do so. The proprieties governing negotiation are determined by the practice of attributing normative statuses to the agent, which is accomplished by *applying* those normative concepts.

An illustrative example is Philip Kitcher’s account of the recognition of slavery as morally repugnant.³⁴ According to Kitcher, a major component of the initial moral acceptance of slavery was a claim about the differences between Africans and those of European descent. The general consensus was that the “slaves’ native situation in Africa was...a state of Hobbesian nature, dominated by strife, bestial practices, and utter ignorance,” and that Africans had “traits of character requiring firm discipline by wiser (and benevolent) people of European ancestry; slaves are no more appropriate bearers of freedom...than wayward children”.³⁵ Another major component was a practical commitment, underwritten by Christianity, to save the souls of the spiritually lost slaves. These combined to underwrite a broad acceptance that agents in colonial and antebellum America had reasons to participate in the institution of slavery.

What’s particularly interesting is how the change in normative stances—criptions of reasons to agents—came about. The repudiation of the institution of slavery as something agents had reason to participate in was justified in terms of “*an inconsistency between Christianity and slavery.*”³⁶ As Kitcher notes, this shift in attitudes “comes about at all only because profoundly devout men and women wrestle with problems of scriptural interpretation, eventually producing the possibility of seeing the sufferings [of slavery] as inflicted on real people.”³⁷ The change was due both to abolitionists coming to appreciate empirical facts about, for example, the cognitive capabilities of slaves and to careful analysis of what was required by the practical commitment to Christianity—something nearly everyone in antebellum America shared—in light of the empirical facts in question. Slavery’s

³⁴Kitcher (2011),§25. All references to Kitcher (2011) will be to section numbers, as the Kindle edition I used lacks page numbers.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., emphasis mine

³⁷Ibid.

incompatibility with Christianity was recognized as entailed from the standpoint of Christianity itself. The change in empirical commitment yielded a change in practical attitudes towards Africans *only in light of its being considered in relation to other ethical commitments had by agents*. In other words, abolitionists acknowledged new empirical commitments that combined with the Christianity that made up a significant proportion of their first-person normative standpoints to generate reasons to repudiate (and perhaps resist) the institution of slavery. The new moral commitments spread, both via the arguments of abolitionists and by the giant moral sanction that was the Civil War. But the important thing to note here is that the initial inroads made by the then-revolutionary claim that agents had reasons not to participate in the institution of slavery were due explicitly to making sense of the practical upshot of commitments—namely those of Christianity—already had by agents. Semantic uptake can be understood both in terms of having the right practical normative commitments—not participating in the institution of slavery *due to* one’s commitment to Christianity—and the capacity to make those commitments explicit via the use of the relevant expressive resources.

What Brandom refers to as the process of negotiation is the messy, imprecise interaction between agents and interlocutors that settles disputes about the content of agents’ commitments that we refer to as “moral practice.” What determines the truth of a *semantic* normative judgment that an action—participation in slavery—stands in some inferential relation with the further set of normative judgments that constitutes an agent’s first-person evaluative standpoint—Christianity—is the fact that the agent who makes the judgment, either explicitly, or implicitly, by acting in the relevant way, *correctly* agrees with interlocutors about that inferential relation. The inferential relations between normative judgments—their *content*—are made determinate by the process of moral practice itself.

It’s important to note that this account does not reduce the set of an agent’s reasons—facts about what the agent is committed to—to the area of agreement

between the agent and interlocutors. Such a reduction is incompatible with the thoroughgoing *fallibilism* about normative judgments that is characteristic of both Street's and Brandom's accounts—the commitment that every one of the normative judgments that make up the discursive practice of a community may well be in error. Rather, practical reasons are what agents are *actually committed to doing*—they're reifications of the standards implicit in scorekeeping practices, what commitments interlocutors ought attribute to a given agent. That's part of what it means to say, as Street does, that “[M]etaethical constructivism is not reductionist in the sense that it does not try to reduce the notion of one thing's “counting in favor” of another to non-normative terms; it denies this can be done. . . .”³⁸ The normative judgments agents and interlocutors *actually* make about their commitments are a best approximation of what they *ought* to make. When members of a community adjust the ways in which they attribute commitments and entitlements to agents due to an inconsistency, they're more closely approximating how they should be attributing commitments and entitlements.³⁹ This is not because they're responding to some sort of irreducibly normative non-natural fact—such things don't, on the constructivist account, exist—but because they're responding to normative frictions and pressures from within their normative practice.⁴⁰

I think, then, that the best way to answer the question about content I posed in the previous section is to understand normative judgments as attributions of normative statuses to agents, and to understand the determinate contents of those

³⁸Street (2008), 242

³⁹At least, this is how it's supposed to work—and how it does work when things go right. Obviously, things don't always go so right. The horrific abuses of Nazism and Communism are instances of moral practice increasingly diverging from the ways in which it ought to generate normative commitments and entitlements, rather than more closely approximating them. Moral progress is not a particularly smooth or uniform process. See Kitcher (2011), Ch.5 and especially Ch.6

⁴⁰I lack the space to argue for this here, but I think that this way of understanding “correctness” or normative truth—not as getting closer to matching some practice-transcendent standard, but as modifying the way one engages in moral practice in response to pressures generated within moral practice itself—is Hegel's way of understanding truth. I think this is broadly the point he's making in §20 of the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, in which he notes that “The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.” See also Chapter 5 of Kitcher (2011).

normative judgments—the set of normative statuses being attributed to the agent in question—as warrants and obligations undertaken by agents as the result of a social, discursive practice of making and reasoning about normative judgments. The agent’s practical normative standpoint is the set of reasons she has—what she’s committed to, in virtue of her being caught up in a practice of reciprocal recognition and interpretation. Thus, practical normative judgments are compatible with what Dorsey calls a “semantic” theory of truth.⁴¹ The normative judgment “Kirun ought to pet Hastings” is made true by my being committed to petting Hastings. The truth condition for the normative judgment “I should pet Hastings” entails that ‘I should engage in dog-petting’ and is incompatible with ‘I ought to ignore Hastings’ just is the fact that certain normative judgments stand in certain normatively-binding inferential relations—that my commitment to ‘I should pet Hastings’ normatively requires that I should engage in dog-petting and precludes my normative authorization to ignore Hastings. The grounds or truth-makers of normative judgments—what it is in virtue of which they are true—are emergent social proprieties, the deontic statuses of warrant and obligation. To say that some normative judgment is true in virtue of or as a result of its withstanding scrutiny from the first-person practical standpoint is to make a point about the purpose of the truth predicate in practical normative discourse—to denote normative bindingness of a warrant or obligation.

The picture I’ve outlined above is compatible with all three of Street’s commitments. Thoroughgoing Constructivism rules out naturalistic reduction. By specifying that the status of every normative judgment as underwriting certain warrants and obligations for an agent be evaluable from the standpoint of the rest of the agent’s normative judgments, the Thoroughgoing Constructivism condition rules out the possibility of what Sellars calls “givens”⁴²—claims or entities that normatively underwrite or justify other claims but are themselves not subject to justificatory scrutiny. By specifying his account entirely in normative terms,

⁴¹Dorsey (2012), 101

⁴²See Sellars (1953)

Brandom avoids the pitfalls (as I will argue below) of naturalistic reductions. Accepting the Thoroughgoing Constructivism condition means accepting that we cannot “build a normative cake out of non-normative ingredients,”⁴³ because such a project would undermine the fallibilism at the heart of Street’s account—the view that *none* of our normative judgments can have a privileged normative status that leaves them unsusceptible to evaluation and (perhaps) rejection.

The Agent-Relativism condition is the requirement that “the truth of ‘X is a reason to Y for agent A’ relativizes not to the speaker’s normative commitments, but rather to A’s.”⁴⁴ This may seem, at first blush, to be incompatible with the Brandom-style account I’ve laid out, given the authority it accords interlocutors over the content of agents’ practical normative judgments. But I think this incompatibility is illusory, and disappears when we attend to the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Though the semantic content of an agent’s normative judgment is secured by interlocutors, its pragmatic force—that it normatively binds the agent and sets standards by which the correctness of other normative judgments might be judged—is entirely the agent’s own doing. An agent determines which normative judgments constitute her first-person practical normative standpoint by playing them as moves in the game of giving and asking for practical normative reasons. The normative judgments she does not make cannot be part of her first-person practical normative standpoint. As such, we can intelligibly say that the standards for the correctness for some normative judgment are set by the *agent’s* further normative judgments, satisfying the Agent-Relativism condition.

The Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition secures the status of an agent’s normative judgments as genuinely normatively binding by entrusting the *semantics* of normative judgments to the agent’s cognitive community. That a given normative judgment binds an agent and helps set the standards of correctness for further normative judgments is something over which the agent has authority. But that the normative judgments that an agent has made *determi-*

⁴³Brandom (1994), 41

⁴⁴Street (2008), 224

nately bind her such that she can be in error about what, exactly, a given normative judgment commits her to requires that normative judgments have a determinate semantic content, over which the community must have authority. By grounding the semantic content of normative judgments in the norms implicit in the practice of interlocutors, we provide a standard external to the agent to which she must answer, fulfilling the purpose of the Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition.

1.5 The Allure of Reductive Naturalism

I want to argue that the above account rules out a popular way of understanding Street’s account: Ridge’s reading of Street as a sort of reductive naturalist. Reductive naturalism both rejects the Constitutive Inferential Articulation Condition and fails to meet the semantic burden for which I’ve argued above.

Street makes two moves that Ridge takes to support his reading. First, she critiques “restricted” constructivism, the view that some set of “materials of construction” are taken as primitive and not subject to further analysis from the first-person practical standpoint. Second, she defends the view that “the truth of a given normative judgment is a function of whether that judgment can withstand the scrutiny of the agent’s other normative judgments *tout court*.”⁴⁵ Ridge takes as a consequence of these two moves that Street’s project will be to give some sort of analysis of what Ridge calls “primitive normative judgments.” Ridge is particularly careful to strictly separate “primitive normative judgments” from “results of construction,” claiming that Street “argues that we can reduce reasons as they figure in normative judgments in the second sense to facts about judgments about reasons in the first sense,”⁴⁶ and thereby allow that “the natural reading of Street’s view is that [normative judgments *qua* results of construction] are beliefs about which primitive normative judgments can withstand the scrutiny of the agent’s other primitive normative judgments.”⁴⁷ If, in fact, this reduction

⁴⁵Ridge (2012), 145

⁴⁶Ibid. 146

⁴⁷Ibid.

from normative judgments *qua* “results of construction” to “primitive normative judgments” is the only reduction that Street explicitly countenances, her account still needs an analysis of those pesky “primitive normative judgments” to avoid becoming subject to her own critique of restricted constructivism.

After an exhaustive survey of things Street says about “normative judgments” in “Constructivism About Reasons,” Ridge decides that the best way to analyze “primitive normative judgments” is to see them as states of mind—specifically, as “desire-like states with a world-to-mind direction of fit.”⁴⁸ As such, Ridge concludes that Street embraces a “sophisticated subjectivism according to which a person’s reasons for action are a function of what he or she would want if a privileged subset of his or her desires (the ones which are primitive normative judgments) were in a recognizable sense more fully coherent.”⁴⁹ In essence, then, Ridge wants to characterize Street as a reductive realist who takes the reductive base to be subject to a coherence condition, rather than, say, the idealized-agent condition defended by classic, paradigmatic reductive realists like Railton⁵⁰ and Lewis.⁵¹

There are two elements of this analysis: the mentalistic reduction of “normative judgments” to “desire-like states with a world-to-mind direction of fit” and the coherence condition. The first is an explicit reduction of a normative concept—“normative judgment,” an attribution of what actions an agent is committed to or entitled to—to a mental state—a desire of some sort. This has been the general strategy of reductive realists since Hume,⁵² and it’s especially attractive because it elegantly explains why our reasons motivate us. However, I think there are several worries about reading Street this way, despite the fact that she bills herself as a “Humean” constructivist.

The first problem here is that Ridge’s account of Street’s reduction—especially

⁴⁸Ibid. 155

⁴⁹Ibid. 156

⁵⁰Railton (1986)

⁵¹Lewis (1989)

⁵²See the aforementioned Railton, Lewis, and Schroeder (2007).

the strict separation of “primitive normative judgments” from “results of construction”— isn’t really anywhere in the text. Street doesn’t ever use the phrase “primitive normative judgment” to refer to her own view. In fact, she only uses “primitive” when talking about restricted constructivist views. Rather, for Street, whether a stance is “primitive” or a “result of construction” is relative to the reflective project in question and what’s under consideration. The important innovation of Street’s project is that the “materials of construction” by which a claim’s status as a reason is judged consists of “...the set of *all* of the relevant agent’s normative judgments, minus the normative judgment whose correctness is in question.”⁵³ Street isn’t after an analysis of some set of privileged normative judgments that are taken as primitive by restricted versions of constructivism. Rather, the primitiveness of those judgments is relative to the chunk of discourse under consideration, and can in turn be scrutinized from the standpoint of all the agent’s *other* normative judgments. Street’s account is, at heart, coherentist and not reductive. It seems out of keeping with the spirit of the project to cast it as a reductive analysis of the primitives of restricted constructivist accounts and then criticize it on the grounds that it isn’t a very good reductive analysis of those primitives.

The second problem with Ridge’s attribution of a reductive move to Street is that, as Street notes, normative judgments do things that mere desires don’t. I’ll admit to finding Ridge’s move from normative judgments to mental states—he never seriously considers any alternative—to be a bit undermotivated. It certainly doesn’t accord with Street’s conception of her project—she explicitly claims that “[T]he idea of one thing’s being a reason for another cannot successfully be reduced to thoroughly non-normative terms,”⁵⁴ and that “metaethical constructivism is *not* reductionist in the sense that it does not try to reduce the notion of one thing’s ‘counting in favor’ of another to non-normative terms; it denies that this can be done.”⁵⁵ She takes this to be a point about the phenomenology of

⁵³Street (2008), 226

⁵⁴Ibid. 239

⁵⁵Ibid. 242

practical reason—” ...our knowledge of *what it is like* to have a certain unreflective experience...of various things in the world as ‘counting in favor of’ or ‘calling for’ or ‘demanding’ certain responses on our part.”⁵⁶ Ridge thinks that “[primitive] normative judgments” just are desire-like pro-attitudes, and what it’s like to have these pro-attitudes just is what it’s like to have the unreflective experience of something calling for some kind of response. Street, however, does not think her reduction of normative status to normative stance entails a further reduction of normative stance to non-normative mental state. Indeed, she denies that such a thing is possible, let alone advisable or a straightforward consequence of her view. I think, rather, that she recognizes that an account of practical, normative reasons requires something more than phenomenally-characterized normative experiences. As I’ll argue below, to be the sorts of things that can constitute the first-person practical standpoint, judgments must be caught up in a certain kind of justificatory structure. That justificatory structure, as I argued in the above section, falls out of a certain sort of practice. It’s not enough to have the experience of some phenomenon P calling for some response R. To count as reasoners, agents must be able to make explicit why P calls for R and not some R’. Reporting that one has had one of those phenomenally-characterized unreflective experiences of P calling for R is not enough. Street explicitly notes that understanding what normative judgments are requires *both* understanding the phenomenal character of the relevant sort of experience *and* “...our recognition of what is constitutively involved in the attitude of judging something to be a reason—the kind of purely formal observations sketched in Section 7.”⁵⁷ That bit after the “and” is what I’ve called the Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition. Moreover, Street identifies a substantive philosophical problem with such reductive-naturalistic views—that “focusing on desires leaves it obscure exactly how standards of correctness in the normative domain are generated.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid. 240

⁵⁷Ibid. 242

⁵⁸Ibid. 245

Street distinguishes between “normative judgments” and “desires” by appealing to the Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition. Soccer fandom provides a useful example. I am a die-hard fan of the United States men’s national team. By asserting this, I’m asserting that I am the subject of a certain set of normative statuses—that I have certain *permissions* or *entitlements* and certain *commitments* or *obligations*. One of those obligations is to wish upon the archrival Mexican national team mediocrity, ignominy and failure every time they set foot on the pitch, regardless of whether or not they’re playing the United States. This obligation just is constitutive of being a die-hard US soccer fan. My attributing to myself a desire that the United States score a goal or win a match carries with it none of that normative weight. Desire-attributions—even attributions of a special, constrained set of idealized desires—fail to do all the same things reason-attributions do. To adopt this sort of reductive view⁵⁹ of normative statuses such as reasons is to turn a blind eye to the surrounding normative contexts essential to the proper functioning of those statuses⁶⁰—their being determinately, normatively binding on the agent. If I desire that the United States win, while also desiring that Mexico win (assuming they’re not playing each other, so such a thing is possible), I’m not failing to do something constitutive of having a desire. I am, however, failing to do something constitutive of being a US soccer fan—I’m failing to respect the obligations and entitlements conferred upon me by that normative status. As I argued in the previous section, that normative status confers upon me the obligations and entitlements they do in virtue of their being caught up in a certain sort of deliberative practice. This is a way of cashing out the “obscurity” of normativity that Street sees in desire-theoretic accounts. Because nothing constitutive of desires can underwrite a coherence condition—desires lack the constitutive inferential articulation of normative judgments—Ridge’s reading of Street can be read as a rejection of the Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition outlined above. It may well be that ultimately, we ought to reject that condition, but if we do so,

⁵⁹For more on this point, see Sellars (1963) and Kraut (2010).

⁶⁰Sellars (1963), 634

we're not getting any sort of handle on what Street's up to, given what she argues in "Constructivism About Reasons." We're just straightforwardly objecting to her view.

The second element of Ridge's reading of Street, the coherence condition, provides a standard of correctness other than what the agent *thinks* she's committed to, but it leaves the lacuna in Street's argument untouched. Ridge says nothing about the standard by which judgments of coherence or incoherence are true. Reductive realists, in principle, have access to a wide array of semantic theories to underwrite the determinate contentfulness of desires. Street, however, by adopting the Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition, limits herself to a semantic theory that uses something constitutive of normative judgments to underwrite contentfulness, and, thus, the possibility of coherence. As I argued above, what underwrites the constitutive inferential articulation of normative judgments is embeddedness in a social practice in which interlocutors are responsible for administering the semantic content of normative judgments, which rules out reading Street's account as reductive naturalism.

Chapter 2

The Reliability Challenge for Nonreductive Constructivist Theories of Value

2.1 Introduction

There is a family of arguments in the literature that question the ability of certain “realist” or “Platonist” conceptions of various discursive domains to explain our reliability in forming accurate beliefs about those domains. Members of this family include the Benacerraf-Field problem for mathematical Platonism¹; Street’s “Darwinian Dilemma” for metaethical realism²; and what Joshua Schechter calls the “reliability challenge” for logic.³ Recently, such reliability challenges have been levied against two ostensibly anti-realist, or at least non-realist, views about normativity. Sharon Street⁴ has argued that quasi-realist views—paradigmatically Blackburn’s⁵ and Gibbard’s⁶—find themselves caught upon the Darwinian Dilemma’s horns. But in what can only be described as tragically

¹Benacerraf (1973) and Field (1989) are the loci classici here

²Street (2006)

³Schechter (2010)

⁴Street (2011)

⁵Blackburn (1984)

⁶Gibbard (1990) and (2003)

ironic fratricide, Jamie Dreier⁷ has claimed that on a plausible interpretation, Street’s own view is subject to the Darwinian Dilemma. I’ll argue that Street can meet reliability challenges, despite appearances to the contrary. I think that the details of how her view can meet such challenges can shed light on how to think about solutions to reliability challenges more generally. An organizational note: In section I, I’ll lay out a couple of formulations of the problem and argue that Street’s own view is subject to it. In section II, I’ll lay out the first bit of a solution. Section III responds to an objection.

2.2 The Darwinian Dilemma, Reliability Challenges, and the Search for Normative Frictions

All reliability challenges take broadly the following form (and here I shamelessly crib from Joshua Schechter): Certain propositions are “logical propositions”—logical truths and logical falsehoods such as “every walrus is a walrus” and “there is some walrus that is not a walrus,” respectively. Says Schechter: “The logical propositions we believe (upon reflection and discussion) are by-and-large true and the logical propositions we disbelieve (upon reflection and discussion) are by-and-large false. The reliability challenge for logic is the challenge of explaining this fact.”⁸ Similarly for morality: we think that by and large we get things right, and leaving aside the objection that we might be giving ourselves far too much credit, we probably ought to explain this fact.

The reliability challenge for our beliefs about medium-sized, slow-moving objects in the world has pretty well been met—we have a pretty good account of what the mechanism is for forming those beliefs—perception, broadly speaking—and how it works. We haven’t, however, got an analogue of perception for the

⁷Dreier (personal communication)

⁸Schechter (2010), 437

moral, modal, logical or mathematical domains. What is it about these domains that engenders reliability challenges? The original formulations of the Benacerraf-Field problem claim that it's the abstractness of mathematical entities that explains why we have such a hard time explaining the reliability of our mathematical beliefs. Schechter disagrees. According to him, “[t]he root of the trouble is not the ontology but the apparent objectivity of mathematics and morality.”⁹ And the crux of objectivity, for Schechter, is the following:

”*Independence*: The truth of logical truths and the falsity of logical falsehoods do not depend on us. In particular, they do not depend on our thoughts, language, or social practices.”¹⁰

In other words, our social practices, stances, evaluative attitudes et al. play no part in the explanation of why the logical truths are true, and why the logical falsehoods are false. Moral realism, as I will understand it here, embraces a similar claim about moral truths and falsehoods—according to meta-ethicists like Enoch¹¹ and Shafer-Landau,¹² our practices play no role in determining which sentences in the ethical domain are true, and which are false. Ethical truth does not supervene on ethical practice. This *stance-independence*—Shafer-Landau’s term—is, for Schechter, the key factor in raising what he calls the “operational” and “etiological” questions about reliability:

Operational: ”How does our cognitive mechanism for deductive inference work such that it is reliable?”¹³

and

Etiological: “How is it that we have a cognitive mechanism for deductive inference that is reliable?”¹⁴

⁹*Ibid.* 4

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Enoch (2011)

¹²Shafer-Landau (2003)

¹³Schechter (2010), 12

¹⁴Schechter (2010), 13

For logic, at least, the answer to the operational question is relatively straightforward: “the deductive rules we employ are necessarily truth-preserving,”¹⁵ and as such the cognitive mechanism that employs them reliably generates accurate beliefs about logical propositions. Schechter claims that the etiological question is the interesting one. On his view, the stance-independence of logical truth raises the question of how we came to have a reliable mechanism for generating logical truths. Street agrees. The Darwinian Dilemma can be read as a formulation of the etiological question applied to moral realism. The realist owes us an explanation of how our evaluative attitudes—buffeted by the forces of natural selection as they have been—have come to (more or less) accurately track those pesky stance-independent moral truths. In other words, reliability challenges are the search for normative frictions—a constraint on our activity in the relevant domain that bears directly on our ability to get things right. In the case of perception, the relevant normative friction is something like the causal relationship between the way things actually are and our beliefs about the way things actually are—insert your favorite story about light bouncing off objects in the world and hitting our retinas thereby triggering certain cognitive processes here. That causal relationship features in the explanation of why we’ve come to be pretty good perceivers. Those for whom cliffs didn’t trigger the relevant cognitive processes fell off those cliffs and didn’t reproduce. *That the causal process works the way it does* factors into an etiological, evolutionary story of our perceptual accuracy.

The Dilemma, according to Street, is that any normative friction the realist can provide runs afoul of scientific respectability. And should the realist decline to specify a normative friction, he faces the claim that the accuracy of our moral-belief-forming apparatus is just sheer dumb luck—what Dreier calls “The Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence”¹⁶—which seems a pretty significant bullet for any metaethical theory to bite.

Street’s own answer to her formulation of the reliability challenge—the Dar-

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Dreier (2012), 270

winian Dilemma—is to reject *Independence* (from above). The thought goes that if we embrace stance-dependence by taking “...evaluative facts or truths to be a function of our evaluative attitudes...”¹⁷ we can embrace our best scientific accounts of the causal pressures to our evaluative attitudes without worrying about how those causal pressures affect the relationship between our attitudes and the evaluative truths—if the latter are a function of the former, as Street holds, there’s no worry about how evolution affects the ability of the attitudes to “track” the truths. Schechter holds that the “two questions [of the reliability challenge] ought not be identified with the question of how the relevant cognitive mechanism works and the question of how we came to have it. Explaining how a mechanism works or how we came to have it is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain its reliability....”¹⁸ I take it that rejecting *Independence* undermines the distinction Schechter wants to draw between operational and etiological accounts about our cognitive mechanism for generating normative commitments and the parallel stories for the reliability of those mechanisms. If the normative truths are a function of the normative attitudes, then the operational and etiological questions about why the mechanism for generating normative attitudes is reliable just reduce, respectively, to the questions of how the mechanism in question works, and how it came to work that way. Moreover, to my mind, the embrace of stance-dependence brings the operational question back into detailed consideration—the etiological question is straightforwardly answered by the relevant evolutionary- or evolutionary-psychological facts, but the operational question requires a detailed investigation of the conceptual architecture of our normative stances. There is no further “tracking” relationship or friction between normative attitude and normative truth to explain. So “anti-realism” about normativity, as Street calls it, can easily answer the reliability challenge. Instead of having to answer difficult questions about the tracking relationship, the anti-realist need only answer relatively straightforward questions about the conceptual architecture and development of

¹⁷Street (2006), 152

¹⁸Schechter (2010), 13

our normative stances.

Not so fast. Independence of the sort outlined above turns out not to be necessary for victimization by a reliability challenge. While Street very explicitly rejects the *Independence* claim from above, I think the reliability challenge crops up for the weaker notion of independence that Street *does* endorse.¹⁹ That weaker variety is a consequence of the fact that on her view, normative attitudes bear a specifically *normative* relation to normative truths. If normative truths are identified with, or reduced to, or constituted by normative attitudes, the reliability challenge goes away, but at the cost of being unable to make sense of evaluative error. If Street embraced a certain sort of reductive stance-dependence, she would easily avoid the dilemma—the normative truths just are constituted by the normative stances, and we reliably form beliefs about them by taking up the relevant stances. But Street explicitly rejects such a view: “[T]he idea of one thing’s being a reason for another cannot be successfully reduced to thoroughly non-normative terms.”²⁰ A particularly important feature of Street’s anti-realism is the fact that it “leaves room for the possibility of evaluative error.”²¹ Indeed, that feature is (as I argued in the previous chapter) what distinguishes Street’s account from certain sorts of reductive views.

Street articulates her non-reductive normative stance-dependence in terms of the difference between normative stances and mere desires. What that distinction amounts to is a question of what the “function” from normative attitudes to normative truths looks like. Street accomplishes the task of making space for the possibility of normative error by defending what in the previous chapter I called the “Constitutive Inferential Articulation” condition. That is, the normative attitudes on which the normative truths depend constitutively stand in relations of incompatibility and logical consequence with one another—and, importantly, these inferential relations hold even when agents don’t realize that they hold.²²

¹⁹My thanks again to Jamie Dreier for bringing this problem to my attention.

²⁰Street (2008), 239

²¹Street (2006), 153

²²Street (2008), 228-9. I discuss this in depth in chapter 1, section 2.

Street is extremely explicit about the fact that on her view, the normative stances an agent takes up have constitutive inferential features that are both normatively binding upon that agent and not up to her to specify. “Constructivism About Reasons” very clearly specifies that agents can have *de re* commitments of which they are unaware.²³ As I argued in the previous chapter, the normative judgments agents *actually* make are a best approximation of the ones they *ought* to make. It’s perfectly compatible with the constructivist account that agents can be blind to what the commitments they espouse require, permit or prohibit of them. Even agents who are particularly reflective and responsive to reasons will fail to appreciate *all* of the inferential space surrounding their acknowledged commitments. So Street still has to explain the friction between normative stance and normative truth that explains, in light of the effects of natural selection and other causal forces on those normative stances, our (relative) reliability in holding-true those normative truths. In Dreier’s succinct phrasing: “the way that the evaluative properties are dependent on a stance is not a causal or constitutive way but a normative way. But normative dependence doesn’t explain our general accuracy in forming evaluative beliefs. Causal or constitutive dependence does, but normative dependence doesn’t.”²⁴ That Street embraces a thoroughgoing sort of stance-dependence is insufficient to ward off the reliability challenge because the stance-dependence is normative, rather than constitutive.

Because Street’s picture is so thoroughly fallibilistic, the reliability challenge arises again—even if the normative truth is dependent upon, or is a function of, agents’ normative attitudes, the very space for evaluative error that is a desideratum for any anti-realist theory entails that normative truth will be reciprocally *independent* of normative attitudes, in the sense that what we think we’re committed to—what we *think* the normative truths are—comes apart from what we’re *actually* committed to—what the normative truths *actually* are. So the reliability challenge arises anew—how are we to explain the general reliability of our

²³I take Section VII of Street (2008) to be an argument for this point.

²⁴Jamie Dreier, personal communication

cognitive mechanism for generating practical-normative commitments?

2.3 The Coherentist Gambit

I think the answer lies in certain structural features of Street’s metaphysics of normativity. We can explain the general reliability of our cognitive mechanism for generating practical-normative commitments by understanding that the mechanism is embedded within a *reliably progressive* social-discursive practice. And what allows us to understand the practice as *reliably progressive* is the fact that it exhibits a normative pressure towards the *resolution* of disagreement. Distinctly *moral* vocabulary—and other sorts of practical-normative vocabulary, but for the time being I’ll concentrate on the moral variety—is a species of vocabulary that expresses norms governing discursive reasoning, and allows agents to get a certain sort of normative grip on their commitments and respond to disagreement, inconsistencies and self-contradictions. The Constitutive Inferential Articulation condition is thus a way of making explicit that normative pressure implicit in the practice—if there were no such normative pressure, we wouldn’t be recognizable as engaging in practical-normative discourse at all.

On Street’s view, “...the fact that X is a reason to Y for agent A is constituted by the fact that the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A’s other judgments about reasons.”²⁵ In other words, A’s other normative judgments *entitle* (and perhaps *commit*) A to a practical sort of inference from X to Y. For Street, to call something a reason is to note its role, given its survival of the relevant sort of scrutiny, as an *inference license*, “expressing our commitment to the goodness of counterfactually robust inferences from necessitating to necessitated conditions.”²⁶ By calling something a *reason* (or, following Blackburn, making a normative dependence or supervenience claim), I’m endorsing the (practical) inference from X to Y for A—that X normatively

²⁵Street (2008), 223

²⁶Brandom (2008), 98, following Sellars (1949) and Ryle (1950)

commits (or entitles) A to Y.

What happens when agent A and some interlocutor I *disagree* about whether the inference from X to Y is licensed? Given the relatively basic assumptions that A is a competent sort of reasoner and I is a competent sort of interlocutor, disagreement between A and I creates a certain sort of normative pressure on A (and, to the extent that it's in question whether the inference license obtains from I's own normative attitudes, on I as well) to resolve the disagreement. This sort of disagreement is, by default, normatively laden, as a constitutive feature of what it is to make a normative judgment in the first place. While I lack the space to argue for it here, I think the distinguishing, common feature of all discourse in which disagreement is by *default* normatively laden is truth-aptness.

According to Price (2003), the truth predicate serves as a norm of discourse, beyond those of sincerity and warranted assertibility, that motivates the resolution of disagreement. It “functions to create the conceptual space for the idea of further improvement”²⁷ of the commitments of both individuals and communities by ensuring that “disagreement automatically becomes normatively loaded.”²⁸ The truth predicate is the piece of vocabulary that allows us as discursive beings to say that my asserting that p while you assert that not-p is a *problem* that needs to be resolved. It's the expressive device that helps us get the normative hold on our commitments that allows us to adjust them in response to inconsistency and self-contradiction. Without the norm expressed by the truth predicate, “...differences of opinion would simply slide past one another [and] seem as inconsequential as differences of preference.”²⁹ That we have the norm in question, however, allows for the possibility of the scrutiny that is vital to Street's metaethical project. Claims about practical reasons are truth-apt, and they're subject to the norm in question. On Street's view, disagreements about whether X is a reason for A to Y are disagreements about whether or not A's other normative judgments license

²⁷Price (2003), 180

²⁸*Ibid.* 181

²⁹*Ibid.*

the inference from X to Y. What is at issue is whether A has licensed herself to an inference to which she is not entitled, and which is incompatible with her other commitments. It just is a feature of our normative practice that disagreement between two competent moralizers about which practical inferences are licensed by the commitments of one of them is sufficient to underwrite the claim that *something, somewhere has gone wrong*, and “...undercut any entitlement one might otherwise have had to either of the incompatible commitments, for each commitment counts as a decisive reason against entitlement to the other, incompatible one.”³⁰ The truth-norm, in Price’s pithy phrase, “...provides an immediate incentive for argument. . . . a preferential pressure toward resolution of the disagreement in question.”³¹ That normative pressure arises *irrespective of the source of the disagreement*. In other words, “what matters is that disagreement itself be treated as grounds for disapproval.”³²

The upshot here is that the use of the pragmatic role of the truth-predicate is to express—make explicit—a norm implicit in our assertoric practice—namely that disagreements between interlocutors are sufficient to create the relevant sort of normative pressure towards *resolution* of the disagreement. *Truth-aptness* undermines the claim that our practical-normative discourse is subjectivist—claiming that moral discourse is truth-apt makes explicit the feature of our discourse by which interlocutors get normative hold on each others’ commitments. The structure of the metaphysics of normativity I’m pushing here is quite self-consciously Hegelian: as Pinkard notes, “[w]hat propels the dialectic is the emergence of new contradictions in the explanation that avoided the old ones, and the dialectic continues until no more contradictions emerge.”³³ The attribution of the property of truth-aptness to practical-normative claims is a way of making explicit a feature of the pragmatics of those claims—namely, the fact that contradiction propels the dialectic in the way it does.

³⁰Brandom (2008), 120

³¹Price (2003), 181

³²Price (2003), 179

³³Pinkard (1988), 19

2.4 Davidson and the Purported Inadequacy of the Coherentist Gambit

There is an objection ready to hand (it might be present at hand too). Coherence is not obviously sufficient for accuracy. Street herself claims that her view admits in principle of an ideally-coherent Caligula³⁴—an agent who is both perfectly internally consistent, and who gleefully endorses the moral permissibility of torturing babies for personal amusement and blasting Nickelback in public and all sorts of other abhorrent conclusions. My dialectical opponent may think this entitles him to begin gleefully powering up the laser in a manner altogether too reminiscent of Auric Goldfinger (“No, Dr. Street, I expect you to DIE”)—mere coherence that admits of ideally-coherent Caligulas is hardly a convincing answer to the reliability challenge. The objection that coherence is insufficient to explain reliability amounts to the claim that there could plausibly be an alternative moral practice that a) exhibits normative pressure towards coherence and b) is nevertheless sufficiently different from our own that there is a question to be asked about which practice more reliably generates correct ethical commitments. Answering this question seems to strand Street on the horns of a dilemma. On the first horn, she can answer the reliability challenge by giving reasons to think our moral practice is better than the posited alternative, and thereby admit to the plausibility of a perspective from which to answer the *further* question about how to pick between multiple coherent or at least pressured-towards-coherence practices. This undermines the position, which Street defends, that coherence is the *only* evaluative criterion for (practical) normative commitments. The second horn would be to bite the bullet and admit to the in-principle, if not particularly realistic, possibility of ideally-coherent Caligulas. That sort of capitulation emphatically doesn’t address the reliability challenge, and seems to admit of a relatively radical sort of moral relativism that many interlocutors find uncomfortable.

³⁴Street (2012), 12-13

I'll attempt here to show—shamelessly adopting Davidson's strategy—that such conceptual relativism is relatively banal: if the purported alternative coherent moral practice is recognizable at all as a moral practice, to the extent that we can make evaluative judgments about it, the reliability challenge just reduces to a set of first-order moral questions about why we have some commitments rather than others. Insofar as two practices are recognizable as moral-discursive, picking between them requires answering no question over and above the set of first-order normative questions about whether to adopt the commitments generated by the first practice or the second. That first-order normative question or set thereof can be answered the same way we answer any other such question—by giving reasons. The goal here is to show that the only standpoint for critique is immanent—from within the practice itself—and thus, that reliability is *unintelligible* as a requirement for our practice of generating practical normative commitments *apart from* the normative pressure towards coherence.

Let's impale ourselves on the first horn of the dilemma the reliability challenger lays out against Street. What sorts of epistemic conditions must be met for us to give the sort of reasons the reliability challenge demands of us? What do we have to know in order to evaluate the other moral practice in comparison to our own? I think that "alternative moral practices," as I'm calling them, are best thought of as analogous to alternative "conceptual schemes." As I understand the philosophical topography, the point of appealing to a conceptual scheme is to allow yourself to talk about some kind of incommensurability of practices. If you're seriously going to claim that some feature or criterion *besides* the normative pressure towards coherence that's immanent to our own moral practice is required to answer the reliability challenge, and thereby preserve the legitimacy of our practices, you're (probably) at least implicitly appealing to something like the possibility of an alternate conceptual scheme. Davidson thinks that even talking about a conceptual scheme seems to involve admitting the in-principle possibility

of others.³⁵ I'm not sure we need to go that far, but the interesting point is about why we ought to read alternative moral practices as conceptual schemes and what effect this has on answering the reliability challenge.

Concepts have an inferential nature. You acknowledge this even if you're not willing to join me in wacko-inferentialist-land. One of the things concepts do is license inferences—moves from some commitments to other commitments. Even if you disagree with the inferentialist about things like the order of expansion or the “sources” or “foundations” of conceptual normativity, you agree that deploying the concept of “dog” in the predicate “x is a dog” licenses the deployment of the predicate “x is a mammal” and precludes deployment of the predicate “x is a cat”. Here's a key claim that I also think is relatively uncontroversial: Moral practice functions as a generator of inference licenses as well. One fundamental feature of our moralizing is to discover and/or create a set of licenses for practical inferences. That our moralizing practice has a normative upshot is a result of the fact that we distinguish between permitted and prohibited practical inferences. If we're to recognize an alternative practice as being about morality or practical normativity at all, we have to understand it as being in the business of licensing some practical inferences rather than others. It seems relatively straightforward that having recognized agents as being in the practical normative business—having taken the intentional stance towards them³⁶—we can by observation of the agents in question generate a data set—a set of holdings-true by agents indexed to times and circumstances. This is sufficient, at least on Davidson's conception of the problem, to proceed in figuring out what the practical normative commitments of our alternative practice are.³⁷ We can begin to radically interpret the practice in question. That is, we can formulate a theory that allows us to generate Tarski-style T-sentences (sentences of the form *P* is true *if and only if* *Q*, where *P* and *Q* are propositions or sentences) that somehow illuminate the relationship between

³⁵Davidson (1974a), 6

³⁶Dennett (1971)

³⁷Davidson (1974b)

the alternative practice and our own.³⁸

Such data had better be sufficient, because we can't help ourselves to more information to assist us in building our theory. We can't rely on an inventory of the speaker's beliefs and other propositional attitudes, because access to such information presupposes an ability to interpret the speaker's utterances—which is just what we're trying to generate.³⁹ Davidson also dismisses the idea of making sense of the meanings of a speaker's words independent of any knowledge about that speaker's beliefs. I think for our present purposes this is the right move. If we knew exactly what all the words and sentences used in the alternative practice meant, we would be in no need of a radical interpretation at all—we would be able to use that information, in combination with our observed holdings-true, to generate an accurate picture of what commitments they had *in our own language*. As Davidson says, "...we cannot assume in advance the correct translation can be recognized without pre-empting the point of radical interpretation."⁴⁰ In other words, we'd already have an interpretive theory. There are other reasons to think that belief and meaning can't easily be separated—pick your favorite critique of Kant's "two-phase story, according to which one sort of activity institutes conceptual norms, and then another sort of activity applies those concepts."⁴¹ Any variety of the Hegelian argument that the practice of making determinate judgments "involves settling at once both what we mean and what we believe,"⁴² such as the one I gestured to in the previous chapter, will do. But for the time being, using time-, agent- and circumstance-indexed holding-true as the data is useful, because "it is a single attitude applicable to all sentences. . . [that] an interpreter may plausibly be taken to be able to identify before he can interpret."⁴³

Leaving aside for the time being the details of how radical interpretation works, we could, given an adequate interpretive theory, evaluate the inferences they li-

³⁸*Ibid.* 318

³⁹*Ibid.* 312

⁴⁰Davidson (1973), 134

⁴¹Brandom (1999), 166

⁴²*Ibid.* 167

⁴³Davidson (1973), 135

cense as either good or bad—but those evaluations would be *from the perspective of our moral practice*. The reasons we might give for accepting or rejecting the practical inference licenses the target practitioners endorse would be the sorts of reasons we might give for accepting or rejecting any other practical normative claim—the sort of reasons the reliability challenger *ex hypothesi* takes to be inadequate for answering his challenge. In other words, the interpretability of the alternative practice precludes the possibility of a *transcendent* perspective from which to evaluate two competing moral practices.

The case for this conclusion only gets stronger when we consider the details of how radical interpretation is supposed to work. In general, holdings-true are taken as *pro tanto* evidence for the truth of certain T-sentences. But if we're supposed to generate explanatorily satisfactory T-sentences from a set of time- and context-indexed holdings-true by agents, we're going to have to pack a few other constraints into the mix. These constraints are required because “explanatorily satisfactory” is a more demanding requirement than the mere truth of the T-sentences. What we really want is some more robust relation than the biconditional that characterizes normal T-sentences. For all the T-sentences adequate for the purposes of interpretation, we want to be able to say that the left side of the biconditional (in the object language) is true *because* the conditions expressed by the right side of the biconditional obtain. And because theory is underdetermined by data—in this case, each holding-true is compatible with a range of explanatorily-satisfactory T-sentences—we ought as a methodological point to embrace a certain sort of holism—“that the totality of T-sentences should...optimally fit evidence about sentences held true by native speakers.”⁴⁴ Davidson also thinks that the formal constraint of first-order quantificational logic with identity is more-or-less inescapable, given “the demand that the theory be finitely axiomatized, and that it satisfy Convention T”.⁴⁵ Brandom argues that the formal constraints in question just are a formalization of a vocabulary that “...gives one the capacity

⁴⁴*Ibid.* 139

⁴⁵Davidson (1974b), 318

to talk about the inferential articulation of any other vocabulary—about what follows from what—which is an essential part of what makes that other vocabulary express the semantic content that it does.”⁴⁶ In other words, the conditional just is the formalization of an accepted inference rule—namely, that some assertion is a consequence of another assertion, and so being committed to the latter normatively requires agents to be committed to the former. So to “fit the object language as a whole to the procrustean bed of quantification theory”⁴⁷ is just to assume that the alternative moral practice roughly obeys the same inference rules that we have codified in first-order quantificational logic.

The overall point Davidson makes is that the only way to generate the belief-meaning complex from the evidence base is to assign “truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right.”⁴⁸ Davidson’s methodological upshot is that we ought to “interpret in a way that optimizes agreement” because “if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.”⁴⁹ Massive agreement is the required background for any sort of meaningful *disagreement*, because mapping the target practitioners’ beliefs onto our own is the only way to even *begin* the project of radical interpretation. And the meaningful comparison of ours with some alternate practices requires radical interpretation—we’ve got to understand what these other fellows are committed to before we can answer the question about whose practice is better.

But the very possibility of that radical interpretation—our ability to understand the other fellows as engaged in a plausibly practical-normative endeavor, involving the endorsement of some practical inferences rather than others—and, thus, the very possibility of our evaluating that practice, and making sense of our

⁴⁶Brandom (2008), 53

⁴⁷Davidson (1974b), 319

⁴⁸Davidson (1973), 137

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

disagreements with it, requires that our practices and the other fellows' not be so vastly different after all. And even if you're not willing to go that far down the Davidsonian methodological rabbit hole, having interpreted the other practice, and having a pretty good idea what those other fellows are committed to, what sorts of reasons might you give in response to the question of why our mechanism for generating practical normative commitments generates better practical normative commitments than the other fellows'? That there is an alternative normative practice is clearly not enough to force upon us a perspective outside *both* practices to be compared—there is nothing to suggest that the patterns of practical normative reasoning demanded by the specter of the reliability challenge be substantially different in kind than the ones used for quotidian moral reasoning. Our very ability to understand the purportedly alternative practice *as* a mechanism for generating practical normative commitments precludes the need for such a perspective. The challenge of picking between our commitment-generating normative practice and the alternate one is easily answered by the *very same* method of moral reasoning as any other challenge of picking between commitments. Insisting by stipulation that there *has* to be some other perspective from which to answer the challenge strikes me as question-begging against the constructivist.

Upshot of the Davidsonian argument: That the only standpoint for critique is immanent; that the only standpoint from which to mount a reliability challenge to the practice of morality is within the practice of morality itself; and so the reliability challenge amounts to nothing more than a set of first-order normative ethical questions ranging over an indeterminately large set of moral claims. Suppose our practice generates a set of commitments C and the other fellows' generates a set of commitments . The reasons one might give for picking one set of commitments over the other just are—insofar as both sets are recognizable as moral commitments—first-order moral reasons. But the range of such disagreement is limited. At some point, if Davidson's right, there's just no way to say that the purported alternative practice is a moral one at all. There just is no

way to abandon *every* one of our commitments and thereby reason about moral practices from the “view from nowhere.” To think that such a thing is possible is to simply fail to recognize that certain commitments just feature in our reasoning and *can’t* be abandoned just for the sake of attempting to find some sort of philosophical foundations of certainty—Peirce notes that “[t]hese prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt”.⁵⁰ Rather, to abandon any given commitment or “prejudice” requires justification of the sort that features in moral practice itself, rather than a vague commitment to trying to find a view from nowhere. The very attempt to find such a perspective is a Cartesian folly.⁵¹

So what does this say about the reliability challenge for Street’s account? Street’s claim is about the structure of justification—whenever we give reasons for not taking up a practical-normative commitment *C*, what we’re doing is reporting an inference we *do* endorse and claiming that *C* is incompatible with it. I do not endorse kicking puppies (and, in fact, endorse not kicking puppies) because commitments I *do* hold (that, for example, one should not cause puppies undue pain) are incompatible with endorsing kicking puppies. Suppose our purportedly ideally-coherent Caligula is recognizable as engaging in practical-normative discourse—as endorsing claims, taking up positions in the space of reasons, and endorsing practical inferences. But our recognition of Caligula as a *moralizer*⁵² requires that we be able to radically interpret him, and *that* undermines our characterization of him as *ideally coherent*. Because on Davidson’s account, overwhelming background agreement is required to make any sort of sense of disagreement at all. Our being able to make sense of our disagreements with Caligula requires that we share a certain backdrop of common commitments. And our reasons for repudiating Caligula’s commitments and adopting our own just are the same sorts of reasons we’d give

⁵⁰Peirce (1868), 140

⁵¹Peirce (1868)

⁵²Because the phrase “practical normative reasoner” is clunky, I’ll just totally slop over the distinction between moral and nonmoral practical reasons.

for repudiating any other set of commitments—namely, in part, that they cohere with the massive background set of commitments we share with Caligula, which are necessary for our being able to radically interpret him. So we can't characterize Caligula as ideally coherent after all. He's just a bad moralizer, as evaluated by us. Our evaluative perspective, according to Street, is the only perspective we can access, and according to Davidson, is totally sufficient for the purposes of evaluating Caligula's commitments. And insofar as we *can't* apply an in-principle coherentist critique to Caligula's commitments, we can't recognize him as a *moralizer* at all—and the application of the predicate “ideally-coherent” to a creature that isn't even recognizable as taking up practical normative commitments strikes me as a category error.

The good news is that the model I attribute to Street can accommodate even relatively massive conceptual or moral changes. I think Kitcher's example of the repudiation of chattel slavery, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is evidence for this—it's a *massive* moral evolution that was accomplished *entirely from an immanent perspective*. Kitcher is emphatic in noting that the spark for the change was a recognition of an internal incompatibility, between agents' commitments to Christianity and the acceptability of slavery. If I'm right, the normative bindingness of contradiction in practical normative commitments entirely explains the relevant progressive change. So as far as I can tell, understanding the structural feature of our moralizing practice we talk about when we talk about its *truth-aptness*—namely, the default normative loading of disagreement—can help us answer the reliability challenge by recognizing this feature as underwriting an understanding of ourselves as *reliably progressive*.

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