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The Value of Practical Knowledge: Against Engstrom's Constructivism

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Abstract

Stephen Engstrom has recently offered an excellent account of morality as practical cognition. He emphasizes the formal conditions of practical knowledge, which he finds in Kant. Engstrom also aligns his account with constructivism, claiming that value is constructed through these formal conditions, chiefly universalisability. In this paper, I employ a variant of Hegel's empty-formalism objection to challenge the moral significance of the mere form of practical knowledge. I hope to show that Engstrom's constructivism is neither philosophically compelling, nor required by the rest of his position. In its place, I propose a realist understanding of the value of practical knowledge.

Introduction

With *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, Stephen Engstrom, after nearly two decades of reflection (2009: xii) has produced a careful, compelling and comprehensive account of the categorical imperative, and in particular, the formula of universal law. In the introduction, he remarks that:

> … the famous canonical formulation [… Kant's] so-called formula of universal law: 'act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law'—can hardly be said to have enjoyed the warm general reception by his readership that we might expect would naturally follow upon the discovery of an implicitly familiar standard we tacitly employ in our ordinary moral reflection. On the contrary, it has been the source of much puzzlement and the object of many criticisms. Indeed, even those readers who are most receptive to Kant's ethics usually look with considerably more favour on his other two famous formulas,

> which at least have some power to stir and inspire the mind. … the formula of universal law is often set aside as a defective or less adequate extension of his principle. (Engstrom 2009: 2–3)

Engstrom seeks to counter this approach.[1] He wants to show how morality is both practical and cognitive, and contends that the form of practical knowledge is the categorical imperative, expressed as the formula of universal law.

I am sympathetic to much of Engstrom's project, but want to raise a question about value, namely whether it is constructed through the mere form of practical knowledge or not. In his book, Engstrom does not explicitly address the constructivism/realism debate.[2] In a recent paper, however, he comes out and explicitly aligns his reading of Kant with constructivism.[3] I will argue that this is neither philosophically compelling, nor required by the rest of his position.

I begin by laying out the very basics of Engstrom's account of morality as practical knowledge (Section I). Whenever Kant shows up, Hegel cannot be too far behind.[4] And so I take it upon myself to draw upon a variant of the 'empty-formalism' objection to dispute the moral significance of the mere form of practical knowledge (II). I find a potential response in Engstrom's appeal to the essential role of practical knowledge for our self-conception, but utilize Enoch's critique of constitutivism (in his famous 'Agency, Shmagency' paper) to question the moral significance of our practical self-conception (III). Having shown some difficulties that emerge from a constructivist reading of the form of practical knowledge, I turn to consider what drives Engstrom towards constructivism (IV). The key impetus seems to be his differentiation between theoretical and practical reason. I argue that this does not count in favour of constructivism (and also briefly consider and contest the other reasons he gives against realism). And finally, after casting doubt upon the impetus towards constructivism, I sketch how we can retain the important aspects of Engstrom's approach (and overcome the afore-mentioned problems) with a realist understanding of the value of practical knowledge (V).

I. Morality as the form of practical knowledge

Let me begin by very briefly running through the basics of Engstrom's position. The *Form of Practical Knowledge* is a dense detailed work, and I will not be able to do all of it justice here. I will however, attempt to sketch the basics in such a way that we can hopefully address the question of whether value is constructed through the mere form of practical knowledge or not.

Engstrom wants to revive a practical cognitivist tradition in ethics which he finds in Plato, Aristotle, and sees reach its fullest expression in Kant (2009: vii).

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So conceived, morality is both practical and cognitive. As cognitive, morality involves judgements—the basic form of (discursive) cognition for Kant. Judgements in turn involve various things: self-consciousness, spontaneity, and universality. And thus practical judgements will also need to involve self-consciousness, spontaneity and universality.[5] Crucially then, in order for a practical judgement to count as such, it must be universalisable. Universalisability constitutes the form of practical knowledge. We are to '*act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law*' (Ak. IV: 421, 7–8).[6]

This has been quick. There is much to be learned from each of Engstrom's claims. However, I believe that even with this brief sketch, we can turn to consider the relationship between the value and the form of practical knowledge. And in doing so, some of the distinctive nature of Engstrom's position will come out.

II. The moral significance of the form of practical knowledge

The empty formalism objection, at its most basic, is the thought that Kant's formula of universal law lacks content (see Hegel *PR*: §135, 162–63; *PS*: §§430–31, 257–59). In the introduction to *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, Engstrom addresses himself to this:

> … the suspicion under which the formula of universal law so often falls stems most fundamentally from doubts raised against Kant's claim that it is based in practical reason … To many, this imperative has appeared to be, in Hegel's words, an 'empty formalism', … Such critics may grant that this formula is an unexceptional principle of reason, but they hold that by itself it places no significant restriction on our conduct. (Engstrom 2009: 3)[7]

This is arguably *the* driving force behind Engstrom's book: to show that the categorical imperative can be both formal and substantive.[8]

It is important to distinguish between two issues here. The first concerns whether the formula of universal law can generate any content, or place any restrictions on our conduct. I do not want to get involved in this debate.[9] Engstrom offers an excellent account of how the formula of universal law can be formal and generate content, and I am happy to grant him this.[10] Instead, I want to pose what I take to be a more fundamental Hegelian challenge to Kant, namely whether a purely formal principle can generate any *moral* content.

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In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel remarks that:

> It would be strange, too, if tautology, the maxim of contradiction, which is admitted to be only a formal criterion for the cognition of theoretical truth, i.e. something which is quite indifferent to truth and falsehood, were supposed to be more than this for the cognition of practical truth. (*PS*: §430, 259)

The principles of non-contradiction and universalizability are only formal criteria for the cognition of theoretical truth. Alongside the traditional issue, part of the empty formalism objection is a general challenge to the Kantian who takes these formal criteria to be more than that for the cognition of practical truth.

Hegel also writes that: 'It is not ... because I find something is not self-contradictory that it is right; on the contrary, it is right because it is what is right' (*PS*: §437, 262). Of course, this is still early days in the *Phenomenology*. We are yet to pass through the various guises of *Geist*, not to mention Religion, and there is always the question of whether we are encountering Hegel's voice and not just that of another form of consciousness.[11]

Nevertheless, this textual wrinkle aside, in this section of the *Phenomenology*, we can find a realist challenge to Kant.[12] In his commentary on this section of the *Phenomenology*, Robert Stern poses a dilemma to the Kantian along these lines.[13] Here is the first horn:

> … on the one hand, if the test of non-contradiction is purely formal, it is not clear that failing the test reveals anything of moral relevance: why, if a maxim fails the test, does this show that acting on the maxim would be wrong? (Stern 2013a: 151)

The other horn is as follows:

> If, on the other hand, the test is seen as a way in which the agent can discover whether or not by acting in a certain manner she would be free-riding, … it then presupposes some moral content as part of that test (namely, the wrongness of free-riding, or of manipulating others), rather than determining what is right and wrong through the test, and so is no longer purely formal in this sense. (Stern 2013a: 151)

In claiming that value resides in the *mere form* of practical knowledge, Engstrom opens himself up to this dilemma.[14] Put in his terms, either:

(1) The value of acting on practical judgements consists solely in conforming to the standard of universality, or
(2) Our practical judgements ought to conform to the standard of universality because there is some independent value in their doing so.

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Engstrom could opt for the second horn, in which case value is not constructed through the mere form of practical knowledge. This, however, would move us away from the purely formal nature of practical knowledge, and introduce some moral content. And indeed, this is precisely what some readers of the *Groundwork* think that Kant does with the introduction of the formula of humanity:[15]

> But suppose there were something *the existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, that, as an *end in itself*, could be a ground of determinate laws, then the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e. of a practical law, would lie in it, and only in it alone.
>
> Now I say: a human being and generally every rational being exists as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* for the discretionary use for this or that will, but must in all its actions, whether directed towards itself or also to other rational beings, always be considered *at the same time as an end*. (Ak. IV: 428, 3–11)

Ultimately, I think this is the way to go, but we are not there yet. First, we need to consider the other available options. Here Engstrom could stick to his guns, and opt for the first horn, where the value of acting on practical judgements consists solely in the judgements conforming to the standards of universality. But then he owes us an explanation of why this merely formal requirement is *morally* significant.

I contend that no such explanation is forthcoming.[16] Let us sketch what it might look like. Engstrom could reply that unless our judgements conform to the form of practical knowledge, they will not be proper judgements.[17] We see something of this sort in the conclusion to his chapter 'The Formal Presuppositions of Practical Knowledge':

> … by being in conflict with the understanding of practical knowledge that they involve merely in virtue of being practical judgments, they will in that sense be in conflict [with] their own form and hence with themselves and so will lack the self-sustaining character essential to cognition, a character that they themselves, as exercises of the capacity for such cognition, purport to have. (Engstrom 2009: 128)

I am happy to grant Engstrom all of this, but why think that judgements being proper judgements—having the self-sustaining nature essential to cognition—is of *moral* significance? I make improper judgements all the time. Now, sure, I do so on pain of irrationality, but irrationality *per se* is not morally significant.

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It is worth pointing out that Engstrom is aware of the dilemma at hand and the difficulty that it poses.[18] In the introduction to *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, he sketches his response. He sets out a view of universalization as a logical operation externally imposed upon a maxim, and then mirrors our objection:

> Why should it matter to us whether a maxim we follow results in a contradiction if universalized?[19] Why should we suppose that an externally imposed logical operation is invested with the authority to constrain the will? (Engstrom 2009: 18)[20]

His view of universalization is supposed to circumvent this worry. On his account, the universalization test makes manifest the form of practical knowledge, and so is not an *externally* imposed logical operation (Engstrom 2009: 18–19). So conceived, the contradiction arises between the form and the content of a maxim.

However, our objection can still be pressed. We can still ask: Why should it matter to us whether a maxim we follow results in a contradiction if universalized? Why should we suppose that an *internally* imposed logical operation is invested with the authority to constrain the will? There are at least two issues in play here. Firstly, if it is just a logical operation, why does it matter whether it is internally or externally imposed? The principle of non-contradiction, for instance, is a norm of reason and accordingly has normative authority over both our thoughts and actions, regardless of whether it is internally imposed or not.[21]

Secondly, let me reiterate my main objection: if this is merely a logical operation, why is it of moral significance? You might think that hypothetical imperatives involve certain internally imposed logical operations (if you will the end, then you also ought—on pain of contradiction—to will the means), but these are not of moral significance. The Kantian constructivist owes us an explanation of why the addition of a merely formal requirement of universalizability is of moral significance.[22] Allow to me use an example to push this point.

If I want a clear head, I should not drink too much coffee. I want a clear head, but I end up drinking too much coffee. I am irrational here, as my behaviour conflicts with a formal principle of practical reason—if you will the end, then you ought to will the means. But this is of no moral significance. In this case, I am irrational, but not immoral.[23]

Changing the example somewhat, imagine that I make a habit of throwing coffee at people who ask me tough questions. Let us grant that this (and the associated maxim) fails the universalizability test—another supposedly merely formal principle of practical reason. In this case however, unlike the last, the violation of a formal principle of practical reason is of moral significance. But why? Both cases involve the violation of formal principles of practical reason. In both cases I am being irrational, but in only one of these cases is this irrationality

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immoral. In treating the universalizability requirement as merely formal, the constructivist is unable to account for this.

It might seem that I have stacked the deck here, in asking for an account of the moral significance of the (supposedly) merely formal requirement of universalizability. The constructivist might reply that this both misses the point and begs the question against them.[24] The whole point of constructivism (all the way down) is that there is no moral value except that which emerges from its procedure. But that is precisely my point. By committing to such an account, the constructivist is unable to explain the moral significance of the universalizability requirement, or differentiate it (normatively) from other formal principles of practical reason.

However, another option is to claim that the form of practical knowledge is essential to our self-conception, in one way or another. Let us turn to consider this.

III. The moral significance of our practical self-conception

In the conclusion to his book, Engstrom writes that: '… for beings such as ourselves … there is no way of maintaining unity of practical self-conception and so no way of having such a thing as integrity or character except through maxims that are in agreement with this law, which constitutes our rational nature, or humanity' (Engstrom 2009: 243).[25] He advances a similar point in his paper:

> Persons, then, as practical knowers, necessarily understand their agency as the efficacy of a capacity for such rational self-knowledge, knowledge in which the two sorts of universality, subjective and objective, necessarily coincide. The implicated awareness that this universality is constitutive of practical knowledge is thus itself constitutive of the capacity for such knowledge and hence also of persons' self-conception. (Engstrom 2013: 147–48) [26]

Here we encounter a familiar constructivist claim: unless we follow certain norms constitutive of agency, we will not be agents.[27] But, as Enoch famously asks: What is the normative significance of agency? Maybe I fail to be an agent, but I will be a shmagent instead—someone who is an agent in all respects apart from following certain norms of agency. Here's Enoch:

> Classify my bodily movements and indeed me as you like. Perhaps I cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. But why should I be an agent? Perhaps I can't act without aiming at self-constitution, but why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don't care about agency and action. I am perfectly happy being a

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> shmagent—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not of shmagency) of self-constitution. I am perfectly happy performing shmactions—nonaction events that are very similar to actions but that lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not of shmactions) of self-constitution. (Enoch 2006: 179)

Why is being a certain type of agent so important? Perhaps such agency has moral value, but that would move us away from constructivism; it would no longer be the form of practical knowledge doing the work, but instead, the independent value of agency.[28] In the passage above, Engstrom threatens that we might have 'no integrity or character' (2009: 243) but, again, what is the value of integrity or character? What is so morally significant about these, as opposed to some lesser version of them—shmintegrity or shmaracter?

There seem to be two options. Either:

(1) We ought to care about being certain types of agents (agents rather than shmagents) because agency is (independently) valuable, or
(2) There is no morally significant reason for us to choose against being shmagents rather than agents.

We find a hint of this challenge in Hegel. In the *Philosophy of Right*, after he lays the empty formalism charge, he repeats his challenge about property, but also mentions human life:

> The fact that *no property* is present is in itself no more contradictory than is the non-existence of this or that individual people, family, etc., or the complete *absence of human life*. But if it is already established and presupposed that property and human life should exist and be respected, then it is a contradiction to commit theft or murder; a contradiction must be a contradiction with something, that is, with a content which is already fundamentally present as an established principle. (*PR*: §135, 162)

A similar point has recently been pressed hard by Rae Langton (2007). Our rational nature is valuable, she argues, and not just because we value it. Moreover, this seems important to Kant. Recall that one of the four examples presented in *Groundwork* II involves suicide, something he wants to show is immoral (Ak. IV: 421, 24–422, 14 and Ak. IV: 429, 15–28, respectively). When it comes to deriving this from the formula of humanity, he tells us that:

> … a human being is not a thing, hence not something that can be used *merely* as a means, but must in all his actions always be

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> considered as an end in itself. Thus the human being in my own person is not at my disposal, so as to maim, to corrupt, or to kill him. (Ak. IV: 429, 20–25)

This aligns nicely with a realist understanding of the formula of humanity. So conceived, our rational nature has absolute worth. It is an end in itself, and our agency is thereby to be respected.

A full defence of Kantian moral realism is beyond the scope of this paper. In its place, I consider and challenge what drives Engstrom towards constructivism. Let us turn to this now.

IV. Practical and theoretical knowledge

In this section, I hope to get to the heart of Engstrom's constructivism. Engstrom differentiates between practical and theoretical knowledge, and this seems to play a crucial role in his aligning his project with constructivism. Consider, for example, the following: 'Constructivism rests on the idea that reason has a practical as well as theoretical use' (Engstrom 2013: 139). The basics of this run as follows:

> In the theoretical case the knowledge depends for its actuality on the actuality of its object; hence the object must, in order to be known, be 'given from elsewhere' by affecting the mind. In the practical case the relation is the reverse: here the actuality of the object—as determined—depends on the actuality of the knowledge. (Engstrom 2009: 119)

Allow me to share a fuller account of his differentiation between practical and theoretical knowledge.[29] I have broken this down into four steps:

> [1] The next step is to identify the characteristic that distinguishes practical knowledge from theoretical. To do so, we need look no further than the other feature of our capacity to recognize moral requirements, namely its efficacy, whereby our exercise of it can determine us to act accordingly.[30]
>
> [2] ... the self-consciousness integral to all rational cognition must also belong to the efficacy that distinguishes practical knowledge from theoretical. ... In knowing that I should ϕ, I understand that it is through this very knowledge that I am to ϕ. Such knowledge accordingly conceives what it represents as its *own* effect, its own action, something dependent on it for realization.
>
> [3] The existential relation in which practical knowledge stands to what it knows is accordingly the reverse of the relation in the theoretical case.

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> [4] Since what theoretical knowledge knows does not depend for its actuality on the actuality of that knowledge, the actuality of its knowledge must depend on the actuality of what it knows; what practical knowledge knows, in contrast, depends for its actuality on the actuality of the knowledge (Engstrom 2013: 145)

I am not exactly sure what to make of this. There is one basic point, that practical knowledge involves bringing about its object, but that is not the point in contention between realism and constructivism. Realists can accept this claim, but still ask where the value of the object comes from.

Kant's distinction between ends to be effected and independently existentent/self-sufficient ends seems important here (Ak. IV: 437, 21–27).[31] Consider the following example. Neil is on fire. I pick up a fire extinguisher, and put him out. Neil is a rational agent; he has value, and is an existent end. I do not bring that into being. I bring a certain helping of him into existence (an end to be effected), but that seems trivially true, and is not something that is going to settle the realist/constructivist issue. Where does this helping of Neil get its value from? That is precisely the point in question, and one that is not settled by the respective existential relationships between practical and theoretical knowledge, and their objects.

We can put the general issue in Euthyphro-style terms: does my action's value consist in its conforming to the form of practical knowledge? Or does it conform to the form or practical knowledge because it is valuable? Engstrom's differentiation between practical and theoretical knowledge does not address this, which, as I hope to have shown (in sections II and III), is genuinely problematic for the constructivist.

Allow me to further consider Engstrom's distancing of his position from realism. In doing so, the significance of his distinction between theoretical and practical reason should come further into focus. In the introduction to his book, Engstrom considers a line of objection to his claim that Kant belongs to a practical cognitivist tradition. The worry is that practical reason would be guided by external sources. He writes:

> We would leave ourselves confronted by the familiar difficult questions of how these directions could be understood to have their footing in any such external setting, given the scientific knowledge we now have of nature and the physical universe, and of how we could ever know them if they were somehow there outside us, written into things. Yet the proposal just broached—that our reading of Kant should be guided by the thought that practical reason is the capacity to know the good,

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> and by the idea that morality is knowledge of intrinsic goodness—threatens to return us to just such an antiquated traditional conception. To read Kant through the lens of these suppositions would be to impose on him the view that there is a teleological order in nature that we somehow rationally apprehend and that provides us with directions for living—a view we today can look upon only with suspicion. (Engstrom 2009: 11)

Engstrom endorses this objection, but distances his Kant from it, through the appeal to practical reason and 'entirely formal' concepts of good and bad (2009: 12). As we have seen, however, this formal account is not entirely satisfying.

In the passage above, we do find other objections to moral realism. In general, Engstrom does make independent objections to moral realism, but they are not discussed in detail. These objections can be thought of in four camps, and they run as follows:

(a) Metaphysical: There are no independently valuable ends.
(b) Epistemological: Even if there were such ends, we could not know about them.
(c) Normative: Even if there were such ends, and we could know about them, they would not be unconditionally normative.
(d) Motivational: Even if there were such ends, and we could know about them, and they were unconditionally normative, they would not be able to motivate us.

Engstrom only mentions these objections in passing, sketching problems for the realist. In what follows, I will address each of these objections in turn, sketching solutions for the (Kantian) realist.

(a) Metaphysical: There are no independently valuable ends.

Let us begin by taking another look at the relevant part of the passage above.

> … the familiar difficult questions of how these directions could be understood to have their footing in any such external setting, given the scientific knowledge we now have of nature and the physical universe … the view that there is a teleological order in nature … that provides us with directions for living—a view we today can look upon only with suspicion.

Engstrom references Mackie here (1977: 38n), which is somewhat peculiar. The Kantian can accept that nature lacks a teleological order that provides us with directions for living,[32] but there is more to the Kantian picture than nature. Crucially, there is also the transcendental. And however one conceives that, the Kantian picture moves beyond Mackie's sparse ontology as it contains a

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distinctive type of being—the Kantian rational agent. These beings, in light of their reason and freedom, stand out from the rest of nature. Both the Kantian constructivist and the realist admit this unique being into their ontology—the Kantian rational agent, who either possesses or constructs value. Of course, the constructivist might insist that rational agents do not possess independent value, but that is exactly the issue under debate. All of this to say that Engstrom's appeal to nature, Mackie and metaphysics does not settle the issue. Let us then turn to the epistemological challenge.

(b) Epistemological: Even if there were such ends, we could not know about them.[33]

> … the familiar difficult questions of how these directions could be understood to have their footing in any such external setting, given the scientific knowledge we now have of nature and the physical universe, *and of how we could ever know them if they were somehow there outside us, written into things* … the view that there is a teleological order in nature that we somehow rationally apprehend and that provides us with directions for living—a view we today can look upon only with suspicion. (Engstrom 2009: 11, my emphasis)

Here we see the epistemic prong of the attack on moral realism. Let us continue to focus on the value of rational nature. There are two questions here: 1) How do we know that we are rational agents? 2) How do we know that such agency has value? The first question is tricky,[34] but it is tricky for both the constructivist and the realist. As for our knowing that rational agency has value, perhaps we only do come to know that rational nature has value through the activity of practical reason, or though formal procedures, but that is fine. That would just show that these procedures have an important, or even essential, epistemic role.

One might still worry that attributing moral realism to Kant inevitably turns him into to some sort of rational intuitionist, as it might seem that we need to posit some distinct faculty to know that rational nature in general has value. We can find an answer to this in Kant's discussion of the formula of humanity.

As we saw earlier, Kant tells us that the ground of a possible categorical imperative lies in the existence of something with absolute worth.[35] He then proceeds to argue from elimination as to what this is. He rules out the objects of our inclinations (Ak. IV: 428, 11–14), the inclinations themselves (Ak. IV: 428, 14–17), and non-rational beings (Ak. IV: 428, 19–21), to end up with rational beings as the only option standing (Ak. IV: 428, 21–33). He then claims that, if there is to be a categorical imperative, the ground of this principle will be that rational nature exists as an end in itself (Ak. IV: 428, 34–429, 35).

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There is much more that could be said about the formula of humanity, but I will stop here. For our purposes, what matters is that this reading outlines how it is possible to know that rational nature in general has value, without turning Kant into a rational intuitionist.[36]

(c) Normative: Even if there were such ends, and we could know about them, they would not be unconditionally normative.

At one point, Engstrom writes the following:

> Kant breaks sharply with the received view that reason's function in the practical sphere is to guide us in action on the basis of its antecedent apprehension of a final end that has an independent footing in nature. Kant rejects this picture, claiming that practical reason's most basic imperatives, those of morality, are categorical rather than hypothetical in form. Human reason must accordingly be conceived as autonomous, as the sole source of its principle of action. (Engstrom 2009: ix)

Here we encounter a familiar Kantian claim—that only a self-imposed law could be unconditionally normative. This claim serves as the centrepiece of Henry Allison's recent commentary on the *Groundwork*.[37] Unfortunately, it does not hold. It involves a *non-sequitur*, by the way of a neglected alternative, namely an unconditionally normative claim that is not self-imposed.[38]

Consider again rational nature. Here, we encounter an end that appears to be of unconditional value. Let us assume that it is, and that we can know this. Then why could this unconditionally valuable end not serve as the ground for unconditionally normative claims? Indeed, at one juncture, Allison himself suggests as much:

> [T]he idea that the existence of something that is an end in itself is a sufficient condition of a categorical imperative seems relatively unproblematic, since, arguably, entities with this status (if they exist) could be the source of unconditioned commands. (Allison 2011: 205)

If there are any ends with absolute worth and we can know them (the metaphysical and epistemological issues), then they could be unconditionally normative for us.

(d) Motivational: Even if there were such ends, and we could know about them, and they were unconditionally normative, they wouldn't be able to motivate us.

Allow me to consider one final objection. In his paper, Engstrom gives a clear account of the motivational worry: 'If we suppose that our capacity to

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observe moral requirements is based in a rational appreciation of them, then we are unable to account for how that appreciation can move us to act accordingly' (Engstrom 2013: 138–39). He also considers this in his book, and notes that: 'It was from a picture of this sort that Hume was understandably recoiling' (Engstrom 2009: 12). I find this picture Humean, all too Humean. That is not to say it is completely without merit, but rather that it should not be a defining worry for the Kantian. The Kantian can (and should) move beyond the Humean picture of requiring desires to motivate us: pure reason can be practical. And here I see no significant difference between claiming that we can be motivated by the mere form of practical knowledge, or the (supposedly) non-moral notions of character or integrity, rather than the value of rational nature.

I take it that the motivational issue is important to Engstrom. Recall our discussion of his distinction between theoretical and practical reason (early on in IV) and the internally imposed nature of the logical operation at hand (II). We saw Engstrom write that:

> (A) Why should it matter to us whether a maxim we follow results in a contradiction if universalized? Why should we suppose that an externally imposed logical operation is invested with the authority to constrain the will? (2009: 18)
>
> (B) [1] The next step is to identify the characteristic that distinguishes practical knowledge from theoretical. To do so, we need look no further than the other feature of our capacity to recognize moral requirements, namely its efficacy, whereby our exercise of it can determine us to act accordingly. (2013: 145)

The thought seems to be that we will only be able to be morally motivated if moral requirements are (A) internally imposed, and (B) dictates of *practical* reason. I hope to have cast doubt upon the first of these claims (II), and (in this section) to have shown that the second does not count in favour of constructivism. Practical reason concerns what ought to be done, and when we are rational, it is efficacious, but this does not settle the question of value. The constructivist does not have a monopoly on practical reason.

The metaphysical, epistemological, normative and motivational issues that surround (Kant's) ethics are complicated in ways that require further discussion. Nevertheless, where Engstrom sketched problems for the Kantian realist, I hope to have sketched solutions.

V. The form of practical knowledge and realism

In this final section, I would like to suggest how we can retain much of *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, whilst dropping Engstrom's constructivism. On this

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account, morality remains practical cognition, but it responds to, rather than constructs, value. One value is paramount here—the value of rational nature. Much of what is said in *The Form of Practical Knowledge* is consistent with this having independent value.

It is worth asking what Engstrom wants from constructivism. At one point, he writes that:

> its most prominent ideas—the notions of procedure, construction, and persons' self-conception, which to a moral realist may smack of conventionalism, voluntarism, or subjectivism—are introduced, not with a view to analysing our basic moral capacity, but to address the practical problem of disagreement over standards or principles in ethics and politics. (Engstrom 2013: 140)

This is certainly a merit of constructivism, but it is hard to see why it counts against moral realism. We might think that various procedures are excellent heuristics or tests, and grant them great epistemic significance. We might also think that they work better on the ground in navigating competing conceptions of what is right in ethics or politics, but none of this directly bears upon the meta-ethical issue of whether value itself is constructed through these procedures or not. Both the realist and the constructivist can allow that various procedures have epistemic and practical worth. Moreover, the realist can go one step further, and claim that these procedures have *moral* worth.

The realist can thus retain the formula of universal law. As we saw at the outset of this paper, Engstrom began his book by complaining that 'the formula of universal law is often set aside as a defective or less adequate extension of his principle' (2009: 3). We do not have to say that. But at the same time, we do not have to think that value is constructed through the *mere form* of practical knowledge. And here we can avoid the aforementioned objections. The form of practical knowledge is valuable because it highlights ways in which our maxims or practical judgements can mistreat the rational nature of others (and ourselves). Moreover, character, integrity and being a rational agent are valuable.[39]

Conclusion

Stephen Engstrom's *The Form of Practical Knowledge* is one of the most careful and compelling treatments of the categorical imperative to date, and will continue to reward readers for years to come. In this paper, I have pressed Engstrom on his constructivism. I have argued that the *mere form* of practical knowledge will not

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suffice. However, I do not think this a significant blow to Engstrom's work, as much of his account sits equally well, if not better, with a realist understanding of Kant, one that emphasizes not only the *form* of practical knowledge, but also the *value* of it.[40]

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Notes

[1] This pleases Jens Timmermann, who writes on the back of the book that: 'In focussing on the general formula and the law-of-nature variant, and trying to make them work, the book presents a welcome counterweight to currently fashionable interpretations that dismiss these formulations in favour of the second variation, commonly called the "formula of humanity."'

[2] He says several things that point towards constructivism (Engstrom 2009: ix–xi, 11–12, 13n7), but also wants to link Kant with Plato and Aristotle, as all part of a practical cognitivist tradition in ethics (Engstrom 2009: vii–viii, 7–8).

[3] Engstrom (2013); see also Engstrom (2012b: 91–92). When I refer to 'constructivism', I am talking about constructivism *all the way down*, that is, the position that there is no moral value prior to the procedures of construction. I should note that there is typically an element of realism to Kantian Constructivism—the moral law is a formal principle of reason and is not up to us in any voluntaristic sense. However, this is not realism in the substantial sense (cf. Korsgaard 1996b: 35–37; 112). As we shall see in IV, Engstrom wants to distance himself from this substantial realism.

[4] Cf. Sellars: 'now that philosophy has gone "back to Kant" for the second time, can a Hegelian "trip" be far behind?' (1971: 270)

[5] One novel feature of Engstrom's account is that this universality comes in two types: subjective and objective. Subjective universality requires a judgement to be valid for all subjects, whereas objective universality requires it be valid for all objects (Engstrom 2009: 115–16). I will bracket this distinction for the purposes of this paper, as I do not believe it bears upon the issue at hand.

[6] Abbreviations used: Ak. = Kant, *Akademie-Ausgabe* (Berlin: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften), cited by volume then page and line numbers; *PR* = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *PS* = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)

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[7] See also: 'If reason does not apprehend any independently subsisting good, but furnishes merely formal constraints such as universality, how can it be the source of morality's evidently substantive demands? … the problem runs deep, threatening the validity of his entire approach.' (Engstrom 2009: xi)

[8] '… what especially needs to be explained is how this principle can be based in practical reason yet also substantive in its implications' (Engstrom 2009: 4).

[9] Cf. Stern (2012a: 75–77) on the Hegelian side, and Allison (2011: 139–40) and Korsgaard (1996a: 86–87, 95) on the Kantian.

[10] Cf. Engstrom (2009: 184–239), where he demonstrates the application of his reading.

[11] In this section (*PS*: §437, 261–62), we appear to be encountering the voice of the Greeks.

[12] For a defence of a realist reading of Hegel, see Stern (2007)

[13] Cf. Stern (2012a: 77): 'In addition to these ways in which Hegel's empty formalism objection may continue to be pressed, it can also be argued that there is a yet deeper worry underlying it, which is that the FUL [formula of universal law] is inadequate as the supreme principle of morality taken on its own, because something more substantive is required if we are to understand why there is any moral significance in acting on maxims that are universalisable—why this matters from a moral point of view. The problem might be put as a dilemma for the Kantian: on the one hand, he could answer this question by relating the FUL to considerations such as equality, fairness, or free-riding, but then it is not clear why 'treat others fairly' is not the supreme moral principle and the FUL merely a test for whether or not in acting a certain way one would be doing so; or he could treat the FUL as somehow prior in itself, but then make its moral relevance mysterious.'

[14] It is worth mentioning in passing that my talk of the *mere* form of practical knowledge is not due to a lack of charity, but instead a central feature of Engstrom's position. He writes, for example, that: 'Morality thus constitutes a purely formal unconditional restraint on willing.' (Engstrom 2012a: 58–59)

[15] Cf. Stern (2012b: 28–29) and Wood (1999: 107, 111–14).

[16] See Geiger (2010) for another attack on the idea that the formula of universal law can generate moral content by itself.

[17] Cf. Deligiorgi (2012: 373), who raises the question of whether such judgements are still judgements.

[18] Compare Engstrom (2013: 141): '[moral realists] ask: Are these procedurally determined judgments correct because they agree with what we really should do, or is what we really should do decided by these judgments? Constructivists do address this question, but their answers have left realists unsatisfied.'

[19] I am not reading the 'to us' in this question in an egoist sense, as this would fall afoul of Prichardian worries; see also Stern (2010) on Prichard and Korsgaard's constructivism.

[20] See also Engstrom (2009: 132).

[21] There is the additional issue of the binding nature of the moral law. As sensibly affected rational beings, we experience the moral law as binding, a categorical *imperative*. This raises the question of where this binding comes from: is it internal or external? However, as Stern has

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recently argued, we can combine a realist account of value with a constructivist account of the bindingness of the moral law (2012b: 1–99).

[22] One commentator who grapples with this is Andrews Reath, who locates the difference in the claim that, unlike hypothetical imperatives, categorical imperatives are synthetic and thereby yield ends (2006: 69; 2013: 46). However, another version of our dilemma confronts this: either the ends that the categorical imperative yields are merely formal, in which case it is not clear why they have different normative status to the (instrumental) ends that the hypothetical imperative recommends; or the ends that the categorical imperative proposes are not merely formal, but of independent moral worth. This latter option makes the normative difference between the hypothetical and categorical imperatives clear, but moves away from constructivism to introduce some moral content.

[23] I think that Kant is right in thinking that immoral conduct is irrational, but of course that does not mean that irrational conduct is immoral.

[24] Cf. O'Neill (1989: 29): 'If the standards of practical reasoning are fundamental to all human reasoning, then any vindication of these standards is either circular (since it uses those very standards) or a failure (since it is not a vindication in terms of the standards said to be fundamental.'

[25] See also Engstrom (2009: 242): 'Since this self-agreement is requisite for the unity of a person's self-constituted practical self-conception, a unity that is implied by the idea of character as well as by that of integrity, the same point can be seen in Kant's assertion that morality is the condition, the *sine qua non*, of having a character at all …'.

[26] He also tells us that: 'the starting point for construction—the idea that moral requirements originate in persons' practical self-conception, their conception of themselves as subjects in whom reason is practical.' (Engstrom 2013: 150)

[27] This particular form of constructivism is often referred to as constitutivism.

[28] Another option for the constitutivst is to claim that, if we fail to comply with the norms constitutive of agency, we will not fail to be agents, but instead fail to be good agents. That seems plausible, but a similar question faces this approach, namely what is the value of agency? What is important about being a good rather than a bad agent? If good agency is morally valuable, that provides an answer, but moves us towards realism. If good agency is not (independently) morally valuable, then once again, the moral significance of the difference between good and bad agency is missing.

[29] Cf. Engstrom (2009: 12–14; 29–30). Bojanowski puts forth a similar reading of Kant, which he terms 'Practical Idealism' (2012: 2–4, 11–13, 16, 18, 20–21).

[30] Deligiorgi notes the connection with Anscombe here (2012: 369, 374); cf. Engstrom on intention (2009: 28–33).

[31] Cf. Wood (1999: 114–18).

[32] It is not so clear that we can only look upon this with suspicion. I will leave this aside here though, as arguably Kant would.

[33] Cf. Bojanowski (2012: 2) and Sensen (2013: 70–71).

[34] Kant's two main options seem to be either that: 1) We must act under the idea of freedom (cf. Ak. IV: 447–48) or 2) The moral law reveals it to us (cf. Ak. V: 29–30).

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[35] 'But suppose there were something *the existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, that, as an *end in itself*, could be a ground of determinate laws, then the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e. of a practical law, would lie in it, and only in it alone' (Ak. IV: 428, 3–6).

[36] For a full realist treatment of this argument, see Stern (2013b: 29–37).

[37] See Allison (2011: 1–3, 56, 133, 237, 240, 262–63, 266, 288). Allison shifts between arguing that only a self-imposed law could be unconditionally normative and that only a self-imposed law could be unconditionally binding. These however, are separate issues. It might be the case that only a self-imposed law could be unconditionally binding, but that does not mean that only a self-imposed law could be unconditionally normative. Again, cf. Stern (2012b: 1–99, and note 20).

[38] Stern has pointed out that even Rawls recognizes that Kant's argument suffers from a neglected alternative here (2012b: 21).

[39] Reath (2012: 88) makes a similar suggestion.

[40] I want to thank Bob Stern, Chris Bennett, Irina Schumski, Carl Fox and Martin Sticker for helpful comments and discussion surrounding this paper.

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