

A PROPOSAL FOR
A COHERENTIST-
CONSTITUTIVIST ACCOUNT
OF NORMATIVITY



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ABSTRACT

We operate under norms of evaluating actions as good and bad, right and wrong, or reasonable and unreasonable. What justifies the authority of these norms? Christine Korsgaard takes the constitutivist position and argues that self-constitution, as the standard for what constitutes action, is the source of normativity. David Enoch argues that it is impossible for any constitutivist model to justify normative standards, and that realism is the best solution. In this paper, I demonstrate that the best solution to the tensions Enoch raises is not realism, but an original coherentist-constitutivist model of normativity rooted in Korsgaardian constitutivism.



I. INTRODUCTION

We all operate under norms where actions are evaluated as good or bad, right or wrong, or reasonable or unreasonable. What source justifies and sustains the authority of these norms? This is the “normative question.”¹

One proposal for answering the normative question is the constitutivist model of the source of normativity.² In “Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant,” Christine Korsgaard takes a constitutivist position and argues that self-constitution is the source of normativity.³ She begins by observing that we as humans must be agents; we must act. Korsgaard claims that when we act, action is always vital in the activity of “self-constitution.” Self-constitution is the process by which our decisions and actions make up, or “constitute,” our identities. This relationship is essential. Korsgaard therefore claims that self-constitution is constitutive of what action is—actions are essentially engaged in the activity of self-creation. Since this relationship is fundamental, we can judge the normative valence of actions in terms of how well the actions self-constitute, or how well one’s actions contribute to or deviate from establishing a unified self. Putting these ideas together, Korsgaard’s constitutivist claim is that since we cannot help but act and we cannot help but be agents, the goal of unified self-constitution gives us the authentic reasons we have to perform every action. Self-constitution thus gives us all of our reasons. Since that which gives us reasons to act is the source of normativity, Korsgaard argues that self-constitution is the source of normativity.

In “Agency, Shmagency,” David Enoch argues that it is impossible for that which is constitutive of action to fundamentally justify normative standards and that realism is the best solution to the issue of normativity.⁴ In particular, Enoch argues that a constitutivist model will struggle to ever justify its normative claims because it will always have to be justified by another normative claim. If no normative claim

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- 1 One understanding of normativity is the sense of “ought-ness” that one perceives when confronted with one or several decisions, choices, or courses of action—wherever they may come from. Yet it may also or ought also be beyond sensation, since it has many implications that are, as I will illustrate, critical to our understanding of the legitimacy of reasons.
 - 2 See Connie Rosati, “Agency and the Open Question Argument,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 490-527, 10.1086/345625; and David J. Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) for other popular models of constitutivism.
 - 3 Christine Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100-26.
 - 4 David Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency,” *The Philosophical Review* 115, no. 2 (April 2006): 169-96, 10.1215/00318108-2005-014.

in the constitutivist framework can ever stand on its own, no normative source will ever be found. Instead, realism posits the existence of normative facts existing independently and needing no further justification for their normative quality.

In this paper, I defend the constitutivist model of Christine Korsgaard against David Enoch by proposing a coherentist organization of normative claims. Coherentism is a philosophical model which argues that a single element in a network derives its doxastic value, truth value, or any other value from its relationship to other elements in that network.⁵ I argue that Korsgaardian constitutivism can be saved once we see that normative claims can derive the justification for their normative value from their relationship to the other normative elements in a coherentist network of normative claims. First, I will reconstruct Enoch's criticism of Korsgaard's constitutivist argument. Then, I will clarify Enoch's case for why the normative solution will not come from any non-realist proposal. Finally, I will demonstrate that the best solution to ease the tensions Enoch raises is not realism but an original *coherentist-constitutivist model* of normativity rooted in Korsgaardian constitutivism.



II. KORSGAARD'S ARGUMENT

Korsgaard's main interlocutor in her essay is the normative skeptic, who does not know why she should care about the purported authority of the norms that we use to evaluate her actions. Korsgaard's goal is to show that the skeptic must be committed to self-constitution. If Korsgaard successfully shows that we are committed to something that necessarily justifies our standards of normativity, then Korsgaard can defeat normative skepticism.

Korsgaard defends her argument with an analogy. She claims that, when building a house, if someone fails to meet what we might consider the essential standards of a house—such as protection from weather—we would think that they failed to make a house.⁶ They would have failed because they did not meet one or more of the qualities *constitutive* of houses. The constitutive standard gives the housebuilder *normative reason* to make the house sturdy, to make it waterproof, etc. If the normative skeptic can accept this analogy, Korsgaard says, the skeptic ought to also accept that, since self-constitution is constitutive of agency, then of all our reasons for actions are rooted in self-constitution. Thus, self-constitution is the normative source. Korsgaard's argument rests on the skeptic's necessary

5 Doxastic: of or pertaining to belief.

6 Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 112; Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 171-72.

commitment to acting and agency to explain the authority of our standards of normativity.

III. ENOCH'S ARGUMENT AGAINST KORSGAARD

But what if the skeptic can disregard agency and action? Enoch claims that, even if the skeptic accepts that self-constitution is constitutive of action, she does not necessarily have a reason to be an agent, proper. If she abandons her commitment to agency, she does not have to care about self-constitution. But how could anyone conceivably abandon their commitment to agency? Enoch proposes that the normative skeptic can simply be a “shmagent:” a person who behaves in almost the same way that agents do, except that these behaviors are not performed with the purpose of building a unified self. Indeed, the shmagent’s behaviors might more properly be termed “shmactions,” which are behaviors appearing to be the same as actions in almost every way, except they do not seek the goal of self-constitution. After all, the goal of self-constitution imposes internal organization on behaviors; the behaviors themselves are not outwardly distinguishable by whether the motive of self-constitution is present. In this way, the skeptic seems able to live her life quite similarly to the agent, if not in the same exact outward manner. Enoch argues that if we find this proposal plausible, we will agree that the skeptic has the ability to disavow agency and thus self-constitution. Moreover, she will not see any threat from disavowing them because failing to be labeled a certain way is a threat which has no bite.

The issues Enoch raises illustrate that Korsgaard’s account leaves self-constitution as an optional goal. To endorse the goal of self-constitution, we require another reason—a reason to be an agent. Enoch’s fundamental criticism of Korsgaardian constitutivism is that, if we require another reason to justify self-constitution, then self-constitution cannot be the fundamental normative source. If Korsgaard has nothing more to offer, then constitutivism has failed to answer the normative skeptic.⁷

But what if the nature of life is such that one cannot help but be an agent? Does this rescue our commitment to self-constitution? Enoch says no. Without reason to play the agency game in the first place, no one is committed to endorsing the goal of self-constitution.⁸ If the skeptic acts grudgingly, inevitably, or ignorantly, without rallying her will to self-constitute, she ought not to be considered as having endorsed self-constitution. For her, self-constitution remains

7 Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency,” 179.

8 Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency,” 186-92.

arbitrary from a normative point of view.⁹ If self-constitution is to be a normative source, it must become more than an inevitable reality. It must have normative justification. Thus, Enoch rejects this defense of constitutivism and concludes that the inevitability response provides nothing redeeming for the constitutivists.

IV. ENOCH'S CASE FOR REALISM

Enoch's argument can also be framed in this way: he claims Korsgaard does not demonstrate that self-constitution is the termination point in the regression of normative claims in her constitutivist argument. Enoch has argued that the normativity of self-constitution needs to be supported by reasons. However, any normative claim referenced as a reason for the normativity of self-constitution will also need reasons for its own normativity. Enoch argues that *any* such normative claim will always need other reasons to defend its normative authority. We would always need to cite another normative claim.¹⁰ So, insofar as anyone seeks to explain normativity by these constitutivist normative claims, they will never be able to offer a fundamental claim. Thus, constitutivists will always be paralyzed by the problem of the regress.

Enter Enoch's solution: a realist theory he calls "Robust Metanormative Realism," that answers the normative question by asserting the existence of irreducibly normative facts.¹¹ The realist proposal is that we answer to a reality populated with normative principles or entities prior to and independent of us. If the best framework of understanding the world is that normative facts exist—after all, we do deliberate about our reasons for action, and use normative claims when we deliberate—then the best explanation is that normative facts exist. For Enoch, the fact of the matter is a fine proof for existence—the proof of "explanatory indispensability."¹² Additionally, if constitutivist arguments cannot stand on their own, then perhaps the best explanation of normative facts is that there are *realist* normative claims out there. If we can satisfactorily prove that these normative facts exist, there will be no more need to seek reasons that back up these normative claims. Enoch's realist theory is immune to the problem of regress.

V. QUESTIONING REALISM

Enoch says the only solution is realism. Yet the realist theory has often been rejected on the grounds that realism must pay high

9 Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 191.

10 Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 189.

11 Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 195-96.

12 Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 195.

prices to explain the normative entities that it posits. Asserting the existence of normative facts poses odd metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological challenges. How can we claim that these normative entities exist? How can we perceive them? Even if we allowed the existence of normative facts, we would struggle to decide which claims have the status of a normative fact. How can we identify the normative facts? We would also have difficulty explaining how they are related to us—our will, our motivation, and our actions. Why do these guidelines on our actions exist? They do not seem to serve a purpose besides arbitrarily limiting our potential set of actions. Enoch himself concedes that there are impressive counterarguments realism must overcome.¹³

The strengths of the constitutivist approach propose two further reasons for rejecting realism. First, Korsgaardian constitutivism implies that normativity has a volitional force, that reasons can compel us because they are internal to our will. This volitional quality of normativity makes intuitive sense. For example, in situations of internal conflict, not only do we feel our conscience imposing itself on us—in a way, we also feel that a part of ourselves is commanding us to do the right thing. In fact, we experience normativity in most situations as having some internal force. The realists cannot locate the authority of normativity in ourselves, since they point to external sources for reasons. How can those reasons move us if they emanate from something independent of our aims and desires? Korsgaard argues that simply asserting that actions are immoral would do nothing to move the skeptic.¹⁴ Even if Enoch proved these facts exist, how can asserting mere existence lend force to the facts' decrees if the skeptic simply does not feel compelled to act on their judgements? The realist must explain how normativity can “get a grip on us.”

A final issue with realism is that realism cannot offer an account for how normativity comes to be. Whereas for Korsgaard all normativity has its roots in action, the realist position has no such unifying account. After all, realism's response to the normative question is that a certain set of principles are justified and authoritative, full stop.¹⁵ This is an assertion—not an explanation—of why normativity exists in the first place. If realism cannot explain and justify the roots of normativity, then realism does not provide us with a clear understanding of why these rules regulate us. For Korsgaard, we ought to aim at normative principles if we want to act. Without similar justification, realism cannot even offer an explanatory answer to the probing skeptic. If the individual opts out of any norms, realists cannot really offer good

13 Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency,” 177, 195-96.

14 Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency,” 172.

15 R. Jay Wallace, “Normativity and the Will,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 55* (2004): 195-216, 10.1017/S1358246100008687.

reasons to hold them accountable. Realism is silent at the moment we most need it to justify itself.

In summary, the strengths of the constitutivist position are that it can explain why normative claims can get a grip on us and it proposes a comprehensive justification of normativity. Realism has a much harder time addressing these two questions and must simultaneously contend with taking a metaphysically difficult position. Thus, realism ought to be a last-resort choice for the source of normativity.

VI. A COHERENTIST-CONSTITUTIVIST VIEW OF NORMATIVITY

If constitutivism can be saved, we should reject the unappealing realist strategy. I argue that we can justify normativity by proposing that it exists in a coherentist network of normative claims which bestow normative reasons upon one another.

As humans, we seem to be deeply committed to things that require the concept of agency to be coherent. Consider the concept of responsibility. When we see evil done, we want the agent who did it to be held responsible. When we see good deeds, we wish to commend the agent who did it. In the skeptic's world, we are forced to give up these practices of responsibility, since we attribute actions only to unified agents with coherent selves, not shmagents. Most of us are not prepared to give up responsibility as it is a central part of our lives as human beings. If we are committed to responsibility, then we have a reason to value agency.

Thus, one chain of support in this normative network is that we have reason to be moral, because we have reason to self-constitute, because we have reasons to be agents, because we have reasons to hold others responsible, etc. We may also include in this network normative claims we adhere to that are consistent with claims involving morality, agency, and responsibility—normative claims relating to relationships, knowledge, belief, identity, government, representation. Each of these normative claims can be placed into a consistent, harmonious coherentist network.¹⁶

Each normative claim supplies reasons for other claims and is likewise supported by reasons from other normative claims in different ways and at different levels. Since one will always have a normative claim to reference when asked to produce a *reason* to endorse any

¹⁶ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1971). My argument is not alone in employing coherentism in moral philosophy. Rawls has proposed the influential model of reflective equilibrium, which argues for justification of moral beliefs through coherentism.



normative claim in the coherentist network, my proposal provides a viable answer to the question of normativity's source that is not susceptible to regress. Also, I have just briefly touched upon some of the nodes within the coherentist network. Enoch himself says that we hold and respond to many normative claims, not just moral ones.¹⁷ It seems likely that there would be many more normative claims consistent with this network, so the coherentist constellation of normative claims is likely large enough to escape concerns about circularity.

The role of self-constitution in the coherentist-constitutivist argument is key. Despite existing in a web of codependent, mutually affirming normative claims, self-constitution can still be the fundamental source of normativity because it is necessary to make sense of all the other normative claims. Without self-constituted agency, one cannot understand normative commitments involving responsibility, love, identity, law, etc.—practices we find central to human life, since all rest on the broad assumption of a coherent individual with a robust self. These derivative normative claims themselves are the source of reasons endorsing other normative commitments, ones involving blame, merit, trust, etc. Thus, self-constitution is the source of normativity because it is the most critical node in the coherentist network. If we were to give it up, then we may have to abandon most, if not all, of our core human commitments.

A strength of the coherentist-constitutivist model is that it seems reflective of how deliberation works in real life. When we make a decision, we do not often directly cite the normative claim of self-constitution. The coherentist-constitutivist model clarifies why this is the case even when self-constitution is the source of normativity. All the nodes in the normative network have normative strength in themselves and have the potential to give reasons to actions. Eventually, all normative claims depend upon self-constitution. Thus, we do not always refer to self-constitution when we think of our reasons for action, but it always lurks in the background. Compared to pure Korsgaardian constitutivism, the coherentist-constitutivist model helps explain constitutivism in a manner that better resembles our experience of normativity in our daily lives.

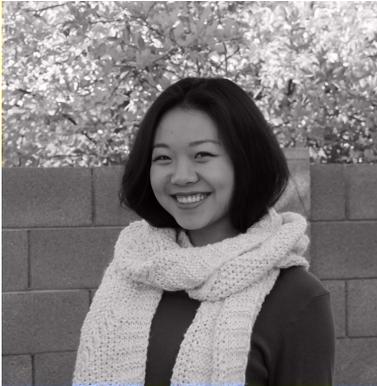
I will now address a concern. One may argue that by using this model, I am no longer advocating for a constitutivist model for normativity. Rather, it is the coherentist nature of the claims which grant them their normativity. Thus, one could theoretically form a circle of exclusively evil or nonsensical claims which are all logically and rationally consistent with each other. If the claims' coherence

17 Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency," 194-95.

grants normativity, then we must grant that one would have normative reasons to be evil or absurd simply because one's values cohere.

However, normativity is not granted by the framework. Normativity is still inherent to the claims themselves. Every node in the coherentist framework has normative force on its own, and when we deliberate, it is the normative force of that particular claim that moves us to action. But when defending the authority of the already-normative claims as a body, one would refer to the coherentist model. The coherentist model is a metanormative, structural explanation of why already normative claims are justified and does not speak to the normative nature of the claims themselves.





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