RECENT WORK

BOOK REVIEW ON
CREATING A SHARED MORALITY: THE FEASIBILITY OF ETHICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM
(BY HEATHER SALAZAR)*

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Heather Salazar's project in *Creating a Shared Morality* is to revive and further develop metaethical Constructivism as a viable third metaethical theory and an alternative to subjectivism and realism. Salazar's approach is twofold. First, she undertakes a deep analysis of Christine Korsgaard's prominent version of Constructivism which she labels neo-Kantian to acknowledge the roots of the concept. Salazar exposes weaknesses in Korsgaard's theory and shows how the difficulties might be resolved. Second, Salazar offers her own version of Constructivism which she terms Enlightenism. Salazar incorporates elements of Eastern philosophy into her theory rendering Enlightenism an East-West moral theory. Moreover, Salazar shows how both traditions, Kantian and Buddhist, can enrich each other.

Salazar well begins by explaining neo-Kantian Constructivism and placing it within the relevant historical context. The first two chapters make this book accessible to readers who are not familiar with this branch of moral theory. Salazar notes that until the end of the twentieth century the two dominant metaethical theories were Realism and Subjectivism (later labeled by William K. Frankena and Thomas Nagel as Internalism and Externalism). Realists hold that moral values are objective because they are rooted in facts. But what are these facts, Salazar asks, and how do they oblige us? Subjectivists, on the other hand, argue that moral values originate within the individual and therefore cannot be objective. Here Salazar raises the question: Is there anything good apart from people's individual motivation? As Subjectivism and Realism seem implausible, Constructivism set out to maintain both the subjective origin of morality and its objective nature.

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Constructivism, more specifically, is an ethical theory that emerged out of John Rawls' article "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory" (*Journal of Philosophy* 77 [1980], pp. 515-572). In that article, Rawls explained that Kantian Constructivism means that objectivity does not stem from moral facts. Rather, it is agreed upon by rational agents. Rawls' aim was to construct his normative principles of justice. Metaethical Constructivism, Salazar explains, sets out to elucidate the origin and nature of moral principles. Neo-Kantian metaethical Constructivism holds that reasons and obligations do emerge out of an individual's psychology, but reflection on various mental states, such as desires and beliefs, yields objective moral standards. In other words, morality begins subjectively and through a rational process values obtain objectivity. Salazar carefully notes that it is through the activity of rationality that we reach objectivity, and as we are familiar with Kant's Categorical Imperatives, she labels this 'The Kantian Procedural Thesis'. Salazar is also careful to stress that rationality does not discover moral reasons but creates them. The internal nature of morality and the idea that moral standards are not imposed, Salazar notes, preserves individual autonomy.

The challenge to metaethical Constructivism is explaining how does rationality create objective moral standards from subjective mental states? Salazar first provides Korsgaards' version and then lays out her response.

Salazar explains Korsgaard's theory of 'publicity as shareability', which purports to demonstrate objectivity. For Korsgaard, all reasons for action originate from the mind, but they are public because they are communicable and sharable. (Public here means objective, something everyone can see or understand.) Korsgaard wants to argue that if a person has a reason to do something, that reason is valid for everyone else. She gives the following example: A person might want to climb a mountain, and this appears to be a reason relevant to that person only. But when asked why she wants to climb a mountain, the answer might be the desire to view the landscape or to overcome fear, and these are reasons that everyone can relate to and agree with. Korsgaard goes further and argues that a reason for action in general is a claim on others or others' claim on oneself, and as such it has a normative force. In the case of the mountain climber, a good reason implies we ought to help or at least not hinder this activity.

Salazar further outlines what counts as a moral reason for Korsgaard. According to Constructivism, we are both moved by desires and we reflect on them. Through reflection we decide to either endorse or reject a desire. The process of reflection consists in considering what Korsgaard calls our 'practical identities', which are the roles we value, such as being a professor, daughter, son, parent, or friend. Salazar gives the example that by her practical identity of a professor she is committed to teaching her students and by her practical identity as a daughter she is committed to calling her mother on Mother's day. In other words, we endorse or reject a desire from the perspective of a practical identity and its obligations, and desires that are endorsed become reasons for action. Because any practical identity implies a commitment to others, a practical identity also entails a 'moral identity'. The idea of a moral identity is rooted in Kant's conception of the Kingdom of Ends, where all moral beings possess intrinsic value and ought to be respected. In other words, moral identity means that we

value and respect each other's humanity. Korsgaard defines a moral reason as a rational approval of desire and calls it 'reflective success'. In Constructivism, Salazar again emphasizes, objectivity is not inherent in reason, rather it is a result of the process of reflection.

By the same token, Salazar objects to the idea that all reasons are public and that there are no private reasons, and she develops a clearer formulation of the role of moral identity. Salazar's criticism of 'publicity as shareability' is laid out in two parts. In the first part, Salazar addresses the arguments in support of Publicity as Shareability, while in the second part she addresses the viability of this theory.

In the first part of her criticism Salazar addresses the arguments Korsgaard provides in support of her view. Here, Salazar extracts two strategies from Korsgaard's work which she labels Inductive and Deductive. These strategies rely on Korsgaard's interpretation of Wittgenstein's Public Language Argument. Both strategies set out to show that reasons and obligation are public and that they have a normative force because they are sharable through language.

The Inductive strategy is based on an analogy between meaning and reason. According to Korsgaard's interpretation of the Public Language Argument, meaning must be normative in order for language to be communicable. There is a right way and a wrong way to use words, and we cannot speak the same language and not understand each other. The same must hold for reasons, and Salazar quotes Korsgaard's remark that "it takes two to make a meaning," and likewise that "it takes two to share a reason."[1] In other words, reason is similar to meaning in the sense that they are both subject to understanding. But Salazar argues that reason is unlike meaning, and she points out that communicable is different than shareable. It is possible to agree on the same meaning but not share a reason. Reasons are not simply subject to communication, they must be accepted as well, such that a reason can be understood and/or rejected. Salazar argues that the analogy between meaning and reason is flawed and that the Inductive argument thus fails.

While the Inductive strategy relies on similarity between meaning and reason, the Deductive strategy is one of entailment. For Korsgaard, according to Salazar, understanding a reason entails responding to it. Korsgaard claims that upon hearing a language we are forced to understand it and think about what was said. It is impossible to hear words of a language one speaks and not react to them. Words are communicated in a public space which Koarsgaard labels 'linguistic consciousness' and claims that one can always intrude on your linguistic consciousness. The examples she provides are that if someone calls your name, you will stop, or if you are asked to picture a yellow spot you will do this as well. The idea that people can force others to understand them and that understanding means accepting or responding to reasons is the source of normativity for Korsgaard. Salazar labels the necessity of understanding when someone speaks: The 'Forced Normativity Premise for Meaning' (or FNPm as Salazar tends to use acronyms). The Deductive argument states this Forced Normativity Premise for Meaning (FNPm) entails the 'Forced Normativity Premise for Reasons'

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[1] Salazar 2022, 37.

(FNPr) which includes the necessity of a response. Salazar points out that Korsgaard's examples of reacting to calling one's name or picturing a yellow spot are instances of an automatic reaction, whereas moral reasons and obligations are the outcome of reflection. Salazar also gives the example of someone on the street asking for money. She agrees that people do feel the need to respond, either giving money, apologizing for not having any cash, or even just shaking their head. Salazar disagrees with Korsgaard that these examples would demonstrate the Forced Premise Normativity for Reasons (FNPr). Salazar points out that if someone asks us for money, it does not mean that we have an obligation to give any or we might give some simply because we have been raised this way. In addition, Salazar points out that understanding something does not mean responding, as no one is obligated to respond to cat-calling. The Deductive strategy fails according to Salazar because Korsgaard did not make the case for the Forced Premise Normativity of Reasons (FNPr). Salazar concludes that Korsgaard failed to show that all reasons are public.

In the second part of her criticism, Salazar accepts Korsgaard's view concerning the source of reason (being internal), but rejects her account of the nature of reason (being universal). To explain her point, Salazar organizes previous views in Constructivism in three parts: The 'Constructivism Thesis', the 'Publicity Thesis' (further divided into strong and weak publicity), and the 'Universality Thesis'. The Constructivism Thesis pertains to the origin of morality and states that all reasons are constructed from individual psychology. The Publicity and Universality Theses pertain to the nature of reasons. The Strong Publicity Thesis presents Korsgaard's view that all reasons are public. The 'Weak Publicity' thesis introduces Salazar's view in opposition to Korsgaard and claims some reasons, such as personal interests, are private. The Universality Thesis states that as the scope of reason is universal, and every reason has a normative force. Salazar claims that the Strong Publicity Thesis leads to the Universality Thesis which is implausible. It cannot be the case that every personal goal one has, such as collecting stamps or becoming a renowned writer, provides a normative reason for everyone. Salazar calls her own view 'Weak Constructivism' which holds that reasons stemming from a practical identity can be private, whereas reasons which stem from the moral identity are public and shared by everyone.

Salazar's most serious criticism is that Korsgaard's version of Constructivism lapses into subjectivism. In Korsgaard's Constructivism a reason is a result of rational endorsement of desire, and this leaves us with the question: Can any desire be endorsed and become a reason for action? Salazar thinks that in Korsgaard's theory there is no way to distinguish between good and bad desires and reasons, and she quotes Korsgaard's recognition of this weakness: "I must say that it is the endorsement that does the work, since I am prepared to agree that if human beings decided that human life is worthless then it *would be* worthless."[2] A moral theory ought to be able to avoid this kind of consequence, and Salazar points out that without limits to which desires can be endorsed, people could endorse immoral desires such as killing, lying, stealing and child molestation. Saying that any desire can become a reason amount to a

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[2] Salazar 2022, 99 and 138.

subjectivist point of view. This criticism leads Salazar to begin outlining her own theory, Enlightenism.

From Salazar's perspective, what is missing thus far in Constructivism are normative standards for creating reasons for action from desires. Because Constructivism relies on the process of reflection to reach objectivity, and given the idea that people are capable of rationalizing anything, formulating normative standards for reflection is called for, and Salazar fills in this gap. Recall that Salazar's intent is to provide a third metaethical theory as an alternative to Subjectivism and Realism. In order to avoid Subjectivism, there has to be a correct and incorrect way for reflection and a way to eliminate bad reasons. Realists will appeal to external objective values to rank reasons, such as claiming that projects aiming at the public good are more valuable than personal profit. The challenge for Salazar is to show that Constructivism, a theory where people's psychology is the source of value, can provide objective criteria to evaluate reasons without lapsing into realism. Salazar addresses this issue in three ways as follows.

First, Salazar provides criteria for what she calls 'Ideal reflection': "On my account, people's desires which they *would* endorse under ideal reflection on their relevant identities produce legitimate reasons. I call this view 'Enlightenism' because an enlightened understanding of oneself and one's reasons is both part of the process and a product of reflecting."[3] Salazar provides questions to discern ideal reflection such as: Who will be affected and how? How will my goals be affected? Will I be happy or regret this action? Will this action result in confidence or doubt? Salazar gives the example of a divorce where the relevant identities are the children and the parents in which case raising the above questions will lead to better self-awareness and a more enlightened decision.

Secondly, Salazar expands the role of the moral identity. Ideal reflection for Salazar must always include the moral identity. Any desire not approved from the perspective of moral identity must be rejected. Salazar gives clear examples in cases such a gossip and manipulation where other people are not respected, and therefore these desires are illegitimate and cannot give rise to moral reasons. Further, Salazar refers to an example originated in G.A Cohen of a Mafioso who has two identities to consider, one as a member of the Mafia and the other as a member of humanity. The Mafioso was ordered to commit murder. Why shouldn't he? Salazar suggests that once the Mafioso reflects on his moral identity, he will recognize that the moral identity is necessary whereas the identity of a mobster is contingent. Consequently, the mobster will consider stopping the life of crime. Salazar is well aware that people sometimes choose to ignore the moral identity and act on immoral desires. Ideal reflection is not meant to eradicate immoral behavior – that would be naïve. Rather, Salazar offers criteria not present in Korsgaard to differentiate moral from immoral reasons.

Third, Salazar offers a way to deal with a conflict of reasons and evaluate reasons in general. The problem of conflicting reasons goes all the way back to Kant, where critics noted that with his formulation of the Categorical Imperative Kant did not

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[3] Salazar 2022, 94 and 104.

provide a way to resolve conflicting demands. Salazar gives the example of having promised a friend to attend their party but now you have too much work to be able to go. Which is the stronger obligation? Here Salazar offers the 'Concern Account' to distinguish the depth of reasons. A reason for action depends on how much concern a person has for the practical identity in question. If we consider the example given above of a conflict between attending a party and completing work, the Concern Account guides one to think which role is more important to them, the one of a friend or an over-worked professor?

Salazar's formulation of qualifying criteria for reason is a good and pertinent addition to metaethical Constructivism, and it improves the theory. As mentioned above, the challenge to metaethical Constructivism is to show that morality is internally generated and at the same time maintain objectivity without an appeal to an external source (such as God or facts). Salazar's criteria for moral reasoning provides an internally generated objectivity that is neither Subjectivist nor Realist.

In the last portion of her work, Salazar identifies a weakness in Constructivism regarding its inability to address selfishness, and here Salazar appeals to Buddhist philosophy to fill this gap. Constructivism recommends acting on the most relevant identity which <u>could</u> amount to doing what is good for oneself. Salazar notes that in considering their identities, most people will choose reasons that favor themselves and their closest relationships. Acting selfishly, as long as one does not act on immoral desires, does not seem to contradict the theory. In addition, Constructivism does not provide a motivation for selfish people to change. Constructivism is also weak in addressing conflicts of interest between self and others as is present in cases of competition, for instance. Salazar's version, which calls for considering the moral identity, is better equipped to deal with selfishness, but the problem still remains: What motivation do people have to be altruistic?

In the last two chapters Salazar undertakes a comparison between Enlightenism and Buddhist ethics. The most important part of her comparison is her integration of the Buddhist concepts of interdependence and non-self. Interdependence is a view concerning the nature of reality that states that everything is connected to everything else. Or, conversely, nothing can exist on its own. Salazar invites us to consider her computer, for instance, and to think about how many people and materials were involved in its construction (the people working in the mines, the manufacturers, the computer scientists, the shipping company, and so on). In addition, think about the minerals necessary to make this computer and the fact they come from the earth, the earth depends on the entire planet Earth, and in the end the computer depends on everything else.

The concept of non-self easily follows interdependence as any aspect of the self one can think of depends on so many people. Salazar notes that her research depends on so many brilliant minds who wrote books and all those who played a role in her education. Of course, other inspiring minds also depend on so many others for determining who they are, and in the end Salazar notes that "the writing of this book

took billions of people."[4] Conversely, it is not possible to think of any aspect of our existence that does not depend on other people. Understanding interdependence and non-self means that one can only see one's self in relation to others. Salazar notes that understanding of the self in light of these Buddhist concepts implies a commitment to others.

Adding the concept of interdependence to the requirement of Enlightenism, that people reflect on all their relevant identities results in a stronger sense for moral obligation. With this addition, one is called to understand the connection between one's self and others. Understanding the way in which we depend on others implies caring and having compassion for them. Salazar goes as far as to say that in understanding interdependence we can come to see "…others as extension of oneself."[5] Salazar recognizes that Buddhist Ethics is motivated by the goal of avoiding suffering, and we all play a role in each other's suffering or wellbeing. As she puts it: "… because one's own suffering is inextricably connected with the suffering of all other beings in the world, it is impossible to remove one's own suffering without also working to reduce the suffering of all other beings."[6] Salazar offers an interesting insight that is worth mentioning with regard to understanding interdependence: "Instead of the goal to become 'the best', enlightened people will seek to be 'great'.[7]

In integrating consideration of interdependence into Enlightenism, Salazar solves the problem of selfishness. Instead of simply choosing what is best for oneself, people come to see that no concern is entirely their own. In understanding interdependence people have reasons to become less selfish or not selfish at all.

In the end, Salazar summarizes her theory in five concise points: moral identity is necessary; the source of reason is internal; reasons are created by reflecting on all relevant identities; prioritizing reason according to the concern criterion; and understanding of the self must include understanding of interdependence.

Philosopher Bo Mou advocates a methodology for comparative philosophy which he calls 'constructive engagement'.[8] The idea being that different philosophical traditions can learn from each other and jointly contribute to the development of contemporary philosophy. This valuable approach can be found in Salazar's work.

Salazar claims that Interdependence still falls short of explaining moral obligation. Interdependence <u>can</u> mean that we are obligated to others based on their usefulness. She points out that in Constructivism the idea of the moral identity entails that we respect individuals regardless of their usefulness. The moral identity, in turn, becomes stronger when understanding how we are all interwoven together. Reflection on

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[4] Salazar 2022, 182.
[5] Salazar 2022, 183.
[6] Salazar 2022, 170.
[7] Salazar 2022, 84.
[8] Bo Mou (2020), *Cross-Tradition Engagement in Philosophy: A Constructive-Engagement Account* (New York: Routledge).

interdependence is thus added to ideal reflection. Salazar suggests calling this merging of traditions 'constructivist enlightenment'.[9]

Enlightenism begins with Constructivism, and the idea that the source of moral reasons is oneself. It continues with a revision of Korsgaard's theory to state that reasons can be both private and public and adding criteria for good reasoning. Enlightenism culminates with incorporating an understanding of interdependence to show that a complete understanding of one's self reveals a commitment to others. Understanding interdependence provides a reason to be altruistic and solves the criticism that Constructivism might condone selfishness. All in all, Salazar's is inviting people to be more thoughtful, and she provides ample guidance of how to do so. With the kind of reflection Salazar calls for, if genuinely followed, people are bound to respect each other.

Salazar is a careful and meticulous thinker. In *Creating a Shared Morality* she provides a thorough, in-depth analysis of Constructivism. Because of her nuanced analysis, Salazar does introduce many new definitions which the reader is advised to keep track of. In the end Salazar makes a solid case for both her criticism of Korsgaard and her own version of Enlightenism. Salazar successfully revised Constructivism into a more plausible version. Anyone who is interested in Constructivism ought to be familiar with Salazar's arguments and theory.

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[9] Salazar 2022, 182