In its most general form, constructivism is the thesis that:

Necessarily, a judgment is true, or a fact, if and only if (and because) it is the judgment anyone capable of following the norms of reasoning would make, on the basis of faultless reasoning, in conditions optimal for reflection.

In this paper, I want to argue for the possibility of applying constructivism to judgments about practical reasons.²

Virtually any kind of fact could conceivably provide a reason for an action—the frequency of fires near one’s home might, for instance, give one a reason to buy fire insurance. I would not suggest that we can construct facts of this or any other non-evaluative kind. A judgment about practical reasons, in the distinctively evaluative sense, is the relational judgment that some fact, or feature of an agent’s situation, is a reason for, or counts in favor of, some intention, emotion, or other reaction (by the agent, in his or her situation). I do want to suggest that we might construct truths, or facts, about reasons in
this relational sense. Where S is an agent, A some response, X a situation, and F one of its features, **constructivism about practical reasons** is the thesis:

Necessarily, the judgment that F counts in favor of A (that is, F is a reason for S to A in X) is true, or a fact, if and only if (and because) anyone capable of following norms of practical reasoning concerning how S is to respond in X would count F in favor of A, on the basis of faultless practical reasoning, in conditions optimal for reflection.

The standard examples of constructivism—for instance, those advanced by John Rawls, T. M. Scanlon, and Christine Korsgaard—lack this thesis’s breadth of application; they apply to domestic social justice, moral wrongness, and moral obligation, respectively, but not to all practical reasons judgments. The principles Rawls derives by reasoning through the original position are meant to bear only on questions of social justice about a society’s “basic structure” of institutions. Scanlon’s constructivism has still broader application to judgments about “what we owe to each other,” even within or in the absence of a basic structure. But he does not propose to construct the judgments about reasons and judgments about what is reasonable which inform constructive reasoning about what principles “could not reasonably be rejected.” Korsgaard constructs our moral obligations on the basis of the self-conceptions we would have and value ourselves under if we were fully rational, where rational consistency as human agents requires not only seeing ourselves and others as deserving of respect, but also counting nothing as a reason for action if it is incompatible with respect for humanity. Still, Korsgaard’s account, like
Kant’s, does not provide *sufficient* conditions for reasons of many kinds, including, most notably, reasons and requirements of prudence.\(^8\)

Because it can seem unclear aside from the standard examples what in general “constructivism” is, it is common to doubt whether the theory could have broader application, to practical reasons of all kinds. In response to this doubt, I am suggesting that the standard versions of constructivism are instances of the general formulation of constructivism provided above, a formulation that can also be applied, as I have indicated, to all practical reason judgments. Unlike constructivism about practical reasons, the standard constructivisms also specify some method or procedure of reasoning about judgments of the relevant kind. One of my aims is to show that the absence of procedural specification does not undermine the interest and promise of constructivism about practical reasons as a foundational theory.

My chief aim is to say what constructivism about practical reasons aims to achieve and what it must assume, not to defend it as against other views. Philosophers routinely express bewilderment or uncertainty about what “constructivism about practical reasons” would look like, quite aside from doubts about whether some definite position could be correct. I want to put this prior concern to rest. Although I will not try to settle doubts about whether the position I will describe is ultimately defensible, it will become clear what some of the further questions of defensibility are.

Although constructivism can have diverse aims, it is often billed as avoiding the excesses of traditional realism about values without admitting a form of subjectivism or relativism that undermines the foundations of ordinary moral and practical commitment. This promise is at best partially fulfilled if only moral values are constructed.\(^9\) Many
foundational questions about moral judgments arise equally for judgments about reasons. Judgments of prudence, for instance, are no less “categorical” than moral judgments. Even “hypothetical” judgments about instrumental reasons and matters of taste can be seen as making a strong claim to objectivity once they are expressed in conditionalized form. If the need for an alternative to realist or skeptical views arises at all, it equally arises whether moral or non-moral practical judgments are at issue.

Constructivism about practical reasons promises such an alternative. If it is correct, all that would have to exist in order for there to be objective moral or non-moral truths about practical reasons, which can be known by reflection, is a familiar and relatively unproblematic human activity, the activity of practical reasoning. There is a fact of the matter about what reasons someone has, because there is a reason judgment one would make if one reasoned about the matter well or in the right way, on the basis of the norms of practical reasoning, in optimal conditions. Since the truth of the matter depends entirely on the output of certain practical reasoning, there is no need for a further “truth-maker,” and so no need for the metaphysical commitments of Plato or Clarke or Moore. The absence of a further truth-maker, however, is not tantamount to skepticism. It is still an objective matter what reasons there are. The truth of a given reason judgment is determined by the relevant reasoning, not what any actual person or group wants or believes. So what reasons we have is “independent of us” or, more precisely, invariant with respect to our attitudes, and therefore fully objective. Moreover, if constructivism is correct, no exercise of quasi-perceptual “intuition” or causal interaction with independent facts about reasons is required for us to come to know what reasons we have. As capable reasoners, it is enough to be well positioned and to carry out the appropriate observation
and critical reflection. The “appropriate” observation and reflection, finally, is simply that required by “norms of reasoning,” in a sense of the idea that can be closely bound up with, and no more problematic than, the ordinary activity of practical reasoning itself. For not only would we fail to count someone (say, a certain alien being) as engaged in practical reasoning, as opposed to an activity of some other kind, unless there seems to be approximate conformity to certain norms. We may have no plausible conception of what the norms of practical reasoning are or would be independent of how reasoning is ever actually carried out.

Like all large promises, these are open to doubt. A first kind of doubt is that constructivism about practical reasons merely pushes back the hard questions to the idea of a “norm of practical reasoning.” Such norms are not themselves constructed. Does this mean Platonic Norms of Reasoning lurk in the background? If not, does constructivism collapse into a form of subjectivism or conventionalism? In other words, do the norms that actually govern practical judgment really allow us to construct objective values on the cheap? I raise this kind of doubt mainly to postpone it. My concern will be with a second kind of doubt, which is less fundamental but of greater preliminary importance.

According to what I will call the circularity objection, every available way of characterizing the crucial idea of “norms of practical reasoning” leaves constructivism about practical reasons either empty or circular. On some characterizations, such as those which appeal to “formal” norms, the reasoning prescribed by the relevant norms could provide an explanation why certain practical judgments are truths, rather than falsehoods. But it also fails to preserve all or most of our ordinary reason judgments. On the other hand, the objection continues, any alternative way of characterizing the norms of practical
reasoning which avoids this problem winds up presupposing truths about practical reasons, the idea supposedly being explained.

I will argue that the circularity objection underestimates the possible bases for construction. We have a coherent and familiar idea of situation-specific norms which guide thought and attention when we consider practical questions. When it is made clearer in what sense a foundational theory (as opposed to substantive or first-order account) must be both non-circular and non-empty, we can see that such norms do offer a coherent basis for constructing truths about practical reasons. It is a further, deeper question, which I will not resolve, whether the norms needed to construct objective values on the cheap actually govern practical judgment (any position on this issue would have to address doubts of the first kind mentioned above, which I have simply set to one side). If I am right, however, we can take this deeper question seriously. We should not be puzzled about what a theory that constructs all values or practical reasons would look like.

PROCEDURAL SPECIFICATION

Constructivism about reasons seeks to provide a reductive (although broadly normative) explanation of the conditions under which the concept of a reason for action applies. What does reductive explanation assume? It need not assume the possibility of traditional conceptual analysis (which the thesis of constructivism would not provide, since the phrase “count F in favor of” makes embedded reference to that very concept). It does assume there is some basis of construction, which has at least the following features. First, the “capability for following norms of practical reasoning” must include nothing more than the intelligence, memory, critical faculty, sanity, minimal rationality, imagination, and
sympathy required for the patterns of thought and attention prescribed by the relevant norms. Second, the thesis must assume that “optimal conditions” can be independently specified; they will include nothing more than having the time, energy, experience, non-evaluative evidence and information about the (unconstructed) non-evaluative facts, and any other resources that would make a difference to any reasoning the relevant norms of reasoning prescribe. Third, constructivism must assume that there are indeed norms of practical reasoning which lead to particular, intuitively correct judgments about reasons for action, and that these norms have authority as a standard of excellent or defective judgment independently of the truth of the judgments to which they lead.

Since the first two assumptions make reference to the idea of a norm of practical reasoning, it is the third assumption that bears the weight of constructivist explanation. What needs to be shown, then, is that norms of reasoning can indeed lead a reasoner to particular, intuitively correct practical judgments without deriving their authority from the fact that they lead to those judgments, conceived as independently true. Rawls, Scanlon, and Korsgaard accomplish this by specifying a general method or procedure, which can be established as independently authoritative, and which can be followed with minimal or restricted exercise of judgment of the kind in question. Insofar as the procedure can be said to yield intuitively correct judgments, then, the theory can be said to explain, without circularity, why the resulting judgments are truths, rather than falsehoods.

Korsgaard and Scanlon also suggest procedural specification of this kind is essential for any constructivist theory. If this is correct, it is difficult to see how all practical reason judgments could be constructed. It seems unlikely that every question we might ask about moral and non-moral practical reasons could readily be answered by any
single procedure of judgment. It could still be that different kinds of practical questions call for different procedures, in which case each class of practical judgment might be constructed taken separately. But some kinds of reason judgment resist derivation from any method of judgment. Severe and absorbing bodily pain is presumably bad and to be avoided; but what informative method which did not require direct exercise of judgment could lead someone not already inclined to take pain as a reason to the conclusion that it is indeed bad?17

Why should procedural specification be necessary? We have little reason to think unspecified good practical reasoning, under optimal conditions, would always or often deliver judgments that are obviously in error. It is precisely a specified method that threatens to generate intuitively incorrect conclusions. To be sure, this will not indicate which judgments are true, rather than false. But this kind of “emptiness” is not automatically objectionable. Whether it is objectionable depends, at least in the first instance, on the aims of a constructivist theory.

Consider Rawls’s constructivism. Rawls supposes that we can independently establish the authority of original position reasoning (at least for matters of justice in the basic structure of society) and therefore treat the principles of justice as whatever principles this reasoning would lead to. He then argues for his favored principles, the Two Principles, on the grounds that they would be chosen by parties to the original position. But here Rawls chief aim—to justify a particular set of principles by something more than appeal to intuition—is substantive and meta-ethically neutral. For, the basis of the original position’s authority is open to either a realist or constructivist interpretation. Rawls’s own Kantian constructivist interpretation is that judgments made according to the Two
Principles are correct, because the Two Principles emerge from an independently authoritative method. But a Rational Intuitionist could equally accept the Two Principles, on the grounds that they would be accepted from the original position, and yet ground the original position’s authority in its tendency to deliver the independent truth about justice.

This suggests we should distinguish between substantive and meta-ethical constructivist theories. The aim of a *specificatory constructivist* theory is to justify particular first-order moral judgments or principles, by showing that they result from an authoritative form of reasoning. The aim of an *explanatory constructivist* theory is to explain how there could be truths or facts of the matter of a certain kind, by showing how those truths or facts can be explained as the output of reasoning which has its authority independently of any tendency to lead one to the truth. Of these only the first—specificatory constructivism—seeks to support claims about which *particular* judgments are justified. Given that aim, it is essential that the relevant reasoning be specified; the first-order judgments being defended will not have been justified, beyond appeal to intuition, if the reasoning in question requires those very judgments. The aim of explanatory constructivism, by contrast, is merely to explain how practical judgments could have an objective subject matter—how, that is, there could be a fact of the matter which one or both parties to a practical disagreement could be mistaken about. But a theory might well do this without saying *which* reason judgments are true. The task of saying which judgments are true, by engaging in substantive practical reasoning (perhaps according to a specificatory constructivist theory), can be delegated to first-order moral or practical theory.
Constructivism about practical reasons is, in the first instance, a form of explanatory constructivism, so procedural specification is not automatically essential. Even so, the norms of reasoning which provide a basis of construction must have two crucial features. The first may be called truth-independent authority: the norms must not depend for their authority as standards of judgment on the truth of any conclusions to which they lead. The second may be called determinacy: the norms must lead reasoners to particular practical conclusions. In the absence of a general, procedural specification, however, it can seem unclear how any norms of reasoning could have both of these features. Having either one can seem to preclude having the other. In other words, without procedural specification, constructivism about practical reasons is open to the circularity objection.

THE CIRCULARITY OBJECTION

In order to approach the problem, notice first that we do have an idea of norms of practical reasoning quite independently of our ability to specify those norms in general terms. Consider realism about practical reasons, either in the metaphysical form traditionally associated with Plato, Clarke, or Moore, or the more recent, minimal realism of Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Ronald Dworkin, Joseph Raz, and Russ Shafer-Landau. On a realist view, the truth about what reasons we have is determined independently of any reason judgments we do or would make. In that case, any reason judgment, no matter how well-reasoned and well-positioned, could possibly be false, at least in principle, simply for failing to correspond to the independent (metaphysical or non-metaphysical) facts about what reasons there are. But this does not seem a genuine possibility: when practical
reasoning is faultlessly carried out, and no further amount of time, energy, attention, non-evaluative information, or experience would lead one to revise one’s judgment, it would seem that one’s practical reason judgments cannot possibly be false.

If such “brute error” is impossible, constructivism would explain why. For then the truth just is the content of our ideally well-reasoned judgments. This is prima facie evidence in favor of constructivism and its assumption that there are independently authoritative norms of practical reasoning. It is not, however, conclusive evidence. Other views equally deny the possibility of brute error and yet do not seek explanation of the sort constructivism aims to provide. In particular, on one widely held kind of view, the truth about reasons and the norms of practical reasoning as we ordinarily understand them are interdependent. Our ideally well-reasoned and well-positioned judgments cannot possibly be in error, on this view. But what counts as good reasoning, or who counts as a good reasoner, is also not independent of whether particular reason judgments are reached, judgments whose truth is not wholly dependent on the output of good reasoning.

How might constructivism about practical reasons distinguish itself from an interdependence thesis? Formal norms of reasoning have the strongest claim to truth-independent authority. Because they count as a standard of judgment simply insofar as a judgment about practical reasons is being made, their authority does not depend on which conclusion one might reach in a particular case. Insofar as they do yield particular judgments, then, the truth of those judgments can be explained by appeal to the more general, authoritative norms that yield them.

The familiar charge of “empty formalism” is that there are few of these judgments. Reasoning guided solely by formal norms, at least in most cases, allows as equally valid
several possible, perhaps logically incompatible conclusions. To illustrate the familiar objection, consider a disagreement in which one party, A, judges that we have reason not to pollute the environment quite aside from its costs to human interests, while another party, B, judges that the cost to human interest is the only reason for environmental protection. We cannot assume that the disagreement results because one of A or B flouts some conceptual requirements on reason judgment. Each party could equally assume that reasons are essentially for agents, that reasons in one situation are equally reasons in any situation of the same kind, that situations cannot differ in kind because of a difference in the numerical identity of agents, and so on. Neither can the difference in judgment necessarily be explained because one of A or B has failed to reach his or her “narrow reflective equilibrium.” For if there are no constraints on how coherence or equilibrium is to be reached, each party might have maintained his or her contested belief in a process of reasoning, simply by revising any inconsistent intuitions or principles. It also will not suffice to suggest that one of A or B must lack non-evaluative information. For both A and B could, at least in principle, maintain his or her view in the face of all the non-evaluative facts. We can even insist on the Kantian requirement that there will never be reasons for an action or response that cannot be willed as the universal practice of every rational human being. Still, the disagreement between A and B, about whether the environment matters at all for its own sake, might well be about action that is both universally practiced and humanity-respecting.

In other words, if we limit our conception of the norms of reasoning to formal norms, then when ideally good reasoners do or would in fact agree, we cannot fully explain why agreement is reached on the basis of those norms (with the possible exception of some
moral disagreements precluded by formal Kantian restrictions); at least part of the explanation will lie in coincidence of circumstance or disposition. Might constructivists simply settle for constrained subjectivism? That is to say, might they concede that different brute reactions, across occasions or reasoners, give rise to different reasons conclusions, in which case the conclusions reached are at most “subjectively true” or “true for” a given reasoner? This may not be a large concession for constructivists such as Korsgaard who aim chiefly to characterize moral requirements. But it is crippling for the constructivist about practical reasons. To admit constrained subjectivism is to admit that constructivism does not ultimately explain how there could be fully objective truths about all kinds of practical reasons.

The circularity objection, insofar as it has force against explanatory constructivism about practical reasons, can be put as the claim that there is little alternative to constrained subjectivism short of admitting an interdependence thesis. In other words, insofar as the norms of practical reasoning have determinacy, their authority is truth-dependent. This objection is chiefly motivated by the difficulty of seeing how norms could be both determinate and truth-independent. It can also be buttressed by at least three suggestive considerations.

First, consider the guidance we follow in reasoning: When there is no general, authoritative procedure or procedures of judgment, are we not guided simply by the aim of reaching the independent truth about what reasons we have? To be sure, it will be a norm of reasoning that we are to reason carefully, conscientiously, with fair mindedness, or, more generally, that we are to reason well or rightly. But what does following such directives come to other than being on guard against things that lead one away from the
truth? Second, consider the *phenomenology of immediate judgments*: When one judges, say, that pain is to be avoided, is not the basis of this judgment, from one’s own point of view, its obvious independent truth? Is not one’s confidence dependent on the merits of the judgment made, dependent, that is, on the manifest badness of pain? Third, consider the *nature of practical authority*: In some cases we assume a person’s reason judgment can be trusted, without knowing all or many of his or her particular practical beliefs. But is not the basis for such authority the assumption that the person in question will very likely get things right?

Does the circularity objection succeed? Aside from these three suggestive considerations, which I will return to below, the objection turns on the mistaken assumption that the possible bases for (non-circular) construction are limited to either formal constraints on judgment, on the one hand, or bare sentiments, on the other. There is a third way. It was characteristic overstatement when Hume wrote: “when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.”

We also see our reactions as *appropriate* to a situation in practical reasoning, or, at very least, as potentially intelligible to others by careful articulation of the facts reacted to. To be sure, people intelligibly react in practical judgment to the same facts in quite different ways. And there are limits on defense of one reaction over another; often, we seem able to articulate the norms or standards that structure our reactions only indirectly, by arguing about particular features of the case at hand. But if there are indeed norms or standards involved—if there is such a thing as reasoning well or badly about the case at hand—then these norms may well provide a basis for constructivist explanation.
Even if we cannot specify the norms which guide our reactions in specific situations as a general method, we can characterize the general kinds of norms involved in any specific case, and provide general reasons why these norms could be said to have both determinacy and truth-independent authority. As I will explain the final two sections of my discussion, there is no reason, a priori, why situation-specific norms should not lead to particular, determinate conclusions; and such norms are no less likely, a priori, to have authority independently of the truth or falsity of any judgments to which they lead. Before turning to this, however, I need to address the prior and crucial matter of how norms that govern situation-specific judgment could count as norms of practical reasoning.

NORMS OF PRACTICAL REASONING

Practical reasoning is a process of consideration which issues in judgment. The process begins when one poses a question about how some agent is to respond, whether the question is posed anew, or as reconsideration of an initial or standing judgment. It concludes when a judgment is reached about what is to be done. Between these events, the process unfolds according to norms of thought, which structure one’s awareness of the facts of an agent’s situation and one’s reactions to the facts attended to. In general, the norms of thought have broad purview: they govern any way attention to the facts is brought to bear on one’s thinking about what is to be done. Specifically, if a defect in reasoning is a failure to follow some norm that appropriately governs one’s consideration of the facts of the case, then the range of ways thought may count as defective is not limited to “instrumental” failures to plan for obvious obstacles to a goal, or to notice the incompatibility of two intended courses of action. One can be careless, insincere, ill-
motivated, biased, unimaginative, unsympathetic, or woodenheaded in reasoning. Or, more important, one can underestimate the force or weight of certain factors, give weaker considerations priority over stronger ones, count facts in favor of a response they count against, ignore relevant features of a situation, overlook a crucial distinction or draw distinctions arbitrarily, be distracted by or fixated on irrelevant details, and so on.  

If practical reasoning is a process of consideration, it is not well characterized as a set of propositions and their relations. To say that the truth of a reason judgment is constructed, insofar as it is the conclusion of reasoning, is not necessarily to suggest it must be derived by arguments grounded in further reason judgments. In the case of Scanlon’s constructivism about moral wrongness, such further judgments—about reasons and reasonableness—may be available. Insofar as practical reasoning is a process of consideration, however, further judgments are not essential. One can begin the process of consideration simply by posing a question, say, whether a certain pain really is so bad. The process can come to a “conclusion,” after some (perhaps brief) amount of time, when one reaches the judgment that pain of that sort is indeed to be avoided. In the interim, one might examine more closely the facts of the case, exclude from one’s view certain facts as irrelevant, look for special cases and make comparisons, and so on.

Like all activities, practical reasoning is guided by norms. Although I will not specify any particular, situation-specific norms, we can distinguish the kinds of norms which guide case-specific reflection. With these general kinds in view, we can then characterize fairly clear-cut elements of practical reasoning.

Consider first someone who overlooks or ignores the difference between sentient beings and other living things, or someone who never thinks to consider how a situation is
viewed from another person’s point of view. This fails a *Norm of Attention Direction*: Among the innumerable manifest facts of the case, and the possible courses of response or action, one is to consider certain facts and possibilities. These kinds of norm dictate, for a particular case, which facts and possibilities one is to attend to.³⁰

Imagine, also, someone who gets bogged down in trivialities or fixated on irrelevant details. This violates a *Norm of Disregard*: One is to attend only to relevant facts and possibilities, that is, only to facts and possibilities to which a Norm of Attention Direction draws one’s attention. Other facts and possibilities are to be ignored.³¹

Suppose, next, that someone counts the painfulness of pain in favor of having painful sensations, or strangely counts the fact that his grave will not be flowered in two hundred years as a reason to set up a foundation that will flower his grave in perpetuity. Such a person may slight a *Norm of Favoring*: Among the facts that Norms of Attention Direction instruct one to pay attention to in a particular case, one is to count certain facts as favoring a particular response and certain facts as disfavoring it. These are norms that say how one is to so count relevant facts.

Consider, finally, someone who sees no reason to promote the interests of others at the slightest cost to herself, or someone who always gives small immediate benefits to himself greater weight than massive burdens in the near future. Such a person would violate a *Norm of Balancing*: Among the relevant facts in a particular case, which are counted for or against particular responses, one is to weigh or balance competing considerations. These are norms that tell one which of two facts to count as the stronger reason.
Of course, practical reasoning hardly involves the sequential steps of, firstly, screening out irrelevant factors, secondly, counting factors in favor of or against responses, thirdly, weighting competing factors, and finally, making a judgment about what is to be done. Actual reasoning usually proceeds piecemeal, even when there is ample time, energy, and capacity for attention. Consider, for example:

*Focusing.* It would be difficult to start practical reasoning by gathering and entertaining all of the facts or possibilities that could conceivably be relevant. Norms of Attention Direction will often require one to focus one’s attention on particular facts or possibilities—to imagine the deep influence of a plan on someone’s sense of meaning and self-worth and other projects, or to work out a heretofore uncharted possible course of action that promises greater benefits and lesser burdens. One will focus well only on “one thing at a time” and therefore postpone consideration of certain facts or possibilities to a later stage of reflection. On the other hand, this does not mean one is to survey the relevant considerations without counting them in favor of certain responses or balancing them against competing factors along the way. Without finding a way “through” the considerations, one may be left feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed.

*Filtering.* One’s practical reasoning may start with the weighing of considerations in accord with Norms of Balancing and only later be filtered by Norms of Attention Direction. In considering whether to cheat on one’s taxes, the benefits of a larger return may outweigh the small risk of being caught and the negligible loss to the public treasury. But upon further reflection, a Norm of Attention Direction may draw one’s attention away from any such benefits. The Norm of Disregard may “silence” reasons that the benefits of
cheating would otherwise provide, in the sense that one is to count them as “irrelevant” to what one should in this case do.

Articulating. Norms of Attention Direction can also aid the balancing of considerations, by allowing articulation of competing factors. If it seems clear that the case in favor of attending a party will clearly outweigh any case in favor of another boring evening at home, one will not need to get clear whether the reasons to party are reasons of fun and relaxation or of schmoozing, gossip, and self-promotion. One may have well followed a Norm of Favoring and counted certain facts in favor of one response without clearly identifying exactly which facts are relevant. On the other hand, in deciding whether one should become a physician or undertake a risky business venture, one needs to see the immediate costs, the relative risks, and the long-term benefits in rich detail. When considerations do point in different directions, assessing their relative force in accord with Norms of Balancing can require a more articulate understanding of what exactly the competing factors are. Being carefully guided by Norms of Attention Direction will help one achieve this by, for instance, allowing one to sort relevant from irrelevant factors.

Closing. Norms of Attention Direction may guide one’s thinking in reaching a verdict. What may keep one from embracing one’s provisional judgment to become a doctor instead of taking up the business venture may not be uncertainty about where the balance of competing reasons falls. One might be quite sure that the longer-term benefits under consideration will outweigh the shorter-term risks and burdens under consideration. What one wants to know is “Have I missed anything?” One wants to be sure one hasn’t ignored hidden risks or a better alternative—that one has attended to all of the factors to which Norms of Attention Direction would bring under one’s consideration.
DETERMINACY

So situation-specific norms plausibly guide the activity of practical reasoning. My remaining tasks are to show how such norms might have both determinacy and truth-independent authority. Consider first determinacy. Let us say that a class of norm is determinate in application if the norms apply simply because one is making a reason judgment, regardless of the particular features of an agent’s situation. Norms are indeterminate in application if they do not so apply. Let us also say that a class of norm is determinate in content if, when the norms do apply to reasoning about a situation, they together lead to a specific practical judgment. The norms are indeterminate in content when they do not lead to a specific judgment.

In these terms, formal norms are determinate in application but indeterminate in content. The present situation-specific norms, of Attention Direction, Favoring, and Balancing, are indeterminate in application; they guide one’s attention depending on what the given (unconstructed) non-evaluative features of an agent’s situation happen to be like. But there is no reason to suppose, a priori, that such norms are or must be indeterminate in content. Where P is the judgment that an agent S in situation X has some reason or sufficient reason to A, the network of such norms may, in effect, amount to a determinate norm of judgment: “In reasoning about S’s reasons in X, judge that P.” This does not reduce practical reasoning to knee-jerk assertion. As we have seen, a process of reflectively answering practical questions involves the interplay of norms central to Focusing, Filtering, Articulating, and Closing—forms of thought well within the purview of ordinary practical reasoning. To be sure, appeal to such norms would hardly advance an
argument whether P (one cannot refute the sadist by claiming it is a norm of good reasoning to judge that pain is bad). But, again, the aim of explanatory constructivism is not to justify particular claims. It is only to show how they could have an objective subject matter.

Insofar as there is an issue of determinacy, it is an issue not of content but application. Since situation-specific norms do not apply simply insofar as a reason judgment is being made, it may seem that practical judgment requires judgment as to which norms are to guide one’s consideration of a particular situation. This appearance is mistaken. As capable reasoners, we do not “decide” in reasoning what norms of reasoning to follow in the way we do decide by reasoning what judgment to make. Normally, we simply put our minds to the question what reasons a particular agent has and our awareness of the facts of the case by itself triggers the appropriate thought and attention. There may be a question how one could fully master the activity of practical reasoning, how one could come to be reliably guided by all appropriate norms of reasoning. But this question is not fundamentally different from the question how we become able to reason practically at all.

One cannot count as being engaged in the activity of practical reasoning, on some occasion, unless one’s thought and attention concerning some agent’s situation approximate compliance with a sufficient range of formal and situation-specific norms. Being capable of good practical reasoning is merely a matter of competence with or mastery of any further norms that structure the activity of practical thought.

With some qualifications, which I mention momentarily, what constructivism assumes can be put as a convergence thesis: any two people fully capable of excellent practical reasoning, who would over time have access to any non-evaluative information,
experience or other resources that would make a difference to the thought and attention
required by all norms of reasoning, would, if each followed the norms of reasoning with
perfect excellence, converge on the same practical judgment. When there is a fact of the
matter about reasons, and any two parties genuinely disagree about what reasons there are,
one party is, of necessity, either not reasoning about the matter, or not fully capable of
following relevant norms of reasoning, or poorly positioned to do so, or else ignoring or
violating some such norm.

The qualifications are, firstly, that we may well in some ordinary cases assume
there is no fact of the matter about reasons. According to constructivism, these are cases in
which the norms of reasoning are not determinate in content. Secondly, when there is no
fact of the matter, or when the reasons for action allow equally appropriate courses of
action, and yet some decision needs to be made, it may be that only the agent him or
herself, who must live with and be existentially defined by his or her choice, could
properly determine what he or she is to do.32 Otherwise, norms of reasoning, treated as
norms of thought, are not norms for the agent him or herself; they are norms for anyone
engaged in the activity of reasoning about what is to be done in an agent’s situation.

The possibility of convergence shows that, aside from formal norms and brute
reactions, there may, in principle, be determinate, situation-specific norms of practical
reasoning. It should be emphasized that this is a claim about the possible bases of
construction. It is a further question whether the norms that actually govern practical
judgment are indeed determinate in content. I emphasized above that I would not attempt
to settle this question. Yet it is worth noting how the actual determinacy of practical
reasoning might be defended against one relevant ground for doubt, the fact there is so
much practical disagreement. The qualifications just mentioned already allow for the
possibility of substantial variance in reasoning or practical belief across agents and
reasoners. Even when there is a fact of the matter about reasons, however, the
convergence assumption’s several clauses leave considerable room to account for
disagreement in any particular case. Disagreement normally involves some difference in
engagement in or the seriousness of reflection; in relevant information, relevant
experience, acquired expertise, and motivation; in skill and crucial powers of attention,
imagination, and completeness of perspective; in the influence allowed to unquestioned
belief; and so on. And even in the absence of such differences, disagreement can be
explained by direct or indirect appeal to some situation-specific norm. We can, for
instance, diagnose the putatively false beliefs of others (or our past selves) as the result of
having ignored or overlooked a crucial distinction, in violation of some Norm of Attention
Direction. A proposed explanation why someone makes the judgment he or she makes
may not resolve an actual disagreement, let alone convince a skeptic. But this is quite
different from the claim that the person’s judgment is false. Any proposed diagnosis of his
or her error will be subject to standards of interpretive plausibility that are not necessarily
met by having the better argument.

TRUTH-INDEPENDENT AUTHORITY

According to the circularity objection, if norms of reasoning are determinate in
content, as I have just suggested they might be, they must lack truth-independent authority.
In this final section, I show that this is not necessarily the case.
In general, how well the activity of reasoning is done can be independent of whether a conclusion reached in that activity is true or false. When someone is said to have ignored or overlooked a relevant distinction, the charge is that his or her making of the judgment is in some way defective, not that the proposition judged to be true is, in fact, false. A sufficiently lucky person might get bogged down in trivialities, ignore crucial distinctions, but still wind up with the practical truth. Conversely, even if we were to suppose that there were no true propositions about reasons, it would not follow that “anything goes” in practical reasoning. It would not follow, for example, that good reasoning could possibly include, as a Norm of Attention Direction, taking into account the number of planets when one is reasoning about whether to have soup or salad at dinner (barring the truth of astrology).

These possibilities show that there is a structural difference between a norm of reasoning and a truth about reasons. While the proposition about reasons, P, can be true or false, the norm of reasoning or instruction “judge that P, under such and such conditions” cannot be true or false, but merely followed, violated, or ignored. The realist or interdependence theorist can still argue that a norm will only count as a norm of practical reasoning insofar as it leads one to the independent truth. My claim is simply that this thesis requires an argument. It is perfectly coherent for the constructivist to assume, quite to the contrary, that determinate norms of reasoning have truth-independent authority. To deny this, without further argument, is to beg the question against constructivism about practical reasons.

Do the three intuitive considerations suggested above provide such an argument? The first appealed to the guiding role of the aim of truth. This, however, can simply be
admitted. Asking what to believe about one’s reasons for action is asking what is true about the reasons one has. But how is one to go about finding out what is true? By avoiding factors that lead one away from the truth, to be sure. But these factors can be understood as factors that interfere with or compromise the quality of situation-specific reasoning, as guided by the norms outlined above. The second consideration appealed to the phenomenology of immediate judgment. We do not often ground our confidence that pain is bad in conscious deliberation from any independent norms of judgment. This, too, can be granted. Situation-specific norms of reasoning are not usually a basis for conscious derivation of reason judgments for particular cases; they are simply followed in judgment, usually without conscious attention. Reasoning appears, from the reasoner’s point of view, as thinking about the facts of the case and what is to be done in light of them. When we consider whether a throbbing and absorbing painful sensation is bad and to be avoided, and we consider, “it sure hurts,” the upshot is not that we are responding to the independent, manifest badness of pain. It is rather that the norms of reasoning which guide us in taking pain to be bad are readily followed and transparent to us. The third consideration appealed to the nature of practical authority. It suggests that people gain practical authority merely by being very likely to get things right. If “getting things right” means reasoning well, this can also simply be admitted. If it means, however, “getting to the independent truth,” where “independence” is something other than the objectivity constructivism provides, then this simply begs the question against a constructivist theory.

This last point is a quite general one. Let us say that it is appropriate to count $F$ in favor of $A$ in one’s reasoning when (i) a fact $F$ is among those to which a Norm of Attention Direction would lead one to consider, and (ii) a Norm of Favoring would lead
one to count F in favor of an action A. Supposing one reasons in optimal conditions, and 
no other norms of reasoning apply, we then have the material equivalence: It is true that F 
counts in favor of A if and only if it is appropriate to count F as a reason for A. Now, the 
common ground between Euthyphro and Socrates, “an act is pious if and only if it is loved 
by the gods,” allows Euthyphro to claim that an act is pious because it is loved by the gods 
and Socrates to claim that it is loved by the gods because it is pious. Similarly, here there 
remains an open question of order of determination: one can claim either that F counts in 
favor of A because it is appropriate to count F in favor of A, or that it is appropriate to 
count F in favor of A because F counts in favor of A. If the order of determination is 
indeed an open question here, however, then constructivism is a non-circular explanatory 
thesis (even if it is not ultimately correct). The difference in order of determination just is 
the central contrast between constructivism, on the one hand, and either realism or an 
interdependence thesis, on the other. If the contrast is genuine, the question is not whether 
unspecified, situation-specific norms of practical reasoning could conceivably have the 
independent authority required of any basis of construction, but whether or not we should 
accept the constructivist interpretation.

One can of course argue that the contrast cannot be sustained. But when the 
coherence and possibility of constructivism is in question, constructivists need only play 
for a tie. Indeed, at first look, Euthyphro has the upper hand. If “F is a reason for A” is 
synonymous with “F counts in favor of A,” then being a reason will seem “response-
dependent.” Much as something will be disgusting or unlovely because we are disgusted 
by it or find it unlovely, F will count in favor of A because we count F in favor of A. The 
Socratic objection will be that we can be mistaken in what we count in favor of what. But
as we have seen, constructivism can give meaning to the idea that we *appropriately* count F in favor of A, independently of whether we actually do so on any particular occasion. The Socratic rejoinder will be that, in optimal conditions for practical reasoning, the explanation why we appropriately count F in favor of A is of a certain kind, namely, that, in fact, it is independently true that F counts in favor of A. But this comes to little more than bald assertion. To insist that we appropriately count pain as bad because it is *independently bad*—bad independently of our appropriate reactions to what makes it bad or to the facts properly counted against it—is far from obviously correct. What is obviously plausible is that we appropriately count as a reason the fact that the pain *really hurts*, the fact that we *intensely dislike it*, or the fact that it *is interfering with our lives*. And if constructivism is correct, all this is to say that the pain really is manifestly bad.

So constructivists can at least “play for a tie.” This hardly shows constructivism to be correct, or even that there is a presumption in its favor. It does, however, suffice for my chief objective, of establishing constructivism’s explanatory credentials. The possibility and coherence of a constructivist explanation of practical reasons should not be in question. The question, instead, is whether the necessary situation-specific norms do indeed govern practical reasoning. I cannot take up this further issue here, beyond the suggestive examples offered above. However, one final concern should be addressed. Our confidence that norms really could possibly have truth-independent authority may seem to depend on our sense that such authority can in some way be independently established. In closing, I therefore briefly outline two ways this can be done.

According to Korsgaard’s broadly voluntarist constructivism, norms of reasoning are explained and justified as essentially norms of choice or action.\(^{35}\) Because we have no
choice but to act or choose, and because in so doing we must treat ourselves as agents, we are committed to seeing ourselves as subject to any norms the fulfillment of which is constitutive of the activity of choice or action. The question of what such norms are, and whether they include norms requiring moral judgment, is the question what norms must be respected in order for us to maintain our practically necessary conception of ourselves as the agents of our actions.

I have assumed that constructivism can also take a broadly intellectualist form: norms of reasoning may essentially be norms of thought, which apply to and guide thought when we actively make reason judgments, whether or not we are engaged in action. An intellectualist approach will not explain the “normativity” of morality as directly as the voluntarist. While the voluntarist can argue that people must make moral judgments merely because they are engaged in action, the intellectualist cannot. Norms of thought will not necessarily apply when we happen to be acting unreflectively or unthinkingly, without engaging in reasoned judgment. There remains, however, a broader similarity: both voluntarist and intellectualist approaches can ground the idea of a norm of reasoning in a practically necessary self-conception and an associated notion of the authority of the self.36

The intellectualist can assume that, as agents, we must at some point make judgments about reasons and in so doing see ourselves as practically reasoning beings. In order to understand ourselves as practical reasoners, moreover, we must see our basic patterns of thought, attention, and reaction as guided, to some significant approximation, by norms of reasoning. If so, the norms of reasoning cannot be wholly divorced from reasoning as we actually carry it out, and we can come to conclusions about what the
norms of reasoning are without independent grasp of the truth, by engaging in practical reasoning and reflecting on that engagement. In the simplest kind of case, for example, we consider an action, attend, say, to its potential enjoyability, count this in favor of doing that action, and these reactions are stable under further reflection. When these conditions are met, we can presume that genuine norms of reasoning lead us to these reactions and the judgments implicit in them. Disagreements may well pose complications. When the complications can be overcome (in the ways suggested above), we are entitled to be confident that our implicit judgment is guided by one or more norms of reasoning, which might be articulated upon careful reflection. In this case, our confidence has truth-independent authority: it will not depend on the independent judgment that the norms in question have their status as norms of reasoning because they have or will lead us to the truth.

---

1 This paper is greatly indebted to T. M. Scanlon, Christine Korsgaard, and James Pryor, who supervised my doctoral dissertation on constructivism at Harvard University. I have also benefited from comments or relevant discussion with Alyssa Bernstein, William Bristow, G. A. Cohen, Peter de Marneffe, Tom Kelly, Penelope Maddy, Philip Nickel, Robert Nozick, Derek Parfit, Sophia Reibetanz, Tamar Schapiro, David W. Smith, and Nicholas White, as well as discussions with the Harvard Moral/Political Workshop, the Harvard Center for Ethics in the Professions, my graduate seminar on constructivism at the University of California, Irvine, and audiences in the Philosophy Departments of California State University, San Bernadino, and the University of Southern California.

2 Because talk about practical reasons has a descriptive “surface grammar,” I take it to be apt to truth or falsity. Following Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), I take this to be sufficient for “minimal truth.”


The original position is designed specifically for this context. It is the result of specifying for the basic structure two abstract “ideas of practical reason”—the “well-ordered society” and “free and equal moral person.” See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 90 and "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," p. 520.
Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*. His constructivism is clear on p. 2, where he claims that, beyond characterization of moral reasoning and the kind of importance moral judgments have for us, “no interesting question...remain[s] about the ontology of morals – for example, about the metaphysical status of moral facts.”

In Ibid., Ch. 1, Scanlon treats the notion of a reason as an explanatory primitive. He does suggest in a footnote (note 48, p. 380) that his account ultimately amounts to what Korsgaard calls “procedural realism” (*The Sources of Normativity*, p. 34-7). But he does not characterize his position about judgments about reasons as constructivist when addresses the topic of constructivism, in either his “Constructivism: What? and Why?” or his “Metaphysics and Morals.”


Which is not to say that any constructivist theories must promise the objectivity of all values. Scanlon is able to adopt a hybrid view (see note 5) because the aims of his moral constructivism do not require taking a position on whether all values or reasons are or can be constructed. I do not mean to deny the possibility of a hybrid view. Insofar as such a view is motivated by the perceived impossibility of constructivism about all practical reasons, however, I am denying this particular reason in its favor.

As influentially argued in Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*.

I suggest in my “The Objectivity of Values: Invariance without Explanation” (unpublished ms.) that once such judgments are put in conditionalized form (the judgment “I have reason to eat ice cream” becomes “if I want ice cream, I have reason to eat some”), they make the same claim to objectivity as moral judgments, a claim, roughly, to being true or false regardless of any possible differences in attitudes. In conditionalized form, a possible difference in the relevant attitude (the desire for ice cream) changes the applicability of the practical judgment, not its truth-value.
Here and below I will assume the widely accepted view that moral, prudential, and instrumental judgments are species of reason judgment. A foundational account of reasons for action therefore accounts for values of these other kinds. Although the view has been widely defended, its recent defenders include Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Christine Korsgaard, "The Reasons We Can Share: An Attack on the Distinction between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996c), Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, ch. 2.

I develop this conception objectivity in my “The Objectivity of Values: Invariance without Explanation” (unpublished ms).

I take up this problem in my “Constructivism as a Foundational Theory” (unpublished ms.).

I have in mind what Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (pp. 44-8) calls “superassertability.” Here the notion applies to not only non-evaluative information, as according to Wright’s characterization, but any resources required for following norms of practical reasoning.

A demand for procedural specification is suggested by Korsgaard’s contrast between “substantive realism” and “procedural realism,” in *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 34-7. Scanlon, in his “Constructivism: What? and Why?”, makes a similar assumption. He treats constructivism in mathematics as his paradigm, assuming that moral theories less able to specify relevant modes of reasoning are less aptly characterized as constructivist theories. If mathematical constructivism is thought to essentially involve a specified method, then constructivism about practical reasons is not analogous to it. A closer analogy is what I call “specificatory constructivism” below, which, as in the mathematical case, seeks to justify particular conclusions by deriving them from specified reasoning. What I call “explanatory constructivism” does not have this aim. I take it that the title “constructivism” is nevertheless apt here, simply because truths are seen as a function of certain reasoning.

Here and below I do not mean to assume any view about the badness of pain. It may instead be bad simply insofar as it is something one may dislike, or something that it interferes with one’s life. In this case, either these reasons why pain is bad or other examples of basic reasons, such as our reason to choose
meaningful projects, or pleasant activities, will suffice to make the point that we do not obviously rely on a
method to make these kinds of judgments.


19 Rawls's “political constructivism” also illustrates the difference, although the case is complicated by
the “political” character of the theory. See Political Liberalism, pp. 103-4.

20 The difference parallels the now standard act-utilitarian distinction between the principle of utility
as a criterion of rightness and as a decision procedure.

21 A first-order account can find support in the (substantively uninteresting) constructivist theory,
when foundational questions arise. Both the first-order and foundational theory can find a common
background within the methodology of “wide reflective equilibrium,” and yet remain quite distinct in their
contents and motivating rationales.

22 Perhaps the clearest formulation of the view is found in Derek Parfit, Rediscovering Reasons
(unpublished ms.). The thesis is similar in Thomas Nagel, The Last Word (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1997); Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," Philosophy and Public Affairs 25,

23 Except if the realist simply defines good reasoning as reasoning that successfully leads to the truth.
In that case the implication is that best-reasoning by our lights could fail to count as genuinely good
reasoning, since it may fail to deliver the independent truth. On the other hand, some of the “realists” just
mentioned, such as Nagel, may not allow the possibility of “brute error.” Nagel, for example, writes: “I do
not believe that the truth about how we should live could extend radically beyond any capacity we might
have to discover it…” (Nagel, The View from Nowhere, p. 139). Once this denial is added, the resulting
view is better classified as either an interdependence or constructivist thesis, both of which I discuss below.

24 Interdependence theses have been advanced, although not directly as theses about practical reasons,
by Mark Johnston, "Dispositional Theories of Value," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,
Supplementary Volume 63 (1989), "Objectivity Refigured: Pragmatism without Verificationism," in Reality,
Representation, and Projection, ed. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
One might insist that formal norms, by themselves, could possibly lead to determinate practical conclusions, at least in most cases. I do not mean to deny this. But I think this is more clearly possible with a different, situation-specific class of norm, which I consider below.

Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, emphasizes the role of “reflective endorsement” and living up to one’s “practical identity.” Aside from the formal requirements she defends, her account is broadly similar to Bernard Williams’s neo-Humeanism. When appeal to or modification of the Humean underbelly of Kant’s own view is inadequate, Kantians, or other constrained subjectivists, can also adopt a partial “error theory.” Rawls sometimes associates constructivism with partial skepticism, as when he writes: “Justice as fairness, as a constructivist view, holds that not all the moral questions we are prompted to ask in everyday life have answers ("Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," p. 350, Italics mine). See also Scanlon’s “qualified skepticism” in Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," p. 118, which includes qualified endorsement of the error theory of J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).


This conception of reasoning finds support in traditional appeal to the “practical syllogism”—appeal, that is, to a set of normative propositions or statements which stand in deductive relations and entail a judgment about an agent’s reasons for action (usually a judgment that there is sufficient reason for some action). Following Harman, I take it this kind of characterization has little to do with the activity practical reasoning (Harman, *Change in View*). First, propositions do not influence how a person
reasons on a particular occasion; only acceptance of a proposition does. Second, even if we assume acceptance of a set of normative propositions, there is no sense in which the premises “lead” one to reason from one set of propositions to another. Even if a set of accepted propositions deductively entail some further proposition, this is not to say one should make that judgment as a conclusion of reasoning. For all deductive relations tell one, one might equally have reason to reject that proposition and also revise one’s belief in one or more of the accepted premises.

Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 77ff, discusses such norms for moral judgment under the heading “rules of moral salience.” The class of Norms of Attention Direction is more general, including moral and non-moral forms of practical judgment.

This norm is similar to, but more specific than, Harman’s “General principle of clutter avoidance,” according to which “It is not reasonable or rational to fill your mind with trivial consequences of your beliefs, when you have better things to do with your time, as you often do.” Gilbert Harman, *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) p. 20-22.

Although this judgment may itself be a conclusion excellent practical reasoners would agree on and therefore an objective practical truth according to constructivism.

When the aim is to answer the moral skeptic, as in Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, an argument from formal norms of judgment may be better suited. The present account is not incompatible with such an appeal. I claim merely that it is not necessary to characterize one form of explanation constructivism seeks to provide.

For discussion of such requirements of plausibility, see Alan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), Ch. 9.

See especially Korsgaard’s Locke Lecture on Self-constitutions.

I hope to develop this parallel elsewhere. For present purposes, it should be emphasized that an intellectualist may or may not suppose that a conception of the self guides the substance of situation-specific reflection.