How Is It That Anything Matters?: A Defense of Metaethical Constructivism Against Nihilism

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How Is It That Anything Matters?:
A Defense of Metaethical Constructivism Against Nihilism

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Philosophy,
University at Albany, State University of New York
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Abstract

A contemporary view of nihilism about values asserts that there is no way to rationalize one normative assessment over another. Metaethical constructivism holds that this is mistaken, seeing that values are non-objective and our standpoint from the practical point of view supplies us with our own set of substantive values. As long as our normative assessment about a given situation follows logically from the practical point of view, then we can say that we have a true and justified normative assessment. The contemporary view of nihilism holds that our values and judgements are arbitrarily ranked, but this is mistaken for at least two reasons. One, our values are subjective in the sense that they pertain to us individually and are not grounded in any fact about the world. Second, as long as the path from our motivational set to our decision is deduced logically, then the outcome is justified. Asking why we came to one conclusion over another is ill-formed, it matters not what the outcome was, but how we arrived at that outcome. As such, this view of constructivism can sidestep the nihilistic argument about non-objective values.

Keywords: Constructivism, Values, Nihilism, Normative judgement, Subjectivity, Anti-realism
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As rational creatures, we take things to be valuable. Questions about the nature of values, how values influence our action, and how our values differ from one another are not new questions in philosophy, but contemporary ethics and metaethics have offered unique perspectives about these questions. There has been recent discussion on metaethical constructivism, but many philosophers question whether this view is really a metaethical view or if it offers something unique to ethics. Because of this, there is very little agreement about what constructivism in metaethics actually is. For this paper, I’ll be using Sharon Street’s account of metaethical constructivism as a starting point. Constructivism is an attractive view, and I argue that it does contribute something useful to metaethics. This kind of view holds that the truth about any statement of what I ought to do comes directly from our perspective of beings who value one thing or another in the world. Adopting a constructivist view allows us to account for variations in judgement across people and cultures as well as an explanation for why we choose to do certain things. This version of constructivism is an anti-realist approach to value, because I argue that values are non-objective properties which surface in virtue of our *attitude* that certain things in the world are valuable.

A familiar worry about anti-realist theories, especially constructivism, is that they lead to nihilism. If the truth of our assessments comes from the idea that values are real properties, but not rooted in something beyond our attitudes about them, how can we think that these assessments really matter, or that their “being true” is something that we should care about?

My goal in this paper is to develop a version of constructivism that ultimately sidesteps the concerns about nihilism. I will argue that our standpoint as rational creatures who primitively hold the concept of *valuing as such* can give us good reason to adopt the view that our judgements about what we ought to do are in fact meaningful.
I’ll start by addressing the realism and antirealism debate in metaethics. This will give us good background information for my antirealist approach in constructivism. Metaethical realists hold that properties (what kind of properties is where realists diverge from each other), are real and mind-independent (Fisher, 2011). A realist about values would hold that values are in some sense really in the world and exist separately from our engagement with them. Realism is attractive for some, because it would allow for claims to be truth-apt according to features about the world. For example, suppose realism is right and we find out that lying is morally wrong. Someone who then claims that lying is morally wrong would be appealing to facts about the world, and the claim that lying is not morally wrong would simply be false. This example shows realism about moral properties, but the same can be applied to values and other kinds of properties that we question in metaethics. The anti-realist, on the other hand, would hold that properties do not exist independently of our engagement with them and that they are non-objective, meaning they don’t have some kind of existence out in the world. Crucially, anti-realist claims can still be truth-apt like realist claims, however, what makes them true comes from something other than independent features of the world. Making this distinction explicit allows us to better understand the kind of constructivism that I argue for in this paper, where I take an anti-realist approach to values.

Constructivism is largely a theory about the ontological features of our normative assessments and judgements about the world. Undoubtedly, we are creatures that value certain things in the world. Our substantive values are non-objective and surface as a product of our attitude towards the world in which we have the ability of valuing as such. Whatever values someone holds determines their motivational set: the things that contribute towards the judgements and assessments we make. Substantive values and their motivational sets differ
between persons which accounts for the variety that we see in normative judgements. Constructivism also holds that these kinds of normative assessments are truth-apt, and what makes them true is that they “follow as a purely logical and instrumental matter from a given set of values in combination with the non-normative facts” (Street, 2010, p. 367).

Constructivism is an attractive view because it allows for us to account for value without appealing to facts about the world, but it seems to face some serious nihilistic worries. At some point or another, many of us have questioned whether there is really reason to think that things matter or have value. These types of worries can surface in different ways, like thinking that all of the things we pursue as humans, such as happiness and health, have no real basis for motivating us and don’t matter or have value whatsoever. After all, if there aren’t some objective features of the world that make these kinds of things matter, then is there any justification for my thinking that they matter? These kinds of worries surface in constructivism because of the idea that values are non-objective. Even if we think things matter, is that really enough to prove to us that they do matter, despite not being real properties of the world? I argue that although objective value is non-existent, we still have value as a formal feature of our consciousness as beings which is sufficient for us to think that things really do matter, and the way in which we value things in a meaningful way gives us the justification for making a normative judgement.

In “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?” Street (2010) describes constructivism as the idea that there is “no normative truth independent of the practical point of view” (p. 366). An understanding of what the practical point of view represents is necessary in order to grasp what constructivism really claims. As humans, we take certain things in the world to be valuable without a philosophically relevant judgement about what value is. Certainly, we recognize the patterns and feelings of what it is to value some thing or another even without an
analysis of what value means. This is the practical point of view; our attitude that there are things in the world which have value. In metaethical constructivism, the practical point of view is relied on as a “formal characterization” (Street, 2010, p. 369). What this means is that the practical point of view is taken as a perspective itself that does not recognize any substantive values, but rather demonstrates what it is to have the attitude of valuing something. This is where the anti-realist approach comes in; the idea that there are no values independent of our attitude of valuing something. Furthermore, constructivism approaches the anti-realist project by appealing to values as non-objective features of the practical point of view.

Within the constructivist debate we find discrepancy about how we come to have substantive values. This kind of discussion can generally be framed through the Kantian constructivists and the Humean constructivists. The general constructivist position, as I have stated, is that the truth of a normative claim is derived from its following from the practical point of view given a formal characterization. The Kantian argues that certain substantive claims do follow from the practical point of view given a formal characterization, but the Humean disagrees. Street argues for the Humean version of constructivist, as do I. The Humean version argues that “the standpoint of valuing as such commits one to no specific substantive values. Instead, the substance of one’s normative reasons must ultimately be supplied by the particular, contingent set of values with which ones finds oneself alive as an agent” (Street, 2012, p. 41). This means that the practical point of view doesn’t entail substantive value automatically, but rather the formal features (what it takes to be a valuer at all) of our practical point of view in combination with the specific values of the agent in question will produce substantive values. Throughout this paper, I refer to substantive values quite frequently. I argue for substantive values via the Humean version of constructivism, and as such my references about substantive
values assume that they surface as a product of the practical point of view given a formal characterization in combination with the particular values, ends, etc. that the agent in question holds.

Throughout this argument, I rely heavily on the idea that normative assessments can be understood through constructivism. In order to get this point across, it will be helpful to lay out some features about normative claims and what they really are. Normative concepts can largely be thought about as something which calls for, necessitates, or counts in favor towards a certain end in view (Street, 2017, p. 126). But as Street rightly points out, normative concepts cannot be fully explained through normative language. Similar to our concept of value, normative concepts are “irreducible and indefinable” (Street 2017, p. 126). Normative concepts in this sense are a primitive feature of our being human. Just as we have an understanding pre-reflectively about what it means to value something, we also have a concept of what it is for some set of circumstances to call for some kind of action, behavior, etc.

I’ll use a perceptual example here to illustrate what I mean when I refer to these kind of concepts as primitive. We have an understanding about what it is for something to be red without being aware of the formal features of color like wavelength and light intensity. We also have this same kind of understanding of what it means to call for, necessitate or count in favor toward an end. Normative concepts are simply a function of our conscious experience as creatures that value. I argue that there is a causal relation between values and normative assessment, such that values determine our motivational set and offer normative reasons, judgements, and assessments.

What reason do we really have for accepting constructivism, and namely the practical point of view? Well on one hand, we have to account for the motivation to think that values guide us. But this still doesn’t give us reason for accepting constructivism, only a primary
motivation for considering that constructivism could be one of many possible solutions to our
questions about value and action. What I will argue in this paper is that if we accept the practical
standpoint as such, then it follows that these substantive values have causal relations to our
normative judgements. Further, I will argue that we ought to not be concerned by questions
posed by nihilists, as constructivism offers us a way to understanding meaning about the world
as a fundamentally intuitive process harbored by any creature with the practical standpoint. The
takeaway from this paper is that constructivism offers us a genuine and real way of
understanding evaluative judgement.

Most of this argument is dependent upon the idea that values are the driving force of
normative judgement. In order to defend this, I’ll use Street as a reference to the argument that
value really is the factor that makes our judgements so attitude-dependent. When we make a
normative assessment, we’re making an assessment about what’s necessary in order to reach an
end.

There’s a clear conceptual difference between valuing and desiring. This is worth
pointing out, as the two are sometimes used interchangeably. The Korsgaardian example which
Street uses to explicate this difference is this: suppose that a Civil War soldier must have his leg
amputated without an anesthetic in order to live. The soldier wants to live, so he decides to have
the amputation. By no means, however, does the soldier have a desire to have his leg amputated,
especially without anesthetic. Ultimately, this example attempts to show that there are more
fundamental considerations than desire that we make during a normative assessment. Street
(2012) characterizes value as something with a “much broader array of conscious experience
than is the attitude of mere desiring” (p. 44). Evaluative discourse is an especially complex
attitude about the world. Rather than focusing on the ends which we desire, we should focus on
the much richer attitude about the world that we characterize as value.

So far I haven’t said anything about how morality might or might not play a role in our
normative judgements. Having the idea that morality is itself an entity for which our assessments
are based upon is certainly a genuine commitment. But morality is just one type of value for
which we can make all sorts of normative assessments. We can broadly divide up values into
moral and non-moral values. I make this distinction because moral evaluations are only one way
in which we reach evaluative judgements. I make plenty of normative assessments each day that
don’t rely on moral values, yet they are still genuine and are generally formulated through the
same ways in which we make moral assessments. Rather than focusing on the ways in which we
make moral assessments, this paper focuses on the way in which we make normative
assessments.

Now that we have established the complexity of the attitude of valuing, one might
wonder why we have reason to accept or believe these values. I’ve given reason to think that we
have values, by appealing to this kind of attitude as primitive, and argued that they are the
driving force of normative assessment. But what reason is there to think that we should accept
these values as such? Are they justified in providing a basis for our normative assessments? As
Street (2012) points out, these types of questions are ill-formed. Asking whether we have reason
to follow values makes a conceptual mistake about the nature of values. The question is ill-
formed because it robs us of the standard of what it means to have the attitude of valuing. Street
points out that we make a mistake in asking this question because you are asking a question
which simultaneously strips the central idea from it. She says that “on a constructivist view there
are no independent standards to fix an answer to this question; this is the rejection of realism”
(Street, 2012, p. 51). Any question about reasons or normative assessment must be answered from the perspective that we do indeed have a practical point of view. This proves useful in arguing that some of our substantive values do exist contingently upon each other, but that ultimately an understanding of normative evaluation comes not from any particular substantive value, but rather the point of view that we value things as such.

One way to establish the anti-realist perspective on values is to look at the argument for error theory from John Mackie. Mackie’s goal is to show that moral judgments are systematically false. I think Mackie gets this wrong, but he does offer an argument against objectivity that will be useful for our understanding of constructivism. For the purpose of this argument, I will focus on Mackie’s argument against objectivity. The first reason against objectivity that Mackie offers is the argument from relativity and the second is the argument from queerness. From these, Mackie reaches the conclusion that for moral values to be objective, they would need to be “independent from us, accessible to us and have some intrinsic reason-giving feature” (Fisher, 2011, p. 42). Further, Mackie argues that “if moral values existed they would give us reason irrespective of our psychology” (Fisher, 2011, p. 44). Mackie gets this idea right; there are no reasons independent of our psychology, thus moral values can’t exist objectively. If we apply this to values in general, rather than just applying it to moral values, we see that any kind of value doesn’t exist objectively. This is because we have all sorts of reasons to do things; money, health, happiness, etc. and these values are non-moral values. If I didn’t value money, I wouldn’t have a reason to do something that only benefited me monetarily. These reasons don’t exist if I don’t have the subsequent value. Thus, we can see how values in general are non-objective.
Non-objective values supports our claim for constructivism in the following ways. I argue that the truth of normative claims comes from their being entailed from the practical point of view, but it’s clear that people often make different normative assessments in similar situations. Non-objective values can serve as an explanation for why different people come to different normative judgements. I argue that values are non-objective only because I hold that their existence is contingent upon occupying the practical point of view. Holding that values are non-objective allows us to account for the variety among motivational sets which ultimately supports the claim that different normative assessments could be equally true.

Some nihilistic concerns arise when considering the antirealist argument for constructivism. One of the key points to the constructivist position which I argue for relies on the claim that value is a non-objective property. Mackie and other error theorists argue that if we take it to be the case that nothing matters objectively, and consider that the only way to matter is to matter objectively, we reach the conclusion that nothing matters (Kahane, 2016). To think that for something to matter is just to matter objectively is the realist perspective. What I aim to show is that constructivism offers us resources for avoiding nihilism through the justification of our substantive values and normative assessments. Things don’t matter because of objective value, and in fact there is no objective value. But things still matter, and they matter subjectively; thus introducing the constructivist argument. Still, it’s hard to let go of the worry of nihilism. Many would argue, and I feel sympathetic to the view, that subjective value just isn’t a fulfilling conclusion for our questions about the nature of values. It does, however, give us sufficient grounds to make one choice over another. What’s really conceptually at stake in nihilism is that there is something lacking from the world that makes our claims, beliefs, values, etc. meaningful and true. Some nihilists claim that if we accept this, then pessimism or despair would follow. I
argue against a specific kind of nihilism in this paper, but I first want to address the pessimistic view.

Some thinkers who did early work on nihilism such as Camus, Nietzsche, and von Herbert, thought that if nihilism is true then we will fall into some kind of depressive state about the world (Kahane, 2016). After all, if nothing matters, why would I have reason to keep on living the way I do? This type of thought has intrigued many nihilists and followers of nihilism, but it is largely a misconception about what really follows if we take nihilism to be true. Kahane (2016) conceptualizes this by asking that “if nothing matters, how could it matter that nothing matters?” (p. 331). That is to say, how could it be unbearably bad that there’s absolutely nothing that is either good or bad? (Kahane, 2016). Furthermore, even if nihilism was true we still wouldn’t have sufficient ground for believing, thinking, or feeling that life is devoid of meaning.

I’ve discussed the standard view of nihilism which, in short, is the idea that if things don’t objectively matter, then they don’t matter at all. Street’s (2017) account of constructivism provides us with good reason not to be convinced by these kinds of nihilistic worries, by appealing to the idea that things do matter, but “their mattering depends on their mattering to beings like us” (p. 147). The idea behind this is the rejection of realism, but the adoption of a view in which things can still be meaningful in virtue of them being meaningful to us. The argument is that meaning does not exist independently from us, but this does not give us reason to think that there is no meaning whatsoever. Meaning just comes in the form of our attitude towards the world. So, Street’s view of constructivism gives us an effective response for this standard concern from nihilism.

In recent work, Paul Katsafanas develops a contemporary view of nihilism which poses different concerns about evaluative judgement. It’s not clear if Street’s view of constructivism
can address this, but I’ll develop the constructivist view such that it does respond to this kind of concern.

The main idea of Katsafanas’s argument is that something subjective, like a value or a reason, doesn’t give us sufficient grounds for a justified normative judgement. Street’s view and defense of constructivism doesn’t say anything about how we could respond to this form of nihilism because she doesn’t address the idea that we value some things above others. The worry here is that constructivism might not say anything useful about how our values interact with each other. Some value things like their career over money, family over work, or the environment over human sustenance. Whatever the case may be, each person fundamentally has certain things that they value over others. In “Nihilism and the Abundance of Values,” Katsafanas (forthcoming) questions if we can really have a justification for the way in which we have this ranking of values. Katsafanas offers a unique view of nihilism in which there is not a lack of value to guide us, but rather all too many values to really justify one choice over another. Just as constructivism is vulnerable to the standard form of nihilism, Katsafanas’s version poses us with a similar issue. I’ll argue that although this might seem worrisome, constructivism actually does offer us a way to understand, or justify, the types of things which Katsafanas is skeptical of.

Katsafanas’s argument comes in six parts. I’ll start by offering my own example, and use Katsafanas’s argument to break it down.

Suppose that I can’t decide between cooking dinner at home and ordering out. To reach a conclusion, I might consider the following things: that making dinner at home would be healthier, ordering food would support a local business, cooking at home would be cheaper, and ordering food would be less work for me. I make these normative assessments based on the different values I have. I value health, which leads to the normative claim that I ought to cook at
home. I value small business economy, which leads me to the normative claim that I ought to order out, and so on. Ultimately, I decide to cook at home. The values that led to the normative assessment that I ought to make food at home superseded any other normative outcome.

I’ll use this example to lay out Katsafanas’s argument. First, in order to reach a decision about what I should do, I consider what normative claims apply to the situation. Second, I recognize that there are multiple normative claims that could apply to the situation at hand. In this case, I consider normative claims about health, economics, money, and effort. The third premise is that each of these claims yield a different outcome. This particular example offers only two possible outcomes, but the idea is that there is typically more than one outcome when considering different normative claims. The fourth premise states that in order to reach an “all things considered” judgement, the agent will assign some weight to the different normative claims. In this example, I assess that my values about health and money outweigh my values about economy and effort. Crucially, the nihilist accepts the fifth premise in which there is no meaningful justification for assigning the relative weight of one value over another. The conclusion that Katsafanas offers from this argument is that we lack justification for coming to an “all things considered” judgement about what we ought to do. If there is no justification for our normative judgements, then nihilism is warranted since it isn’t clear that there is something that makes them meaningful. Katsafanas’s view is different from standard nihilism because he argues that we do in fact have values, but these values don’t provide us with sufficient reason for thinking one assessment is better than another.

An approach like this to nihilism offers a genuine concern for certain aspects of value theory. Specifically, this brings forth the concern that evaluative judgements about normative claims have no significance if we can’t offer a compelling reason to think that one evaluative
judgement is better than another. I propose that we can better understand the path to evaluative judgement through metaethical constructivism and offer a response to the worry about the abundance of values which Katsafanas suggests.

I used the previous example to explicate Katsafanian nihilism. This example can also be used to show that the path to a judgement about what to do in a given situation is best understood through constructivism. Our practical point of view as a formal characterization encompasses certain things about the world which we value, thus the practical point of view gives us our individualized motivational set. The practical point of view encompasses the attitude of any person who takes something to be valuable. As such, this kind of attitude is primitive and my substantive values are not reliant on any objective feature of the world. When I come to the conclusion that I should cook at home rather than order out, it is because this decision is logically deduced from my substantive values, in which I ultimately determine that cooking at home has better results than ordering out.

A key point in this argument is to understand the causal relations between the practical point of view, substantive values and one’s motivational set. Because the practical point of view merely is the attitude of valuing, it follows that each person has substantive values if they occupy the practical point of view in combination with having at least some values. There would be no attitude of valuing if there is nothing substantive that a person values, and it would be wrong to think that someone could occupy the practical point of view but not value any particular thing in the world. Once you establish that the practical point of view in combination with an agents particular values entails certain substantive values, we can see how these values are causally related to one’s subjective motivational set. What you value influences your motivational set. If I value charity, then I have motivation to donate money. I might also have motivation to volunteer
my time. Crucially, I must point out that this motivation does not ensure a subsequent normative judgement. I might not actually donate money because of some other reason. Still, it’s possible that I continue to have the motivation to do so without really going through with it. The main point here is that your own substantive values motivate your subsequent normative judgements.

The following diagram illustrates a sort of web of values. I take it to be the case that many of our values are derivative of other values. This will be useful in understanding the causal relation between values and motivation. This also serves as useful to show how some values are given to us as a formal characterization. What I mean here is that since we occupy the practical point of view, we have a formal characterization of at least some values. \( V_1 \) is supposed to illustrate a particular value that one might have considering their practical point of view. While it may be true that these fundamental values are abstract or non-distinguishable, let’s imagine that there exists a recognizable fundamental value. The purpose of the following explanation is not to take a position on metaphysical aspect of values, but rather to show the relationship between them.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
V_1 \\
/ \\
V_2 / \\
\_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \\
V_3 V_4 V_6 V_7
\end{array}
\]

**Figure 1**

*Relationships between values*

Suppose person X values the environment (\( V_1 \)). Because this value leads us to more instrumental values, \( V_2 \) might be something like a value for climate activism. Then, \( V_3 \) could be something like a value for freedom of speech. Now, we can make the causal relation that person X values
freedom of speech, because she values climate activism, because she values the environment. Putting this in normative terms, person X has the normative assessment that she ought to read the First Amendment, so that she can be educated about the limits of climate activism, because she ultimately wants to protect the environment to the best of her ability.

I take it to be the case that each person has many sets of these value webs. Person X values her mental health as well as the environment. From the same logical setup of the previous argument, we could come to the conclusion that she ought not to read the First Amendment because she would not enjoy it, so she should do something more enjoyable with her time, because doing more enjoyable things will help her mental health.

So, Katsafanas might ask us how to pick between the two outcomes. I think that rather than asking how we pick, we should ask what we pick. Person X will come to a conclusion about this scenario; she either won’t read the First Amendment or she will. Let’s imagine she doesn’t read the First Amendment. Merely choosing this over the opposite outcome gives us the explanation for why the choice is justified, as long as she is right about what her values are. She chooses to not read the First Amendment because she likes the outcome better, thinks it will do more good than the alternative, etc. Whatever the reason may be, person X shows a value for mental health over the environment, and choosing it is the explanation for why the choice is justified.

But justification isn’t really the right way to phrase it. Justification entails that there is good reason to believe something is genuinely valuable over another. Belief, however, is not applicable to the question at hand. Just as normative truth depends on normative claims being entailed from the practical point of view and subsequent values, the so called “justification” is just a product of whether the normative claim really is entailed from the practical point of view
as a formal characterization. Katsafanas’s argument fails to recognize that a set of possible normative claims isn’t arbitrarily ranked. He is wrong in assuming that there is some objective standard to which values can be ranked, when in fact there is not since values are non-objective. It is often the case that we are misled about the outcomes that we desire which can make it seem like there is no real reason for choosing one normative claim over another. What I mean is that in any scenario, my judgement of one normative claim to be better than other is in fact meaningful, simply in virtue of the fact that I think it is better, if this judgement follows from my substantive values. What gives something “justification” for my judgement that it is more valuable than something else is just the attitude that it is better given the formal characterization of my values as such.

To be clear, there mere fact that I think one choice is better than the other is not sufficient for a true normative judgement. What entails a true normative judgement according to the Humean perspective is that my assessment comes rationally and logically from my substantive values. It is often the case that I might be mistaken about what my substantive values are. One might worry though, that according to my view, if one thinks something is more valuable to them, then it is. This is not the case. Just as I can be wrong about what is best for me in a certain situation, I can also be mistaken about the way in which I value certain things over others. This mistake can come different places; maybe my emotions flood my judgement, and so I decide to order food because I’m too hungry to wait for something to cook. I take it to be the case that we often have this kind of mistake about our values, and subsequently make false normative judgements. My point is that in order for us to make a true normative judgement, this judgement must follow from our actual substantive ranking of values.
What about the cases where we’re really not sure what to pick? This seems to be Katsafanas’ main concern; that we don’t have any way of deciphering what the best normative judgement would be if we’re not sure about our values. Recall that a main idea of Humean constructivism is that normative truth is entailed from the practical point of view given that an agent has at least some values. I emphasize this because Katsafanas’ worry seems to go awry in really determining what’s at stake when we make a normative judgment. In the case where I choose to cook at home rather than order out, as long as my judgement is reflective of my motivational set, the choice is justified. Even if I had chosen to order out, this normative judgement still reflects my motivational set. Either normative assessment would be true. Still, this doesn’t give us reason to believe one is better than the other. What I aim to make clear here though is that constructivism doesn’t make any assumptions about the implications of the outcomes of a normative assessment. Rather, constructivism gives us reason to assess the normative truth of these kinds of judgements. I argue that this does offer us a way to justify a choice. Rather than considering the implications of an outcome while assessing justification, the kind of justification that I argue is really just a form of normative truth. As long as your normative assessment is true, i.e. is a product of your motivational set, then by virtue of merely picking one assessment, the choice is justified.

One might still worry, however, that this kind of justification argument relies merely on the subjective motivational set of values that someone holds. This might also be worrisome because it doesn’t provide any way of standardizing judgements, nor does it give us sufficient reason to think that what person X chose to do was better than what person Y chose to do in a similar circumstance. The claim that there is no way to distinguish between person X and person Y is right, but this needn’t worry us. Normative claims are subjective in this sense, and their truth
is dependent on whether they are entailed from the motivational set of an individual agent. Normative claims do not have truth independent of the practical point of view. Thus, we adopt the internalist perspective on normative claims; that is that normative assessments are dependent on a “sound deliberative route...from the subjective motivational set of the agent...in question” (Street, 2017, p. 131). To be more precise, if nothing in my motivational set tells me to perform action A, then I ought not to perform action A even if others might think that I still have reason to. It would be a mistake to try to characterize one person’s actions as better than someone else’s, seeing that everyone has a different motivational set. Any claim that values one set of normative outcomes over another is simply a judgement based on the subjective motivational set of the person making that claim. Saying “person X had a better normative judgement than person Y independent of any subjective motivational set, including my own” is a claim that mistakes the idea of value for something that exists independently in the world. Value exists dependently on the attitude of valuing, thus the practical point of view.

What does it mean to value something, and how do these values influence our judgements? These are some of the questions I have aimed to discuss in this paper. I find value theory to be extremely intriguing because values greatly influence how we act in any given situation. In most circumstances where I’m urged to make a judgement, I seem to employ at least some substantive values. I’ve argued that we can use a version of constructivism to explain the ways in which we fundamentally value certain things over others by appealing to the idea that non-objective values carve out a path to true normative judgement. I outline Street’s defense of constructivism against a standard form of nihilism, and develop this idea further to articulate the justifications for how we reach one normative assessment over another. The practical standpoint and the attitude of valuing at least some things in the world entails substantive values in an agent.
These substantive values are ranked somewhat abstractly, meaning we can be wrong about them, but the idea is that if a normative judgement follows rationally from the way in which they are ranked, then this normative judgement is in fact true. Since I argue that values are non-objective, asking how they are ranked is an ill-formed question because it misinterprets what it is to have the attitude of valuing as such. This is Katsafanas’s mistake; he assumes that there is some standard to which values can be ranked but in fact there is not, seeing as values are non-objective. I’ll admit that this line of reasoning does imply a sort of relativist stance on the issue; but defending relativism would be a separate project from the context in which I argue for constructivism. The important take-away is that normative judgements can be true, and what makes them true is that they are reflective of our own motivational set such that this motivational set is derived from our substantive values via the practical point of view. This kind of conclusion thus responds to the worry about arbitrarily ranked judgements, such that they are not arbitrarily ranked and the truth of one claim over another is dependent on its following from our substantive values.
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