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Ph.D. Program in Political Theory

Constructivism: Metaphysical Not Political

ABSTRACT

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Ph.D. Thesis

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Cycle XX

Constructivism is said to be a new and promising approach to moral and political theory. Nevertheless there are no precise statements of it. Many theories are defined as constructivist or attacked for being constructivist. But most of the time, those theories are so different from one another that is not clear whether there is a unified approach that one can really call constructivism. As a result, before entering the contemporary debate on moral and political constructivism, I want to introduce its general, intuitive idea, in order to get a general definition and a better understanding of what it is about.

Constructivists claim that moral norms or principles of justice are justified (namely, there are reasons for endorsing those principles as guidelines and employing them in our normative evaluations) when they are issued by a suitably specified procedure of construction. This procedure is thought as a device that allows for the selection of valid normative principles.

Constructivists share moral realism's aim of a robust notion of objectivity: indeed, both the constructivist and the realist admit the possibility of objective moral norms or principles of justice. But the realist and the constructivist disagree about the kind of independence of us the subject matter of moral and political theorizing shows, and about what makes objective our moral claims. While realism requires strong commitments to a mind-independent order of moral facts or properties that exists independently of us, constructivism aims at ontological parsimony about these facts or properties. Constructivists claim that moral facts or properties exist, but they depend on our conception of them. In this sense, constructivism amounts to an anti-realist position.

Non-cognitivist approaches to normative theory make the same objection against the metaphysical commitments that realism implies. Consider theories that oppose realism like moral expressivism or error theory. Moral expressivists claim that our moral evaluations are expressions of some non-cognitive attitudes. Expressivists give up the standard notion of objectivity of evaluative practices and the universality of judgments. Indeed, different people might have different attitudes towards the same object. And they might as well have different attitudes towards the same action or political institution. Accordingly, the same action can be considered right for some and

wrong for others. What makes things right and wrong, or just and unjust, depends upon process of attitudes formation, influenced in their turn by processes of socialization, cultural elements, geographical circumstances and so on. Error theorists, on the other hand, claim that even if our moral discourse has some realist pretensions, that is just an illusion. If there were something like moral facts or properties they would be of a kind really different from other objects in the world. Moral realists have to prove how it is possible for such bizarre ethical entities to exist.

Constructivists share expressivists' anti-realist worries about the metaphysical extravagance of moral realism. They agree with expressivists on the fact that judgments do not refer to a pre-given order of moral properties. But constructivists do not renounce to the project of a cognitivist-objectivist account of moral and political theorizing. Constructivism represents an anomalous position since it accepts a cognitivist claim (there are facts of the matter about morality) and an anti-realist claim (facts of the matter about morality are worked out by a function of our practical reasoning) at the same time.

Whether or not it is possible to keep these two claims together depends upon the definition of the procedure of construction and its criteria of objectivity. Here, the problem does not consist in defining what makes correct moral principles. As said, it is the procedure that makes moral claims correct. Rather, the issues are, first, how a procedure is able to yield justified principles, and, second, what makes a procedure the correct one for yielding justified principles. They are different problems, even if they are related.

The selection of a certain procedure has a bearing on the kind of principles we get, and, consequently, the objective status of the moral claims we are going to make. Principles are valid if yielded by a correct procedure. There are different strategies to justify procedure of construction, as well as different forms of constructivism. The great variety of constructivism worked out in recent years makes impossible to give a complete overview of this approach. Indeed, we can have procedures embedding theoretical considerations (such as the coherence among the elements of the overall system of thoughts), empirical considerations (like factual circumstances in which agents

perform morally relevant actions), or a combination of them. In this dissertation, I take into consideration the most prominent examples of constructivist theory – or those so considered. My intention is not to provide a full analysis of all the possible constructivist theories, but rather to argue that constructivism is the most tenable strategy for justifying our normative claims in moral and political theorizing.