



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

# ALIGNING WITH THE GOOD

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## Aligning with the Good

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IN “CONSTRUCTIVISM, AGENCY, AND THE PROBLEM of Alignment,” Michael Bratman considers how lessons from the philosophy of action bear on the question of how best to construe the agent’s standpoint in the context of a constructivist theory of practical reasons. His focus is “the problem of alignment”: “whether the pressures from the general constructivism will align with the pressures from the theory of agency” (Bratman 2012: 81). He thus brings two lively literatures into dialogue with each other. This is laudable. However, I shall argue that the considerations Bratman brings to bear from the literature on action do not support his conclusion that evaluative judgments are not constitutive of the agent’s standpoint in the context of constructivism.

### 1.

Bratman’s focus is Sharon Street’s (2008) Humean metaethical constructivism. On this account, the fact that a consideration is a reason for an agent to do something is constituted by the fact that the judgment that this consideration is a reason for this agent to do that thing withstands reflective scrutiny from the standpoint of the agent’s own evaluative judgments.<sup>1</sup> My desire to dance is a reason for me to go to the dance party just in case and because my judgment that this desire is a reason for me to do so withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of my evaluative judgments. This is a *constructivist* account of practical reasons because facts about reasons for action are constructed through the process of reflective scrutiny, as opposed to dependent on normative facts that are prior to and independent of this process.<sup>2</sup> It is a *metaethical* constructivism because it does not take any judgments about reasons as given – in principle, at least, all normative judgments are proper objects of reflective scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> And it is a *Humean* account because the constructed normative facts are contingent on the particular constitution of the

<sup>1</sup> Street puts the view in terms of “normative” judgments as opposed to “evaluative” judgments. But she often refers to a suite of attitudes, of which normative judgments are a part, as “evaluative attitudes.” (See Berker (2014: 216, n. 2) on this point.) Since I will follow Bratman in taking Street’s to be a “Watsonian” view (see below), I will stick with the terminology of value throughout to refer to what is supposed to constitute the agent’s standpoint. On Watson’s view, the agent’s standpoint is constituted by her commitments to the *worth* of various things. (See, esp., Watson (1975: 215).) But I will occasionally talk of “normative judgments” when I mean to refer to both evaluative judgments and judgments about reasons. (They are not obviously the same thing.)

<sup>2</sup> The contrast here is with a realist account, according to which mind-independent normative facts ground facts about which reasons an agent has.

<sup>3</sup> The contrast here is with a “restricted” constructivism that takes the truth of certain normative facts as given and partly constitutive of the grounds for reflective scrutiny.

agent's standpoint – what reasons one has depends on the content of one's set of evaluative judgments, however unique it may be.<sup>4</sup>

Since my concern here is with Bratman's objection to Street's proposal that the agent's standpoint is constituted by the agent's evaluative judgments, I will put to one side certain issues about how, exactly, we are supposed to understand the process of reflective scrutiny. It is enough to work with the basic idea that an agent can take her judgments about the reasons she has to do various things as objects of reflection and consider how they mesh with her judgments about what is worthwhile. To illustrate, suppose I judge that dancing is worthless. This evaluative judgment will undermine my judgment that my desire to dance is a reason for me to go dancing, and so my judgment about this reason will not survive reflective scrutiny.

Now, since this is a metaethical constructivism, my judgment about the worth of dancing is fair game for scrutiny, and it may turn out that the thing to do is to repudiate my commitment to the worthlessness of dancing, rather than to revise my judgment about my reason to go dancing. In this scenario, it might turn out that, from the standpoint of my non-repudiated evaluative judgments, my desire to go dancing does survive scrutiny.

Neurath's boat is an apt metaphor here. I can scrutinize any of the elements of my set of normative judgments, but always from the standpoint of evaluative judgments that I do not, at that time, call into question. And a set of judgments that at one time served as part of the basis for my reflection may now itself be the object of scrutiny. It is, thus, possible for one to actively change one's set of evaluative judgments, and this may ground changes in one's judgments about reasons and their correctness.<sup>5</sup>

The core idea of Street's view is that the correctness of my judgments about reasons depends on my scrutiny of these judgments from the standpoint of my evaluative judgments. Let us turn now to Bratman's criticism of this claim.

## 2.

Bratman distinguishes between two kinds of account of the agent's standpoint. The first he calls "Watsonian," referencing the influential account of free agency developed by Gary Watson (1975), which takes the agent's standpoint to be constituted by her values. Street's view is of this first kind. The second kind of account is "Frankfurtian" because, following Harry Frankfurt (1988; 2004; 2006), it takes the agent's standpoint to be constituted

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<sup>4</sup> The contrast here is with a Kantian constructivism that takes the standpoint of all rational agents to have at least one element in common.

<sup>5</sup> This is one reason why Bratman's (2012: 91-92) appeal to the fact that we can be alienated from certain of our evaluative judgments does not pose a problem for Street's view. The possibility of repudiating one's former values is a precondition for active participation in changes in one's values. And we do not want to rule that out. (For more on this point, see Mitchell-Yellin 2015.)

by volitional commitments. Unlike evaluative judgments, Bratman claims, these Frankfurtian commitments do not bring with them intersubjective commitments to correctness. To illustrate, consider an example Bratman borrows from Sartre of the young man who is torn between staying home to tend to his sick mother and leaving to join in the resistance. He need not take his decision to join the Free French to involve any commitment to the claim that for someone else similarly situated it would be a mistake to choose otherwise, nor must he, even implicitly, aim at social convergence on the judgment that his decision was correct. He may simply have made a personal choice without taking it to have implications for others. His choice may have been grounded, not in his judgments about values or reasons, which do seem to entail intersubjective commitments to correctness, but rather in conative elements of his will, such as his higher-order volitions or policies about how to deliberate.

The challenge to a Watsonian view such as Street's is to account for the apparently undeniable role that Frankfurtian commitments play in structuring our practical deliberation, while simultaneously maintaining that the agent's standpoint is constituted by her evaluative judgments. This seems difficult to pull off because evaluative judgments appear to entail intersubjective commitments to correctness that Frankfurtian commitments do not. This is what Sartre's case is supposed to show. But if that does not do the trick, then think of your love for your children (or anyone else). Presumably, you do not think that others would be mistaken if they failed to love your children as you do; nor do you take yourself to be aiming at effecting intersubjective convergence on your kids' lovability. You simply love your children, and your love for them helps to constitute the standpoint from which you make judgments about values and reasons. Playing Legos is worthwhile because that is what your kids like to do with you, and you take yourself to have reason to get up early in order to see them before school. Thus, your love for your children (at least partly) structures your practical standpoint. And it seems that we cannot make sense of a standpoint shaped by your love for your children simply in terms of evaluative judgments because this would require introducing unwarranted intersubjective commitments to correctness.<sup>6</sup>

The Frankfurtian challenge that Bratman articulates seems quite forceful. The insight behind the challenge is that the agent's standpoint is (at least partly) structured by elements that do not entail robust intersubjective commitments to correctness. But, in the end, the challenge is unsuccessful. It centers on the claim that Frankfurtian commitments do not entail the intersubjective commitments to correctness that evaluative judgments do. As I shall now argue, this central claim, properly understood, is false, and there is

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<sup>6</sup> An anonymous referee for this journal has suggested that we might make sense of this case in terms of judgments about agent-relative value. This seems to me to be a very interesting alternative to the line of reply I pursue here. There may be several (potentially compatible) ways in which Street might avoid the sting of Bratman's Frankfurtian challenge.

a way of construing the agent's standpoint as constituted by evaluative judgments that is consistent with the insight behind the challenge.

### 3.

There are more worthwhile pursuits than can be fit into a single life; there are more valuable things than one person could possibly value.<sup>7</sup> I judge that an ascetic life of meditation on a mountaintop is worthwhile, but it is just not for me. These considerations suggest that we need some way of marking the difference between judging something to be valuable and valuing it. Call an agent's commitment to something, when she values that thing and does not merely judge it to be valuable, an *evaluative commitment*. An agent's evaluative commitments will involve a proper subset of her total set of evaluative judgments.

What makes the difference between judging something valuable and valuing it? Let us borrow an account from Samuel Scheffler (2011).<sup>8</sup> To value something involves four related tendencies: (i) to judge it valuable, (ii) to be emotionally attuned to it, (iii) to see oneself as having reason to be emotionally attuned to it and (iv) to have certain motivations. Though I judge that the ascetic lifestyle is valuable, I am not motivated to practice it and find it appropriate that I am not particularly sad that it does not seem to be in the cards for me. Though I exhibit one of the tendencies constitutive of valuing the ascetic lifestyle, I fail to exhibit any of the other three. Thus, my judgment that the ascetic lifestyle is worthwhile is an element in my set of evaluative judgments but is not an element of any of my evaluative commitments.

Bratman claims that evaluative judgments come with intersubjective commitments to correctness.<sup>9</sup> And he contrasts them with Frankfurtian commitments in this regard. But now consider this claim in light of the dis-

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Scheffler (2011: 27) and Frankfurt (2004: 13). I borrow the meditation example from Frankfurt.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace (2013) develops the thought that valuing, in Scheffler's sense, amounts to a certain kind of attachment with interesting implications for our practical lives and sentiments.

<sup>9</sup> There is extended discussion of this point in Bratman (2007b, esp. 151-54). But there is a sense in which that discussion seems too narrow: It focuses narrowly on *comparative* evaluative judgments. It is not clear that the Watsonian theorist is best understood as claiming that the evaluative judgments that constitute the agent's standpoint are comparative. The evaluative judgments constitutive of the agent's standpoint are about the worth of things, but not necessarily their comparative worth. The most plausible thing to say (though I do not have space to argue for it here) seems to be that the evaluative judgments constitutive of the agent's standpoint are of the form "X is worthwhile" not "X is more worthwhile than Y." The comparative judgments may be understood as derivative on the non-comparative judgments. Elsewhere, I have characterized evaluative commitments as ends ranked in terms of worth. (See Mitchell-Yellin 2014.) It seems we would do well to think of non-comparative evaluative judgments as providing the stockpile of potential ends that are ranked in the formation of the agent's evaluative commitments. And we would do well to think of comparative evaluative judgments as derivative on the agent's evaluative commitments.

inction just introduced, between evaluative judgments and evaluative commitments. Two points stand out.

First, it seems that evaluative judgments do not entail any relevant intersubjective commitments that Frankfurtian commitments do not also entail. To see this, consider a distinction between practical commitments, which structure one's deliberation about what to do, and theoretical commitments, which structure one's deliberation about what to believe. In light of this distinction, it seems that Bratman's Frankfurtian challenge is best understood as focused on practical intersubjective commitments to correctness. These are the ones that help structure the agent's standpoint in relevant ways. Is there a difference between what Frankfurtian commitments entail and what evaluative judgments entail with respect to practical intersubjective commitments to correctness?

It seems not. Consider the parallels between the following cases. While I do not value the ascetic lifestyle, I judge it valuable. And this seems to commit me to thinking that everyone, myself included, should respect this lifestyle.<sup>10</sup> We should not prevent others from pursuing it. And I seem committed to trying to achieve social convergence on this point. It is not all the same to me if the ascetic lifestyle is outlawed. Similarly, Sartre's young man may not be committed to thinking that it would be wrong for someone in his position to choose to stay with his ailing mother, but he does seem committed to thinking that everyone should respect his choice to join the resistance. And he seems committed to trying to achieve social convergence on this point. If his friends and family protested, he would surely plead his case and not simply throw up his hands or change his mind. Thus, it seems that my evaluative judgment and the young man's Frankfurtian commitment entail the same practical intersubjective commitments to correctness. Call them commitments to respect.

There does seem to be an obvious difference between the intersubjective commitments to correctness entailed by evaluative judgments and those entailed by Frankfurtian commitments. My judgment entails the commitment that others would be incorrect to judge otherwise. But this is a theoretical, not practical, commitment, and not an especially onerous one at that. It would be too much to claim that others would be incorrect were they to fail to make this judgment. The topic of asceticism might never cross their minds. It does seem appropriate to claim that, were the topic to occur to them, they should not make the contrary judgment, that this lifestyle is worthless. And it also seems appropriate to hold them to norms of respect with regard to this value. They should not prevent people from pursuing this lifestyle. But my judgment that the ascetic lifestyle is worthwhile does not seem to entail a commitment to anyone's structuring her practical life around this value. I need not think that others should aim at engaging in this lifestyle.

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<sup>10</sup> On the claim that values rationally require respect, and the distinction between this and engagement, see Raz 2001.

And my commitment to the correctness of my judgment does not generate any ends or projects of my own. It does not even entail that I adopt the ends of making others aware of the possibility of meditating on mountains and convincing them that it would be a worthwhile thing to do.<sup>11</sup>

The upshot is this: Evaluative judgments may entail more intersubjective commitments to correctness than Frankfurtian commitments, but the difference is merely theoretical, about what judgments not to make, and not practical. The relevant intersubjective commitments to correctness are practical, and in this sphere both evaluative judgments and Frankfurtian commitments entail the same commitments to respect.

Perhaps the source of these commitments to respect is different in the two cases. In the case of evaluative judgments, one might think that it is the content of the judgment that brings the commitment to respect in tow. The concept of worth entails the relevant commitments to respect. In the case of Frankfurtian commitments, perhaps the source is the standing of the one whose commitment it is. We are obliged to respect the determinations autonomous agents give to their wills. These two options are not exhaustive or exclusive. And anyway, the issue seems to be beside the point. The Frankfurtian challenge turns on the claim that Frankfurtian commitments do not entail the same intersubjective commitments to correctness as evaluative judgments. The issue is whether there are the same commitments, not whether they are explained in the same way. And I have argued that, with regard to the commitments at issue – practical ones – the entailed intersubjective commitments are the same.

Notice a second point about the relevance of the distinction between evaluative judgments and evaluative commitments. The insight behind the Frankfurtian challenge is that our wills are structured by elements that are distinct from evaluative judgments and do not entail practical intersubjective commitments to correctness. I have been arguing that it is wrong to account for this insight in terms of Frankfurtian commitments because they entail the same practical intersubjective commitments to correctness as evaluative judgments. But it does seem that evaluative commitments can do the trick. Evaluative commitments do not entail any more practical intersubjective commitments to correctness than are already bound up with the evaluative judgments they involve. I value the life of an academic philosopher. But this does not mean that I think someone like me who chose, instead, to meditate on a mountaintop would be making a mistake. Nor am I committed to

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<sup>11</sup> I take the claims made here about the commitments entailed by evaluative judgments to be consistent with the basically internalist picture suggested by Watson (1975). As he puts it, the agent's "valuational system" necessarily overlaps with her "motivational system." In other words, evaluative judgments are necessarily motivating. This leaves open the nature of these motivations. One thing I am claiming here is that they need not be motivations to pursue or promote the object of the evaluative judgment. Rather, they may simply be motivations to respect and protect it. Evaluative commitments, on the other hand, do seem to entail further motivations to pursue and promote the things one values.

achieving social convergence on the value of philosophy. It is enough that others respect and do not interfere with my pursuit of one among many valuable careers. But these commitments to respect are already accounted for by my evaluative judgment that the life of philosophy is worthwhile. My evaluative commitment does not add further intersubjective commitments to correctness.

#### 4.

These reflections suggest that the central claim behind the Frankfurtian challenge, properly understood, is false. Evaluative judgments do not entail more practical intersubjective commitments to correctness than Frankfurtian commitments. Moreover, if we construe the agent's standpoint as constituted by those evaluative judgments that overlap with the agent's evaluative commitments, we are able to capture the Frankfurtian insight that our practical standpoints are structured by individual commitments that outstrip our judgments about what is valuable. And we can do so while maintaining that evaluative judgments constitute the agent's standpoint.

But why would we want to do that? What is so important about holding on to the claim that evaluative judgments constitute the agent's standpoint? In the context of Street's metaethical constructivism, one advantage is that it allows for the process of scrutiny to operate on normative inputs. It is a normativity-in/normativity-out process. This allows the view to maintain its metaethical ambitions and avoid a nonnormative reduction or appeal to fundamental normative facts. Bratman recognizes that answering his Frankfurtian challenge would seem to require important concessions in this regard. If the foregoing argument is cogent, however, Street need not make any such concessions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> There may, however, be reason to think that Street's view requires other important concessions. For example, Michael Ridge (2012) has argued that Street's view collapses into a more familiar metaethical subjectivism, something like the view developed by Bernard Williams (1981), according to which an agent's reasons are a function of her desires. If so, this raises questions about why, precisely, Street's view is constructivist – Williams's view is not thought to be – and in what sense it is supposed to be a distinctive metaethical view. Examination of these issues would be interesting, and it may even be worth considering whether the distinction between evaluative judgments and evaluative commitments, which I invoke on Street's behalf in response to Bratman's Frankfurtian challenge, might be useful as well in responding to Ridge's concerns. Unfortunately, I cannot consider these issues here. (I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to mention them.)



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