Stephen Engstrom, The Form of Practical Knowledge

Universality and Humanity in Practical Knowledge: Kant’s Formulas of the Categorical Imperative and Engstrom’s Interpretation

Stefano Bacin

In the very crowded field of the literature on Kant’s practical philosophy Stephen Engstrom’s recent book stands out as a highly original reading that strikes the reader as an often persuasive outlook on much-debated topics. Engstrom argues that Kant’s practical philosophy re-affirms and strengthens the core thoughts of classical moral cognitivism, and is to be seen as belonging to a tradition rooted in ancient and medieval ethics.Engstrom does not directly compare Kant’s theory with its antecedents (that would arguably require not uncontroversial readings of the moral theories of such authors as Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas), nor he intends to investigate the mediations that may have allowed Kant to connect to that tradition. Engstrom’s analysis focuses on what makes of Kant’s approach a radically new variant in that tradition. On this account, Kant’s theory is a form of non-realist cognitivism born of the spirit of rationalism, re-invented as practical cognitivism. Kant’s basic move would be the re-interpretation of the core of morality as specifically practical knowledge, and every significant novelty in his moral philosophy would follow from this central thought. If we project Engstrom’s interpretation of Kant onto the 18th-century debates, Kant’s approach looks not merely like a defense of moral rationalism against sentimentalism, but a defense of moral rationalism against its own weaknesses as well, or against the flaws of preceding variants of it.

What does it mean that Kant focuses on the practical character of moral knowledge, though? To summarize very briefly Engstrom’s detailed analysis, practical knowledge differs from theoretical knowledge in that practical knowledge is intended to have an efficacy concerning its object. This definition would be easily misunderstood without a further specification, though, that Engstrom underscores much carefully. The efficacy of practical knowledge lies not merely in the production of the intended

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2 Ibid., p. vii.
3 Ibid., p. 25n.
4 See Ibid., p. ix.

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external object, but in the production of it through the subject; practical knowledge is thus essentially self-determination of the subject. In these terms Engstrom renders Kant’s insistence on choice as a defining moment of practical knowledge, in contrast to mere causation. Engstrom recalls only briefly important details of how Kant redefines the notion of the practical, in clearly polemical terms against common usage, that he regarded as misguided. Kant aims precisely at an appropriate understanding of the peculiar efficacy of practical knowledge when he argues that what is properly “practical” is to be separated from what is to be called “technical.” Kant’s point is that the latter notion should be used to denote cognitions that are applied to bringing about some external product and are “efficacious” in the common sense of the word, while “practical” is rather to be called a cognition that gives grounds for a choice. “Practical” is thus, in Kant’s vocabulary, a predicate to be applied specifically to maxims and to what has to do with “the determining grounds of the will.”

Moving from the central thought of practical cognition, Engstrom develops an interpretation of the main features of Kant’s moral philosophy in a dense and very rich analysis that is impossible to discuss here in its entire scope. My remarks will focus on a central piece of it, namely on the interpretation of the main variants of the categorical imperative, which deserves closer attention for several reasons. The formulas stated in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals are both a crucial and highly controversial step in Kant’s argument for the categorical imperative. From Engstrom’s perspective, furthermore, they are a terrain where the practical cognitivist interpretation confronts the attempts to attribute to Kant a form of value realism, especially because of the appeal to humanity in the second formula. A further reason to look closely at Engstrom’s reading of the formulas of the categorical imperative, finally, is that he approaches them in a quite unusual way, that deserves to be underscored. Indeed, the structure and the method of the book are not less original than its main thesis. While it would be obvious to develop an interpretation beginning from an analysis of the relevant texts and extracting from them the philosophical substance, Engstrom first provides a general reconstruction of the basic tenets of Kant’s position and only afterwards comes to consider the texts more closely, in the light of the preceding reconstruction. This does not mean that Engstrom develops his reading moving from a position having nothing to do with Kant’s writings, trying to read it into them. On the contrary, the entire reconstruction is grounded on an impressive and very precise knowledge of Kant’s corpus. Indeed, Engstrom’s approach does follow the pattern of Kant’s arguments in *Groundwork II* in one central feature: As Kant brings in

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5 See Ibid., pp. 120-122.
6 See Ibid., pp. 54-55.
8 Id., *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, vol. 5, p. 15; see e.g. pp. 42 and 46. (Quotations from the second *Critique* are taken from: Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, edited and translated by M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
the first two formulas moving from a definition of the will, similarly Engstrom investigates first Kant’s theory of the will as capacity of practical knowledge, and thereby prepares the examination of the formulas. Engstrom appears to think that, since these extraordinarily difficult pages seem to resist any direct solution, if we just look at the *Groundwork’s* arguments for the categorical imperative and its formulations, we face too many interpretive issues to be able to grasp the philosophical substance in a consistent reading. Engstrom takes thus a path opposite to the one of the increasingly numerous commentaries on the *Groundwork*, notoriously Kant’s most commented work. It is tempting, then, to look into Engstrom’s reading and compare it back with the texts that we often have to struggle with, and see how it might help in understanding them.

One basic issue for every attempt to make sense of the formulas stated in the *Groundwork* concerns Kant’s controversial claim about their equivalence. Kant declares that they are to be seen as “fundamentally [im Grunde] the same.” He thereby reaffirms the first sentence introducing the categorical imperative (“There is therefore only a single categorical imperative”) and makes an important point against preceding theories that had proposed multiple principles of morality. (Kant has here especially Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in mind, but his remark affects other positions as well, for instance Richard Price’s pluralist intuitionism.) Nevertheless, even interpreters sympathetic with Kant’s theory regard the formulas as not equivalent and read them as principles with different substantive content. Engstrom, instead, does not call the equivalence claim into question, but regards it as a key to the interpretation. Assuming the equivalence leads Engstrom to make his first interpretive point: he suggests that the three main variants are to be interpreted regarding the point of the third one as already implicit in the first two. That may sound uncontroversial, but I take the point to entail the leading thread of Engstrom’s reading. On that assumption he

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11 Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, pp. 437-438, see also p. 436.


13 See e.g. *Id.*, *Moralphilosophie Collins*, in *Id.*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 27, p. 266.


is able to recognize an advancement in the enumeration of the formulas, as a process of making a thought explicit, which would explain why Kant is talking of a progression on this regard. At the same time, this allows Engstrom to highlight a continuity through the variants as different expressions of the same basic thought. Interpretations that are not willing to accept Kant’s equivalence claim can account for these further claims not just as easily.

Engstrom stresses that the formula of universal law is to be regarded as the main variant of the categorical imperative, and presents his book as a thorough defense of it. The first variant is central insofar as it presents universality as the form of every maxim. What is relevant here, though, is to point out the role of the first formula in the progression, and to see how it can be interpreted as substantially equivalent to the other ones. On Engstrom’s reading, the formula of universal law underscores a first pole of the form of practical knowledge, namely what he calls objective universality, that is, the universal validity of a maxim regarding every possible circumstance of action. One may object that Engstrom, in contrast to other interpreters, downplays the difference between the formula of universal law and the formula of the law of nature. But in fact the latter is actually even more explicit in pointing to the direction suggested by Engstrom’s reading, insofar as it emphasizes that the maxim should be apt to become a law of nature “by your will.” It is quite clear, thus, that here Kant cannot just aim at expressing a purely objective requirement of universality, but wants to stress that the operation of the will (here still in the singular) is in itself bound to the acceptance of a universal necessity. That is precisely what leads to a further step of the progression, that is, to the formula of humanity.

If there has to be not merely an equivalence, but a progression through the formulas, the second variant cannot be just another way to put the content of the categorical imperative in terms more easy to grasp, but must have a more specific role. Engstrom interprets it as the expression of the second pole of the form of practical knowledge, that is, of subjective universality, which Engstrom defines as the universal validity in regard to all agents. Engstrom develops his interpretation through a rather indirect path. He does follow quite closely, though, the direction of Kant’s argument. Indeed, Kant comes to the formula of humanity in order to establish a genuine practical law

16 Kant, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, p. 436.
17 See Engstrom, The Form of Practical Knowledge, p. 3.
18 Kant, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, p. 436.
19 See Engstrom, The Form of Practical Knowledge, p. 151.
20 The formula of the law of nature is introduced by Kant in Id., Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, p. 421 and brought up again ibid., p. 436.
that is “valid as well as necessary for all rational beings, or for all willing,” and argues that what makes that possible is an end that, in spite of the variety of purposes of the individual agents, belongs to the form of every maxim. He famously calls that an “end in itself” and identifies with the “rational nature.” On Engstrom’s reading, an end is what is determined by practical knowledge, and the only formally universal end coincides with rational nature itself as the object of its self-determination. The formula pointing out the status of rational nature in practical knowledge highlights, thus, that practical knowledge entails a self-determination bounding every subject as such. Only through this second step Kant’s progression can reach the idea of autonomy as “the self-relation of practical knowledge (as self-knowledge), through which its subjective and objective universal validity necessarily coincide,” as is stated in the third variant.

One of the merits of Engstrom’s reading is that it develops a convincing alternative to the interpretations that push Kant’s talk of humanity towards a sort of value realism hardly compatible with the basic tenets of the Kantian approach to moral theory. Engstrom’s reading helps to grasp that Kant argues for extending to every subject the universality of the categorical imperative by appealing to their shared capacity of practical knowledge that puts them in “the subject position in all practical knowledge.” By interpreting the rational nature as practical reason, though, Engstrom seems to downplay Kant’s distinction between mere practical rationality and pure practical rationality. Engstrom refers the formula of humanity to the capacity of practical knowledge in general, as it is operative in “all acts of practical predication through which particular ends are adopted, even the act of making one’s own happiness an end.” Engstrom stresses that pure practical reason is the constitutive form of every practical use of reason; setting ends, thus, requires a basic capacity of rational choice in accord to a concept of good. But Kant seems to put much more weight on distinguishing between technical and practical judgments (as I have recalled above) and between (mere) rationality and humanity (or personality) should express, as it appears increasingly clear in later writings. Indeed, Engstrom addresses the same concern at an earlier stage of his reconstruction, arguing against the readings that take “rational nature” to mean a “merely prudentially rational being;” according to Engstrom, “such a being, should it be possible, would act on the basis of practical thought, but not on

25 Ibid., p. 428.
28 Ibid., p. 171. See Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, p. 428. For a different recent reading that does not commit Kant to any form of value realism see O. Sensen, “Dignity and the Formula of Humanity,” in Timmermann (ed.), *Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 102–118.
30 Ibid., p. 171.
31 See ibid., pp. 72 and 82.
the basis of practical judgment or practical knowledge.”33 So “rational” cannot have a weaker sense, in his vocabulary; since in Kant’s it does, though, it would be necessary to connect more clearly that earlier caveat with the interpretation of the formula of humanity, in order to prevent misunderstandings.

The connection between the first two formulas and the third one that builds a key assumption of Engstrom’s reading suggests, too, that “humanity” in the *Groundwork’s* vocabulary must be taken to mean not merely the capacity to set ends through reason, but more specifically the capacity to choose according to the moral law regarded as a law that the agent gives autonomously to himself. If the formulas amount to the same substantive content, understanding “humanity” and “rational nature” as generic practical rationality seems to leave a gap open in the progression from the formula of humanity, that on the weaker reading would merely invoke the non-moral faculty of generic practical reason, to the formula of autonomy, that instead is about rational beings partaking in moral lawgiving. If, according the third formula, rational beings are those whose will is to be conceived as “a universally legislating will,”34 this has to be true for the second formula as well. That the end in itself is to be understood not just as the subject of any possible end-setting, but as practical subject in a norm-giving sense appears also from some passages that Engstrom does not discuss. Kant claims that the end in itself must be conceived of “only negatively,” that is, as an end “which must never be contravened in action.”35 In these negative terms, the end in itself excludes particular purposes to be the ground of willing;36 Kant understands it accordingly as “an objective end that, whatever ends we may have, as a law is to constitute the supreme limiting condition of all subjective ends, and hence must arise from pure reason.”37 While, according to Kant, the first formula highlights universality as the form of a maxim, the second formula regards the matter of a maxim;38 this is not to be taken to mean that the end in itself immediately provides that matter, but that it plays its limitative role by putting constraints to the material element of a maxim.

The reference to humanity puts on willing constraints that ultimately show us the coincidence of the second formula with the more negatively sounding formula of universal law, in spite of the appearances, as Engstrom points out.39 The subject-as-end-in-itself at issue here should be understood, thus, as the subject of moral lawgiving that constraints himself and others as subjects setting themselves particular ends. A passage from the second Critique, not mentioned by Engstrom, seems to confirm that with the same vocabulary as the *Groundwork*. Kant argues there that humanity in one’s own person “must be holy” to every man, that is, “a human being alone, and with him every rational creature, is an end in itself” because “by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom he is the subject of the moral law, which is holy.” That makes every will

34 Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, p. 432.
36 See ibid., p. 425.
37 Ibid., p. 431, emphasis added.
38 See ibid., p. 436. While Engstrom refers often to the claim about the form, he does not comment on the one about the matter.
subject to “the condition of agreement with the autonomy of the rational being, that is to say, such a being is not to be subjected to any purpose that is not possible in accordance with a law that could arise from the will of the affected subject himself; hence this subject is to be used never merely as a means but as at the same time an end.”  

Besides confirming the connection between the first two formulas of the *Groundwork* close to Engstrom’s arguments, this passage stresses as well that the subject-as-end-in-itself is the subject taking part in autonomy, not merely the rational end-setter. The “subject of all ends” in the *Groundwork* should be understood not as a weaker requirement, according to which the formula of humanity applies to any being just capable of setting ends, but as a transcendental condition of any practical use of reason (in analogy to the I of pure apperception that Kant calls the “subject of all predicates”).

Several significant aspects of *Groundwork* II would still deserve to be discussed (for instance, Kant’s insistence on the existence of the end in itself in the second variant). It should be clear, yet, that Engstrom’s practical cognitivist interpretation provides a very helpful key for understanding these crucial and challenging pages, making sense of many important passages, in spite of some distance of his exposition from the text. The most significant aspect that I find not entirely convincing concerns the scope of Kant’s idea of rational nature in this context. Nevertheless, Engstrom’s perceptive interpretive suggestions can be fruitfully applied to this issue as well, maybe even developing a partially different reconstruction of Kant’s argument. Most importantly, Engstrom’s approach does an excellent job in explaining the formulas as central feature in Kant’s project of a new moral rationalism. They show how Kant’s theory, unlike its predecessors, is able to provide substantive requirements without depending on specific value statements and without giving up the unity of moral worth and the singleness of the categorical imperative as the core of any moral command. Along these lines, Engstrom’s interpretation encourages to ask also how Kant’s new orientation of moral cognitivism has changed – at least within his project – aim, status, and contents of the fully developed analysis of ethical duties, in comparison to the preceding approaches. But that would be matter both for another book and for more discussion.

Stefano Bacin  
Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main  
bacin@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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**The Claims of Reason: Engstrom’s Account of Practical Knowledge**

Carla Bagnoli

Stephen Engstrom’s book *The Form of Practical Knowledge* is no doubt one of the most important contributions in recent Kantian scholarship. It is an original account of the role of the categorical imperative in Kant’s theory of practical knowledge. My remarks

40 Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, p. 87, emphases added.

41 Id., *Metaphysische Anfanggründe der Naturwissenschaft*, p. 542.
are not meant to assess the value and significance of Engstrom’s work as an interpretation of Kant’s ethics, however. Others are better suited to this task. My purpose is to situate Engstrom’s work in a broader theoretical context, with a focus on the debate about moral epistemology.

It is an open philosophical question whether we can properly talk of moral epistemology. For the most part, epistemology in the analytic tradition has treated morality as a peripheral case. Resistance to admit of moral epistemology is pervasive in the metaethics of early analytic philosophy, dominated by non-cognitivism, the view that moral judgments lack cognitive import and are not truth-evaluable. But even in such obsolete metaethics, direct arguments against the claims of a distinctive moral epistemology are rare to find. Typically, these were the corollaries or by-products of the anti-metaphysical arguments against moral intuitionism, the variant of moral realism of those days. The recent resurgence of interest in the claim that moral claims are of cognitive import is parallel in the recent uptake of realism, both in its intuitionist and naturalist variations.

Where to place Kantian ethics is an interesting question. Clearly, the question is partly interpretative, since it partly depends on what we take the basic claims of Kantian ethics to be. But it is not a merely taxonomical question; and it is not merely an anachronistic attempt to place Kant’s ethics on the current meta-ethical map. Kantian scholars influenced by the teaching of John Rawls endeavor to show that Kant’s ethics is an alternative to realism and anti-realism. For instance, Onora O’Neill, a leading promoter of the constructivist interpretation of Kant, starts her argument for Kantian constructivism with the claim that “somewhere in the space between realist and relativist accounts of ethics there is said to be a third, distinct possibility;” Kantian constructivism, she further argues, is that third option. More recent defenses of Kantian constructivism have insisted on the anti-realist implications of the view. For instance, Christine Korsgaard has crystallized Rawls’ remarks on the ontological implications of Kantian constructivism in a definition that has become current in contemporary meta-ethics. Following Rawls, she suggests that constructivism is a form

of “procedural realism,” the view that “there are answers to moral questions because there are correct procedures for arriving at them;” and she contrasts procedural realism with “substantive realism,” according to which “there are correct procedures for answering moral questions because there are moral truths or facts, which exist independently of those procedures, and which those procedures track.”48 Because it is offered in contrast to realism, this definition has been generally taken to characterize a form of anti-realism.49 And most of its critics have taken constructivism to be anti-realist.

I believe that these anti-realist and agnostic readings of Kantian constructivism are based on misunderstandings and are responsible for ignoring perhaps the most important aspect of Kant’s legacy in ethics, that is, his contribution to moral epistemology.50 I have thus welcomed with particular enthusiasm the work of Stephen Engstrom.51 His essay is an original and profound study of the categorical imperative understood as the basic structure of practical knowledge. It situates Kant’s ethics in an interesting continuity with the Ancient accounts of practical knowledge. My purpose here is to carry the task forward, and to show how Engstrom’s interpretation of Kant contributes, albeit indirectly, to current disputes on moral epistemology.

There is a first striking similarity with Kantian constructivism as Rawls defines it and Engstrom’s theory, which goes under the name of “practical cognitivism." The basic claim of practical cognition is that there is practical knowledge, which shares structural features with theoretical knowledge, and yet presents other distinctive features. More precisely, practical knowledge shares with theoretical knowledge a universalistic structure. The contrast between the two forms of knowledge is captured in terms of “direction of existential dependence.”52 In the case of theoretical cognition, the object of knowledge affects the mind, and thus it is “given from elsewhere.”53 Instead, the objects of practical cognition (or objects of the will) are produced by the very act of cognition, and thus they do not exist prior to and independently of the act of cognition. As for the constructivist definition, what is distinctive of the practical domain is not exactly the ontological status of its objects, but their genesis. That is, what is relevant to both the constructivist’s and Engstrom’s account is not the denial of moral truths. They also agree with realists that there are moral properties, objects, and facts. But they disagree that such properties, objects and facts are found out by an empirical investigation, or simply grasped by the intellect, or else revealed and commanded by some divinities. They also disagree with quasi-realists such as Simon Blackburn that moral properties are projected from the mind of valuing agents.


50 I have argued for this claim in Carla Bagnoli, “Kant’s Contribution to Moral Epistemology,” in B. Centi (ed.), *Kant nel XX secolo*, special issue of *Paradigmi*, forthcoming.


53 Ibid.
on external reality of which they become a part.\textsuperscript{54} Finally, they disagree with error-theorists, such as John L. Mackie, that moral properties, objects, and facts are not part of the fabric of the world, but we mistakenly use our moral discourse as if they were thus and so.\textsuperscript{55} This latter sort of disagreement is important for further reasons, which I postpone to the next paragraph.

At the ontological level, the contrast between constructivism, realism, and practical-cognitivism depends on two issues. First, constructivists and practical-cognitivists are interested in marking a sharp distinction between an ontology that is independent of our cognitive processes, and an ontology that it is not. Many express the contrast in terms of mind-independence: they are interested in making moral ontology dependent on subjective features of the mind. To this extent, Engstrom and constructivists share an interest other subjectivists, such as David Wiggins or John McDowell have.\textsuperscript{56} But we should be careful about the qualification “subjective.” This is not in contrast to objective, but to mind-independence. Moreover, what is subjective is not particular; there can be universal features of subjectivity, and indeed for Kantians there are. Now, to complicate the matter, some realists reject the claim about mind-independence. That is, they formulate realism as not to include mind-independence, just as constructivists and practical-cognitivists. A second issue concerns the notion of property. Practical cognitivists and constructivists oppose the talk of facts and properties only to the extent that they are taken to imply a robust moral ontology, but they allow for nominalist or ontologically non-committal notions of properties and facts.

These may seem mere tedious technicalities, but on such differences rest our chances to develop a coherent moral epistemology. Once we have clarified that talk of moral knowledge does not rest upon a queer ontology, there is little argument against the view that we can coherently build a moral epistemology. In this respect, I daresay that the first generation of Kantian constructivists have conceded too much to a debate dominated by non-cognitivism.\textsuperscript{57} Among Kantian constructivists, there is a general dismissal of moral epistemology. For instance, Christine Korsgaard thinks that the epistemological approach to ethics is positively misguided.\textsuperscript{58} Her argument does not invoke considerations based on the ontological dispute above. Rather, her point is that talk of moral knowledge induces a misleading analogy between moral competence and other sorts of theoretical capacities. It invites the thought that we know


\textsuperscript{55} Mackie, \textit{Inventing Right and Wrong}.


\textsuperscript{57} I should remind the reader that, in some cases, this agnostic position and the withdrawal from meta-ethics are justified on the basis of political reasons. But we should not confound political constructivism with Kantian constructivism, since they differ in scope, argumentative, strategies, and task. I am concerned solely with the latter, which is a view about the nature of moral obligation and practical reason. Onora O’Neill, “Constructivism vs. Contractualism,” \textit{Ratio} 16 (2003) 4, pp. 319–331, p. 320. See also Thomas Hill, “Kantian Constructivism in Ethics,” \textit{Ethics} 99 (1989), pp. 752–770, and Id., “Moral Construction as a Task: Sources and Limits,” \textit{Social Philosophy and Policy} (2008), pp. 214–236.

moral properties in the same way in which we know of non-moral properties, that is, by discovering them in the world. A further, equally misleading but more insidious implication is that in acquiring moral knowledge, we are merely perceiving moral reasons. On this account, we would simply respond to reasons that are already part of the fabric of the world, prior to and independently of our reasoning about them.59 The battle Korsgaard fights is for autonomy in practical thinking.

No doubt a commitment to autonomy must characterize any account of ethics that deserves to be called Kantian. So the question is whether the proposal to refocus the debate on moral epistemology amounts to deprive moral subjects of autonomy. Engstrom’s answer is, unsurprisingly, negative. Surprising is that his defense is such that does not undercut Kantian constructivism in the least. To see why, we should reconsider a previous point of agreement with the constructivist against meta-ethics such as the error-theory and projectivism. Both these theories say that appearances are deceiving. There is a systematic mistake involved in moral discourse. While these meta-ethics have sophisticated logical and semantic apparatuses, they are bound to face an unsurmountable objection. That is, how are we supposed to hold moral claims credible, be committed to moral convictions, and driven by moral reasons, if we accept the theory that makes morality bogus? The objection is not that such theory discredits the appearances, but that the acceptance of the theory makes the object of the theory disappear.60 What is important about this line of argumentation is its positive implication. That is, it appears to be a requirement of ethical theory that it accounts for moral practices in a way that does not undercut them. This is a second, and to my mind, more significant point of agreement between Engstrom’s theory of practical cognition and Kantian constructivism. It is something that Rawls often refers to as the requirement of congruence between the results of the theory and the experience of moral agents.

Kantian constructivists like Korsgaard are correct that our moral practices involve some sort of agential autonomy, even if there is a significant disagreement about what autonomy implies. For Kant, the relevant sort of autonomy is autonomy of the will, which he identifies with practical reason. This is the sort of practical knowledge that Engstrom is after in this book. Engstrom shows that Kant appropriates of the traditional conception of practical reason by “reconceiving the will as desiderative reason.”61 Kant’s theory of autonomy emerges in a context of continuity with Ancient ethics. This is not only to show that Kant bears a complex relation to the Aristotelian tradition, which the non-cognitivist readings disregard, but also to emphasize that there is no anti-metaphysical barrier against the task of explicating practical knowledge.

How, then, shall we understand Kant’s celebrated invention of autonomy? Engstrom sees Kant’s originality in his characterization of a rational being as a practical subject capable not only of acting on principles, but also and most importantly of “knowing by principles.” Discursive cognition, which means cognition through concepts,

59 See, for instance, Audi, The Good in the Right.
60 This is my own formulation of the objection. Quasi-realists may reply that projectivism does not lead to error-theory, but it is arguable that it does, see Crispin Wright, Truth and Objectivity, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 9–10, see also p. 87.
61 Engstrom, The Form of Practical Knowledge, p. 25.
is rational insofar as it is principled. In contrast to theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge brings its object about. It is the act of practical judgment that determines the object, exactly like constructivists contend.

This difference in the order of existential dependence plays a crucial role in Engstrom’s account of the autonomy of the will. In the practical domain, appeal to principles identifies a distinctive sort of causality. Rational agents are capable of a special kind of causality, which depends on being self-consciously efficacious. They have an impact on the world through their being self-consciously efficacious. In order to be “self-consciously efficacious,” rational agents are required to act on the basis of coherent intentions that command necessary agreement. Basically, Kant’s practical cognitivism claims that reason is causally efficacious in a distinctive way that depends on its universal form.

This distinctive form of efficacy is such that it establishes a special relation of the practical subjects to themselves that is not found in the theoretical domain. It is a relation of authorship and responsibility, as constructivists have also insisted. Practical knowledge is thus ultimately self-knowledge, or knowledge of oneself as a practical subject. Insofar as practical subjects bring their moral objects about, the activity of practical reason is also, and most fundamentally, an activity of self-constitution.

Engstrom argues that self-constitution pertains first of all to the account of practical cognition. This is in sharp contrast to Korsgaard’s view about self-constitution as pertaining to deliberation. For Engstrom, it is exactly this aspect of practical cognition that marks the distinction with cognition in the theoretical domain. But this disagreement with Korsgaard should not be taken to signal a difference between practical cognitivism and constructivism. In fact, Engstrom’s position is perfectly in line with Rawls’ remarks that “in his moral philosophy Kant seeks self-knowledge: not a knowledge of right and wrong – that we already possess – but a knowledge of what we desire as persons with powers of free theoretical and practical reason.”

It follows from both practical cognitivist and constructivist arguments that robust or substantive realism is inconsistent with Kant’s claims about the autonomy of the will as identical with practical reason. The categorical imperative expresses requirements internal to and constitutive of the standpoint of pure practical reason. Such requirements are not the premises in practical reasoning, but its constitutive norms. Even on this point, Kantian constructivists largely agree with Engstrom that the categorical imperative is not simply a model of deliberation, but the very form of rational reflecting.

To treat the categorical imperative as the constitutive norm of reason raises the specter of mere formalism. Abstractness and indeterminacy are canonical objections against Kant’s ethics. Constructivists have insisted that abstraction is an important feature of any adequate ethical theory. They have also distinguished between forms of idealizations that dogmatically rely on some uncritical picture of moral agency,

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62 Ibid., §IV. 3, pp. 118–121.
63 Ibid., p. 33, see also p. 120
64 Rawls, Lectures on Moral Philosophy, p. 148, see also p. 218
and theories that simply abstract from arbitrary features of human agency. Of course, the issue hinges on what counts as an arbitrary feature. It is clearly out of substantive preoccupation of impartiality and equality that Kant favors abstractions. But my question here is whether the Kantian strategy of abstraction makes the standards of moral agency too remote or dramatically different from human agency, as its critics object.

Both Engstrom and Kantian constructivists (such as O’Neill) are driven by concerns about human vulnerability and frailty. Typically, constructivists who are interested in the subjective aspects of practical reason and the predicaments of “impure” practical rationality, emphasize that Kant offers a very meager and indeterminate account of rational agency. The claim sounds surprising, especially in view of the fact that Kant relies on a rather cumbersome metaphysics. Critics of constructivist interpretation have endlessly picked on this shocking claim, and pointed at the obvious: Kant is a metaphysician, hence constructivism is grossly inaccurate as an interpretation of Kant. Those critics miss the point of constructivists, here. Constructivism arises out of conviction that “if we are to make any sense of the Kantian enterprise we must take the notion of critique of reason as the most fundamental, and that in doing so we may find that Kant’s underlying moves, which govern his account of philosophical method in the *Doctrine of Method* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, constitute a constructivist vindication of reason.”

This constructivist vindication of reason has its counterpart in Kant’s account of rational motivation as spontaneity. As Engstrom points out, it is the characterization of reason as desiderative that makes sense of spontaneity as a distinctive form of efficacy, and thus it establishes the direct practical relevance of reason. Practical judgment concerns the object of practical knowledge, which is also the end of rational willing. By focusing on this connection, Engstrom’s interpretation most effectively brings to light how it is that for Kant there is an intrinsic connection between morality and rational agency. Skeptics object that we have reasons to ignore the demands of morality insofar as they are external impositions that undermine our legitimate right to happiness. The skeptical argument makes sense of the fact that morality is always experienced as a burdensome source of demands or constraints. As Engstrom reconstruct it, the Kantian reply is that the requests of morality may be difficult to accommodate, but they are not external or contrary to our happiness. It is our taking ourselves as practical subjects that rules out some maxims as immoral and identifies some others as rationally necessitated. It is thus our nature of practical subjects that is inconsistent with sustaining immoral maxims. If Engstrom is right, this is Kant’s definitive and distinctive reply to the skeptic.

Carla Bagnoli
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
cbagnoli@uwm.edu

68 Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, p. 64.