

## Epistemic Schmagency?

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### Introduction

Constructivist approaches in epistemology and ethics offer a promising account of normativity. Norms are authoritative—when they are—in virtue of being constitutive of our agency (or they derive authority from norms that are constitutive of our agency). But constructivist accounts face a powerful objection raised by David Enoch, the Schmagency Objection. David Enoch (2006) argues that constructivist accounts of normativity face an insuperable challenge. While his Schmagency Objection has been widely discussed as a challenge to constructivist views of moral and practical norms, no one has yet explored how the Schmagency Objection might undermine popular approaches to epistemic normativity. In this paper, I rectify that gap; I explore whether the Schmagency Objection holds in the epistemic case. First, I develop the objection against a popular and prominent form of epistemic constructivism, Belief Constitutivism. Belief Constitutivism holds that epistemic normativity is grounded in the constitutive aim of belief, namely a belief is correct just in case its contents are true. Belief Constitutivism is susceptible to a Schmagency Objection, I argue, because it locates the source of normativity in the *belief* rather than the *agent*. In the final section, I propose a version of epistemic constructivism that locates epistemic normativity as constitutive of agency, rather than constitutive of belief. I argue that this version has the resources to respond to the Schmagency Objection. My view has the added benefit of illuminating the role that belief plays in action.

### 1. The Schmagency Objection

Many practices have constitutive norms. The norms of gift-giving, as recorded in Amy Vanderbilt (1952), dictate that one ought to mail a note of thanks as soon as possible, “within a week preferably.” The norms of being cool, at some time and for some people, involved wearing backward baseball caps. The norms of greetings, also at some time and for some people, involve a firm-but-not-too-firm handshake lasting 1-2 seconds. When we participate in these activities, we ought to follow the norms.

But the question arises: *should* we participate in these activities? And if we do, should we participate *well*? From the fact that there is a constitutive norm, it doesn't follow we have reason to comply with it. David Enoch develops this point into the Schmagency Objection against constructivist accounts of normativity. In this section, I will lay out the constructivist strategy, present Enoch's Schmagency Objection, and then develop the constructivist response to the Schmagency Objection. I will sketch a general outline of the strategy that any constructivist view must take to overcome Enoch's Objection.

The constructivist strategy, as it is understood by Enoch, and as I will understand it in this paper, attempts to show that normativity is constructed from the constitutive norms of agency.<sup>1</sup> The constructivist argues that practical reasons (reasons that justify engaging in contingent practices like gift-giving, being cool, and greeting each other) and moral reasons arise from the constitutive norms of agency.

In general, constitutive norms govern various activities and give rise to reasons within those activities. We see this sort of normativity all around us. Take the perennial example of chess. Chess is a game that is governed by rules, and the aim of playing chess is to win. Within the game there are certain norms—norms of the mechanics of the game, norms of strategy—and these norms generate reasons for performing particular movements within the game. But unlike chess, the constructivist argues, agency is “closed under its own operation.” (Ferrero (2009), p. 308) That means we cannot coherently ask whether we have good reason to follow the norms of agency. And so while the norms of chess are contingent requirements that can be abandoned at any moment if the agent quits the game, practical and moral norms are inescapable. On the constructivist view, normative questions arise from within a standpoint. There is no standpoint from which one could reason about whether to play the agency game. Whatever you appeal to (implicitly or explicitly) relies on the fact that you are already engaged in the activity of agency. Moral and practical norms are constitutive of the activity of agency.

A virtue of this account is that can answer certain skeptical challenges. The skeptical challenge that constructivists (particularly Christine Korsgaard) have in mind is the requirement of reason turned inward (Korsgaard 1996). In order for something to be truly normative, Korsgaard argues, it must be

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, following Enoch, I am calling constitutivist-constructivist views constructivist. Whether non-constitutivist-constructivist views (alá Sharon Street) face a similar question is outside the focus of this paper. See Street (2010).

something that we can rationally view as authoritative. Constitutive norms are resilient in the face of skeptical challenges because they bind the activity *essentially*. The normative question is answered by reflecting on the type of creatures we are (creatures who are constituted by a set of norms) and the types of norms at play (norms that govern us and our activity essentially).

In general, constructivists who hope to derive normativity from the nature of agency hope to ground all normativity: moral, practical *and* epistemic. In metaethical debates, the focus has primarily been on practical and moral norms. But attentive readers will notice that constructivists and their critics express hope that the epistemic case is no different from the practical.<sup>2</sup>

### *Schmagent's Soliloquy*

Enoch argues that constitutive norms cannot ground normativity. He illuminates this point by giving us the character of a schmagent. The schmagent rebuffs the constructivist's normative judgements about what he ought to do. Here, the schmagent delivers the Schmagent's Soliloquy:

“Classify my bodily movements and indeed me as you like. Perhaps I cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. But why should I be an agent? Perhaps I can't act without aiming at self-constitution, but why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don't care about agency and action. I'm perfectly happy being a “Schmagent”—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not “schmagency”) of self-constitution. I am perfectly happy performing “schmactions”—nonaction events that are very similar to actions but lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not schmactions) of self-constitution.” (Enoch 2006, p. 41)

The Schmagent's Question, then, is “Why should I be an agent?” or “Why should I play the agency game?” We should understand the schmagent's question as a query for justification (i.e. a reason) for why it is that the schmagent ought to view the norms of agency as authoritative. The Schmagency Objection is that if there is no answer to the Schmagent's Question, then we cannot see the

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<sup>2</sup> Enoch writes, “I conclude... that normativity will not come from what is constitutive of action. (Nor, I think, will epistemic normativity come from what is constitutive of beliefs, for reasons similar to the ones I put forward in what follows).” (Enoch (2006) p. 33)

requirements of agency as justified. And if we cannot see those requirements as justified, then we cannot be justified by following them.

This soliloquy is meant to capture the way in which constructivist accounts fail to ground the right kind of normativity (or perhaps any normativity at all) for moral and practical norms. Enoch's central point is that agents are in a position to challenge the normative status of a normative practice (as we did above with gift-giving, being cool, and greetings). The constructivist, Enoch claims, has no satisfactory answer to the Schmagent's Question. From the fact that the agent engages in some normative practice we cannot conclude that the agent *ought* to engage in a normative practice.<sup>3</sup> In order for the practice to normatively bind the agent, the agent must have *reason* to engage in the practice.

This problem is especially pressing for the constructivist because she cannot appeal to any reasons outside of the norms of agency.<sup>4</sup> The constructivist approach attempts to explain all normativity in terms of the constitutive norms of agency. As a result, if we challenge whether agency itself is justified, the constructivist cannot appeal to anything outside of agency for her response. Otherwise, the view is no longer constructivist. And if we can demand justification for activity of agency, appeals to what would justify something *within* the practice of agency will not help us justify *the practice itself*. And so, the constructivist has no resources to answer the Schmagency Objection.

Without a reply to the Schmagency Objection, Enoch thinks, the most we can provide in terms of normative assessment is a semantic classification, and this renders all norms toothless. In order for something to be classified as a game of chess, or an agent, certain norms must have force. But what happens if we don't follow the rules of chess, or we rebuff the requirements of agency? It doesn't follow that we've done something *wrong* or *violated a requirement* in a deep sense. Instead, it follows that we weren't really playing chess, or we weren't actually agents. If we were to confront the haphazard chess player or a recalcitrant agent, they could reply to us, "so I'm not following the rules—who cares?"

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<sup>3</sup> I am glossing over some of the details of Enoch's **Schmagency Objection**. There are two complexities that are worth noting. First, Enoch worries about indeterminacy over *which* normative practice we are discussing. Second, Enoch phrases the question in terms of whether the agent/schmagent should *care*. But the constructivist is interested in whether the norms are *authoritative*, not whether the agent *cares*. While these nuances are interesting, they are not important for this paper.

<sup>4</sup> See Enoch (2006), p. 48

Why should the rules motivate me? The only sanction is that I fail to deserve the folk-theoretical term chess player or agent.”

Constructivists claim that agency is inescapable, we have no recourse but to be agents. As Korsgaard writes, agency is “our plight” (Korsgaard (2009) p. 2). But this, Enoch argues, is insufficient. You may be doomed to some activity, but that does not mean you have *reason* to engage in the activity. It doesn’t mean you have *reason* to follow the norms of the activity. Enoch writes, that it is never a good answer to the question “why should I  $\varphi$ ?” to say “because you are a  $\varphi$ -er.” (Enoch 2011, p. 213) Thus, Enoch concludes, constructivism cannot ground normativity.

### *The Constructivist Response to the Schmagency Objection*

The constructivist response is to show that either the answer to the Schmagent’s Question is trivial, or the question is semantically defective. The Schmagent’s Question is ambiguous between two readings. On one understanding of the question, it can be answered trivially. On the other, it presupposes an incoherent state of affairs. It is helpful to keep in mind Rawls’ (1955) distinction between internal justification (justification within a practice), and external justification (justification by something outside the practice). The Schmagent’s Question is a request for either internal or external justification. If it is an internal question, it takes place within the activity of agency, and so can be answered according to the internal norms of agency. If it is an external question, then the constructivist argues that the question is semantically defective. The Schmagent’s Question presupposes that we can consider reasons *outside* the practice of agency. But, says the constructivist, this is like asking, whether a “telephone is correct rather than a tree.” (Velleman 2009, p. 145) The schmagent demands that we justify the demands of agency *independently of any standard whatsoever*. But the constructivist has argued that reasons can only be in force relative to some standards. And so the constructivist can give no answer to the question, but that is because the question is semantically defective.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Velleman (2009) writes that until we specify the constitutive standards to which we are appealing, we haven’t asked a determinate question. He writes, “What the Kantian argues is that the criterion in relation to which guidance is possible must lie in the very nature of that which is to be guided. A question must establish criteria for what can count as a correct answer; if it fails to establish criteria for an answer, then it is not a fully constituted question. If ‘Why be an agent?’ isn’t about a choice or

While the exact details of the response to the Schmagency Objection can differ, any successful response must involve showing the external version of the Schmagent's Question to be defective. The constructivist cannot provide an answer to the question. She cannot, in principle, appeal to reasons why one should be an agent rather than a schmagent. This would be to give up constructivism. And it seems that if she accepts that there is no reason to be an agent, the fully reflective agent cannot see herself as justified in following the norms of agency. In order to diffuse the Schmagency Objection, the constructivist must reject the Schmagent's Question.

On the internal disambiguation of the question, the constructivist argues that the Schmagent's Question is answered trivially. This is because constitutive norms bind the activity *essentially*. And so from within the practice, the question "Why are these the norms of the practice?" is answered by appealing to the nature of the activity itself. When we are playing chess, the rules of chess bind us. The nature of the activity and its constitutive rules answer the question, "because those are the norms of this activity." And this is a sufficient answer, within a practice, for the normative status of some rule. Within a practice, it is sufficient to appeal to the nature of the practice itself. To ask for additional justification for the rules is not intelligible. In chess, the question, "why is it permissible for you to castle?" can only be answered by "because that's the rules of chess, the game we are playing!" Contra Enoch, if the schmagent's question is raised within the practice, it is appropriate to appeal to the practice itself to diffuse the question. Similarly, if the question is, within the practice, "why should I follow the norms of agency?" it is appropriate to answer, "Because you are an agent!" Perhaps there is no deep reason for why we are playing chess rather than schmess. Perhaps there is no deep reason for how I ended up an agent rather than a schmagent. But given that we are playing chess, the norms of chess apply to our game. And given that I am an agent, the norms of agency apply to me in virtue of my very nature. So from within the practice, there can be no Schmagency Objection to constructivism.

And the external version of the question, the constructivist argues, is incoherent. In order for the objection to get going, we must be able to raise the question from outside the practice of agency. In general, we can raise external challenges for justification from outside a practice. We can ask *which*

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a shmoice or any third thing for which there is a criterion of correctness, then you aren't owed an answer, because you haven't yet asked a question." (p. 144)

practice to engage in.<sup>6</sup> We can decide, for example, whether to play chess or schmess. Enoch argues that in order to have reasons to make moves within the game of chess, I must have reason to play chess. This is why the schmagent retreats from the constructivist's criticism by saying, "Fine! I'll be a schmagent, then!" The schmagent, standing between two practices, picks one. The schmagent is asking for a *reason* to engage in one activity over another (or no activity).<sup>7</sup>

In order to diffuse the Schmagency Objection, the constructivist must show that the Schmagent's Question is ill-formed. The structure of the response goes something like this. The Schmagent's Question presupposes a substantive claim about normativity, one that the constructivist has explicitly rejected. The substantive claim is this: that we can settle what we have reason to do *independently* of the practice of agency. The constructivist argues that in order to have authority over us, a norm must relate to our agency, and it must be constitutive. The Schmagent's Question presupposes that something could be authoritative for us independently of agency. Because the question involves a presupposition failure, the constructivist rejects the external version of the question.<sup>8</sup>

Constructivists give different accounts of the semantic defect contained within the Schmagent's Question. For Korsgaard, the question is defective because normative concepts embody solutions to practical problems, problems that arise within the domain of agency.<sup>9</sup> As agents, our normative concepts embody norms of agency. They can only correctly be applied *within* the practice of agency. Perhaps if there are schmagent normative concepts, they can answer what to do within the practice of schmagency.<sup>10</sup> But for creatures like us, we can correctly apply normative concepts *within* the practice

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<sup>6</sup> This point becomes especially clear in Enoch's follow-up paper Enoch (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Enoch overstates the grip of this question, though. In general, we do not need a reason to engage in a practice. We might decide whether to play chess or schmess by flipping a coin. The rules of the road dictate that I should drive on the right side, so I have reason to drive on the right side. But suppose I find myself driving, and I ask myself "why am I driving?" and I can think of no reason why I am. I still ought to conform to the rules of the road, even if I cannot answer the question for justification for why I am driving. Similarly, I could take up the hobby of croquet on a whim. I may not have a reason for doing so (other than my whim), but I still have reason to follow the rules of the game. So, dialectically, if I find myself in a practice, and I cannot justify why I am in the practice, so long as I stay in the activity, I still have reason to follow the rules of the practice.

<sup>8</sup> To be clear, the presupposition failure occurs *by the constructivist's lights*. So while the constructivist can reject the objection as question-begging, the result is impasse, not triumph.

<sup>9</sup> See Korsgaard (1996) p.47.

<sup>10</sup> Unless schmagency is really just a particular conception of agency, as Ferrero argues (2009).

of practical reasoning. The concepts cannot be correctly deployed *outside* the practice. By contrast, Velleman (2009) argues that something can be normative only relative to some standard. So it is nonsense to ask whether something is normative independently of any standard whatsoever. To ask what we have reason to do independent of any standard whatsoever is semantically ill-formed. As Velleman puts it, you have not even asked a question yet, since there is nothing that could count as a correct answer to the question.

Regardless of the exact nature of the conceptual confusion, both agree that the concepts cannot be correctly applied outside the domain of agency. The Schmagent's Question is like asking, "How do I castle outside the game of chess? I know what it is to castle *in* chess, but how would I castle *independently* of the practice of chess? Independently of *any* practice whatsoever?" But the concept of castling is essentially constructed from *within* the practice of chess. There is no answer to this question, because the concept can only have correct application within the practice. Similarly, normative concepts are only correctly applied *within* the domain of agency. And so trying to ask normative questions outside the domain of agency is like asking how to castle outside any practice whatsoever. The question cannot be answered because it involves a conceptual confusion.

The success of the Schmagency Objection, then, rests on a substantive assumption about the nature of normative concepts and normativity in general. The realist disputes the constructivist's conception of what it is for a reason to be authoritative. The objection is persuasive to the realist, and not to the constructivist. In order to settle whether the objection succeeds, we would need to make progress on the disagreement between the realist and the constructivist. Here, I do not mean to definitively settle the debate. My main aim is to sketch the Schmagency Objection, and show the response that the constructivist must give in order to diffuse the objection. She must deny the question. In the next section, I will explore whether a popular constructivist account of epistemic normativity can make the same move.

## **2. Epistemic Schmagents**

I mentioned at the outset that constructivists and their critics have expressed hope that the same moves can be made for epistemic normativity. However, when constructivist views are applied to the epistemic domain, they take a very different form than from the practical and moral case. In the



practical case, constructivists argue that practical and moral norms arise out of the nature of *agency*. By contrast, the most prominent epistemic constructivist views hold that epistemic norms arise out the nature of *belief*, not the nature of agency.<sup>11</sup> And the activity of agency, I will argue, is structurally quite different from the nature of the propositional attitude of belief. The result of this asymmetry is that a pressing Schmagency Objection emerges for constructivists who locate epistemic normativity in belief.

According to one prominent constructivist strategy, which I will call Belief Constitutivism, epistemic normativity is generated by belief's internal standard of correctness.<sup>12</sup> This standard of correctness is expressed (with or without caveat) as:

(SOC) S's belief that p is correct iff p is true.

The proponent of Belief Constitutivism argues that epistemic normativity is best understood as constitutive of our concept (Shah & Velleman 2005). This means that our concept of belief contains within it certain normative standards. We evaluate beliefs positively if they meet these standard, and negatively if they do not. For example, part of what it is to be a knife is to be an object that is good at cutting things. To be a knife is to be sharp. A knife is a good knife just in case it is sharp. And it is a bad knife if it is not sharp. This sort of normativity is often present in artefacts. Artefacts are objects that are created to serve a function, and they can serve that function well or poorly. It is part of the nature of the thing to perform some function, and so we can say that it is *constitutive* or essential to the thing that it is normatively governed by that standard (Korsgaard (2008), Wright (1992), Velleman (2000)).

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<sup>11</sup> Why *belief* rather than *believing*? Shah and Velleman came to a consensus in their 2005 paper, "Doxastic Deliberation." Velleman (2000) put forward the view that believing has a constitutive aim, namely truth, and this aim structures our believing. Shah (2003) responded with the counterexample of wishful thinking. Wishful thoughts should be classified as faulty beliefs, but the Velleman (2000) model would classify them as not beliefs at all, since they are not governed by the constitutive aim of believing. Shah & Velleman (2005) propose that we should instead locate the normativity in *belief*. It's important to note that this move wasn't forced by the considerations of Shah (2003), but was rather motivated by considering a number of factors.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Shah and Velleman, other philosophers endorse SOC, though not necessarily as constructivists. See Wedgwood (2002). While Wedgwood's version is consistent with constructivism, he himself is a realist, see Wedgwood (2009).

What makes Belief Constitutivism constructivist? According to the proponent of Belief Constitutivism, epistemic normativity arises from belief's internal standard of correctness. When we deploy the concept of belief, the standard of correctness determines the conditions under which the belief is correct. Belief Constitutivism does not ground epistemic normativity in anything beyond the attitude of belief. For the attitude to count as a belief, it must have an internal standard of correctness. SOC captures a goodmaking feature of belief, *qua* belief. But this standard of correctness is a normativity of kind, not a normativity of activity. Epistemic normativity, on Belief Constitutivism, is like knife normativity.

(SOC-Knives) A knife is correct iff it is sharp.

It is part of the nature of knives that they ought to be sharp. This sort of normativity is very different from the normativity of activities. The normativity of games gives us reasons to perform certain actions within the game. But SOC-Knives doesn't give us reason to perform any action, or do anything. It is a good-making feature of a knife that it is sharp. Knives can be evaluated as correct, as exemplars of the kind knife, just in case they are sharp. But I may not need a sharp knife (suppose I am using it to tap a rhythm). From the fact that it is correct for knives to be sharp it does not follow that I have any reason to sharpen a knife, or even any reason to care if my knife is sharp. I have a reason to care if my knife is sharp only if I need a sharp knife. But if I'm tapping a rhythm, then the sharpness is irrelevant to me.

A constitutive standard of correctness can ground normative evaluations. It can ground the judgement that, for example, the knife is not a very good knife because it is dull. It can ground the judgement that it is an excellent knife because it is sharp. If we were to apply this to belief, we could ground the claim that a true belief is a good belief and a false belief is a bad belief. But from these evaluations, what else follows? A standard of correctness does not, in itself, provide an agent with any *reason* to do anything. It is not authoritative for the agent. It only grounds judgements for evaluating the object. Sometimes, butter knives are useful; sometimes, false beliefs are useful. It would make no sense to criticise an agent for using a dull knife to cut butter. The knife is perfectly suited for the agent's purpose. If the dullness of the agent's knife gives the agent no reason to sharpen it, then why would the falseness of a belief give the agent a reason to give up the belief? In order to see the judgement of a false belief as a criticism of the agent, we must tell some further story about why the agent should

have correct beliefs. An internal standard of correctness is ill-suited to ground epistemic normativity because it cannot show the normative standards to be authoritative for the agent. In what follows I will develop this central point.

A standard of correctness like SOC indicates a goodness of kind. However, goodness of kind does not ground any sense in which the agent should be concerned with bringing about correct instances of that kind. Above, we discussed SOC-Knife. It is correct for a knife to be sharp. Sharpness is a goodmaking feature of a knife. But if I only need to cut butter, I may not care if my knife is sharp. It is no criticism of me that I keep dull butter knives in my kitchen drawer.

Goodness of kind does not mean a good instance of the kind is good. Goodness of kind is not good, for example, if the thing is bad. A perfect exemplar of a guillotine is a heinous object. A good virus adapts quickly to ensure continued existence, but we still ought to eradicate such viruses if we can. And many good instances of kind are neither good nor bad, but their goodness depends on feature of the situation. Knives illustrate this. So what about beliefs? Appealing to internal correctness doesn't tell us whether good instances of the kind are good. In order to understand why the agent should accept goodness-qua-belief as relevant, we must have some further account about why that kind (or good instances of that kind) generate reasons for us to regulate an item according to the good making features of its kind. But this is just to admit that the constructivist project has failed. If we must appeal to additional normative facts in order to ground epistemic normativity, we have not given a constructivist account.

In the previous section, I outlined that the constructivist must diffuse the external question in order to avoid the Schmagency Objection. But this version of Belief Constitutivism does not even have the resources to answer the *internal* constitutive question. Because there is no practice, no activity, there are no norms internal to the practice. A standard of correctness doesn't give the agent any reason to do anything. I am not a belief, nor am I constituted by any particular belief that satisfies the norm of correctness. It is always open to me to step back from my beliefs and question whether I should continue in them.<sup>13</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson, in her discussion of Belief Constitutivism, reaches the

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<sup>13</sup> The **Belief Constitutivist** might respond, but beliefs are not under our direct voluntary control. As a result, we can never get the reflective distance required for this to be possible for us. See my "Evidentialism in Action" (manuscript) for a detailed response to this concern.

same conclusion.<sup>14</sup> She writes, “There is no enterprise of believing, and *a fortiori*, there is no such thing as carrying out well the enterprise of believing.” (Thomson 2008 p. 112). And so Belief Constitutivism, as formulated, cannot answer *any* normative challenge.

### *From Belief to Believer*

Perhaps we should shift from talking about *belief* to talking about *believers*. The attitude of belief is integrated into our psychology. Beliefs are not like knives, ordinary objects that we can use for whatever purpose we deign. Beliefs are a part of us. We cannot help but have beliefs; we cannot help but be believers. And there is an activity that we recognise as believing. It involves regulating one’s beliefs for truth. A charitable reading of SOC suggests that we interpret it as applying to the agent’s relationship to her beliefs, not only the belief itself.

The Schmagency Objection arises here as well. The agent is a believer, engaged in the practice of belief. The agent can still question the significance of truth for *her*. “Fine!” she might say, “Truth is normative for belief! But why should I believe? And if I do believe, why should I believe well? There are plenty of things that have an internal standard of correctness that need not be normative *for me*. So why should believing well matter for me? Rather than be a believer, I will be a schmeliever!”

In section I, I argued that the constructivist can only diffuse the Schmagency Objection by showing the external version of the question to be ill-formed. But in the case of the Epistemic Schmagent, the question is quite well formed. In fact, it’s one that we regularly face. Consider one case. Psychologists have documented the phenomenon of optimism bias.<sup>15</sup> Optimism bias involves a systematic skewing of beliefs centred on assessing oneself and one’s opportunities as much better than they are. People who have optimism bias, psychologists tell us, are more successful in their endeavours. They handle disappointments better. They are happier. Suppose Alex is confronted with this literature, and she decides to cultivate an optimism bias. We can imagine her saying much the same words as the

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<sup>14</sup> Thomson distinguishes between the notion of internal-correct and external-correct. Internal-correct refers to an enterprise that can be done well or poorly. External-correct refers to the satisfaction of a standard of correctness. Thomson objects that SOC cannot pick out an enterprise because there is no such thing as internal correct, only external correct. There is nothing that counts as well or poorly of following the SOC. Instead, SOC is just a standard used to evaluate beliefs.

<sup>15</sup> See Hazlett (2013) for an overview of the psychological literature on optimism bias.

schmagent. “Why should believing well matter for me? I’d far rather be an schmeliever (someone who governs her beliefs according to the norm of optimism bias), than a believer! My life will be so much happier!”

Alex’s response is intelligible. More than that, it even sounds plausibly rational. And remember, the structure of the Schmagency Objection is that if we cannot give an answer to the Schmagent’s Question, then the norms of believing could not be authoritative for us. And so Belief Constitutivism has a schmagency problem. Not only does the Schmagent’s Question sound intelligible, it even sounds like the right way to go, in some instances. Belief Constitutivism can only show the importance of truth for belief, not the importance of truth *for the agent*. It can ground normative assessments of a qualified nature. *Qua* believer, Alex ought to believe her chances of success are quite low. But *qua* schmeliever, Alex ought to assess her chances of success as much higher. And Alex can intelligibly ask, “Why be a believer rather than a schmeliever?” Belief Constitutivism can answer what we should believe *qua* believers, but it leaves open what role belief should play in our psychology. Perhaps the upshot is that for creatures like us, we shouldn’t be believers, or we shouldn’t be good believers.<sup>16</sup>

Where do we go from here? There are a few options. One is to ground epistemic normativity in some further normativity. The result would be a kind of conditional normativity. Another strategy would be to engage the schmagent and try to justify the authority of epistemic norms on practical grounds. This strategy is consistent with a global constructivism. Epistemic norms are justified on practical terms, and practical norms are justified by the constitutive norms of agency. In the final section, I will develop this option. Another possibility would be to say that there is some non-constructed reason for the authority of epistemic norms (But this is for the constructivist to admit defeat).

The last possibility that I would like to explore is the possibility of just not answering the Schmagency Objection. What if we tried to live with it? Here, I will argue that the problem with this approach is that it gives *no normativity whatsoever*. Even if I have an attitude, and I cannot help but follow the norms of the attitude, I can still question whether I *ought* to regulate my attitude according to those norms.

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<sup>16</sup> See Hazlett (2013) for an argument that, in fact, we shouldn’t be good believers.

Consider the case of Sam's Paranoia.<sup>17</sup> Suppose Sam is clinically diagnosed with paranoid thinking. Suppose his particular ideation is that the postal service is spying on him. Paranoid thoughts are classified by an internal standard of correctness. In order to count as a paranoid thought, the thought involves a certain psychological and representational response to external stimuli. The more the thought embodies this response, the better it is *qua* paranoid thought. And we can characterise not only what it is to be a paranoid thought, but also a paranoid thinker. The paranoid thinker engages in an activity of responding to inputs and maintaining the paranoid ideation. The result is that Sam is engaged in the activity of paranoid thinking, and he regulates his thoughts according to the standard of correctness for paranoid thoughts. Sam receives his diagnosis of paranoia in stride, though, and decides to go to a therapist to try to eradicate his paranoid thinking. But suppose a philosopher meets him along the way and they have this exchange:

*Philosopher:* Wait, Sam! The standard of correctness for paranoid thoughts is that the more paranoid they are the better they are as instances of paranoid thoughts! You ought to be a good paranoid thinker!

*Sam:* Well, if I ought to be a good paranoid thinker, then I just won't be a paranoid thinker!

*Philosopher:* You seem stuck in your paranoia.

*Sam:* Perhaps true, but I want as little paranoia as possible! I can't work, I can't sleep, I can't get anything done. My life is falling apart. I'm going to be a bad paranoid thinker.

Sam is right. Just because Sam has an attitude that is governed by a constitutive norm does not mean that Sam must see himself as bound to that norm. And this is true, even if Sam cannot eradicate the attitude. Suppose Sam is unable to entirely opt out of paranoid thought. He still ought to be bad *qua* paranoid thinker, rather than try to have paranoid beliefs that fully satisfy their correctness conditions. Even if the agent inescapably possesses the attitude, this does not give her reason to conform to the standard of correctness.

It might be objected that paranoid thinking is not normative for Sam is because it does not have a *rational force* behind it. Since paranoia is by nature irrational, it could have no rational force. By contrast,

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<sup>17</sup> This case is structurally similar to Enoch's Reluctant Patriot. See Enoch (2011), p. 216.

belief has rational force for us. We are required to be believers. In the final section, I will develop this possibility in greater detail when I propose my positive view. But here, I only want to note how such a strategy undermines Belief Constitutivism. Suppose the authority of epistemic normativity comes from the rational necessity imposed by the importance of belief for our rationality. If this is true, we no longer need to talk about Belief Constitutivism. Instead, we could just talk about how belief is constitutive of rationality, and rationality is (of course!) rationally required of us.

The external question must be answered. As agents, we find ourselves engaged in a multitude of activities. Some activities are ones we should engage in, some are not. The constructivist project is to show that all normative questions are settled within the practice of agency. Normative questions arise *for agents*. Normative questions are answered *by agents*. And so it makes sense that if we are to be truly constructivist about epistemic normativity, we should not locate epistemic normativity in belief, or in believing, but in agency itself. It is this version of epistemic constructivism that I will defend in the final section. This version of epistemic constructivism has the same resources to answer the Schmagency Objection as its moral/practical counterparts.

### **3. Epistemic Constructivism Defended**

In this last section, I will explore the possibility that epistemic norms, like practical and moral norms, are constitutive of agency. If this is true, then the constructivist can argue that the Epistemic Schmagency question is unintelligible. Thus, my Epistemic Constructivism is on at least as firm setting *vis-à-vis* the Schmagency Objection as the constructivism considered in section I. This is a reason to prefer my Epistemic Constructivism to Belief Constitutivism.

Before presenting my view, I will contrast it to a popular alternative. Some have thought that the relation between believing and agency is an instrumental one (Kornblith 1993). The practice of agency generates a reason for me to be a believer, and this is because believing truly is necessary to successful action. On this view, being a believer is *necessary* but not *constitutive* of agency. Epistemic norms are distinct from the requirements of agency. We can formulate the norms of agency without making any reference to the epistemic norms. The epistemic norms are necessary like eating a hearty breakfast is necessary for doing well on an exam. The hearty breakfast makes possible doing well on the exam, but eating a hearty breakfast isn't part of taking an exam.

This response could defuse the Schmagency Question. The external question is intelligible, and it is answerable. We can tell Alex that she should be a believer because it is instrumental to bringing about her ends. We have given a conditional constructivism: we have reason to engage in the practice of being a believer. And if the constructivist project is successful, the reason to engage in being a believer can be generated by yet another constructivist norm. This possibility is attractive.

But unfortunately, an instrumentalist defense of epistemic normativity has a fatal flaw. On this conception of agency, successful action is interpreted as “bringing about the intended state of affairs.” And beliefs that conform to epistemic norms are often *not* necessary to successful action. Think back to the schmeliever who indulged in optimism bias. The reason to indulge in optimism bias was that it made the agent happier and more successful. So if the question is to be a believer rather than a schmeliever, we can’t defend being a believer on instrumentalist grounds. If our beliefs are drastically and pervasively false, we can see that successful action is unlikely. But the converse is not true. Having beliefs that systematically follow the epistemic norms need not make successful action more likely. There may be other norms that are better suited for bringing about successful action. And so while we may have instrumental reason to sometimes and in some ways engage in the practice of being a believer, this approach can only ground a contingent and limited reason to be a believer.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to an instrumentalist defense, I propose that we should view epistemic norms as among the norms that are constitutive of action. On this conception of agency, action is not understood as merely producing a state of affairs. Following Korsgaard, I understand an action as “[a]n essentially intelligible object that *embodies* its reason.”<sup>19</sup> The complete description of an action includes three things. It includes the thing to be brought about (the *act*), the *end* which the act serves, and the *reasons* the agent takes to show that the act serves the end. Korsgaard understands these reasons to be captured by the agent’s relevant beliefs. So a complete description of the agent’s action implicates not only the act, and the end, but crucially, the contents of the beliefs that are relevant to making intelligible

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<sup>18</sup> A similar point is made by Côté-Bouchard (2016).

<sup>19</sup> In Korsgaard (2008), she develops this notion in chapter 7, “Acting for a Reason.” In her understanding of action, Korsgaard is drawing on Kant and Aristotle.



what she is doing.<sup>20</sup> Korsgaard writes that, “[g]iving a description or explication of the action, and giving a description or explication of the reason, are the same thing... The reason for an action is not something that stands behind it and makes you want to do it: it is the action itself, described in a way that makes it intelligible.” (ibid. p. 227) On this conception of action, we cannot characterise the action without making reference to the agent’s beliefs. Contra the instrumentalist picture, beliefs do not *bring about* actions. They are partially constitutive of the action.

On this version of epistemic constructivism, the relationship of belief to action is like paint to a painting. The painting is not understood as *merely* globs of paint—the creative imagination of the artist gives form to the painting—but it *is* globs of paint. We could not display the painting without also displaying the paint. When an agent acts, her movement is attributable to her as an action; it is purposive and guided by her representation of the world. Our understanding of an action is intelligible only if we see it as the agent engaging in movement that is *guided* by her representation of the world. So any description of what the agent is doing will have to include what the agent took to be true when she acted. It is part of what makes the action the action it is.

Epistemic Constructivism grounds the normative status of being a believer within the activity of agency. Believing—the activity that is governed by certain norms—is constitutive of agency. And believing well is constitutive of acting well. Here, I cannot give a full defence of this view, but I will sketch the outline. An agent is a creature who sets and pursues ends. In order to set and pursue ends, the agent requires a representational capacity to represent the world as it is. An agent cannot set an end of changing the world without having some representation of how the world already is. And this representation will have built into it certain correctness conditions, namely that it accurately represents the world. In order to reason about how to bring about her ends, the agent will need to have a set of background beliefs about how the world works, what means are effective for accomplishing ends, and so forth. And finally, because the agent exists through time, the agent will need to dynamically regulate her representational capacity, gathering information, updating beliefs, dissolving beliefs that do not meet the epistemic norms.

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<sup>20</sup> Crucially, Korsgaard does not think that the beliefs function as reasons that *cause* the action. The beliefs function as reasons-for-performing-this-act-for-this-end, and the agent’s reasoning is embodied in the action.

I want to contrast my Epistemic Constructivism with what we discussed in section II. On my version, the source of epistemic normativity is the agent herself. It is not primarily the belief, or even being a believer. The agent requires that her capacity for representing the world be regulated according to certain norms, epistemic norms. So her agency requires her to be a believer. Her agency also generates the epistemic norms that are authoritative for her beliefs. And so the question, “why should I be a believer?” can be met with the answer, “because you are an agent, and this is what agency requires!” The norms of agency settle that one should be a believer, and manage one’s beliefs in a particular way.

On my version of Epistemic Constructivism, the Epistemic Schmagency Objection does not arise. If we understand belief as something that *produces* successful action, we can always ask whether another set of norms will do better. This is why the optimism bias of the schmeliever presented such a compelling challenge. But if the agent’s beliefs are playing a different role, a role of making intelligible what the agent is doing by illuminating what the agent takes to be true of the world, what the agent seeks to accomplish and for what end, then nothing else could fulfill that role besides the agent’s beliefs. While we can have debates *within* agency over how and when epistemic requirements on belief may be overridden in a particular case, we cannot formulate a distinct Epistemic Schmagency Objection for my Epistemic Constructivism. The question of “why be a believer?” is answered, “because you are an agent, and this is the role that belief plays for agents.”

There is still the regular old Schmagency Objection for constructivism. As I argued in section I, I think the constructivist has a response to this (though of course more can be said). But, at least for my Epistemic Constructivism, there is no unique Epistemic Schmagency Objection.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I examined the Schmagency Objection and sketched the general strategy that the constructivist must take to defuse the objection. I then developed a version of the Schmagency Objection for a popular version of epistemic constructivism, Belief Constitutivism. Finally, I motivated a different version of epistemic constructivism, one that locates epistemic norms as being (partially) constitutive of agency. I have not offered a full defence of this account, and more needs to be said in order to establish that epistemic norms *are* constitutive of agency. But I have raised a

plausible version of epistemic constructivism, one that avoids the pitfalls of Belief Constitutivism. A fuller defence will have to wait for another time.

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