Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a mismatch between the world as it is and the world as we would like it to be. That is true for every one of us, no matter who we are, or what our own particular array of loves, hopes, and fears. This fact is not news.

A second fact is that this mismatch is not going away. Sometimes it can seem otherwise: In youth, health, and times of good fortune, the gap between the way the world is and the way we want it to be—at least with respect to our own, individual lives—can seem modest, quite possibly surmountable. In life’s peak moments, the gap may seem to close entirely, and we may even think we glimpse the promise of its permanent elimination. But youth and health fade, good fortune can’t be depended upon, and the peak moments pass. So when circumstances or reflection force us to take a more realistic view of our situation, most of us acknowledge that whatever closing of the gap we might be able to achieve and hold on to for this or that period of time, it’s a battle that each of us will lose in the end. The inevitable deterioration of body and mind, and more generally the transience of all things, see to that.

This second fact is also not news, although I take it that it’s one thing to acknowledge this fact intellectually—that one will never have, forever, what one wants—and quite another to absorb this truth completely, down to one’s very bones. The human ability to keep this second truth at bay, shoved off to the perimeter of otherwise bright and absorbing lives, is almost without bound. Sometimes it takes the full force of the world entering in—shattering the heart with loss, and bringing one to one’s knees in the comprehension of that loss’s finality—before one finally gets it (and maybe not even then) that there is no escape after all, that the world has no plan to cooperate with one’s own little point of view in the end.

How best to cope with these facts? We may ignore them, deny them, try to forget them, or numb out in various ways. We may seek to protect the heart against loss by steeling ourselves against others or adopting a cynical attitude. Or we may allow ourselves to love deeply and become invested in things—holding nothing back in our engagement with life, but at the risk of a constant battle against the anxiety and depression that the awareness of inevitable loss can bring. These are all options, but they’re not very good ones, I assume we can agree. Most of us muddle through with some combination. We get by, usually, but it’s not ideal. The strategies are
unstable, and it is hard not to suspect that if placed under enough strain, one’s haphazard system for coping could fail one entirely. Theistic belief offers solace to some, but if one finds it impossible to believe in the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good god, then that is not an option.

Are there better strategies available to us—strategies that don’t involve either turning away from love, turning away from reality, or the daunting prospect of soldiering on in the face of losses that one reasonably fears could become unbearable? We might hope that secular moral philosophy would have something to say about this question, if only to help us think more clearly about the situation and the options available to us.

The goal of this essay is to make some small inroads on this question, while at the same time (in what might at first sound like an odd combination of aims) sketching a metaphysically antirealist but objectivist metaethical view. In other words, my goal is to explore the following two questions, which might at first seem unrelated. The first question is practical:

(1) Each of us faces the inevitable loss of everyone and everything we love. More generally, we face an ineliminable gap between how things are and how we would like them to be. Is there a way to live in full awareness of this fact without falling into anxiety or depression, or resorting to one form or another of forgetfulness, denial, or numbing out? In more positive terms: Is it possible to live a flourishing, deeply engaged human life, while fully conscious of the passing nature of everything one loves, and harboring no illusions that “everything will be okay in the end”?

The second question is metaethical:

(2) Is it possible to vindicate a strong form of ethical objectivity without positing anything metaphysically or epistemologically mysterious?

Given the size of both questions, my goal is of course not to give anything remotely approaching a full answer to either. Instead, my aim is to begin chipping away in an incremental fashion at both, with an eye to explaining how the two questions might be related. The hope is to make a small bit of progress on a larger undertaking, which is to articulate, in the language of secular analytic philosophy, a partially Buddhist-inspired metaethical view that would, if it could be made to work, offer a positive answer to both questions. In the next section, I sketch how the practical question and the metaethical question might be connected. In subsequent sections, I begin filling in certain very limited parts of that sketch.

2. HOW THE TWO QUESTIONS MIGHT BE CONNECTED

The landscape of secular analytic metaethics is inhabited by a diverse array of inventive and intricate metaethical positions. These include non-naturalist realism, naturalist realism, quasi-realist expressivism, sensibility theories, and metaethical constructivism, to name just a few.¹ While I can’t argue for the comparative point here, I believe that among these views, our best hope for vindicating a strong form of ethical objectivity, while avoiding metaphysical and

epistemological mystery, is metaethical constructivism. I defend this view elsewhere and will be saying more about it below.

But first, to clarify the spirit in which I am approaching my topic, it is worth emphasizing that although I regard metaethical constructivism as our best hope for vindicating a strong form of ethical objectivity, I have, at least in the past, regarded it as a meager hope at best. In particular, I’ve argued for a Humean as opposed to a Kantian version of metaethical constructivism. The Kantian version of the position, defended most prominently by Christine Korsgaard, aspires to underwrite a very strong form of ethical objectivity—roughly, by trying to show that all agents are rationally committed to morality whether they realize it or not. The Humean version of the position is skeptical of such attempts to derive morality from pure reason, instead taking the position that it is false that morality is normatively binding on all rational agents, though of course we might say otherwise if we think that doing so might be useful as a pragmatic matter.

The difference between the two brands of constructivism may be illustrated with reference to Allan Gibbard’s helpful example of an ideally coherent Caligula. Caligula, we may suppose, values the activity of torturing others for fun, is perfectly logically and instrumentally consistent in holding this value, and is making no mistakes about the non-normative facts. (He is perfectly aware of the nature and extent of his victims’ pain, for example, and of the fact that other people hate him and will do their best to stop him.) The Kantian constructivist we may understand as trying to show that, contrary to how it might at first seem, there actually is no such thing as an ideally coherent Caligula—that rather there is, buried somewhere in Caligula’s evaluative point of view on the world, and indeed in any immoral evaluative point of view on the world, some kind of rational inconsistency. In opposition to this, the Humean constructivist is inclined to think that an ideally coherent Caligula is all too possible, and that since realism about normative reasons is false (a point on which the Kantian and Humean constructivist agree), we are forced to accept that such a character does have normative reason to torture others for fun, even though (again) we might say the opposite, if we think doing so might help to stop him.

In spite of having defended this rather subjectivist view, I’m not ready to give up on the search for a stronger form of moral objectivity than Humean constructivism delivers. After all, when we contemplate examples such as the ideally coherent Caligula, many people still have the strong sense—indebate perhaps, but very strong—that such an agent is somehow failing to “see” what’s true about how to live—that he or she is badly mistaken, for example, in thinking that the pain of others has no bearing on how he or she should live (or worse, that it counts as a positively good thing). While this strongly objectivist thought is, to my mind, both obscure and plausibly

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2 I discuss Korsgaard’s position in more detail in the following section.

3 I characterize Humean constructivism in greater depth in “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason,” in Constructivism in Practical Philosophy, eds. James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 40-59. While there are important differences, the basic position is very much in the spirit of Bernard Williams’s position that there are no external reasons, only internal ones. See his “Internal and external reasons,” reprinted in Bernard Williams, Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 101-113.


diagnosable as wishful thinking, the inchoate sense of a mistake here is nevertheless hard to shake, even for those of us who are inclined to think that the idea may not make sense in the end or will face fatal epistemological problems. The Holy Grail in secular metaethics would be a vindication of this inchoate sense—a philosophical account that clearly explained, with no mysterious metaphysical or epistemological remainder, and in a way that rang deeply true with our pre-philosophical sense of things, exactly what such an agent’s mistake would consist in, when he or she contemplated the suffering of others and saw it as counting for nothing. In spite of my reservations, I agree that it would be premature to give up on the search for this Holy Grail. I furthermore think it is high time for those of us who work in metaethics in the western tradition to look to other traditions for fresh ideas about how we might make this project work.

As we continue the search, then, I continue to think that a metaethical constructivist approach is the most promising one. The constructivist approach is also the nexus that potentially connects the two questions we started with. So let me now state in compressed form the plan of attack that I am interested in exploring:

(A) According to metaethical constructivism, the objectivity of ethics would be vindicated, without metaphysical and epistemological mystery, if we could somehow show that there is a universal problem, faced by every individual agent, to which morality is the universal and best (or only) solution. (One of the main points of this paper will be to say more about this first point.)

(B) A plausible candidate for a universal problem faced by every individual agent is the problem of a mismatch between the world as it is and the world as that agent would like it to be. (I will be calling this the problem of attachment and loss.)

(C) It’s at least possible that there is a universal, best solution to this problem.

(D) It’s also at least possible that the solution mentioned in (C) somehow necessarily involves taking up an ethical perspective on the world.

Pulling the four points together: If the problem of attachment and loss is a universal problem, if there is indeed a universal best solution to it, and if that solution somehow necessarily involves taking up an ethical perspective, then we would have a vindication of the objectivity of ethics of exactly the form proposed by constructivist views in metaethics. So if metaethical constructivism is correct, then we would have a vindication of the objectivity of ethics that avoided metaphysical and epistemological mystery. We would also have found an answer to the practical problem we started out with—the question of how to cope with the inevitable loss of everyone and everything we love. Oddly enough (or not so oddly?) the answer would be that one should seek out and occupy an ethical perspective on oneself and others.

Obviously there are a lot of very big “ifs” here. But I don’t think they should deter us from exploring the general line of thought to see what we can make of it. One big “if” concerns metaethical constructivism. Since it is not the point of the paper to defend this view against alternatives, and given that many readers will be skeptical of it, let me emphasize that much of the interest of what I’ll be exploring does not depend on whether one accepts constructivism as a metaethical view. Specifically, to the extent one is interested in the practical problem on which I will be focusing (and indeed, one of my claims will be that you must be interested in it!), much of the discussion will, I hope, be of interest as a substantive normative matter, even if one disagrees with me about how to understand normativity at the foundational level. Borrowing terminology from John Rawls (and indeed, to emphasize a constructivist point), my discussion of the problem of attachment and loss and its possible solutions may be thought of as a freestanding “module”
that can fit into, and be underwritten by, any number of metaethical views, just as Rawls’s political conception of justice can (according to Rawls) fit into, and be supported by, any number of comprehensive doctrines.\(^6\)

Other big “ifs” include what may seem like the farfetched suggestions of (C) and (D)—that there could be a universal, best solution to the problem in question, and that this solution could necessarily involve taking up an ethical perspective. I agree that it is very hard in advance to see how these moves could go. Here let me just say two things: First, Buddhist tradition—a vast and rich tradition representing the upshot of thousands of years of human experimentation with living—gives us some reason for hope on both points. For at a broad level, we may understand that tradition as suggesting that there is a universal solution to the problem of attachment and loss, and moreover, that achievement of the relevant state of mind somehow necessarily involves coming to occupy a compassionate point of view from which one sees the suffering of all beings as mattering. Second, we may learn a great deal from exploring these possibilities even if we decide they don’t pan out in the end. For example, even if we don’t manage to vindicate an extremely strong form of ethical objectivity—one that shows, for example, that any agent is making a mistake not to care about others’ suffering—we might still make progress on showing how a restricted but nevertheless very large range of agents, perhaps of a kind most or all human beings happen to be, would be making a mistake. Vindicating the objectivity of ethics is not an all-or-nothing affair, and we may make progress by aiming high and then seeing where, short of that, we actually land.

My focus in the remainder of the paper is almost exclusively on (A) and (B). There won’t be space to say much of anything about (C) and (D). This is frustrating, insofar as it means that this paper is mostly about a problem, with almost nothing to say about solutions. It is a common methodological point, however, that arriving at a clearer statement of the problem may assist us in identifying the solution, so it is worth proceeding slowly. That being said, since it is important for the sake of motivating the overall project to give some vague sense of how (C) and (D) might go, I’ll close by giving the briefest of indications of the Buddhist-inspired solution to the problem that I have in mind. While those closing remarks won’t be at all convincing in the absence of further development, I hope what I say will be enough to persuade readers that the ideas are worth looking into, and to win some converts to the idea that analytic metaethics in the western tradition may have a great deal to learn from eastern meditative traditions.

3. THE CONSTRUCTIVIST STRATEGY FOR VINDICATING THE OBJECTIVITY OF ETHICS

We may summarize the general strategy pursued by constructivist views in ethics—whether in substantive normative ethics, political philosophy, or metaethics—as consisting of a series of three steps:

**Step 1:** Identify some (more or less widely shared) evaluative point of view that is of interest. Identify the point of view by saying what is constitutively involved in occupying it.

Step 2: Identify some (more or less widely shared) problem that faces anyone who occupies the evaluative point of view identified in Step 1. It may be that the problem in question arises only in the context of certain “outer” factual circumstances. In that case, to identify the problem, one will also need to specify the factual circumstances that generate the problem when combined with the “inner” evaluative point of view identified in Step 1. These factual circumstances may also of course be more or less widely shared.

Step 3: Identify the solution (or solutions) to the problem identified in Step 2. This will require substantive argument to the effect that some particular solution $S$ is the best, or only, way to solve the problem identified in Step 2.

To illustrate, let us briefly consider how Rawls’s political constructivism and Korsgaard’s Kantian constructivism implement the strategy. Below, in chart form, is a summary that draws heavily from Korsgaard’s helpful discussion in “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: The evaluative point of view of interest</th>
<th>Rawls’s political constructivism</th>
<th>Korsgaard’s Kantian constructivism</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>The point of view of citizens in a liberal democratic society, who are assumed to accept certain loosely characterized normative conceptions of society and the person.</td>
<td>The point of view of the “will,” any will at all; the point of view of a being with some ends or other (it doesn’t matter what).</td>
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| Step 2: The problem confronted by this evaluative point of view | “[H]ow are we to give reasons that everyone can accept, in a society where people derive their reasons from radically different conceptions of the good?”$^8$ | “[S]ince the will is practical reason, it cannot be conceived as acting and choosing for no reason. Since reasons are derived from principles, the free will must have a principle. But because the will is free, no law or principle can be imposed on it from outside…. But now we have a problem: for where is this principle to come from? If it is imposed on the will from outside then the will is not free. So the will must adopt a principle for itself. But until the will has a principle, there is nothing from which it can derive a reason. So how can it have any reason for adopting one principle rather than another?”$^9$ |

| Step 3: The proposed solution to the problem | Rawls’s two principles of justice | The categorical imperative as represented by Kant’s Formula of Universal Law. |


$^8$ Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism,” p. 113.

$^9$ Ibid., p. 114.
Rawls’s view is what we may call a restricted version of constructivism. As Rawls makes clear, especially in his later writings, his argument for justice as fairness is not addressed to any agent, no matter what that agent’s particular starting set of values. For example, Rawls does not have, nor does he intend to have, anything to say to an agent who rejects the values of freedom and equality, or who has no concern with fairness. This is not a weakness of Rawls’s position, but just a question of its intended scope. Rawls’s aim is to speak to a problem that arises for a certain restricted set of agents, a set of agents distinguished by the fact that they already possess a certain fund of evaluative concerns. The concerns in question are, roughly speaking, those of citizens in a liberal democratic society, who, it is just assumed, already accept certain very general sorts of values, including a normative conception of society as a fair system of cooperation over time, and a normative conception of persons as free and equal. Rawls identifies a problem that confronts agents who already possess these evaluative concerns—or, better, agents who not only possess these concerns, but also find themselves in certain factual circumstances, including (at the most fundamental level) conditions of scarcity and (more to the point in Rawls’s later writings) the presence of a persistent reasonable pluralism—and then, with his theory, proposes a solution to that problem.

Korsgaard’s view, in contrast to Rawls’s, is a maximally ambitious or thoroughgoing form of constructivism. Whereas Rawls’s view is addressed to a circumscribed set of agents, Korsgaard (interpreting Kant) seeks to provide an argument that will find a footing with any agent, no matter what that agent’s particular starting set of evaluative concerns. The evaluative point of view of interest—and the audience to whom the argument is supposed to be pitched—is any evaluative point of view. The problem that Korsgaard (again, interpreting Kant) identifies is supposed to be entirely general, confronting every conceivable agent simply in virtue of his or her being an agent. Since the solution is supposed to be perfectly general as well, and moreover necessarily to involve accepting morality (as captured by Kant’s Formula of Universal Law), we would, if Korsgaard’s argument were to succeed, have achieved a very strong vindication of the objectivity of ethics. I’ll say more in a moment about why I think Korsgaard’s argument doesn’t succeed, but first we need to consider a more general objection.

Noting the general three-step strategy I’ve identified, an objector might ask what any of this has to do with ethical objectivity. After all, Step 1 merely involves identifying some evaluative point of view or other. But for all that’s been said, the point of view identified in Step 1 could be badly mistaken. For example, one can imagine an implementation of Step 1 in which one gives a constitutive characterization of the evaluative point of view shared by racists. We could then, in Step 2, identify some “problem” faced by agents with that evaluative point of view (in combination with outer factual circumstances) and then argue persuasively that some solution S (Jim Crow laws, say) is the best or only solution to that problem. But obviously none of this

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11 Think here of Rawls’s notion of the “circumstances of justice,” describing the set of factual circumstances (both objective and subjective) in which the problem of justice arises. See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), §22.

12 Here see Rawls’s discussion of the “fact of reasonable pluralism” and two other “general facts” that Rawls thinks characterize the political culture of a democratic society (Political Liberalism, pp. 36-38).
shows that $S$ is normatively binding. One might therefore object to the general three-step strategy: “Maybe the agents who share the evaluative point of view identified in Step 1 will think the solution is binding, but that doesn’t mean it is binding. If the evaluative point of view identified in Step 1 is normatively horribly mistaken, then solution $S$ isn’t binding in the least.”

This objection is entirely correct if what we are looking at is a restricted version of constructivism. Naturally, when the evaluative point of view identified in Step 1 is one that we happen to share, or at least find broadly congenial, then we will be liable to conclude, if the other steps work out, that solution $S$ is binding upon us. That is why we may be inclined to nod along with Rawls’s version of restricted constructivism—because we ourselves share the basic fund of liberal democratic values that Rawls is operating with. So if we find Rawls’s other arguments compelling, we will be tempted to regard Rawls as having established the normative objectivity of the two principles. But all we have to do is to consider a “Jim Crow” version constructivism to see that this has not been established. Restricted constructivist views do not in themselves vindicate the normative objectivity of anything; normative objectivity has not been vindicated until the evaluative point of view assumed in Step 1 has itself also been vindicated, and of course it might not be.

But what about a maximally ambitious, metaethical version of constructivism? Here one might have a similar worry. Transferring the objection to this case, one might argue: “Suppose it’s so that every agent, no matter what the substantive content of his or her starting set of evaluative concerns, is committed, by his or her own lights, to morality. Suppose, in other words, that every agent necessarily, by his or her own lights, faces a certain problem, and that morality is indeed the best and only solution to that problem. Here, as in the Jim Crow case, all this shows is that agents must think morality is binding; that doesn’t mean morality is binding.”

To this objection, I must simply reply with an assertion that is too much to defend here. While an objection of this structure is legitimate in the case of restricted versions of constructivism, the objection in this case is based on an implicit acceptance of normative realism, which is a particular (and, I would argue, problematic) metaethical view. Normative realism is the view that there are mind-independent normative truths not only in the sense that:

(Modest mind-independence) There are some reasons that every agent has no matter what the particular substantive content of his or her starting set of evaluative attitudes.

but also in the stronger sense that:

(Robust mind-independence) There are some reasons that every agent has no matter whether the conclusion that he or she has those reasons is in any way logically or instrumentally derivable from his or her own evaluative perspective on the world when that evaluative perspective is combined with the non-normative facts.

Normative realism, as defined by the second, stronger claim, is false. While there might be “mind-independent” normative truths in the former, more modest sense—indeed, that’s exactly what Korsgaard is trying to show—there are no mind-independent normative truths in the latter, much more robust sense.

Why not? Obviously I can’t argue for the falsity of realism here, but in my view, the most devastating objection to realism is epistemological." In the remainder of the paper, I will

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13 I develop an epistemological argument against various forms of normative realism in “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-166; “Reply
simply assume for the sake of argument that realism is false. On the assumption that realism is false, then the successful implementation of a maximally ambitious form of constructivism like Korsgaard’s would succeed in vindicating the objectivity of morality; the basic constructivist thought is that in the end, the subject matter of ethics just is the subject matter of what follows (logically and instrumentally) from evaluative points of view on the world in combination with the non-normative facts.

As I’ve said, I don’t think that Korsgaard’s particular Kantian-style implementation of the constructivist strategy works. First, it is not clear that the so-called “problem” of the free will’s “needing a principle” is really a problem. I argue elsewhere that a “will” that has no principle is like “parent” who has no (and never had a) child. The right thing to say is not that we have a will or a parent with a problem; the right thing to say is that we don’t have a will or a parent at all. Second, as I also argue elsewhere, even if one buys the idea that the free will has a “problem,” it is not clear enough why the Formula of Universal Law (as opposed to any other arbitrarily adopted principle) is the solution. Third, the alleged “problem” of “needing a principle” is not one with a powerful intuitive grip. It is a highly abstract, philosophically motivated problem—not something that is likely to keep one up at night unless one is a professional philosopher or someone with a lot of time on one’s hands. It also arguably reflects a culturally idiosyncratic preoccupation with “reason” and “acting for reasons.” While we all in some sense want to act for good reasons, at least a lot of the time, it takes a certain kind of cultural and philosophical obsession to want to have “reasons all the way down,” which is one way of understanding the “problem” that Korsgaard, interpreting Kant, is focused on.

While I don’t think Korsgaard’s implementation of the constructivist strategy succeeds, I believe we can take something extremely valuable away from her discussion: namely the proposed general strategy for vindicating the objectivity of ethics. We may summarize that strategy as follows: To vindicate the objectivity of ethics, try to show that morality is the universal (and best or only) solution to a problem that is somehow built into the structure of agency itself, such that if you qualify as an agent at all, then necessarily the problem (and therefore also the solution) is yours (by your own, evaluative lights). Since, according to metaethical constructivism, the subject matter of how to live is exhausted by the subject matter of how, by our own evaluative lights, to live, given the non-normative facts (this is the rejection of realism), to pull off this feat would be to provide the strongest possible vindication of the objectivity of ethics. In the remainder of the paper, I will begin to explore an alternative implementation of this general strategy.

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14 I argue for both this point and the previous one in “Coming to Terms with Contingency.”

4. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF STRENGTH AND TRANSITION TO AN ALTERNATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Note that there are at least four dimensions of strength along which a proposed constructivist vindication can vary. Roughly speaking, the proposed vindication will be stronger:

1. ...the larger the proportion of agents who face the problem. (At the limit, the vindication would identify a problem that is necessarily faced by every agent.)

2. ...the more urgent the problem is relative to other problems agents face. (At the limit, the identified problem would necessarily be the most urgent problem faced by every agent.)

3. ...the larger the proportion of agents for whom morality is either the best solution or the only solution to the problem. (At the limit, morality would be the best or only solution to the problem for every agent, and this would not just be a contingent fact.)

4. ...the extent to which morality is a good and complete solution to the problem. (One can imagine its being the best or only solution for an agent, without being a particularly good one.)

In considering the force of any proposed vindication, it will be helpful to consider each of these four dimensions. Let me now summarize the alternative implementation of the constructivist strategy that I have in mind.

Recall that the first step is to identify a certain evaluative point of view by saying what is constitutively involved in occupying it. Since we, like Korsgaard, are pursuing a maximally ambitious version of constructivism, Step 1 in our case will consist in trying to give a clear account of what is constitutively involved in occupying any evaluative point of view whatsoever. That is the task of section 5. The second step, and the task of section 6, is to identify a problem that is faced by anyone who occupies the evaluative point of view identified in Step 1. I will argue that no matter what the particulars of a given agent’s evaluative point of view, he or she faces the problem of attachment and loss. I will then evaluate the strength of this problem along the first two of the four dimensions of strength identified above. The third step is to identify a solution to the problem in question, and argue that this solution, whatever it is, necessarily involves taking up an ethical perspective on the world. As I’ve already warned, there won’t be time to say much about this, but I will close with a hasty sketch. I also won’t be able to say anything about the third and fourth dimensions of strength: in other words, at best I’ll just give some sense of how adopting an ethical perspective on the world might be a solution to the problem of attachment and loss for some agents. I won’t be able to say anything to persuade you that it might be a universal, or best, or even particularly good or complete solution. These are questions for another time.

5. STEP 1 OF THE ALTERNATIVE IMPLEMENTATION: WHAT IS INVOLVED IN OCCUPYING ANY EVALUATIVE POINT OF VIEW?

Korsgaard’s implementation of Step 1 revolves around the Kantian notion of the will. It is through analysis of this concept that we are supposed to arrive at an understanding of the universal point of view to which the justification of morality is supposed to be addressed. For reasons I won’t discuss here, I find the concept of the “will” and the associated idea of “willing”
Instead, if our task is to provide an account of what is constitutively involved in occupying any evaluative point of view on the world, I believe it is more helpful to focus on giving an account of what is constitutively involved in what I will call the state of mind of *valuing*.

While I intend to draw on our intuitive understanding of “valuing” up to a point, it is important that I am not meaning to track ordinary usage, but rather am introducing *valuing* as a philosophical term of art meant to encompass a wide range of attitudes and experiential states. In brief, the attitudes that I wish to encompass include attitudes such as the attitude of taking some thing X (perhaps a particular person, object, state of affairs, action, etc.) to be *good*, *valuable*, *desirable*, *called for*, or *required*, and the attitude of taking one thing X to be a *reason* to Y, where this is a matter of seeing X as *calling for* or *counting in favor of* or even *requiring* or *demanding* Y. I also mean the term *valuing* to encompass a range of attitudes and experiential states that vary a great deal in their cognitive, emotional, and linguistic sophistication (or lack thereof)—ranging from the “proto” form of valuing that we might see in a simple organism that experiences dull pain and pleasure in regular tandem with certain circumstances (the most primitive form of taking something to be “good” or “bad”), to the most sophisticated, full-blown forms of valuing we see in an adult human being who values something very consciously and deeply upon reflection.

What is supposed to be the unifying feature of this wide range of states? First let me say what I think will not work. What will not work, in my view, is to try to give a reductive characterization of the attitude of valuing, in the sense of a characterization of valuing that does not in any way invoke normative concepts (such as *good*, *valuable*, *desirable*, *called for*, *required*, or *counting as a normative reason for*). Normative concepts are irreducible; on this point I agree with theorists such as T. M. Scanlon and Derek Parfit. To try to explain what


16 In other words, my goal is not to provide an “account of valuing” in the sense of an explication of a pre-existing concept. For that reason, I do not regard what I say below as in tension with, for example, Samuel Scheffler’s account of valuing in his essay “Valuing,” in Equality & Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 15-40. I count as instances of “valuing” many things that Scheffler would not (e.g., certain patterns of pleasure and pain experience in non-human animals, or a person’s dispassionate belief that something is valuable). This does not indicate a disagreement, but merely reflects the stipulative nature of my use of the term. My aim is to point to a very wide range of states that I see as unified by their relevance to metaethics (being examples of the kinds of states that ultimately “ground” or “give rise to” normativity). Scheffler’s aim, in contrast, is to give an informative account of one important and distinctive subclass of “valuing” in my (broader) sense.

17 What follows is not meant to be an argument, but just an assertion of my view; I say more about the antireductionist element of my position in “Nothing ‘Really’ Matters, but That’s Not What Matters,” forthcoming in Does Anything Really Matter: Parfit on Objectivity, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Oxford University Press). But one could reject this antireductionist element of the position and still buy a great deal else of what I have to say in this paper; I thank David Plunkett for helpful discussion of this.

valuing is in purely non-normative terms—for example, seeking to give a reductive account of valuing as a kind of second-order desire—will inevitably fail, in my view.\footnote{For the proposal that valuing is desiring to desire, see David Lewis, “Dispositional Theories of Value,” \textit{Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society}, suppl. 63: 113-137, p. 116. For discussion of the inadequacy of this kind of account, see Scheffler, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 15-20.}

But the fact that we cannot accurately characterize the attitudes in question without invoking normative concepts doesn’t mean that we’re saddled with any naturalistically problematic mystery; nor does it mean that we can’t say anything informative about these attitudes and locate them perfectly well for ourselves. First off, we can get a fix on the relevant \textit{concepts} by pointing to circumstances in which we tend to experience things as good, valuable, worthwhile, called for, etc. The idea is that just as we may point to the concept of something’s being \textit{yellow} by pointing to circumstances in which we tend to have the conscious experience of something as \textit{yellow}—e.g., when looking at sunflower petals or a school bus—so too we may point to the concept of something’s being \textit{called for} by pointing to circumstances in which we tend to have the conscious experience of something as \textit{called for}—for example, when a truck swerves toward us (and we experience evasive action as called for) or when we see a lost child weeping (and we experience helping behavior as called for).\footnote{I say more about these points in “Nothing ‘Really’ Matters, but That’s Not What Matters.”} Observing other animals we are able to infer that some of them also surely have conscious experiences whose qualitative character is best described as experiences of certain things as “good,” “bad,” “called for,” and so forth.

We may furthermore characterize the relevant set of attitudes by contrasting them, or at least full-blown versions of them, with the attitude that we might call \textit{mere desire}. I argue elsewhere for at least three points of contrast.\footnote{I argue for these points in “Coming to Terms With Contingency,” section 2.} First, valuing an end, in contrast to merely desiring it, constitutively involves valuing what one is fully aware is the necessary means to that end. Second, the state of mind of valuing is characterized by a much broader array of conscious experience than is the attitude of mere desiring. Third, the attitude of valuing is characterized by greater structural complexity than the attitude of mere desiring.\footnote{There are complications here. On the one hand, I think it helps to characterize the state of mind of “valuing” by contrasting it with “mere desire.” On the other hand, as the final paragraph of this section suggests, I think that we see in nature and ourselves a vast continuum of states of mind that are in some sense recognizable as “valuing”—ranging from the simplest pleasures and pains to the highly complex evaluative attitudes of a normal adult human being. So there is a sense in which I think even “mere desire” is recognizable as a “proto” form of “valuing.” The contrast that I mention here, then, between “valuing” and “mere desire,” is meant to elucidate the state of mind of valuing in its most full-blown form.}

As yet another helpful means of getting a fix on the relevant type of state of mind, we may point to loose constitutive connections with emotions such as anticipation, hope, joy, relief, anxiety, fear, sadness, and regret. The rough idea is that to value something (at least in a lot of core cases in emotionally complex beings) is to experience joy when that thing is safe, alarm when that thing is threatened, sadness when that thing is lost, and so on.\footnote{The connection between valuing and certain patterns of “emotional vulnerability” is argued for and explored by Scheffler, \textit{op. cit.}, as well as by Elizabeth Anderson in \textit{Value in Ethics and Economics}.}
This is a sketch, but I hope it gives some sense of how I think we should implement Step 1. The priority throughout is to specify what’s involved in the attitude of valuing in a way that respects the point that we can, without any problem, imagine a being valuing virtually anything—including its own death, the activity of torturing others, counting to the number 79 over and over again, and so on. There is no conceptual confusion in imagining such states of mind, and the work involved in Step 1 is a matter of just identifying those “thinnest” things a creature needs to be doing in order recognizably to be valuing something, regardless of the particular substantive content of its values. Note finally that I think this work is messy: I do not think it is possible, necessary, or desirable to hammer out an extremely strict and precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions. It is the family of attitudes here that matters; we want to be able to capture idea that there is something important in common between the simplest “proto” forms of valuing (represented by dull experiences of “pleasant” and “unpleasant” in systematic response to certain circumstances), and the most cognitively sophisticated instances of valuing (some of them emotionally extraordinarily rich, others abstract and virtually affectless in their presentation).

6. STEP 2 OF THE ALTERNATIVE IMPLEMENTATION: THE PROBLEM OF ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

Now to the next step. Recall that Korsgaard’s implementation of Step 2 involves arguing, following Kant, that there is a certain “problem” that confronts any will whatsoever—the problem of needing a principle of action that is freely adopted for a reason, as opposed to given from the outside. I complained earlier that it isn’t clear that this is a real problem, and moreover that even if it is, it lacks a powerful intuitive grip. So let me now sketch an alternative way of going that may hold more promise.

Consider the following idea: Constitutively involved in the attitude of valuing is taking there to be either an actual gap, or the potential for a gap, between the way the world is, on the one hand, and the way it would be good or desirable for the world to be, on the other. This is not intended to be a substantive point, but merely a conceptual observation. To the extent the claim strikes you as trivial, that is good—this is not meant to be a revolutionary idea but a statement of the obvious.

In a move that is meant to be similarly trivial and obvious—just a reframing of the same point, but now pivoting to put it in terms of a “problem” that arises from the point of view of the valuer—consider the following. If the point of the previous paragraph is true, then the problem that is necessarily built into the standpoint of any valuer is the problem of a gap, or the potential


24 If one reads the phrase “something important in common” and impatiently wants to hear more about what, my answer is the disappointing one that I already alluded to, namely that no accurate reductive account of this is possible. (This is the point about the irreducibility of normative concepts.) In the end, the only accurate way to say what is common between a simple pleasure of the kind a robin might enjoy upon devouring a worm and an adult human’s reflective judgment that “we should seek to grow the economy” is that both states involve the taking of something (the ingestion of the worm, the growth of the economy) to be “good.” This is not informative, but as I also suggested above, I don’t think it’s philosophically problematic that it’s uninformative.
for a gap, between the world as it as a matter of fact is, and the world as the valuer thinks it would be good or desirable for the world to be. Let us call this the problem of attachment and loss, with the intuitive idea being that to be a valuer is, among other things, to be a being who is attached to the world’s being one way rather than another. To be a valuer, in other words, is to be a being for whom there is always at least a potential divergence between how things are and how one values their being, such that one is subject to loss, or anyway the ever-present threat of loss.25

The problem of attachment and loss “presents” in a different, particular, substantive form to each individual valuer—that is, to every individual evaluative point of view on the world. These substantive evaluative points of view may be deeply different and opposed; the same thing that is “good” from one evaluative point of view may be a terrible loss from another.26

What else can we say about the problem? Let us next look at how it fares along the first two of the four dimensions of strength along which a constructivist vindication can vary. To assess the first dimension of strength, we ask: What proportion of agents face the problem of attachment and loss? My remarks so far might suggest that every evaluative point of view necessarily faces the problem of attachment and loss. But a closer look quickly reveals questions about this. After all, the problem of attachment and loss has to do with a relation between a particular evaluative point of view and the way the world is. And it would seem that depending on the evaluative point of view and the nature of the world, we can imagine valuers who are not subject to loss after all. I will call such valuers invulnerable valuers.

25 The following points need more discussion than is possible here, but let me make some quick remarks on my choice of the label “problem of attachment and loss.” For many readers, this phrase will immediately summon to mind the psychologist John Bowlby’s seminal three-volume series Attachment and Loss. This resonance with Bowlby’s work on the case of a child’s attachment to its parents is in some respects what I want, for this most primal case of attachment evokes the emotional depth, urgency, and intensity that can be involved in our evaluative experience of the world. More broadly, it calls to mind what is, for many of us, by far the most powerful concrete manifestation of the problem, namely the inevitable final separation from those we love, either through their deaths or our own (if not beforehand due to other causes). In other respects, however, the label is potentially highly misleading. In particular, it suggests a much narrower phenomenon than the broad and abstract one that I want to pick out. Briefly, we might distinguish between attachment in a narrow sense, in which an “attachment” is something that can only exist with respect to an already or previously possessed object, person, place, or time, and attachment in a broad sense, in which one can be “attached” to things that are not yet (and perhaps never will be) present, actualized, or possessed (as one might be attached to the idea of becoming a famous writer, or of having a certain kind of life, or of winning the love of a particular person). The “problem” posed from the first-person standpoint of attachments in the narrow sense is the problem of inevitable separation or loss. The “problem” posed from the first-person standpoint of attachments in the broader sense is the possibility of their never being realized. More needs to be said about these matters, but for now I simply want to stress that I am using the phrase problem of attachment and loss as a term of art, and invoking the term attachment in its broadest sense, where there is no assumption that one will ever have, or see realized, the thing to which one is attached.

26 For this reason, one might doubt that there could be any universal solution to the problem. After all, the solution to the cheetah’s problem is diametrically opposed to the solution of the gazelle’s. And even when we turn to more flexible human lives, there are innumerable zero-sum situations in which the solution to one person’s problem involves the permanent lack of solution to someone else’s. I agree that it is hard to see how there could be a universal solution when the problem’s substantive manifestations have this conflicting structure; let me just say I think there is hope (in the form gestured at in the final section).
Possible examples include a valuer who values the fact that \(2 + 2 = 4\) (and not 5 or some other number), and a valuer who values the fact that the universe for some period of time (it doesn’t matter when) contained diamonds. Notice that to be an invulnerable valuer, it is not enough that one value the above sorts of things; it must also the case that this is all one values. For example, it can’t be the case that one also values sticking around another day (if only to continue contemplating the wonderful fact that \(2 + 2 = 4\)). For as soon as one valued this, one would be subject to loss: after all, one might not live another day, or one might be having trouble finding the resources to live another day, and so on. So invulnerable valuers would be strange creatures indeed, and they wouldn’t live very long (indeed they would never evolve), since they wouldn’t be motivated to do anything, including seeking to maintain themselves in any form at all. That being said, I think we can imagine them, which is all that’s relevant for the conceptual point. We simply imagine an evaluative point of view that is delighted that \(2 + 2 = 4\), full of joy and pleasure and relief in contemplating that fact, and full of horror at the thought (however confused) that “what if it had been 5?” and so on. This point of view would also not place any value on its own continuing to exist; from its point of view, “all that mattered” would be that \(2 + 2 = 4\). It could die happy the next second knowing that.

If this is right, then it is not true that every conceivable evaluative point of view faces the problem of attachment and loss. The next question is whether this puts much of a damper on the strength of a potential vindication emerging from this strategy. One way of exploring this is to ask: Should we view the set of all conceivable valuers as identical with the set of all conceivable agents? It’s not clear that we should, for notice that an invulnerable valuer has no reasons for action. From an invulnerable valuer’s point of view (assuming he or she knows the world is and always will be exactly how he or she wants it to be), there is nothing at all that needs doing. The world is normatively perfect just as it is. Thus, to the extent that an agent (as opposed to a mere valuer) is a being who is subject to reasons to act—a being for whom there are normative reasons to do things—we may have secured the conclusion that all agents are necessarily subject to the problem of attachment and loss. There is some intuitive plausibility to this idea: roughly, if you have things to do—if you have normative reason to do anything—then you might (as far as you know, anyway) fail. You are therefore subject to the problem of attachment and loss.

But even if you don’t like this suggestion about how to think about the concept agent, it seems to me that no matter what, the possibility of invaluable valuers does not weaken the strength of our potential vindication. Invulnerable valuers, after all, are not part of the audience that a vindication of ethics needs to address, any more than we need an argument that speaks to plants. There is nothing that an invulnerable valuer is going to do (on the assumption he knows he is an invulnerable valuer—and if he doesn’t know this then we will be able to show him he has no reason to do anything—and a fortiori, anything unethical—by showing him that the world is already, and always will be, exactly the way he wants it to be).

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\(^{27}\) This is another point where I am assuming that constructivism about reasons, as opposed to realism, is correct. (A realist could think that an invulnerable valuer had normative reasons that he wasn’t recognizing.)

\(^{28}\) We can imagine a miserable invulnerable valuer who doesn’t know that’s what he is; imagine a being who values the fact that \(2 + 2 = 4\) and nothing else, but is in constant anxiety about what he believes is the never-ending threat of the sum’s changing to 5 (or worse, 6!). These complications about what a valuer believes to be the case about the way the world is (or might be) versus the way it as a matter of fact is (or could be) should not be overlooked, but they can be finessed.
Now consider the second dimension of strength along which a constructivist vindication can vary. The question here is: What is the urgency of the identified problem relative to other problems agents face? The first thing to notice is that there is no real “problem of attachment and loss” as such. The problem of attachment and loss is the form of a problem, not a problem itself. For a real problem to exist, you need a real, living being with an actual evaluative point of view on the world, a point of view constituted by actual, substantive values.

Noting the formal nature of the problem of attachment and loss, we may now see the following. The “problem of attachment and loss”—which doesn’t exist except as substantively manifested in actual, contentful evaluative points of view—just inherits all of the urgency of whatever problems a given agent in fact faces. In other words, whatever a given agent’s most urgent substantive problems are—whatever force his or her problems have from his or her own point of view—that is the force of the problem of attachment and loss for that agent. If your most urgent problem is that you’re about to starve to death, then that is the force of the problem of attachment and loss for you. If you are anguished about the inevitable loss of everyone and everything you love, then that is the force of the problem of attachment and loss for you. We may even say: If you are an ideally coherent Caligula and you hope to live forty more years so that you can continue to enjoy torturing others for fun, then that is the force of the problem of attachment and loss for you. The problem we have identified, in other words, is genuinely universal, finding maximal practical foothold in the standpoint of every valuing being.

If the above arguments succeed, then we are on strong footing with regard to the first two of the four dimensions along which the strength of a constructivist vindication of ethics can vary. We’ll have established that every being who has normative reasons for action at all necessarily faces the problem of attachment and loss. We’ll furthermore have established that the problem of attachment and loss is necessarily the most urgent problem that every agent faces. This is because it is just a formal description of whatever is the most urgent problem the agent faces. Finally, we’ll have identified a problem that, unlike Korsgaard’s proposed problem, has an immediate and powerful intuitive grip. Indeed, its grip is as immediate and powerful as your biggest problem in life, for it just is that problem, formally described in a way that highlights its structural similarity with the problems of every other vulnerable valuing being.

7. STEP 3 OF THE ALTERNATIVE IMPLEMENTATION: A UNIVERSAL SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF ATTACHMENT AND LOSS?

Even supposing the first two steps of the alternative implementation can be made to work, the third step is the most puzzling and formidable of all. As I’ve said, it is not the point of this paper to explain or defend this step. But let me just say a few things to try to convince a skeptic that it’s not hopeless.

It will be useful to start with a story from the Buddhist tradition, the story of Kisa Gotami. Kisa Gotami was a young mother who lived at the time of the Buddha. She had one child, a darling little boy whom she loved beyond all measure. One day, he died of cholera, and Kisa Gotami is said to have gone mad with grief. She wandered the streets of the city, carrying her son’s lifeless body on her hip as though he were still alive; she insisted that he was merely sick, and begged everyone she met for medicine to make him well again. Finally someone directed her to the Buddha, who was living a short distance outside the city. Kisa Gotami approached the Buddha, begging him for help the way she had begged everyone else for help.
The Buddha said, “I will help you, but first you must bring me a mustard seed from a household that has never experienced death.” Frantically, but with new hope, Kisa Gotami ran off to find one. You can guess what happened next: While kindly strangers at the door of every house were willing to give Kisa Gotami a mustard seed, nowhere could she find a household that had never been visited by death. According to the story, she searched and searched until—realizing that her problem of the mustard seed had no solution—she became enlightened. She returned to the Buddha, at last willing to let go of her son’s precious body and allow it to be cremated. She then became one of the Buddha’s disciples.

The problem of attachment and loss that each of us confronts might seem to be unsolvable, and the bad news is that in one sense it surely is. It is unsolvable in the sense that for any individual, finite evaluative point of view on the world, the gap between what that being loves and longs for, and the way the world is, has the potential to become unbearably large, with no hope of repair. To put it another way, the problem of attachment and loss is unsolvable in the following sense: Kisa Gotami’s son was dead and she would never get him back. As individuals, we are vulnerable to unmitigated loss.

It is easy to conclude from this that there is no solution whatsoever to the problem of attachment and loss. What the story of Kisa Gotami suggests, however, is that this conclusion may be a mistake—perhaps one that stems from being in the grip of a natural but artificially narrow understanding of our options when faced with a gap between the way the world is, and the way one wants it to be. The obvious options are to change the world; to change our loves; or to retreat from reality. When none of these options is possible or desirable, as unfortunately is often the case, it is natural to conclude that there is no (good) solution whatsoever. But this is where we should look to the Buddha and try to start thinking outside the box. The historical person of the Buddha, after all, may be understood as having been speaking directly to the problem of attachment and loss (pitching it as a problem about desire and impermanence), and he suggested that there is a universal solution.

So what is that solution? He recommended a “path” that includes, as a crucial component, the practice of mindfulness meditation—roughly, a form of mental training in which one cultivates the ability to pay attention, directly and non-judgmentally, to everything that is happening in one’s field of awareness in the present moment.

How on earth could this provide a universal solution to the problem of attachment and loss? I conclude with the briefest possible sketch. Here is the broad argument I have in mind:

1. Arguably, there is a maximally thin, universal point of view on the world that one may reach via the practice of mindfulness meditation. Call this point of view the standpoint of pure awareness. I do not claim that mindfulness meditation is the only way to reach this standpoint, but an appeal to mindfulness meditation may be useful in seeking to give a more precise philosophical characterization of exactly what the relevant “standpoint” consists in. It may also be the case that mindfulness meditation is currently the most reliable means we have of reaching that state of mind.

2. Arguably, the standpoint of pure awareness offers each individual valuer the solution to his or her own particular version of the problem of attachment and loss. Not in one sense, but in another. How so? Because when one occupies this standpoint, one is identifying with a universal point of view on the world that transcends any particular, finite point of view—a point of view that is not itself vulnerable to loss. Kisa Gotami does not get her son back, but she comes to identify with a maximally universal point of
view. This does not change her loves so much as her relationship with them. She still adores and misses her son, but she sees that “she” is not ultimately the same as these loves—that these loves are rather part of the world like everything else, and that in the end “she” and her son and every other being are the same.

(3) Arguably, the standpoint of pure awareness is also an ethical standpoint. Why? Because the point of view in question is that of pure subject—the maximally thin point of view of the “one who is aware.” This point of view sees itself everywhere and is necessarily compassionate with the lived experience of every being. It recognizes that there is no real difference between “self” and “other”—that instead, “I” am everywhere, in “you” as much as “me.”

Obviously the view as a whole requires much more development before it is remotely clear or convincing. But if it turns out that the Buddha was right, and if we can figure out how to give his insight clear, secular analytic expression, then we will have found good answers to the two questions we began with.

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29 This needs more comment than is possible here, but note that this way of putting the insight I have in mind has much more in common with the Advaita Vedanta tradition than the Buddhist tradition. This is but one of many reflections of the fact that my aim with the larger project is not to be loyal to, nor to propose an accurate interpretation of, any particular tradition, Buddhist or otherwise.