

Beyond Normativity: Can Metaethics Escape Samsara's Wheel?

Stephen Finlay

Presumptively to appear in S. Kirchin (ed.), *The Future of Normativity*, OUP 2022.

Draft 7-28-2022

Comments welcome to finlay@usc.edu; Please request latest version to cite.

What is the future of normativity? What should the future of normativity be? My answers depend on whether these questions are read narrowly or broadly. The narrow reading concerns debate over the nature of something conceived under the rubric 'normativity', a busy but recent industry. Call this *meta-'normative' theory*. My tentative prediction is that it is a passing fad due to fade away, and my prescription will be roughly speaking that it should.

Read broadly, however, inquiry into the nature of normativity is a central thread in philosophical thought, pursued in different ages and places under many rubrics such as 'good', 'value', 'obligation', 'ought', 'justification', 'reasons', 'rationality', 'Wert', 'Dao'. For simplicity I'll call this *metaethics*,¹ excluding many other debates claiming the label. This project mightn't be disappearing anytime soon, but I consider it stuck in a rut making no genuine progress. It purports to be a search for truth akin to a science with similarly legitimate methods, but this claim has no credibility if decade after decade—or century—we keep cycling through the same debates resolving nothing. This essay sketches two possible futures: a Bad Future where the same disputes and moves are recycled in new clothing, and a Good Future where we finally put these disputes behind us—whether this means metaethics moving on, or moving past metaethics.

The immanent demise of meta-'normative' theory might be predicted for purely sociological reasons. Every fashion is doomed to be shortlived if only because people exhaust its resources for novelty, get bored, and want something of their own free from the previous generation's shadow. Already the literature on "normativity" has grown too huge to digest, incentivizing a move to greener pastures. But I'll suggest there are more fundamental forces working to bring meta-'normative' theory to an end, which also threaten metaethics itself with perpetual futility. An allegory is provided by the Buddhist and Hindu doctrine of Samsara's Wheel. Like an individual human life in Samsara, meta-'normative' theory is just a temporary manifestation of an underlying cycle of futile struggle. Progress is illusory, as the inevitable end of one epicycle merely launches the next, differing only superficially. Genuine, permanent resolution can only come through enlightenment (Nirvana) in which the illusions propelling the wheel are recognized and thereby escaped.

A full explanation of this allegory needs two things. First, a cause for "death": why does each epicycle degrade and expire? My answer is *systematic ambiguity*, resulting from the under-appreciated two-dimensional character of the paradigms of normative thought. Second, a cause for "rebirth": why does a new epicycle emerge from the ashes? My answer here appeals to a combination of four factors: illusion, attachment, charity, and forgetfulness.

¹ An older use not limited to morality; an alternative label is *metanormative theory*.

1. *Of Futility: A postmortem of the 'normativity' epicycle*

To illuminate the cycle of futility we can look to the progression of its current epicycle. The adjective 'normative' and its nominalization 'normativity' came into metaethical vogue in the 1980s/1990s, largely displacing discussion earlier conducted under rubrics such as 'value,' 'justification,' 'ought,' 'obligation,' 'rationality,' and 'reasons'. I understand this shift as prompted partly by a growing dissatisfaction with the older terminology as harboring an ambiguity obstructing clear discrimination of the intended topic.²

This dissatisfaction can be seen in some classic papers of the 1970s. Philippa Foot (1972) observed that deontic terms like 'ought' and 'must' fail to isolate the special feature of interest to moral philosophers—evocatively labeled the *fugitive thought*—since there are also “mundane” or “trivial” oughts of etiquette and club rules, etc. which lack it. J. L. Mackie (1977) observed that while there is a mundane use of many terms like 'valuable' and 'good' signifying “answering to interests” or meeting some arbitrary or institutional standards, this isn't the (inchoate and “queer”) use of interest to moral philosophers. And whereas Foot seemed comfortable differentiating the special use of 'ought' as *reason-giving*, Bernard Williams (1979) distinguished between two different (normative) uses of 'reason': an “internal” use he accepted as ordinary and legitimate, and an “external” use he attributed to moral philosophers and found to be either “bluff” or “not clearly expressed”.³

Each writer here addresses some term or terms commonly taken to express a special feature of interest to philosophers and observes an ordinary use lacking that feature, challenging the term's ability to distinguish it. This wouldn't be a problem if we could give a *reductive* definition of the special feature entirely in other kinds of terms, but most metaethicists consider this impossible, leaving many to doubt that we have a coherent conception at all, and others looking for a privileged term to isolate it.⁴

This terminological slipperiness has played a major role in metaethicists' adoption of 'normative' as a term for distinguishing the special oughts, value, reasons, etc. from the mundane ones. As Christine Korsgaard puts it, different writers make “different assumptions about which is the normatively loaded word” (1996: 44)—showing that for her, the loaded word has become 'normative' itself. But ironically, 'normative' itself is now widely recognized to harbor this same ambiguity,⁵ as succinctly expressed by John Broome:

... 'normative' means *to do with 'ought'*, but this 'ought' has to be a normative one, of course. I have to assume that you know a normative 'ought' when you meet one... The terminology in this area is confusing because so many words have both normative and nonnormative senses. Even the word 'normative' has a nonnormative (in my sense) sense. (2013: 10-11)

² This needn't involve lexical semantic ambiguity (different meanings of words), merely that sentences involving these words can be used differently. I've defend unifying semantics for ordinary words like 'good' and 'ought' (e.g. Finlay 2014), but consider this infeasible for 'normativity'.

³ Also Mackie 1977: 78f, Foot 1972: 309n (“to say that moral considerations are *called* reasons is blatantly to ignore the problem”). Williams' primary target is apparently Nagel 1970, which itself drew a distinction in “reasons for action”—the cause of much confusion in the 1960s—between *justifying* and *explanatory* reasons. Similar stories can be told for other terms like 'rational' and 'authority'.

⁴ I've proposed such definitions (Finlay 2010, 2014), but arguably succeeded only in defining mundane normativity, at best (e.g. Dowell 2016).

⁵ Cf. Hieronymi 2021: “slipperiness seems its legacy”.

Although writers commonly suggest a binary distinction into just two relevant kinds of use—labelled in various ways, such as “robust”, “genuine”, “authoritative” on one hand, versus “formal”, “pseudo”, “institutional”, “trivial” on the other—I’ll distinguish four major kinds, using “mundane” as a catch-all contrasting with “special”.⁶

It is this pesky ambiguity that I anticipate killing off meta-‘normative’ theory, as increasingly more writers abandon the term ‘normative’ and elevate new favored terms in its place. The power-struggle over the next regime is underway, and it is diverting but probably fruitless to speculate about which pretender will emerge victorious, or if we’re entering a period with no hegemonic rubric. Each of the “X-first” camps provides a candidate, for example. Reasons-firsters sometimes suggest that the relevant use of ‘normative’ can be isolated in terms of *reasons*—nevermind the role ambiguity in ‘reasons’ played launching the ‘normativity’ epicycle—while fittingness-firsters have recently made competing claims for the notion of *fit*. Favor has also been shown towards *mattering*, *importance*, *authority*, *rationality*, *correctness*, *guidance*, *choiceworthiness*... but the options are endless.⁷

A shared assumption behind these efforts is that failure to capture the fugitive thought is merely due to a poor terminological choice, and that metaethics can be fixed with a better choice: selecting a term already dedicated to special use in ordinary practice, pinpointing whatever special normativity has and mundane normativity lacks. It is easily argued that ‘normativity’ was a poor choice, given its derivation from ‘norm’ and history of mundane use in legal scholarship and even metaethics, as when Foot writes, “it is obvious that the normative character of moral judgment does not guarantee its reason-giving force.” (1972: 309-10) So hope for a better option isn’t unreasonable.

I consider this hope misguided, however, because *every* normative term in ordinary language allows a mundane use—despite attempts to disallow these by fiat—and every mundanely normative term can be put to special use. The ambiguity is systematic, running through our vocabulary, as Wittgenstein observed in 1929:

The first thing that strikes one about all these expressions is that each of them is actually used in two very different senses...the trivial or relative sense on the one hand and the ethical or absolute sense on the other.... Used in [the trivial] way these expressions don’t present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how Ethics uses them. (1965: 5)

Unfortunately not everybody finds the systematic ambiguity of normative terms so immediately obvious. My Bad Future is the shell game where metaethics “makes progress” by replacing ‘normative’ with another term, then reprises all the same old moves.

We can further illustrate the lifecycle of a metaethical rubric by considering how the dialectic unfolds with two current court favorites, ‘fitting’ and ‘matters’. Stage one: some writers (*pioneers*) notice that thoughts of the special kind can be expressed in these terms, which have previously escaped attention. Some attitudes are fitting towards certain objects while others aren’t, some accomplishments matter while others don’t. Stage two: others (*fundamentalists*) suggest this could

⁶ Cf. Parfit 2011: 267-8. The present paper overlaps discussion in Finlay 2019, which distinguishes 16+ definitions for ‘normative’ but avoids predictions and recommendations.

⁷ Some writers acknowledging a mundane ‘ought’ recently propose to isolate the special use by appeal to *correct* standards (Perl 2017, Worsnip 2019); Judy Thomson makes the opposite choice (2008: 90, 165f), maintaining that ‘correct’ (‘right’) is semantically mundane while ‘ought’ is univocally special, rejecting mundane ‘ought’ claims as misuses.

be the metaethical Holy Grail, an unambiguous term enabling us finally to articulate the fugitive thought and say what differentiates the special from the mundane.

This provokes a critical response (stage three), where yet others (*insurgents*) observe mundane uses of these terms. An instrumental use where an attitude is described as “fitting” if it promotes the subject’s goals, for example, or a purely formal use where an attitude is judged to “fit” its object, although there is no *reason* (insert loaded term) for having the attitude. Perhaps a joke is witty making amusement “fitting”, while also offensive making amusement *wrong*. Anger or envy might be a “fitting” response in that the object is outrageous or enviable, although being angry or envious is still wrong because *vicious*.⁸ We might observe mundane talk about something “mattering” relative to an end or rule—e.g. not losing your queen early in a game matters for winning in chess, agents’ intentions often matter for their actions’ legal status—without *mattering*, since the end or rule doesn’t itself *matter*.⁹

While fundamentalists may deny these mundane uses are legitimate, over time the counterexamples will become entrenched, and eventually (stage four) a critical mass of writers will get fed up with the intractable debates over the term and always having to qualify their statements: what *really* matters, what is fitting in the *robust* sense, etc. After the next wave of pioneers discovers another term seemingly without this baggage the fundamentalist crowd will jump on this new bandwagon, leaving behind only some nostalgic diehards, and the epicycle is over.

The claim here is not that each epicycle or rubric is identical, just as not every life in Samsara is identical. It is merely that the *fundamental* issues and moves remain the same. Normative terms have different meanings, so there are genuine shifts in emphasis between a focus on “value”, or “ought”, or “reasons”, etc. In the case of “normativity”, conceived as a shared *property of value*, oughts, reasons, etc., there is more explicit emphasis on the higher order.¹⁰ But this change isn’t as significant as it may seem. First, metaethical writing on “normativity” seems frequently to conflate the supposed higher-order property of normativity (being normative) with the lower-order or substantive properties or relations that are normative (“the normative”), and in practice the latter receives almost all the attention as in previous epicycles.¹¹ Second, these earlier epicycles were no less interested in what was special about thoughts about value, oughts, reasons, etc., and fixed on particular terms merely as representative of the class. Finally, efforts to define the special sense of ‘normative’ frequently reach back down for the lower-order terms, revealing the ultimate futility of appeal to the higher order. The same fundamental issues arise at both levels.

What can be done? Some dismiss the significance of natural language, denying philosophy need be constrained by what words normally mean. One gambit is to stipulate an intended use of an ordinary term. But clear stipulation is itself difficult or impossible without *any* language that already isolates one’s meaning—consider Broome’s reliance on his readers “knowing it when they meet it”—which does nothing to address skepticism as in Foot, Mackie and Williams about whether there even is a coherent thought here. We seem also to struggle to detach familiar words from their ordinary

⁸ E.g. Nussbaum 2016, Paytas 2021.

⁹ Finlay 2006, 2014: 253.

¹⁰ Conversely, a salient connection to choice/behavior deemphasizes the “evaluative”, commonly glossed as “normative in a broader sense”; see Kirchin (this volume).

¹¹ For discussion and *mea culpa* see Finlay 2019: 200f. As grist to my Samsara mill, this is precisely the conflation G.E. Moore in 1903 criticized as “naturalistic fallacy” (between “goodness” and “the good”), in the text said to have launched 20th century metaethics.

meanings despite stipulative declarations, and these associations may provide a deceptive feeling of understanding.

Another gambit is to introduce a new technical term stipulated to have exclusively the special use (e.g. ‘oomph’, ‘robust’, ‘ardent’)¹², hoping to avoid altogether the baggage of ordinary meanings. This doesn’t escape the challenge of clear stipulation without an existing vocabulary, however. Those adopting this path have often been skeptics about whether the special use is coherent or refers to anything, perhaps because without the reassuring familiarity of ordinary words it is too hard to sustain the illusion we understand what we’re talking about. Instead of dismissing mundane uses as irrelevant and trying to evade the terminological obstacles, I propose stepping back to consider why normative vocabulary might be so systematically ambiguous and indefinable. The existence of some underlying connection is beyond doubt; my diagnosis identifies mundane uses as basic and special uses as derivative.¹³

2. *Of the Origin of Futility: a perspectivist diagnosis*

The origin of the confounding ambiguities and indefinability threatening metaethical debates with futility, I’ll now suggest, is a largely unrecognized complexity in their subject-matter. Here I’ll focus on tracing the implications of this opinionated and controversial diagnosis for progress in metaethics, having argued for its truth elsewhere.¹⁴

It is fairly uncontroversial that metaethicists of all stripes are united by interest in a special kind of thoughts we all have. The central paradigms are present-tense, first-personal, *deliberative judgments* (e.g. *I ought to φ*), which settle a process of practical deliberation and result in intention or action. But everyone also agrees that these deliberative judgments don’t exhaust the class of similarly special thoughts, which may include thoughts about past and future actions, the actions of other agents, the value of objects or characters, what to believe or feel, and more. The same kind of specialness may also extend from thoughts to their constituents (e.g. concepts), and to speech and language as their expressive vehicles, although for simplicity I’ll focus on thoughts.¹⁵ To distinguish them from mundane uses, I’ll follow a convention of capitalizing special uses of terms (and mentions of these uses), denoting this class as *Normative* (Ought/ Reasons/ Value) thoughts. Eventually I’ll reject the assumption that all parties are concerned with the *same* class of “Normative” thoughts, and drawing the same line between special and mundane—as emerges once we broaden our view beyond the uncontroversial paradigms—but it will briefly serve as a convenient fiction.

This shared assumption of a common subject-matter is where the agreement ends. Philosophers offer sharply different views of what it is to be a Normative thought (utterance, etc.), divisible for present purposes into three major camps, which I take to be competing theoretical *interpretations* of a metaethically-innocent ordinary practice. A fundamental dispute is whether these thoughts are distinguished as a kind by (i) their *content*, or the nature of what they are about—special Normative stuff (such as Value properties, Ought facts, relations of Rationality, entities like Reasons) sharing a

¹² Joyce 2006, Enoch 2011, Eklund 2017.

¹³ Rival diagnoses include (i) that mundane normativity is fool’s gold easily mistaken for the real thing, and (ii) that mundane uses attribute a claim to special normativity (Raz 1979, Wodak 2019).

¹⁴ Especially Finlay 2014.

¹⁵ Here I follow Laskowski 2017 in prioritizing thought over language, although would resist attributing “Normativity” at the component/lexical level of concepts.

property of Normativity, or rather by (ii) their *functional psychological role*—typically, a motivational role connected to practical attitudes like desires, intentions, and emotions. I’ll distinguish:

Cognitivism: For a thought etc. to be Normative is for it to be about a certain special Normative subject-matter, involving facts, properties, etc. experienced as possessing a property of Normativity.

Noncognitivism: For a thought etc. to be Normative is for it to have a certain special motivational role or profile in the thinker’s psychology.¹⁶

For noncognitivists, Normativity is primarily a feature of thought and talk, and only derivatively if at all attributable to facts and properties. While a minority view within philosophy,¹⁷ noncognitivism seems almost universally assumed in talk about “normativity” by other humanists and scientists (e.g. in talk of “gender normativity”)—who generally see it as coercive (heteronomous) and don’t think noncompliance with it Matters or is Irrational, etc. By contrast, for cognitivists the Normativity of facts and properties is primary, and thought or talk is relevantly “Normative” in a derivative sense of being *about* something that is Normative in the primary sense.

This application of the labels ‘cognitivism’ and ‘noncognitivism’ is nonstandard and needs comment. Here they mark a higher-order distinction between views about *what makes a thought Normative*, rather than the usual lower-order distinction between views about *whether (Normative) thoughts about Value, Reasons, Ought etc. have cognitive (descriptive) content*. A theorist may give these questions different answers, and today many who are cognitivists regarding the lower-order issue, ascribing descriptive contents to Normative thoughts, nonetheless endorse or simply assume noncognitivism about the higher-order issue, classifying thoughts as Normative purely on the basis of their noncognitive psychological profile (“Normative role”).¹⁸ This includes most so-called hybrid theorists, who combine cognitive and noncognitive elements at the lower order while being straight noncognitivists about their Normativity.

My terminological choice may therefore seem ill-advised, but avoids obscuring the crucial point that the same issues arise at both levels, so that the “new” dispute under the ‘Normativity’ rubric is fundamentally just the rebirth of the old issue in the current epicycle.¹⁹ Note that even if Normative thoughts are not strictly thoughts about Normativity itself, any plausible cognitivism about their Normativity must invoke a thinker’s *awareness* of the special feature, as transparent in the thought somehow. This is needed to allow for (higher-order) *error theory* attributing Normative thoughts even in the (local or global) absence of any actual property of Normativity, and also saves us from implausibly classifying thoughts as “Normative” because they are about something that *happens* to have such a property, unbeknownst to the thinker—just as at the lower level it is implausible to classify something as a “Reasons judgment” merely because it is about a fact that happens to be a Reason.

A second dispute further divides cognitivism into two camps. The issue here is whether the Normativity of the properties and facts that Normative thoughts or utterances are about is

¹⁶ Noncognitivists focusing on talk rather than thought might instead invoke motivational effects on *audiences*; e.g. Hare’s prescriptivism (1952), Gibbard’s “normative governance” (1990). For simplicity I’ll treat this as a variant of a “thinker”/“judge”.

¹⁷ The 2020 PhilPapers.org survey (<https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/5078>) is suggestive, only 15% of metaethicists (and 11% of philosophers) favoring “expressivism” about “morality”.

¹⁸ E.g. Eklund 2017, Schroeter & Schroeter ms.

¹⁹ Laskowski & Hernandez (2021) favor instead ‘metaphysicalism’/ ‘anti-metaphysicalism’, observing that the higher-order question has previously escaped attention.

metaphysically prior to/ independent of the psychology (particularly, motivations) of the agents for whom they are Normative. I'll employ the following distinction:

Subjectivism (Subjectivist Cognitivism): For a thought etc. to be Normative for a subject/agent *S* is for it to be (at least partly, in a particular way) about the psychology/ motivations of *S*.²⁰

Objectivism (Objectivist Cognitivism): For a thought etc. to be Normative, either *per se* or for a subject/agent *S*, is for it to be about a special Normative subject-matter that isn't even in part the psychology/ motivations of *S*.

For subjectivists, Normativity is fundamentally subject-relative or relational, due to being grounded in psychological features of those subjects. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as being Normative *simpliciter*, but only Normative-for-*S1*, Normative-for-*S2*, etc., relative to different subjects. Subjectivism comes *inter alia* in both neo-Humean or instrumentalist forms (e.g. to be Normative-for-*S* is to involve an instrumental relation to *S*'s desires), and neo-Kantian forms (e.g. to be Normative-for-*S* is to involve *S*'s inability to will something as a rule). But all sophisticated versions of subjectivism will observe a crucial distinction between *basic* (ultimate, intrinsic, input) motivation—towards ends or principles—as grounding Normativity, and *derivative* (proximate, extrinsic, output) motivation—towards behavior—as responding to it.

Objectivists by contrast view relevant motivation as merely a (derivative/proximate) *consequence* of being sensitive to mind-independent Normativity. Although a big tent in principle, we'll see that objectivists face pressure towards a package of views that includes *primitivism* (or nonnaturalism, quietism) about the metaphysics of Normativity, *intuitionism* about its epistemology, and *motivational externalism* about its extension. In other words, Normativity is *sui generis*, cognizable a priori, and not contingent on agents' concerns. These pressures prompt some objectivists to be antirealists (error theorists), denying "Normativity" exists. My impression is that objectivism is endorsed or implicitly assumed by the majority of philosophers in metaethics, ethics, and other "normative" fields, as they treat classification of facts and properties as "Normative" as a nonrelative matter.²¹

For all their differences, these three camps share an important assumption. They all offer accounts of what it is to be Normative that are *one-dimensional*. A thought is Normative in case it is (i) about something with a particular property or relation (according to objectivists and subjectivists), or (ii) involves having a particular kind of motivation (according to noncognitivists). It is this assumption that ensures futility, I'll suggest, because key to explaining the systematic ambiguities and indefinability plaguing metaethics is to recognize that *paradigmatically and uncontroversially* Normative thoughts all have a two-dimensional or hybrid character. They are both about certain kinds of descriptive content and also involve certain motivational stances—kinds of content and

²⁰ Subjectivism about *Normativity*—as opposed to subjectivism about (e.g.) Reasons—attributes the psychological content to the cognition of the Normativity of the (lower-order) content, as above. Note also that a thought such as *I Ought to be motivated to φ* doesn't entail subjectivist treatment in virtue of being about motivation; what is at issue is the subjectivity of the *Ought*'s Normativity.

²¹ The 2020 PhilPapers.org survey is suggestive: "morality" is apparently considered objective by roughly 73% of metaethicists (combining 36% "nonnaturalism", 30% "naturalistic realism", 7% "error theory"), versus 17% favoring subjectivism (assuming equivalence with "constructivism", although some "naturalistic realists" may belong here) and 15% favoring noncognitivism (see note 17).

stance that are relevantly special only when and because they are internally connected to each other. I'll call this two-dimensionalist view *perspectivism*.²²

The perspectivist theory I favor construes the motivation as constituting the perspective or standpoint from which these thoughts are formed, and analyzes their descriptive contents as propositions about how things are related to the motivation's object, such as a desired or intended end/outcome or an accepted rule/principle. What thoughts of this special kind are about therefore varies according to the perspective from which they are made, suggesting a contextualist semantics for the corresponding language. A deliberative judgment expressed as "I Must wear a mask" might be made from the motivated perspective of intending to minimize risk to others' health, for example, and be more explicitly articulated as *If I am going to minimize risk to others' health then necessarily I wear a mask*. Or it could be made from the perspective of wanting to avoid a fine, explicable as *If I am going to avoid a fine then necessarily I wear a mask*.²³ If trying to avoid inflicting harm or getting a fine, these are the right kinds of beliefs to guide deliberation.

Equipped with this perspectivist understanding of paradigmatic and uncontroversial Normative thoughts we can begin to explain the ambiguity and futility of metaethical debate as the inevitable consequence of failing to appreciate their two-dimensional character and assuming instead the existence of a single special characteristic (whether of the contents or of the mental states themselves) sufficient to distinguish them and account for their features. It is this supposed single characteristic to which 'Normativity' or other favored term *du jour* will be taken to refer. But if perspectivism is correct we can expect the two dimensions sometimes to fail to intersect in the relevant way—as we indeed find once we look beyond the paradigmatic to the controversial cases. One can think or speak from a motivated perspective, like a desire for some end or a commitment to some principle, in ways other than making or expressing judgments about how things relate to those ends or principles, as when we merely emote, prescribe, or decide. And one can think or speak about how things relate to certain ends or principles without having any motivation towards them, as when making disinterested "amoralist", instrumental or legal judgments.

Figure 1 provides a first-pass depiction of this fragmentation. It represents the space of thoughts (utterances, etc.) potentially classifiable as "Normative" (along with the mundanely normative) and their diverging amenability to being so-classified for noncognitivist, subjectivist, and objectivist theories (the three intersecting circles) which interpret these thoughts differently. For orientation, the uncontroversial deliberative paradigms of special Normative thought are in §1, while the

²² The term has unfortunately many uses (e.g. for information-relativity, which I also accept), but this use is faithful to Nietzsche's original coinage. Two-dimensionalist views of thought's Normativity are also advanced by (e.g.) Toppinen 2013, Schroeder 2013, Laskowski 2015, Laskowski & Hernandez 2021. David Copp (conversation) endorses a two-dimensionalist reading of his hybrid views (e.g. Copp 2001).

²³ This invokes *end/rule-relational* semantics (Finlay 2014, Finlay & Plunkett 2019). Perspectivists could also recognize as (parochially) "Normative" any thoughts involving nonrelational ("thick") concepts, such as *brave*, *South-facing* etc., where similarly perspective-connected; e.g. Väyrynen 2013.

uncontroversially mundane are in §8.²⁴ (Strictly speaking, perspectivism accounts for the intersection of formally normative content and motivated stance, i.e. {§1, §2, §6}).

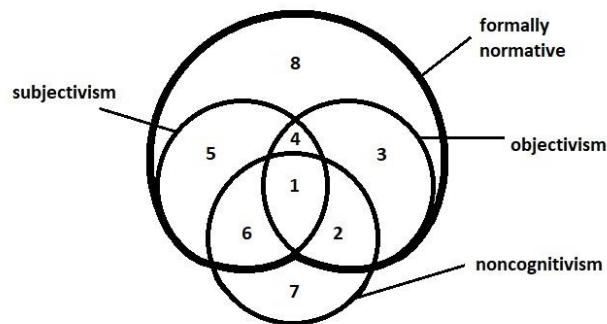


Fig. 1. Which thoughts etc. are “Normative”? (First Pass)

If we make the cognitivists’ one-dimensionalist assumption and treat ‘Normativity’ as referring to the common character of what all paradigmatically and uncontroversially Normative thoughts (§1) are about, then perspectivism finds nothing there except *formal* normativity, or a relation to some end or rule, since these thoughts all have a formally normative content. But there is nothing relevantly *special* about formal normativity, which is equally the content of uncontroversially mundane thoughts (§8). Propositions about which actions promote particular ends or conform to particular rules (i.e. all sectors except §7) are only significant from a perspective of concern for those ends or acceptance of those rules. What relevantly distinguishes our (Normative) Moral judgments from our (merely formally normative) mafia rules judgments is just that we are partisans of Morality but not of *la cosa nostra*.²⁵

This means that *any* term a cognitivist might privilege as special inevitably already has or soon acquires a mundane formal use. Any possible content of a paradigmatically special thought can also be the content of a formally normative thought, making conversion from special to mundane or vice versa too natural to be preventable. For every Normative thought concerning what is Valuable, Justified, a Reason, or Important, there is a corresponding non-Normative thought about what is valuable, justified, a reason, or important in some relativized or qualified way.

This doesn’t yet explain the intractability of metaethical debate, since all three camps agree at least that they aren’t talking about uncontroversially mundane “mere formal” normativity (§8). The further problem is that the two-dimensional character of the paradigmatically special thoughts (§1) cannot be captured with the resources of a single dimension. Consider analogously the cartographical challenges of flattening the three-dimensional globe into two dimensions.²⁶ There are different flattenings or projections that variously preserve (to some degree and within some range)

²⁴ Illustrations of other sectors: §2 Engaged “categorical” 2nd/3rd-person moral, prudential, legal judgments: “You Oughtn’t hurt others, whatever your desires”; §3 Disengaged categorical thoughts, like wondering what final ends one Ought to have (perspectivism may struggle to identify *coherent* thoughts in this space); §4 Perverse, hostile prudential judgments; e.g. (gleefully) “To defeat me, you needed to choose differently!”; §5 Disengaged perverse instrumental judgments: “Alas, murderers have no reasons to confess even to spare the innocent”; §6 Amoral instrumental exhortations: “Who cares if it’s “Wrong”, you Should do whatever pleases you!”, “Evil, be thou my Good!”; §7 Engaged judgments, utterances without end/rule-relative content; e.g. imperatives, slurs, emotives, arbitrary policies, brute decisions; §8 Disengaged non-instrumental thoughts, e.g. of formal legality (law, games, etiquette), amoralist judgments.

²⁵ Foot 1972: 315, Finlay 2006: 17f, Tiffany 2007, Baker 2018. This allows for hope, shared by Hume and Kant, that we’ll all emerge partisans of morality under cognitively ideal conditions.

²⁶ See e.g. <https://www.axismaps.com/guide/map-projections>

geographical features of area, shape, distance, or direction, but no projection can preserve all these features, making distortion unavoidable.

Flattening the metaethical domain, I'll suggest, has two significant consequences. First, each camp ends up using the same term 'Normativity' to talk about a different feature (projection), talking past each other with the inevitable result of entrenched misunderstanding, stalemate, and the futile search for an unambiguous vocabulary. Second, even given its own idiosyncratic conception of "Normativity", each camp's claims will be irremediably flawed due to the impossibility of capturing an n -dimensional phenomenon in an $n-1$ dimensional model without distortion. These defects prevent each camp from being able to develop a fully satisfactory theory even on its own terms, emboldening its critics and leaving metaethics in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction.

Metaethicists arguing about 'Normativity' usually assume themselves to be speaking univocally and engaging in substantive disagreement about the nature of a common subject-matter. Rejecting this assumption may seem intemperate, but is hard to resist from the perspectivist's viewpoint. On the assumption of a single dimension there isn't just one kind of thing for "Normativity" to be, but three different kinds of things, depending on how you attempt to collapse two dimensions into one; i.e. which feature of the 2D phenomenon you choose to track in attributing specialness. I'll label these *N-Normativity*, *S-Normativity*, and *O-Normativity*. They don't only answer to different definitions, but also have diverging extensions. So there isn't after all a single class of Normative thoughts, but rather three different ways of defining special classes with only partial overlap, as represented by Figure 1's circles.

The fundamental question separating the camps is: *whose* motivated perspective do you track when classifying a thought as special ("Normative")? There are three (main) options: you can track the motivated perspective of (i) the *subject*, or agent/person (if any) the thought is about; (ii) the *judge*, or thinker of the thought; or (iii) the *theorist*, i.e. yourself as the person classifying the thought. These options yield the three different meanings and extensions for 'Normativity' corresponding respectively to subjectivism, noncognitivism, and objectivism.²⁷

This fragmentation is obscured when we focus narrowly on the paradigmatic and uncontroversial cases of Normative thought (§1) such as deliberative judgments (*I Ought to φ*). In these cases the different conceptions of "Normativity" converge extensionally, due to the coincidence of the motivated perspectives of subject and judge (being the same person at the same time) and theorist (due to our sympathetic identification with the subject's perspective). When our view expands to include second- and third-person judgments (*You/She Ought to φ*) and diachronic judgments (*I Ought at that time to have φ -ed*), for example, we encounter cases where the perspectives of subject, judge, and theorist diverge. Here attributions of "Normativity" become controversial, as in Figure 1 and now in higher resolution:

Fig. 2. Which thoughts etc. are "Normative"? (Second Pass)

²⁷ A fourth option (meta-noncognitivism?) interprets ascriptions of 'Normative' as themselves noncognitive/expressive of one's motivational stance—which will be largely coextensive with objectivist's classifications (Gibbard 2003). One could also privilege third parties' perspectives (e.g. God, ideal observers).

		Subject (x)		
		A	B	C
Content (y)	A	NSO	NO	NO
	B		S	
	C			S

Judge A (z)
(=Theorist)

		Subject (x)		
		A	B	C
Content (y)	A	SO	O	O
	B	N	NS	N
	C			S

Judge B (z)

		Subject (x)		
		A	B	C
Content (y)	A	SO	O	O
	B		S	
	C	N	N	NS

Judge C (z)

This array represents the different attributions of “Normativity” to thoughts with formally normative content, from the standpoints of noncognitivism (‘N’), subjectivism (‘S’), and objectivism (‘O’).²⁸ ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’ label different ends or rules. The Subject/x-axis tracks the motivated perspective of the subject or agent (if any) whose actions etc. the thought is about. So “Subject A” is motivated towards/in accordance with end/rule A, but not with ends/rules B or C. The Content/y-axis tracks the end or rule that the thought is about. So “Content A” includes thoughts about *what ought to be done in order to achieve A*, for example, and *what conforms with A*. The Judge/z-axis tracks the motivated perspective of the judge (thinker, speaker), so “Judge A” is someone who is motivated towards end/rule A but not B or C, thinking about what some subject (x-axis) ought or has reason etc. to do relative to some end/rule (y-axis). Finally, the theorist classifying thoughts as “Normative” or “non-Normative” is stipulated to share the motivated perspective of Judge A but not of Judges B or C.

This diagram helps us explain each camp’s characteristic insights, oversights, and errors. *Noncognitivism’s* distinctive insight is that paradigmatically “Normative” judgments differ from mundane descriptive, non-“Normative” judgments in having a special motivational profile (N-Normativity) due to being made from an engaged, motivated perspective. Noncognitivists’ ascriptions of “Normativity” to thoughts therefore follow the motivated perspective of the judge alone, insensitive to those of subject and theorist. While they will concur with their opponents in classifying deliberative judgments and their closest relatives as “Normative” (the bolded 3D diagonal²⁹ in Figure 2/ §1 in Figure 1), as we move away from these paradigms they will be under pressure to classify cases differently.

Noncognitivists will struggle to accommodate—or reject as not genuinely “Normative” or possible—*nonjudgmental* thoughts and nonassertoric uses of “Normative” sentences. This includes interrogative thoughts like *wondering* what Ought to be done, also *fearing, hoping, imagining* etc. that something Ought to be done, conditional judgments that *if* something Ought to be done, then... and other familiar aspects of the Frege-Geach Problem.³⁰ They’ll deny there is a “Normative” subject-matter or that “Normativity” is a feature of facts and properties (e.g. the contents of thoughts in Figure 1, §§3-5). Noncognitivists will also be under pressure—even if they resist—to ascribe “Normativity” where others won’t (Figure 1, §7), involving a motivated perspective without

²⁸ i.e. corresponding to Figure 1’s three small circles, excluding §7 (no formally normative content) and §8 (merely formally normative).

²⁹ See note **Error! Bookmark not defined.** on ‘O’'s divergence from ‘NS’ on this diagonal.

³⁰ These objections’ fairness to hybrid noncognitivism is complicated; the closer to perspectivism the less vulnerable a hybrid theory will be.

end/rule-relative content—potentially including imperatives (*Stay off the grass!*), emotive language, pejoratives and expletives ('bastard', 'fuck!'), arbitrary policies (*Always call heads*) and decisions (*I shall ϕ*).

N-Normativity is undoubtedly a genuine family of psychological properties of thoughts, utterances, etc. But in assimilating paradigmatically "Normative", deliberative judgments to the same general category as imperatives, pejoratives, and arbitrary decisions, noncognitivists overlook that these judgments are interestingly special in essential part due to what they are about.³¹ They therefore fail to accommodate one of the central desiderata for a satisfactory account of paradigmatically "Normative" thinking: that it seeks guidance of behavior by discovering truths of a special kind (that "tell us what to do"), rather than mere causation or influence ("making us do it")—a kind of guidance central to other theorists' conceptions of "Normativity".³² Opponents thus complain that "there is something *better* for Normativity to be."³³

Whereas noncognitivism errs by overlooking the content dimension of paradigmatically Normative thought and collapsing the phenomenon into the perspective dimension alone, its cognitivist rivals are motivated partly by recognition that these thoughts have descriptive contents of a particular kind, aiming at accurately grasping facts that serve to guide (derivative) motivation. However, they make the opposite error of overlooking the role of a distinct perspective dimension as such, attempting to collapse the phenomenon of "Normative" thought into the content dimension alone. Subjectivist ('S') and objectivist ('O') ascriptions of "Normativity" to thoughts are therefore insensitive to the motivated perspective of the judge/thinker (z-axis). While both cognitivist camps hold that what makes "Normative" judgments special is purely the ("Normative") nature of what they are about, they develop this in two very different ways, by following alternatively the motivated perspective of the subject (subjectivism) or the theorist (objectivism).

Subjectivism's distinctive insight is that an essential feature of the deliberative paradigms of Normative thought is that they are about (or sensitive to) a content that is related to the subject's motivations (desires or will). When you judge that *you* Ought now to ϕ , thereby settling your deliberation over what to do, the content of your judgment depends on your present motivated standpoint. The *truth-conditions* of these paradigmatically "Normative" thoughts can therefore be specified extensionally in terms of a relation between some choice or behavior etc. and the subject's (basic) motivations, a kind of relation (S-Normativity) that can also be found between other subjects' options and their motivations, which the subjectivist therefore identifies as "Normativity".³⁴

The subjectivist's classification of thoughts as "Normative" ('S') therefore tracks only the subject's motivated perspective, and is insensitive to both the judge's and the theorist's (i.e. subjectivist's own) perspectives. This puts subjectivists under pressure to diverge from other theorists' classifications in idiosyncratic ways. On one hand, subjectivists are committed—sometimes scandalously—to deny "Normativity" to thoughts about what a subject ought to do relative to ends/rules that matter from either the judge's or the theorist's own motivated perspectives if they don't also matter from the subject's perspective (Figure 1, §§2, 3). Most prominent here is

³¹ Due perhaps to the implausibility of any kind of fact having a sufficiently universal tie to motivation (Gibbard 1990: 32, Blackburn 1998: 70).

³² See e.g. Parfit 2011, Finlay 2014: ch.5 for discussion, and Finlay 2007 for a perspectivist account of guidance. 'Guidance' itself is ambiguous between noncognitivist, objectivist, and subjectivist readings.

³³ Parfit 2011.

³⁴ E.g. Mark Schroeder's (2007: 1) reasoning from the contrast between Ronnie (who likes to dance) and Bradley (who doesn't) to subjectivism.

categorical moral condemnation; e.g. a judgment that *Hitler ought to have refrained from genocide, regardless of his own ends*.³⁵

On the other hand, subjectivists will uniquely ascribe “Normativity” to third-personal thoughts about what a subject *S* instrumentally ought to do relative to *S*’s favored ends or principles in cases where those ends/principles are a matter of indifference or even repugnance to both the judge and the theorist themselves (Figure 1, §5); for example a judgment that *Hitler had reasons to pursue genocide, given that it advanced his ends*—as utterly reprehensible as those ends were. Accordingly, their opponents sometimes deny that subjectivists could be talking about Normativity at all, since judging/classifying something to be *S*-Normative for some other subject *S1* generally doesn’t settle practical questions for the judge or theorist like whether to promote something or how to feel about it.³⁶

S-Normativity is also a family of real (in this case) relations, in which subjects genuinely do stand to various behaviors, etc. But the subjectivists’ way of flattening two dimensions into one also leads to distortions. In overlooking the perspective dimension of paradigmatic Normative judgments and collapsing the motivation into the content, subjectivism misidentifies the actual contents of those thoughts. While we may be able to specify the *truth-conditions* for (narrowly) deliberative judgments extensionally in terms of *S*-Normativity, this fails to capture their *meaning* or what they (or subjects’ awareness of Normativity) are actually about. There is extensional coincidence in these paradigmatic cases due to the judge’s motivated perspective selecting the end or principle that is here the object of the subject’s motivation. But what these thoughts are about, perspectivism claims, is how things stand in relation to those *ends* (outcomes) or *principles*, not to the desiring or willing of them.

Deliberating agents think *from* their motivated perspectives, not *about* them. For anyone but the most narcissistic, their deliberative judgment will be (e.g.) *I Ought to run into the burning building in order to save my child*, rather than *I Ought to run into the building in order to satisfy my desire (to save my child)*, or *...in order to act on a principle I can accept as law*. As subjectivism’s opponents rightly complain, deliberative and other Normative thought isn’t usually about the subject’s motivations, or *S*-Normativity, even in part.³⁷ A further consequence of this “psychologistic” error is that because moral judgments evidently don’t track *S*-Normativity, subjectivism either fails to recognize or significantly distorts the continuity between first-person deliberative judgments and (e.g.) categorical moral judgments about others, or prudential judgments about one’s past or future self: how they share the same kind of content and the same relation to the judge’s perspective.

Objectivism’s distinctive motivating insights are precisely these points missed by noncognitivists and subjectivists: (i) that paradigmatically Normative thought aims at grasping truths about a kind of subject-matter with a guiding function of settling practical questions about what to do or think etc.—and (ii) that this thought isn’t even partly about the subject’s motivations or psychology. Recognition (with noncognitivists) of the implausibility of any ordinary, natural or empirical content sufficing to make a thought “Normative”, or being the common subject-matter of every person making “Normative” judgments regardless of their perspective (i.e. “open question” intuitions) tends to push objectivists—even if they resist it—towards embrace of the “nonnaturalist” view that Normativity is a *sui generis*, unanalyzable part of reality detected by direct intuition.

³⁵ Some subjectivists bite this bullet, denying this is a Normative ‘ought’ (e.g. Harman 1975, Williams 1979) while others try to dodge it (e.g. Schroeder 2007: 103f). Prudential analogs involve a subject changing perspectives over time, e.g. Parfit’s Future Tuesday Indifference.

³⁶ E.g. Parfit 2011, Thomson 2008: ch. 9.

³⁷ E.g. Parfit 2011, Hieronymi 2021. For subjectivist defenses, see Smith 1994: 153-4, Schroeder 2007: ch.2.

But the objectivist completely overlooks the essential role of the perspective dimension in paradigmatically Normative judgments, mistakenly attributing their special character entirely to being about a special, nonpsychological “Normative” content (sharing an objective property of O-Normativity), and mistaking their own motivations for mere responses to their cognition of these O-Normative facts and properties. As a result, the objectivist mistakes their subjective perspective for objective reality, and so their ascriptions of “Normativity” (‘O’) will generally track the motivated perspective of the *theorist* (i.e. themselves), while being insensitive to the motivated perspective of either subject or judge. Whatever conforms to their desires or will they’ll classify as “objectively Good”, and whatever conflicts they’ll classify as “objectively Bad”, while others’ diverging judgments will be interpreted as either factually mistaken attempts to grasp the same family of objective Normative truths, or as not Normative at all.³⁸

Objectivism’s way of flattening “Normative” thought necessitates many distortions, due to positing as “Normativity” or the specialness of this thought a supposed property that doesn’t exist. In differentiating its content from that of thoughts about “mere formal” normativity it too errs about the subject-matter of that thought.³⁹ It also errs on how “Normative” judgments motivate us and how they are formed from the dual inputs of empirical information and motivated perspective. In rejecting all the correct explanations of the nature, content, motivational force, and epistemology of “Normative” thought, objectivists are commonly left with a choice between embracing either brute mysteries and the impossibility of satisfactory explanations in metaethics, or extreme skepticism and error theory.

What are the upshots of this perspectivist diagnosis of the errors informing and following from the three one-dimensionalist metaethical camps? To take perspectivism as a *rival theory of Normativity* misses my central point, which is rather that the noun ‘normativity’ and adjective ‘normative’ — along with any possible substitutes — are equivocal traps deceiving us into supposing there to be a single feature of things, whether in the mind, language, or world, which is the common topic of competing theories championed by different camps. The class of paradigmatic and uncontroversial cases (Figure 1, §1) here given a perspectivist analysis is merely the intersection of three different ways of dividing. There is no objectively Wrong or Right choice whether to focus on the perspective of subject, judge, or theorist/oneself: each is relevant for different purposes. If anything is especially significant about this intersection itself, it would be its role in fooling us into thinking there is a single class of thoughts we all call ‘Normative’ and a single property we all call ‘Normativity’.

3. *Of the Cessation of Futility, and the Path Leading to it*

Assuming this perspectivist diagnosis is correct, what do I recommend metaethics do? What *Should* we do? Some may challenge whether a perspectivist can even ask such a question coherently. While perspectivists cannot consistently opine or wonder about what the *objectively* Right thing to do is, we can certainly raise practical questions and make recommendations from particular standpoints we occupy. My discussion assumes the intellectual or philosophical end of collective understanding

³⁸ An objectivist classifying others’ divergently engaged thoughts (e.g. Judge B’s (mafioso’s) thoughts about end/rule B (the mafia code)) can interpret these *either* (i) as non-Normative even if deliberative thoughts, or (ii) as mistaken Normative thoughts. In Figure 2 ‘O’ tracks choice (i); (ii) coincides rather with ‘N’ — making the bolded diagonal relatively uncontroversial. A morally-concerned objectivist may also classify amoralists’ disengaged “moral judgments” as Normative but alienated (following ‘O’), or as non-Normative (following ‘N’).

³⁹ Don’t objectivists’ judgments involve *objectivist concepts* (Dowell 2020)? I consider objectivism rather a mistaken *theory about* a shared kind of thoughts (Finlay 2020).

of metaethical truth (“enlightenment”), and my Good Future is the cessation of the futile cycle and escape from rebirth into the next epicycle. Others might have different priorities, and for them my recommendations may therefore lack any (subjective and noncognitive) force. Rather than bemoaning the futility of Samsara and the lack of real progress, for example, one could “will the eternal recurrence” in metaethical debate.

Given my assumptions it would be unhelpfully trivial to say here that (in order to reach enlightenment) we should all become perspectivists. But for metaethics to escape the cycle it may be enough simply to recognize the availability of the perspectivist option, and how distinguishing the dimensions of perspective and content fragments the possible interpretations of ‘Normativity’ (or other favored term), so as to make us wary of assuming any unified reference and aware there are different things for “Normativity” to be. We can nontrivially ask: What is the Path to this Good Future, and the obstacles metaethics must overcome to reach such enlightenment?

For past and future failures to escape the cycle I blame a combination of four factors: illusion, attachment, charity, and forgetfulness. My discussion will be necessarily programmatic, but also largely unoriginal. In particular it echoes error theorists—except that the indictment here is not of ordinary first-order “Normative” thought, but only of higher-order, reflective interpretations or philosophical theories of this thought. Stated provocatively, this narrative places blame primarily on *objectivists*, as the obstinate majority in ethics and metaethics centrally responsible for the futile cycle due to their proselytizing zeal for an inchoate idea and an imaginary property. Or more carefully, while we all bear some responsibility, some among the ranks of objectivist realists are disproportionately responsible.

A. Illusion

The case for objectivism is generally made on the basis of alleged evidence from our ordinary first-order thought and practice. Much of this, I contend,⁴⁰ can be fully accommodated with the perspectivist’s resources, so that objectivism may often stem from an innocent failure of imagination. But often, objectivism is ultimately justified by appeals to “intuition” or how things seem. This presents a puzzle: if no property of O-Normativity exists, where could objectivist intuitions and its very idea even come from?

These intuitions can be explained as a ubiquitous kind of illusion, the allegation of antirealists in every era that we “project” into the external world something internal or subjective. Mackie writes of our tendency “to objectify concerns and purposes...giving them a fictitious external authority” (1977), George Santayana of “human ideals that have been projected into the empyrean” (1911). In the previous century, Nietzsche writes, “It is we...who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations... Whatever has *value*...has it not in itself...but has rather been given [it], and we were the givers...!” (1882). Another century prior, Hume writes about our tastes “gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment” (1751) and of the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects” (1739).

Sometimes complained to be merely a vague metaphor, projection is plausibly an artifact of a general bias of our cognitive systems towards attributing external or mind-independent contents-as-causes for our experiences.⁴¹ Consider visual afterimages following a laser hitting the retina; a naïve

⁴⁰ E.g. Finlay 2008, 2014. The hardest challenge (as suggested by Gideon Rosen) may come from *wondering what our final ends Ought to be*, which can seem to demand a “Normative” content independent of any existing standpoint.

⁴¹ Rival, evolutionary explanations are offered in Joyce 2006, Street 2016.

interpretation construes the resulting blurry spot in your visual field as a perceived fuzzy object buzzing around your head, and may fool less self-aware creatures into trying to evade or catch it. Such illusions are common and familiar: ringing in ears experienced as external noise, phantom pain experienced as if in a nonexistent limb, the brief sense that the world continues to move past in reverse after your train comes to a stop. The general scheme of such conceptions is roughly: *that feature of the external world that is the content and explanation of this experience*. What makes it an illusion is its insensitivity to the subjective contribution to the experience. This insensitivity seems often to stem from a further bias by which the variable is more salient (as foreground) than the comparatively constant (as background/ acclimatization).

This scheme applies directly to intuitions of objective Normativity, originating as misinterpretations of metaethically innocent thoughts and experiences. The experiential element may include the (derivative) motivations or feelings attending a “Normative” thought, or even the disposition to mentally or verbally token a sentence like ‘I ought to ϕ ’. The resulting conception of O-Normativity will therefore be: *that external feature of what my thought is about, which is the explanation and content of these motivations/ feelings/ thoughts etc.*⁴² There is no such feature, because the relevant characteristics of “Normative” thought aren’t wholly determined by anything external, but essentially in part by something subjective: one’s—typically stable—motivated perspective.⁴³ This conception provides only a *higher-order description* of a property, one which fails to denote anything. It follows there isn’t even an uninstantiated property of O-Normativity, merely a confused idea, explaining why the objectivist’s concept remains stubbornly fugitive and attempts to capture it never escape metaphor.⁴⁴

Such illusions could only be part of the story, however. If objectivist intuitions are akin to perceptual illusions then they could perhaps even be universal and impossible to escape, but there is an important difference between the illusion of things seeming a certain way, and the *delusion* of believing they are so.⁴⁵ We can confidently know that the lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion are equal even as they appear unequal to us, or that our train is stationary even as we seem to be moving. “Normative” thoughts seeming to concern an objective quality similarly doesn’t entail any credence that they do, and is compatible with knowing they don’t. Enlightenment doesn’t necessarily involve escaping illusion, but only recognizing it as such.

How things seem may be prima facie evidence for how they are, but we generally reject appearances when they don’t withstand further scrutiny: their posits cannot be independently verified and they conflict with our general understanding of the world. When additionally we can fully explain away the appearance as an illusory effect of the operation of our cognitive systems, then any prima facie justification is defeated. It is on this basis that we dismiss the illusory deliverances of other faculties, like the appearances that the Müller-Lyer lines are unequal, sticks bend at the waterline, or that we were orbiting Jupiter moments before waking up in bed. I suggest that applying the same standards supports the same rejection of objectivist intuitions, whose

⁴² Projection doesn’t absurdly attribute our *subjective states* to the world, but rather a supposed *inverse* or *complementary* quality as fit to produce the subjective experience. The “push” of our desires (for particular ends) is interpreted as an external “pull” (towards particular actions).

⁴³ Cf. Hume on “calm passions” mistaken for “reason”.

⁴⁴ This stymies any argument from conceivability to metaphysical possibility to epistemically possible actuality, which falls at the first premise: there is nothing conceivable here.

⁴⁵ This echoes moral error theorists (e.g. Joyce 2009: 58-9, Olson 2014: 7), without attributing any delusion to ordinary, first-order moral/normative thought, following rather Nietzsche’s attribution to “we contemplative ones” (1882, §301).

supposed property finds no independent support outside of these seemings. Perspectivism satisfactorily explains everything about our “Normative” thoughts,⁴⁶ while the posit of O-Normativity fails to explain anything, including the objectivist’s intuitions themselves.

How then can we explain the hold of the objectivist delusion over many philosophers? Objectivists often assign these particular unexplained, independently unverified intuitions a strikingly robust authority—sometimes even insisting intuitions in these matters are unchallengeable and necessarily have the “last word”.⁴⁷ From a distance this stance looks baffling; consider the absurdity of insisting analogously that the inequality of the Müller-Lyer lines, or waterline bends in sticks, was a fixed data-point licensing any accommodations! Plausibly all our other faculties are prone to illusion and error, so why would these intuitions be an exception? To fully understand the grip of this delusion I believe we need to observe a second factor.

B. Attachment

A major cause of “rebirth” and obstacle to enlightenment, as with Samsara, appears to be “attachment”, in the form of motivated reasoning and credulity within objectivism’s ranks. Many philosophers seem to be strongly attached to objectivism, wishing for their own Normative beliefs and claims to be cognitions and assertions of facts that Matter perspective-independently. (I hasten to acknowledge again that many are surely inclined towards objectivism rather by impartial appraisal of the evidence, recognizing the deficiencies of noncognitivism and subjectivism while overlooking or underestimating the perspectivist alternative.⁴⁸) As is well-known, motivated reasoning shifts our thresholds for proof so that *any* favorable pseudo-evidence can be regarded as sufficient for accepting a hypothesis, while the burden for unfavorable evidence can be set unattainably high. The projective illusion provides this motivational bias all the ostensible justification it demands, and in combination they pose a formidable obstacle to progress.

Here it may be protested that a philosopher’s motives are nobody else’s business, and anyhow impossible to discriminate confidently. Generally I’d agree, but objectivists have not uncommonly declared such motives apparently in the hope of rallying others to their cause, making those motives fair game. The many possible grounds of “fear of relativism”⁴⁹ include: thinking that without objectivity we can’t take morality seriously and are forced to tolerate the Intolerable,⁵⁰ wanting a guaranteed rational path to moral persuasion of aggressors,⁵¹ wanting to be able to criticize conflicting values as factually mistaken, fearing a lack of divine retribution absent a divine Judgment, existential angst towards the burden of responsibility for one’s own values, and more. Arguably we even have a moral or prudential *obligation* to be objectivists (to be “warm in the cause of Virtue”), perhaps leading some to publicly espouse objectivist realism without privately believing it.⁵² While outside this essay’s scope, one useful therapy may therefore be to demonstrate such calculations misjudged, as Santayana proposes: “I cannot help thinking that a consciousness of the relativity of

⁴⁶ Opponents will disagree, of course, and may doubt perspectivism’s ability to accommodate phenomena such as disagreement, uncertainty, akrasia, and more. These are important disputes.

⁴⁷ E.g. Nagel 1997, Huemer 2005.

⁴⁸ E.g. Bertrand Russell: reluctantly persuaded of objectivism by Moore (“while my opinions as to ethics do not satisfy me, other people’s satisfy me still less” (1944)) but eventually enlightened by Santayana (Russell 1929). Parfit (2011) argues extensively against noncognitivism and subjectivism but never addresses perspectivism.

⁴⁹ Cf. Scanlon 1995.

⁵⁰ E.g. Joyce 2011, Enoch 2011.

⁵¹ Cf. Williams 1985.

⁵² Cf. Kramer 2009, Isserow & Elliott 2021.

values...would tend to render people more truly social than would a belief that things have intrinsic and unchangeable values” (1911: 430).

Is it hypocritical or self-defeating for a *perspectivist* to take issue with motivated reasoning while holding there are no questions of what one Ought to do except from motivated standpoints? I again embrace the perspective aiming at the intellectual ends of shared understanding, as a philosophically kosher or nonideological kind of motivated reasoning, and endorse Santayana’s sentiment that “there is no room in philosophy for the shouting Moralists”—acknowledging that some things Matter more than philosophy.⁵³ We all have “non-intellectual” motives, of course, such as ego, career, and attachment to a favorite theory. But we expect good-faith philosophical inquiry to leave these at the door, and they don’t have to dictate our philosophical views.

Acknowledging it an empirical question (and that I might be self-oblivious), my impression is that ideologically-motivated reasoning is disproportionately found among objectivists. It is generally objectivists who accord supreme authority to their intuitions or make issues of the practical consequences of a theory’s rejection or their desire for its truth. Only objectivists seem happy to embrace quietist or mysterian positions, e.g. about the metaphysics and epistemology of “Normativity”. Even if we grant that some philosophical questions might lack illuminating answers, this should be a bitter pill for anyone with a primary goal of reaching understanding—but may be a welcome result if your priority is rather (e.g.) to fortify your preferred conclusion against refutation. Objectivism, particularly in nonnaturalistic realist forms, is thus noted to have close affinities with religious faith.⁵⁴ To echo Nietzsche, what is objective Normativity ultimately but a de-personalized version (“shadow”) of God, peremptorily telling us what to do (“thou shalt!”) in a way supposed mysteriously to be beyond challenge?

Philosophers in other camps do not seem similarly directed by “non-intellectual” motives that I can discern. Contra the suggestion (for example) that rejection of O-Normativity may be motivated by a wish to escape one’s moral obligations, contemporary noncognitivists and subjectivists seem more concerned to insist that their theories don’t diminish the Importance or scope of morality, and aren’t notorious for immorality. They seem more plausibly moved by their inability to conceive how assigning objective content for “Normative” thought could explain its characteristic roles, e.g. in practical deliberation, than by fear of what follows if subjectivism or noncognitivism is false.

Even if all this correct, it might be complained, taking aim at opponents’ motives is an egregious breach of philosophy’s charitable norms. But while charity surely has a general instrumental value for intellectual ends there is danger in fetishizing it, and charity itself is the third obstacle to enlightenment in my narrative.

C. Charity

While so far we have focused on the role of objectivists, it takes two to Tango. The motivated reasoning of some members of one camp cannot be solely responsible for the futility of an entire discourse. Here I regretfully see charity, of multiple forms—as a tendency to assume the best of others—as playing a significant role preventing progress. (To push my allegory perhaps too far, it is charity towards the deluded that keeps the more enlightened in Samsara.)

⁵³ Ultimately I want enlightenment not for its own sake, but because—like Santayana—I believe it would position us better to promote other desirable ends such as social harmony and mutual respect.

⁵⁴ E.g. Santayana 1911, Street 2016, Killoren 2016. Plato’s treatment of the Form of the Good is archetypical.

One such form of charity concerns *reference*: the naïve assumption that when others use words (nouns, adjectives) they are successfully thinking and talking about something actual. This leads us to interpret others as thinking and talking about whatever seems by our lights the most suitable references for their terms, even when we have grounds to suspect error, incoherence, or reference-failure.⁵⁵ It perpetuates the futile cycle by leading metaethicists to assume we're all engaged in dispute over the same property, and is a necessary condition for "rebirth", as objectivism's opponents follow them into new epicycles assuming that objectivists are talking about something genuine with their newly selected special term for expressing their fugitive thought.⁵⁶

Another form of charity concerns *motives*: the assumption that our opponents are basing their views on good-faith intellectual assessment of arguments and evidence rather than their "attachments" or motivation towards non-intellectual ends. This charity underlies our investment of time and effort in the debate, which will be largely in vain insofar as objectivists are actually more interested in defending and spreading their faith than in reaching metaethical truth and understanding—entangling us in unwinnable battles rather than simply taking our ball and going home.

A final form of charity concerns *truth*: our tendency to trust others' reliability and to interpret them however we think best secures their statements' accuracy.⁵⁷ These three forms of charity combine to have unfortunate epistemological effects. As expert opinion and peer disagreement generally provide evidence of what is the case, the prevalence of objectivism among ethicists and metaethicists is liable to lend it authority, and lower confidence in contrary insights and understanding—especially since those holding metaethical views as articles of faith will tend to project the highest levels of confidence.⁵⁸ This influence will be particularly strong on non-experts and newcomers, a perpetual thumb on the scale lending objectivism an unmerited initial credibility. While most of us would be rightly wary of an argument from authority for God's existence citing the prevalence of theists among philosophers of religion, the parallel selection bias in metaethics although not as obvious may be no less real.⁵⁹

If metaethics is to overcome the obstacles to enlightenment we may need to become a bit less charitable: less ready to assume others are using their terms coherently, successfully, and with the same meanings we do, less trusting that their positions are intellectually motivated by the weight of evidence alone, and less deferential to them as reliable indicators of truth.

D. Forgetfulness

The fourth and final factor I see obstructing enlightenment is *forgetfulness*. Samsara's Wheel keeps turning partly because of ignorance of the futile cycle, due to an inability to remember previous epicycles. "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it," as Santayana memorably said. An important step in the Buddha's path to enlightenment is therefore recollection

⁵⁵ Cf. Harman 1996. I blame this impulse for the idea of reference-magnetism, which invites us to ignore differences in theorists' intentions and naïvely trust the world will magically sort out our mess for us.

⁵⁶ E.g. Matt Bedke's case for subjectivism about "oomph" (2019).

⁵⁷ Admittedly, more charity between philosophers would often be welcome.

⁵⁸ Cf. the 2020 PhilPapers.org survey "morality" question: of metaethicists favoring "nonnaturalism" 60% selected "Accept" over "Lean Towards". Compare: "naturalistic realism" 41%, "constructivism" [≈subjectivism?] 36%, "expressivism" [≈noncognitivism?] 28%, "error theory" 25%.

⁵⁹ Metaethicists' largest divergence from philosophers generally on the PhilPapers.org survey "morality" question is a higher adherence to nonnaturalistic realism (36% vs. 27%), which is most strongly correlated with theism in the philosophy of religion.

of his past lives. Awareness of the lack of genuine metaethical progress and our repetition of past moves is similarly hampered by the regrettably short memory of academic philosophy.⁶⁰

For various reasons—including professional pressures and, ironically, belief that philosophy is progressing like science—most writers today rarely bother to read any philosophy written more than a decade or two ago, leaving us ill-equipped to recognize how the contemporary debate replicates the past.⁶¹ Indeed the key points of this paper itself aren't particularly original and have been made to some approximation many times before. (I hope to have at least framed them in a helpful new way.) This includes among many others Foot, Mackie, and Williams in the 1970s, Elizabeth Anscombe in the 1950s,⁶² Santayana in the 1910s, and especially Nietzsche in the 1880s—to whose slogan “Beyond Good and Evil” my title pays homage. So we might despair over the prospects of the current epicycle yielding to general enlightenment.

If meta-‘Normative’ theory is riddled with ambiguity and equivocation, it might seem advisable to abandon the rubric altogether, as some have begun to counsel.⁶³ However, while endorsing the demise of the current epicycle—as battle over the nature of “Normativity”—I don't think this necessarily should involve abandoning the term. After all, my diagnosis has been that its defects are only symptoms of an underlying problem vexing any possible terminology used for the same purposes, so jettisoning the rubric may simply promote the Bad Future by erasing metaethics' collective memory and plunging us into the next epicycle. A post-meta-‘Normative’ enlightenment might be better secured by retaining the term along with our hard-won appreciation of its ambiguities, limitations and perils, and becoming accustomed to challenging injudicious uses with a request for disambiguation: “Do you mean that formally, noncognitively (motivationally), subjectively (instrumentally), objectively, or ...?”

To attempt a nuanced appraisal, whereas the ‘normativity’ rubric fails to satisfy ambitions either to elucidate the nature of the subject-matter(s) or to escape the special/mundane ambiguities, it does helpfully provide a general technical term enabling us to talk efficiently about the commonalities cross-cutting a wide range of ordinary terms, thoughts, properties, etc.—the term we happen to have right now—and for this reason I haven't managed to eliminate it from my own vocabulary. So I propose we retain it, as a useful albeit dangerously polysemous term of philosophical art. Love the one you're with!⁶⁴

⁶⁰ “When we occasionally catch [metaethical knowledge]...we always forget it again immediately” (Nietzsche 1882, §301).

⁶¹ I'm not claiming any moral high-ground!

⁶² 1958: 3-9.

⁶³ E.g. Hieronymi 2021, Dannenberg ms.

⁶⁴ Thanks to Simon Kirchin, Hille Paakkunainen, Robert Audi, Sam Baron, David Clark, Jorah Dannenberg, David Enoch, Nick Laskowski, Matt Lutz, Laura and François Schroeter, participants in my Spring 2021 USC graduate seminar, and audiences at the 2020 Normativity in Philosophy Conference at Seoul National University, Lingnan/HKU/ NUS Philosophy Seminar, ANU Philosophy Seminar, the Dianoia Ethics Working Group, the Syracuse Philosophy Graduate Conference, and the 2022 Frankfurt Metaethics Conference.

References

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33 (124): 1-19.
- Baker, Derek. 2018. "Skepticism about Ought Simpliciter." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13.
- Bedke, Matthew. 2019. "Practical Oomph: A Case for Subjectivism." *Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (277): 657-677.
- Blackburn, Simon. 1998. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford University Press.
- Broome, John. 2013. *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Oxford University Press.
- Copp, David. 2001. "Realist-Expressivism: A Neglected Option for Moral Realism." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18(2): 1-43.
- Dannenberg, Jorah. Unpublished ms. "Doing without Normativity."
- Dowell, J. L. 2016. "Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normative Language, by Stephen Finlay." *Mind* 125 (498): 585-593.
- . 2020. "Finlay's Methodology: Synthetic, Not Analytic." *Analysis* 80 (1): 102-110.
- Eklund, Matti. 2017. *Choosing Normative Concepts*. Oxford University Press.
- Enoch, David. 2011. *Taking Morality Seriously*. Oxford University Press.
- Finlay, Stephen. 2006. "The Reasons that Matter." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 84(1): 1-20.
- . 2007. "Responding to Normativity." In R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2. Oxford University Press, pp. 220-239.
- . 2008. "The Error in the Error Theory." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86(3): 347-369.
- . 2014. *Confusion of Tongues*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2019. "Defining Normativity." In D. Plunkett, S. Shapiro, K. Toh (eds.), *Dimensions of Normativity*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. "Reply to Worsnip, Dowell, and Koehn." *Analysis* 80(1): 131-147.
- Finlay, Stephen and David Plunkett. 2019. "Quasi-Expressivism about Statements of Law: A Hartian Theory." In J. Gardner, L. Green, B. Leiter (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Law* 3. Oxford University Press.
- Foot, Philippa. 1972. "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." *The Philosophical Review* 81(3): 305-316.
- Gibbard, Allan. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Harvard University Press.
- . 1990. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*. Harvard University Press.
- Hare, R.M. 1952. *The Language of Morals*. Oxford University Press.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1975. "Moral Relativism Defended." *Philosophical Review* 84(1): 3-22.
- . 1996. "Moral Relativism", in G. Harman & J.J. Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Blackwell, pp. 1-64.
- Hernandez, Shawn and Nicholas Laskowski. 2021. "What Makes Normative Concepts Normative." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 37(1).

- Hieronymi, Pamela. 2021. "Reasoning First." In R. Chang & K. Sylvan (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Practical Reasoning*. Routledge.
- Huemer, Michael. 2005. *Ethical Intuitionism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Isserow, J. & Elliott, E. 2021. "Don't Stop Believing (Hold onto That Warm Fuzzy Feeling)," *Ethics* 132(1): 4-37.
- Jackson, Frank. 2008. *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Joyce, Richard. 2006. *The Evolution of Morality*. MIT Press.
- . 2009. "Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 12(1): 53-75.
- . 2011. "The Error in 'the Error in the Error Theory'." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89(3): 519-534.
- Killoren, David. 2016. "Robust Moral Realism: An Excellent Religion." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79 (3): 223-237.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kramer, Matthew. 2009. *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Laskowski, Nicholas. 2015. "Non-Analytical Naturalism and the Nature of Normative Thought." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 9(1): 1-5.
- . 2017. "Rethinking Reductive Realism in Ethics." USC PhD dissertation.
- Mackie, J.L. 1977. *Ethics*. Penguin.
- Moore, G. E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. Dover Publications.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1970. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton University Press.
- . 1997. *The Last Word*. Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2016. *Anger and Forgiveness*. Oxford University Press.
- Olson, Jonas. 2014. *Moral Error Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 2011. *On What Matters*, Volume 2. Oxford University Press.
- Paytas, Tyler. 2021. "Be Not Afraid: The Virtue of Fearlessness." *Philosophers' Imprint* 21(23).
- Perl, Caleb. 2017. "Positivist Realism." USC PhD dissertation.
- Raz, Joseph. 1979. *The Authority of Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Ridge, Michael. 2014. *Impassioned Belief*. Oxford University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1944. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. Harper & Row.
- Santayana, George. 1911. "Russell's Philosophical Essays: III Hypostatic Ethics." *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 8(16): 421-432.
- Scanlon, T.M. 1995. "Fear of Relativism." In R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons*. Oxford University Press, pp. 219-246.
- Schroeder, Mark. 2007. *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2013. "Tempered Expressivism." In R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 1. Oxford University Press.
- Schroeter, Laura & Schroeter, Francois. Unpublished ms. "Deflationary Normative Naturalism."

- Smith, Michael. 1994. *The Moral Problem*. Blackwell.
- Street, Sharon. 2016. "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It." In R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 11. Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 2008. *Normativity*. Open Court.
- Tiffany, Evan. 2007. "Deflationary Normative Pluralism." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37(5): 231-262.
- Toppinen, Teemu. 2013. "Believing in Expressivism." In R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 8. Oxford University Press.
- Väyrynen, Pekka. 2013. *The Lewd, the Rude and the Nasty*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard University Press.
- . 1979. "Internal and External Reasons." In R. Harrison, *Rational Action*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 101-113.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1965. "A Lecture on Ethics." *The Philosophical Review* 74(1).
- Wodak, Daniel. 2019. "Mere Formalities: Normative Fictions and Normative Authority." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*: 1-23.
- Worsnip, Alex. 2019. "Contextualism Beyond the Parochial." *Philosophical Studies* 176(11): 3099-3119.