

Recent Work on Normativity*

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The Topic

Although only a recently introduced term of art, philosophical enquiry under the rubric of “normativity” has quickly become a major industry. A date-range search of the *Philosopher’s Index* for titles with the word returns zero results before 1980,¹ three results for the ‘80s, 76 results for the ‘90s, and (to date) 218 results for the 2000s.² Philosophical appeals to normativity are also exceptionally widespread. In addition to the subjects traditionally considered ‘normative’—ethics, practical reason, political and legal philosophy, and epistemology—it is increasingly common for philosophers to maintain that normativity is essential in the analysis of subjects as diverse as truth, meaning, probability, and psychological attitudes like belief. This article is therefore unavoidably selective and idiosyncratic in the issues and literature it addresses, focusing on some recent developments in metaethics on the nature of normativity.

The explosion of work under this rubric doesn’t signify a newly discovered frontier, however. “Normativity” is merely a new label for one of the oldest and most central of philosophical problems, previously approached through a variety of terms including ‘value’, ‘good’, ‘ought’, ‘justification’, ‘rationality’, and ‘obligation’. So why has this new word been embraced so quickly and widely? The answer is that philosophers are interested in a phenomenon or character taken to be shared by the topics picked out by these terms, but only imperfectly and incompletely picked out by any of them. Normativity is what distinguishes the *value* side of the ‘fact/value distinction’, but since many writers believe in normative facts this distinction is problematic. It also distinguishes the *ought* side of the ‘is/ought distinction’, but many paradigmatically

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¹ The term first appears in legal scholarship; the first occurrence in the OED dates from 1935 (an older variant, ‘normativeness’, is documented in 1914). Occurrences of its root, ‘normative’, are documented from 1852.

² By comparison, a parallel search on “ought” reveals stable occurrence since 1960.

normative statements—like those ascribing goodness—involve an ‘is’ rather than ‘ought’. Hence it is common for contemporary writers, like Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008), to explain what they mean by ‘normativity’ by *ostension*, in the tradition of Wittgenstein (1997/1930), inviting us to notice the common character shared by various normative notions. The embrace of the term, then, is a consequence of the need for some convenient and efficient way to refer to this important yet hitherto nameless character.

Convenient labels for philosophical problems are characteristically attended by a danger, however: that the label conceals significant ambiguities. Does “normativity” refer to a single, philosophically significant kind, or might the term present a mischievous package deal that lumps together things that should be kept separate? There may be just cause for concern, as we can distinguish at least two different senses.

The original meaning of “normative” is closely tied to its etymological root in “norm”. A *norm* is just a criterion, standard, or rule to which something either does or does not conform and against which it can be compared or measured. Normativity in the related sense is simply *norm-relativity*, and is quite unremarkable. Even a shopping list is normative in this sense, because it provides a standard against which the contents of a shopping cart can be compared. This kind of normativity underlies ordinary judgments of *correctness* (rightness) and *incorrectness* (wrongness). Perhaps (as Thomson argues) there is nothing more to the notion of the normativity of truth than a connection to such correctness conditions.

Recent metaethical interest in ‘normativity’ is directed toward a quite different issue, so that (e.g.) Thomson rejects the ‘tendency to take it that the appropriateness of the word “correct” or “incorrect” in a context is, by itself, a conclusive sign that there is normativity at work in that context.’ (2008: 108) Following this usage, we can distinguish between norm-relativity and normativity proper. Saying anything uncontroversial about normativity proper is difficult, but Thomson illustrates the difference helpfully:

Suppose you are playing chess, and it is your turn to move. You then learn that if you don’t move your bishop horizontally, hundreds will die! Are you all the same under an obligation to not do so? Must you, ought you not to do so? That idea is just silly.’ (2008: 90)

To put it another way, it doesn't necessarily *matter* if somebody moves her bishop—or uses a word—incorrectly. This distinction is often characterized (following Foot 1972) as the difference between the cases where an 'ought' or norm merely *applies* (i.e. the norm-relative) and the cases where an 'ought' or norm is *reason-giving* to some agent.

Many philosophers today characterize normativity accordingly, by appeal to *reasons for actions or attitudes* (e.g. Scanlon 1998, Raz 1999). But there is resistance to this characterization. One source of skepticism is the idea that in addition to reasons, there are also what John Broome (1999, 2004) calls 'normative requirements': rational requirements on agents for consistency in their attitudes. A case attracting particular attention is the *instrumental principle*: it is widely agreed if an agent intends an end (like disposing of her romantic rival) and believes that some action (like poisoning her) is a necessary means to that end, then her intention and belief rationally require her to intend that action—even though there are no *reasons* that justify her doing so. Other cases include the requirement to intend to do A if one believes one ought to do A, and the requirement to believe that *p* if one believes one has conclusive evidence that *p*.

Why can't these requirements be explained in terms of having reasons? The main objection is that this leads to unacceptable 'bootstrapping' (Bratman 1987). By intending an end, even an *evil* end, we would thereby be able to give ourselves a reason for (and thus justify) pursuing it. By believing that we ought to do A, we would thereby make it true that we ought to do A. However, the need to acknowledge the normativity of rationality as separate from the normativity of reasons is contested. Niko Kolodny (2005) argues that these so-called requirements can be explained as *apparent* reasons from the agent's point of view, with only *apparent* normativity, while Mark Schroeder (2009b) appeals to a distinction between objective reasons based on the facts, and *subjective* reasons based on beliefs, where subjective reasons can be analyzed in terms of objective reasons.

Even with mere norm-relativity set aside, we should thus perhaps be cautious about assuming that investigation into 'normativity' is investigation into just one kind of thing, rather than a group of things related only by some vague family resemblance. Might we for example need to draw a fundamental distinction between the *evaluative*

and the *directive* (Thomson 2008),³ or between *favoring* and *mattering* (Finlay 2006)? Most writers have not exercised any such caution, however.

From Normative Concepts to Normative Properties

So what is normativity? It is difficult to saying anything here that is informative yet uncontroversial. Indeed, an increasingly prevalent view is that this isn't a contingent fact about the present state of the debate, but rather that inexplicability is of the very essence of normativity. To begin with something that is uncontroversial, everyone agrees that we have and use normative *concepts* and *language*—even if there is widespread disagreement over exactly which concepts and items of language qualify. We can then distinguish between two different kinds of view about what makes a concept or item of language normative. On a *realist* view of normativity, a concept or word is normative in virtue of being about a normative part or feature of the world—a normative fact, entity, property, function, or relation. (For simplicity, I'll talk about normative facts and properties). For realists, normativity is in the first place something metaphysical, and only derivatively a feature of thought and discourse. By contrast, on an *antirealist* view, normativity is a feature of concepts and words in their own right, and not a part or feature of the world. For antirealists, concepts and words qualify as normative rather in virtue of the *role* they play in thought and discourse, a role that isn't descriptive or representational. (Note, however, that metaethicists often draw realism vs. antirealism distinctions in different and conflicting ways⁴).

A potential objection to this classificatory scheme is that it overlooks *error theory* or normative nihilism, which accepts the realists' claim that concepts and words are normative in virtue of being about normative properties in the world, but agrees with

³ Some writers observe a similar difference between the 'normative' and the 'evaluative', restricting the former to that which has a *guiding function* for the behavior/attitudes of agents, or that to which agents should be responsive in forming their attitudes. So, for example, there is a dispute over whether the *principles of rationality* are 'normative' in this sense or purely 'evaluative', having a role only in external assessments of agents' behavior (e.g. Kolodny 2005). Most writers, however, use "normative" more broadly for whatever it is that the normative narrowly construed shares with the evaluative. This essay explores views about normativity in the broader sense.

⁴ In Finlay 2007 I distinguish four different faces of the *moral* realism/antirealism debate: semantic, ontological, metaphysical, and normative.

the antirealists that no normative properties actually exist/ are realized in the world. However, while error theory about narrowly *moral* facts and properties is a popular position in contemporary metaethics (e.g. Joyce 2001, 2006; Kalderon 2005), error theory about normativity as such is virtually unheard of, and so we can set it aside here.⁵

What kinds of facts and properties might normative facts and properties be? We need to be aware of a significant ambiguity lurking here. If we operate with a loose sense of what is necessary for a fact or property to be normative, it can seem very easy to locate such things, because they are just ordinary facts and properties. For example, if it is a fact that (e.g.) *Tony's tooth aches*, this would widely be agreed to be a normative reason for Tony to go to a dentist. If it is a fact that *Jenny has evidence that p*, this constitutes a normative reason for her to believe that *p*. Sometimes philosophers claim that considerations like these are sufficient to establish that realism about normativity is correct (e.g. Bloomfield 2001), or that there is nothing metaphysically strange about normative properties (e.g. Scanlon 2003). However, it is not facts and properties like these that are the target of antirealists' skepticism. We need a distinction between facts and properties *with* normative significance, and facts and properties *about* normative significance (e.g. Parfit 2006: 333). The fact that Tony's tooth aches—call it '*T*'—is an example of the former; it is a fact with normative significance. But the fact about normative significance would be the fact *that T is a reason for Tony to go to the dentist*. The normative property here would not be the property of being painful, but rather the property of *being a reason for action*. Antirealists deny that such properties exist, and propose to give different accounts of what we mean by saying that these facts are reasons, or that they have normative significance. Do such facts and properties really exist, and if so how are we to explain what they are?

Realist views I: Nonreductionism

Presently enjoying a resurgence of popularity is a nonreductionist, *quietist* answer: Yes, normative facts and properties exist, but they're not to be explained unless

⁵ One representative is Biehl 2008.

by appeal to more fundamental normative facts and properties.⁶ This view is heir to G. E. Moore's claim (1903) that goodness is indefinable, although today it is most commonly claimed that the relation of *being a reason for* (or 'favoring', 'justifying') is the fundamental normative component of reality (Scanlon 1998, Raz 1999). A prominent view of what it is for something to be *good* is T. M. Scanlon's 'buck-passing' account: for something to be good is simply for there to be some reason favoring having some attitude like desire or admiration toward it.

This nonreductionism has close ties to the suggestion, also originally due to Moore, that normativity is 'nonnatural'. This has passed into popular culture in the form of vague talk about the 'naturalistic fallacy', equated with a failure to respect the supposed fact-value or is-ought distinctions. Metaethicists still commonly line up on one or another side of this naturalism/ nonnaturalism debate. However, there is no consensus even on what it *means* for a theory of normativity to be a form of 'naturalism' or 'nonnaturalism', so increasingly many writers prefer to avoid using these terms altogether. The problem is that Moore, whose metaethical views are taken as the archetype of a nonnaturalist position, leaves us with two independent legacies. One is the nonreductionist metaphysical doctrine that the normative is *sui generis* and unanalyzable into nonnormative components or in purely nonnormative terms, leading some writers to classify views as forms of 'nonnaturalism' on this basis (e.g. Wedgwood 2008, Parfit 2006) The other legacy is the epistemological doctrine of *intuitionism*: that some substantive or synthetic normative truths are knowable *apriori*. Other writers prefer to understand "nonnaturalism" as denoting intuitionism (Shafer-Landau 2003, Sturgeon 2006). While most nonreductivists are also intuitionists, in recent years views have emerged on which the normative is *sui generis* and yet empirical or knowable only *aposteriori*—e.g. the views of David Brink and Nicholas Sturgeon—which are therefore classified as nonnaturalistic on one definition but as naturalistic on the other.⁷

Resistance to *sui generis* normative facts and properties revolves around charges of intolerable 'queerness' (following Mackie 1977) on three dimensions: metaphysical,

⁶ A partial list: Scanlon 1998, Raz 1999, Dancy 2000, Shafer-Landau 2003, Oddie 2005, Parfit 2006, Huemer 2006, Enoch 2007, Cuneo 2007, FitzPatrick 2008.

⁷ However, it is not clear that these are intended to be views of *normativity itself*, as opposed to whatever it is that our moral and other evaluative vocabulary is about.

epistemological, and practical. They are often seen as metaphysically unacceptable by those who accept that physical science is the measure of what exists (e.g. Timmons 1999: 13). Some philosophers resist the reign of science over ontology, but recently it has been more popular to try to mitigate the apparent conflict. Normative properties are said to be ‘fully realized’ by properties countenanced by science (Brink 1989, Shafer-Landau 2003, Wedgwood 2008). Normative concepts are merely ways of carving up the same, scientifically describable world—ways that only make sense from the perspective of nonscientific interests, as perhaps is also the case with folk-psychological and social concepts. Perhaps, then, *sui generis* normative facts and properties can even be causally efficacious, without trespassing on science’s domain (Wedgwood 2008).

Many are also skeptical about the possibility of *knowledge* of, or epistemic access to, these alleged *sui generis* facts and properties. This skepticism is usually directed toward intuitionist versions of nonreductionism. For example, Matthew Bedke (2009) argues that since our mental states can all be causally explained, it can only be a ‘cosmic coincidence’ for the intuitionist if our normative beliefs are true. Nonreductionists argue that the possibility of normative knowledge can be defended, even if perhaps it can’t be explained. One common strategy is to appeal to the authority of first-order normative convictions. Surely if we know that *anything* is true, we know that it is true that (e.g.) torturing children for fun is wrong. So if our philosophical theories or world-views suggest that such knowledge is impossible, then so much the worse for those theories or world-views. Another strategy appeals to partners in guilt: Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) argues that all philosophical enquiry is synthetic a priori, so we shouldn’t be skeptical about normative knowledge unless we are also prepared to be skeptical about philosophical knowledge as such. Appealing to epistemological reliabilism, he argues further that even if we can’t explain how we acquire normative knowledge, all that it requires is that these (mysterious) mechanisms are indeed reliable. Ralph Wedgwood (2008) goes further, arguing that the rational dispositions constitutive of having normative concepts are reliable indicators of correctness.

Other objections to *sui generis* normative facts and properties proceed from the thought that there is something essentially *practical* about normativity. This practicality has often been understood in motivational terms. According to the doctrine

of (strong) *motivational judgment internalism* (MJI), if an agent judges that she ought to do A, then she must be motivated to do A. But the idea that objective, *sui generis* facts and properties could be ‘magnetic’ or have this kind of close connection with the motivation of agents has struck many as unacceptably peculiar (Mackie 1977: 40, Joyce 2001). Today this kind of objection has largely been abandoned. First, there is broad consensus that strong MJI is *too* strong, since it doesn’t make room for the possibility of irrational failures to be motivated by one’s normative judgments. Accordingly, the preferred versions of MJI are weaker; the most popular version maintains simply that if an agent judges that she has a reason to do A, then she must have some motivation to do A *so long as she is rational* (e.g. Smith 1994).

Some recent defenders of *sui generis* normative facts and properties think that a closer connection to motivation can be accommodated. Under the slogan that ‘the intentional is normative’, Wedgwood (2008) argues that normative and motivational concepts are interdefined, and that the characteristic *conceptual role* of normative concepts is to be specified in terms of certain dispositions of thought and intention. So, for example, the conceptual role of ‘ought’ is tied to a disposition to form intentions to act. But easily the most popular response to motivation-based objections today is simply to deny that there is any interestingly close relationship between normative facts/ properties and motivation. Nobody argues this point more determinedly than Derek Parfit (2006), who suggests that support for MJI is simply a result of conflating normative authority with motivational force: in trying to fill out the blank in the equation, *normativity*=_____, philosophers have reached for psychological notions because they couldn’t imagine what else normativity could be. But Parfit contends that the very project is misconceived: normativity is just normativity. In the slogan that G.E. Moore borrowed from Joseph Butler, it ‘is what it is, and not another thing’.

Practical queerness objections can be formulated instead in *normative* rather than motivational terms. Some philosophers object that *sui generis* facts and properties could not possess the *authority* over agents that is the essential characteristic of normativity. On acknowledging any such facts or properties, the objection runs, an agent could rationally respond ‘So what?’ (e.g. Joyce 2001, Korsgaard 1996, 2008, Gibbard 2003)—a response that would allegedly be incoherent if the agent had just

acknowledged something genuinely normative. But nonreductionists are not impressed. As Scanlon puts it,

Suppose a person believes that he has conclusive reason to do X at t. How can this fall short of what is required? What is lacking does not seem to be a reason. A person cannot coherently say ‘Yes, I see that C is a conclusive reason to do X, but what reason do I have to do it?’ (2003: 14).

In other words, the ‘So what?’ challenge could only have force against nonreductionism if it were understood as a demand for (e.g.) *reasons*—rather than (e.g.) a challenge to be *made to care*. But it would only be supposed that the nonreductionist hasn’t already met this demand if one was assuming that reasons and normativity aren’t what the nonreductionist claims, i.e. if one were begging the question, perhaps by assuming the identity of normativity and motivational force.

Nonreductionists have been emboldened by these seeming failures of the familiar objections. But many philosophers remain unsatisfied with the thought that normativity might be brute and inexplicable. Even one recent defender of *sui generis* normative facts and properties, Wedgwood (2008), insists on the need and possibility of explaining normativity: he argues that normative concepts can be analyzed in terms of *intentional attitudes*, but remain *sui generis* for the reason that intentional attitudes themselves cannot be analyzed without appeal to normativity. Other realists claim that it is possible to provide noncircular analyses and explanations of normative facts and properties—‘naturalistic’ accounts, on one definition. We now turn to these views.

Realist views II: Neo-Aristotelianism

Neo-Aristotelian accounts of normativity (Foot 2001, Bloomfield 2001, Thomson 2007, 2008) are partly motivated by observation of significant continuities in our normative thought and discourse from agents to nonagents. They can be seen as understanding normativity as a special case of norm-relativity, where the norms for evaluations of things as correct or incorrect (or ‘defective’) are provided by the *nature* of particular kinds of thing. On Thomson’s view, all normativity exists in virtue of the existence of ‘normative kinds’. There is such a thing as a *good* toaster or person, and

such as thing as what a toaster or a person *ought* to do, ultimately because *toaster* and *person* are both normative kinds. By contrast, without a special context it makes no sense to talk about a good pebble, or what a pebble ought to be like, because *pebble* is not a normative kind. In Thomson's use, "normativity" has a meaning that is narrower than norm-relativity (she holds that being *correct* or *incorrect* is not a normative distinction if it isn't connected with ways of being *better* or *worse* (the 'evaluative') or how things *ought* to be (the 'directive')). Yet normativity in Thomson's sense is still broader than the widespread conception of normativity as 'reason-giving': there are normative facts about what a toaster ought to do, which don't nontrivially entail anything about normative reasons. The normativity of *reasons* is a special case of kind-relative normativity: a fact is a reason for an agent S to do A just in case it 'lends weight' to the proposition that S ought to do A—i.e. to the proposition that S would otherwise be a defective member of some relevant normative kind. The peculiar normative nature of reasons, then, can be analyzed in terms of there being certain kinds of person or agent of which it is possible to be a defective or nonvirtuous member.

How is the existence of 'normative kinds' to be explained, and what determines whether a kind is normative—like toasters and beefsteak tomatoes, but unlike pebbles and smudges? Aristotle's answer appealed to the *natural function* (teleology) of certain kinds; although this notion has long been out of favor in modern science, recent neo-Aristotelians have embraced the development of new accounts of functions in the philosophy of biology (Thomson 1997, Foot 2001, Bloomfield 2003, Casebeer 2003). Thomson is wary of the idea, however, recognizing the existence of normative kinds that are not 'function-kinds', like *tiger* and *human being* (2008: 20). This leaves the distinguishing characteristics of normative kinds murky; Thomson tells us only that 'each of them is such that what being a K is itself sets the standards that a K has to meet if it is to be good *qua* K.' (2008: 21)

If these appeals to functions and normative kinds can be vindicated, then neo-Aristotelian views of normativity would seem free of metaphysical and epistemological problems. Some worry, however, that neo-Aristotelianism cannot meet *normative* challenges. Why think that we have any *reasons* to avoid being defective members of our kind? Some neo-Aristotelians have adopted the same response as the quietists. If to

have a reason to do A is nothing other than (for example) for it to be the case that we would be defective human beings if we did not do A, then there is no coherent challenge here (Foot 2001, Thomson 2008).

Realist views III: Neo-Humeanism

According to neo-Humean (or ‘instrumentalist’) theories of normativity, normative facts are analyzable in terms of relations to agents’ *desires* or similarly conative attitudes. Considered orthodox in the 1970s and 1980s, these theories subsequently suffered an erosion of support, but have since found a fresh face and new champions, most prominently Mark Schroeder (2007). Some opponents of neo-Humeanism have charged that it is unable to accommodate the fact that agents’ reasons for action typically don’t *include* their desires. Contemporary neo-Humeans respond by analyzing reasons for agents as facts that stand in an external relation to their desires (Finlay 2006, Schroeder 2007). Other philosophers, worried that desires *per se* are not the right kind of thing to base normativity on—being often perverse or a product of ignorance—have endorsed forms of what Richard Joyce (2001) calls ‘non-Humean instrumentalism’. This analyzes normativity in terms of the desires that agents *would* have under certain ideal circumstances (e.g. Williams 1979, Smith 1994, Joyce 2001). Many of these views can be thought of as extendedly Humean, because they view the normative significance of these ideal circumstances as deriving from the special interest that deliberating agents necessarily have in achieving them.

The classic argument for neo-Humeanism was an argument from *motivation*, which proceeded from the premises of strong MJI and the ‘Humean’ Theory of Motivation (that all motivation requires a desire). Adherence to neo-Humeanism has declined as credence in strong MJI declined. But contemporary neo-Humeanism often starts out from different premises. A prominent argument is that it offers the best and simplest explanation of our first-order normative judgments; i.e. our ordinary intuitions about when agents do and don’t have reasons to act (Schroeder 2007). A related basis is the desideratum of explaining the intuitive truth of *hypothetical imperatives*, which

directly infer from agents' desiring ends that they ought to adopt the means. Once considered unproblematic and philosophically uninteresting, as philosophers have grown increasingly suspicious of motivational accounts of normativity and of the normative authority of desires, the challenge of explaining and accommodating the apparent truth of hypothetical imperatives has become one of the hottest topics in metaethics.

First-order normative judgments also present one of the chief objections to neo-Humeanism, however. As Kant observed, *moral* claims are apparently 'categorical', not conditioned on agents' desires. Epistemological normativity, or the 'ought to believe', also looks like problematic data for neo-Humeanism (e.g. Kelly 2003, Cuneo 2007). One instrumentalist strategy for dealing at least with moral claims is to adopt an *error theory* about categorical reasons (Mackie 1977, Joyce 2001, 2006, Kalderon 2005), maintaining that these claims are all false—even if possibly useful. Schroeder (2007) rather argues that the requirements of morality might after all be desire-based, if there are certain requirements that follow from any set of desires whatsoever.⁸ On a different, *contextualist* strategy, normative language is relativized to *ends* which may or may not be the agent's *desired* ends. Hence moral claims can be relativized to moral ends (Finlay 2004, 2006, 2009)⁹, and epistemic claims can be relativized to epistemic ends (Chrisman 2008). Neo-Humeanism can be preserved by the claim that these norm-relative 'oughts' and 'reasons' are only normative (they only *matter*) for a particular agent if they are relativized to ends that the agent desires (Finlay 2006).

Neo-Humean views are largely immune from metaphysical and epistemological objections, and they provide an easy explanation of a close connection between normativity and motivation—if there is in fact such a connection to be explained. Besides first-order worries, the main objections here concern the normative authority of desire. Derek Parfit suggests that like MJI, neo-Humean accounts mistakenly conflate motivational force with normative authority, two quite different things. Neo-Humeans are not persuaded; if normativity consists in objective promotion or satisfaction

⁸ This is a close cousin of Michael Smith's non-Humean instrumentalist view (1994) that moral requirements exist only on the condition that they follow from the set of desires that any agent whatsoever would have were they in ideal circumstances.

⁹ See Price 2009 for a similar but non-Humean contextualist view.

relations that actions etc. bear to desires, then normativity is distinct from motivational force. Neo-Humeans can also adopt the strategy of appealing to the analysis of reasons (Schroeder 2007); if facts about reasons just are facts about our desires (roughly speaking), then the demand for *reasons* for being guided by these facts is ultimately question-begging.

Antirealist views I: Expressivism

On antirealist accounts of normativity it has no in-the-world presence. Rather, it is properly construed as a characteristic of our words or concepts. The chief argument for antirealism has been that realist accounts cannot account for the special practical or motivational character of normative judgment. The classic noncognitivist views of A.J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson, and R.M. Hare were forms of *semantic behaviorism*;¹⁰ to understand the meaning of normative words or concepts is on these views to understand what attitudinal states someone is in, or what they are trying to do, when they use them. These states are identified as essentially *motivational* states, to accommodate the special practical role of normative thought. This includes both *self*-motivating states and *other*-motivating states, so for example to think that you have most reason to do A is at least in part to be motivated to do A, while to assert that some other person has most reason to do A is to do something like issue a command to the other to do A.

This set of views has encountered many problems, which can perhaps be collectively summarized as the complaint that normative thought and discourse *sure do appear descriptive*.¹¹ Early noncognitivists were largely oblivious to the extent of this problem, a situation which gave way to the project that Simon Blackburn named ‘quasi-realism’—the project of showing that the antirealist had the right to say realist-sounding things (so that Alan Gibbard (2003) claims the right even to acknowledge the existence of normative ‘facts’ and ‘properties’). Recently, however, some expressivists appear to be shifting to a more aggressive and less apologetic posture, maintaining that the appearances don’t favor realist over antirealist views at all.

¹⁰ See helpful discussion in Kalderon 2005.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of recent developments in expressivism, see Sinclair 2009.

The behaviorist model opened noncognitivism to a charge of *speech act fallacy*: that it conflates what sentences mean with what speakers use them to do. This charge was motivated by noncognitivism's difficulty in accounting for the use of normative sentences when they are *embedded* in more complex sentences, like conditionals and negations, uses which are typically *not* accompanied by the presence of the states or behaviors proposed as their meanings. Contemporary expressivists like Gibbard (2003) respond by abandoning behaviorism for a *conceptual role* semantics: to be competent with normative language involves internalizing inferential rules, which include rules about moving from normative sentences to motivational attitudes. (Others, like Wedgwood 2008 and Kalderon 2005, observe that a conceptual role semantics doesn't entail expressivism, as it remains to be established that the conceptual role of normative concepts doesn't include reference to some normative properties or facts).

A related problem is the *logical behavior* of normative sentences: embedding in conditionals and negation (etc.) apparently put normative claims into ordinary logical relationships with each other and with nonnormative claims—but classic noncognitivism denies that such sentences have truth values. Expressivists reply by appealing (a) to minimalist theories of truth—i.e. that one is entitled to declare that S is true just in case one is entitled to declare that S, and (b) to inferential links between sentences explained not by the truth-relations of their contents, but by the conceptual roles of normative concepts. Claiming success in accommodating the logic of normative thought is however quite a different thing from proving it. Some philosophers who are broadly sympathetic towards expressivism have remained skeptical about whether expressivists have yet given a satisfactory account even of *negation* (Dreier 2005). Mark Schroeder (2008) demonstrates that expressivists can accommodate negation by holding that all normative sentences express a single kind of attitude, and that different predicates just affect that attitude's content, but argues that once we've set out on that road we have no choice but to embrace radically expressivist revisions of all our theories of logic, truth and meaning.

Expressivism also faces challenges to its *raison d'être*. We've already noted the recent pushback against the idea that normative authority is just motivational force. But modern day expressivists have also come a long way since Charles Stevenson

suggested that by a ‘reason’ for an agent we just mean any consideration that might have motivational influence on her. Gibbard argues that normative language plays an essential conceptual role in practical thought about ‘what to do’; on this basis he identifies the attitude underlying normative thought as *planning* (or intention). Normative thought is thus thought that is ‘plan-laden’, embodying agents’ psychological commitments about how to act in various circumstances. To account for the extension of normative thought, Gibbard appeals to extended ‘contingency plans’—even for impossible scenarios such as (e.g.) when one is Julius Caesar deciding whether to cross the Rubicon.

Recently, a simpler strategy has become popular. Confusingly almost every different proponent of this kind of strategy has his own label for it; to give precedence to the earliest, we can call it ‘realist-expressivism’ (Copp 2001).¹² On these views, normative thoughts and utterances consist both of a descriptive and a nondescriptive or expressivist part (Barker 2000, Copp 2001, Ridge 2007, Boisvert 2008, Bar-On & Chrisman 2009).¹³ While there are significant differences between these theories, they share the following features. The descriptive element of normative claims accounts for their logical and semantic behavior without any need for revisionary theories of logic or semantics (although see Schroeder 2009a for examination of how well different versions succeed). But on these views there is nothing distinctively normative about the properties and facts to which normative claims refer; rather their normative character is accounted for by the expressivist element. For present purposes, therefore, these realist-expressivist views may count as supporting nondescriptive accounts of normativity.

¹² Other labels in use for at least similar views include ‘ecumenical expressivism’ (Ridge 2007), ‘assertive-ascriptivism’ (Boisvert 2008), ‘neo-expressivism’ (Bar-On & Chrisman 2009), & ‘hybrid expressivism’ (Schroeder 2009a).

¹³ I exclude my similar view in Finlay 2004 and elsewhere because I do not identify normativity with the attitudinal or expressivist elements of the view.

Antirealist views II: Constructivism

Might there be objective correctness and incorrectness in normative judgments even in the absence of any normative facts or properties? In the tradition of Immanuel Kant, *constructivists* like Christine Korsgaard (1996, 2008), Hilary Putnam (2004) and Aaron James (2007) argue that there are. According to these views, normativity derives ultimately from *processes* of practical reasoning. So a fact R is a reason for an agent to do A just because following the correct process of reasoning would (for example) lead her to a certain judgment or attitude, and not vice versa.

It is debatable, however, whether constructivism is properly construed as an alternative to realism or as a form of realism (Hussain & Shah 2006). Arguably, for example, the constructivist order of explanation is properly interpreted not as eliminating the property of being a reason, but simply as identifying the nature of that property. Constructivists also have to explain in what sense the favored processes of reasoning are ‘correct’, without appealing to some further normative property. Korsgaard’s neo-Kantian answer is that these processes are simply *constitutive* of practical reasoning, so that one is simply not an agent reasoning about what to do if one isn’t trying and to some degree succeeding in adopting them, just as one is simply not walking if one isn’t putting one foot in front of the other (2008a: 8). On the other hand, Sharon Street (2008) opts for constructivism ‘all the way down’; the judgment that a process of reasoning is ‘correct’ is itself the output of a process of reasoning. There are no objective facts about which processes are ‘correct’, and any normative judgments presuppose an ultimately ungrounded adoption of a process of reasoning. Normative thought cannot be vindicated from a standpoint external to normative thought itself.

Constructivists also differ on what the relevant output of the favored process is. On some views it is simply a desire, preference, or decision. But Korsgaard and Street characterize it as an agent’s ‘taking’ some R to be a reason to do A. What then is the nature of this judgment? If it is to *believe* that R has a property of favoring doing A, then given the rejection of realism, constructivism seems to amount to a kind of error

theory (or fictionalism) about normativity.¹⁴ If it is to have some kind of noncognitive attitude like *planning* to do A on the basis of R, then constructivism seems to amount to a kind of expressivism. So some constructivists have to work to distinguish their views from others surveyed above.

Conclusion

This survey barely scratches the surface of recent work on normativity, overlooking much important work, but I hope provides a helpful overview of the major available positions and some of the significant recent developments in the dialectic. The debate over the nature of normativity has been vigorous, and shows every sign of remaining so. Nonreductionism, Neo-Aristotelianism, Neo-Humeanism, Expressivism and Constructivism all retain many dedicated champions, who show no inclination to surrender the battlefield.

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¹⁴ Street's solution (2008) is to posit an ambiguity in 'reason', so that real reasons are constructed from judgments about (illusory) sui generis reasons.

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