

Beyond Normativity

Can Metaethics Escape Samsara's Wheel?

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ABSTRACT: What is the future of normativity? What should that future be? This essay employs the analogy of Samsara's Wheel to characterize recent inquiry under the rubric 'normativity' as merely the latest epicycle in a futile circle of metaethical debate in which the same moves are reprised for different terms such as 'ought', 'value', 'reasons', 'justification', 'authority', 'matters', 'fit', etcetera. This futility is blamed on a four-way ambiguity running systematically throughout normative language. A two-dimensional, "perspectivist" diagnosis is provided of the difference between special ("robust") and mundane ("merely formal") normativity. By distinguishing between descriptive content and motivated perspective the three major metaethical camps (nonscognitivism, subjectivism, objectivism) are explained as corresponding to the three possible ways of flattening two dimensions into one, depending on whose perspective (judge, subject, or theorist) is privileged. This reveals the errors characteristic to each camp, and fragments "normativity" into multiple objects, denying the univocity of metaethical debate. Four obstacles to metaethical enlightenment are identified: illusion, attachment, charity, and forgetfulness.

What is the future of normativity? What should that future be? These questions can be read narrowly or broadly. The narrow reading concerns debate over the nature of something conceived under the rubric 'normativity', a recent but busy industry I'll call *meta-'normative' theory*. My prediction is that it is a passing fad due soon to fade away, and my prescription will be roughly that it should. Read broadly, however, inquiry into the nature of normativity is central to philosophical thought across ages and cultures, pursued under many different rubrics such as 'value', 'dao', 'good', 'ought', 'authority', 'justification'. I'll call this *metaethics*, although its scope is both broader than morality and excludes many other metaethical questions. This project mightn't be disappearing anytime soon, but I see it as stuck in a rut making little genuine progress. Its claims and methods have no credibility if decade after decade 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 them behind us.

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 and want something of their own, out from under the previous generation's shadow. Already the literature on "normativity" has grown too massive to digest, incentivizing a move to greener pastures. But I'll suggest there is a more fundamental dynamic working to bring meta-'normative' theory to an end, which also threatens metaethics itself with perpetual futility. An allegory is provided by the Buddhist/Hindu doctrine of Samsara's Wheel.

Like an individual human life in Samsara, meta-‘normative’ theory is only a temporary manifestation of an underlying cycle of futile struggle. Progress is illusory, as the inevitable end of one epicycle merely launches the next, each differing only superficially. Genuine and permanent resolution (Nirvana) can only come through enlightenment in which the illusions propelling the wheel are recognized and thereby escaped.

A full exploration 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 the combination of four factors: illusion, attachment, charity, and forgetfulness.

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

To illuminate the futile cycle we can look at 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 various rubrics including ‘value,’ ‘justification,’ ‘ought,’ ‘obligation,’ ‘rationality,’ and ‘reasons’. I see this shift prompted partly by a growing dissatisfaction with the earlier terminology as harboring an ambiguity obstructing clear discrimination of the intended topic.

This dissatisfaction can be observed in some classic writings of the 1970s. In 1972, Philippa Foot 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, club rules, and games etc. which lack it. J. L. Mackie observed in 1977 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 philosophy. And whereas Foot seemed comfortable differentiating the special use of ‘ought’ as *reason-giving*, Bernard Williams in 1979 distinguished between two different uses of ‘reason’: an “internal” use he accepted as ordinary and legitimate, and an “external” use he attributed to moral philosophers and declared either “bluff” or “not clearly expressed”.¹ Similar narratives can be given for other terms like ‘rational’ and ‘authority’.

Each writer addresses some terms commonly taken to express a special feature of philosophical interest and observes an ordinary use lacking that feature, challenging the terms’ ability to discriminate it. This would be no problem if we could give a “reductive” definition of the special feature entirely in other kinds of terms, but most philosophers today consider this impossible, leaving many to doubt we have any coherent conception of this supposed feature, and others searching for a privileged term to isolate it.

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 put it in 1996, different writers make “different

¹ Also Mackie (1977: 78f), Foot (1972: 309n: “to say that moral considerations are *called* reasons is blatantly to ignore the problem”).

assumptions about which is the normatively loaded word”²—showing that with her ‘normative’ has become the loaded word. But ironically, ‘normative’ itself is today widely recognized to harbor this same ambiguity,³ as succinctly put 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.⁴

Most writers assume a binary distinction into two relevant kinds of use (a fateful oversimplification, I will suggest)—labeled variously as “formal”, “pseudo”, “institutional”, “trivial” for the mundane, versus “robust”, “genuine”, “authoritative” for the special. Where I need to differentiate I’ll adopt the convention of capitalizing my special uses of terms, and my mentions of those uses: ‘Normative’ vs. ‘normative’, ‘Ought’ versus ‘ought’, etc.

It is this pesky ambiguity 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, tempting speculation about which pretender will emerge victorious or whether we’re entering a period without a hegemonic rubric. Each “X-first” camp provides a candidate: reasons-firsters sometimes suggest the relevant use of ‘normative’ can be isolated in terms of *reasons* (nevermind the role played by the ambiguity of ‘reasons’ in launching the ‘normativity’ epicycle), while competing claims are recently made for the notion of *fit*. Also receiving favor are *matterng, importance, authority, rationality, guidance, choiceworthiness*... but the options are endless.⁵

These proposals all share an assumption that failure to capture the fugitive thought is due merely to poor terminological choices, and that metaethics can be fixed with a better choice. If we select an ordinary term already dedicated to special use we can pinpoint what special Normativity has and mundane normativity lacks. Plausibly, ‘normativity’ was always a (particularly?) poor choice, given its derivation from ‘norm’ and history of mundane use in legal scholarship and even in metaethics, as when Foot wrote, “it is obvious that the normative character of moral judgment does not guarantee its reason-giving force.”⁶ So hope for a better option isn’t unreasonable.

This hope seems to me misguided, however, on the ground that *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 throughout our vocabulary, as Wittgenstein observed in 1929:

² 1996: 44.

³ Cf. Hieronymi (2021): “slipperiness seems its legacy”.

⁴ Broome (2013: 10-11).

⁵ Some writers (Perl (2017), Worsnip (2019)) acknowledging a mundane ‘ought’ recently propose to isolate the special use by appeal to “correct” standards; Thomson (2008: 90, 165f) makes the opposite choice, maintaining that ‘correct’ (‘right’) is semantically mundane while ‘ought’ is univocally special, rejecting mundane ‘ought’s as misuses.

⁶ Foot (1972: 309-10).

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.⁷

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 and then reprises the same old moves.

We can further illustrate the lifecycle of a metaethical rubric by considering how the dialectic unfolds with two current 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 be the metaethical Holy Grail, enabling us finally to articulate the fugitive thought and say unambiguously what differentiates the special from the mundane.

This provokes a critical response (stage three) in which mundane uses are pointed out: an instrumental use where an attitude is described as "fitting" for promoting the subject's goals, for example, or a 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/envy might be a "fitting" response in that the object is outrageous/envious, although being angry/envious is still *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.

While fundamentalists may deny these mundane uses are legitimate, the counterexamples gradually become entrenched, and eventually (stage four) a critical mass will get fed up with the intractable debates over the term and always having to qualify: what "*really* matters", is "*robustly* fitting", etc. When the next wave of pioneers discovers another term naively hoped to lack this baggage the fundamentalist crowd will jump on this new bandwagon, leaving behind only some nostalgic diehards, and the epicycle is over.

My claim here is not that each epicycle or rubric is identical, just as not every life in Samsara is identical: merely that the *fundamental* issues and moves remain the same. Since different normative terms have different meanings there are genuine shifts in emphasis between rubrics of "Value", "Ought", or "Reasons", etc. "Normativity", conceived as a shared *property of Value, Oughts, and Reasons*, emphasizes the higher order.⁹ But this change is less significant than it may seem.

⁷ Wittgenstein (1965 [1929]: 5), my emphasis.

⁸ E.g. Nussbaum (2016), Paytas (2021).

⁹ Conversely, a salient connection to guidance of behavior deemphasizes the "evaluative", commonly glossed as "normative in a broader sense"; see Kirchin (this volume).

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”) which in practice receive almost all the attention as in previous epicycles.¹⁰ Second, the earlier epicycles were no less interested in what was special about thoughts about Value, Oughts, Reasons, etc., fixing on particular terms merely as representative of the class. Finally, efforts to define the special sense of ‘normative’ frequently reach back down to 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 ordinarily mean. One gambit is to stipulate an intended use of an ordinary term. But clear stipulation is itself difficult or impossible without *any* terminology that already isolates one’s meaning—consider Broome’s reliance on readers “knowing it when they meet it”—which does nothing to address the skepticism of Foot, Mackie and Williams about whether there even is a coherent thought here. Since we struggle to detach stipulated uses of familiar words from their ordinary meanings, this strategy may serve only to provide an illusion of understanding. Another gambit is to introduce a new technical term stipulated to have exclusively the special use (e.g. ‘oomph’, ‘robust’)¹¹, hoping to avoid altogether the baggage of ordinary meanings. This doesn’t escape the challenge of clear stipulation without an existing vocabulary, however, and those adopting this path have often been skeptics about whether the special use is coherent or refers to anything.

Rather than dismissing mundane uses as irrelevant and trying to evade the terminological obstacles, I suggest we step back and ask why normative vocabulary is so systematically ambiguous. The existence of some tight connection between mundane and special uses is beyond doubt. My diagnosis will identify the mundane uses as basic and the special uses as derivative,¹² exposing an underappreciated complexity in the subject-matter of metaethical debate. This complexity provides an explanation of the ambiguities confounding metaethics, the intractability of metaethical debate, and the apparent indefinability of special Normativity. Here I’ll focus on expounding this opinionated diagnosis and tracing its implications for progress in metaethics, having argued elsewhere for its truth.¹³

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

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 or include first-personal, present-tense, *deliberative judgments*—such as *I Ought to φ*—which settle processes of practical

¹⁰ For discussion and *mea culpa* see Finlay (2019: 200f). As grist to my Samsara mill, this is essentially the conflation between adjective and substantive that G.E. Moore in 1903 denounced as “naturalistic fallacy” (between “Goodness” and “the Good”), in the text said to have launched 20th century metaethics.

¹¹ Joyce (2006), Enoch (2011).

¹² Reverse diagnoses include (i) that mundane normativity is “fool’s gold” easily mistaken for the genuine article, and (ii) that mundane uses attribute a *claim* to special normativity (Raz (1979), Wodak (2019)).

¹³ Especially Finlay (2014).

deliberation, and produce intention or action. But everyone also agrees that these deliberative judgments don't exhaust the class of similarly special ("Normative") thoughts, which may include thoughts about actions in the past or by others, how to believe or feel, the value of objects, situations, or characters, and more. The same kind of specialness may also extend from thoughts to their constituents (e.g. concepts) and expressive vehicles (language and speech), although for simplicity I'll focus on thoughts.¹⁴

This shared assumption of a common subject-matter (challenged below) is where the agreement ends. Philosophers advance strikingly different views of what it is to be a Normative thought, utterance, etc., divisible for our purposes into three major camps.¹⁵

One fundamental dispute concerns whether these thoughts are made special 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) that share a property of Normativity, or rather by (ii) their *functional psychological role*—typically, a motivational role connected to practical attitudes like desires or intentions. I'll distinguish:

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

Noncognitivism: What it is 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

Here I'm giving these familiar labels an unfamiliar use. Whereas normally they mark a dispute over whether Normative thoughts (about Value, Ought, etc.) have cognitive (descriptive) content, here they are used instead to mark a higher-order dispute over *what makes a thought Normative*. A theorist may answer these questions differently, and today many who are cognitivists regarding the lower-order issue (ascribing descriptive contents to Normative thoughts) nonetheless endorse or assume noncognitivism about the higher-order issue, classifying thoughts as Normative purely on the basis of their noncognitive psychological profile ("Normative role").¹⁷ This includes many "hybrid theorists", who combine cognitive and noncognitive elements at the lower-order while being either straight cognitivists or straight noncognitivists about their Normativity. My choice of these labels may therefore seem ill-advised,¹⁸ but unlike other choices it reflects my contention that this "new" question under the normativity rubric is fundamentally just the rebirth of the old issue in the current epicycle.

¹⁴ Following Laskowski (2017) in prioritizing thought, although I resist attributing "Normativity" to the component/lexical level of concepts.

¹⁵ I take these to reflect competing *theoretical interpretations* of shared, metaethically-innocent ordinary practices, rather than diverging first-order concepts/practices.

¹⁶ Noncognitivists focusing on speech might instead invoke motivational effects on *audiences*; e.g. Hare's prescriptivism (1952), Gibbard's "normative governance" (1990). For simplicity I'll subsume this as a variant of a "thinker"/"judge".

¹⁷ E.g. Eklund (2017), Schroeter & Schroeter (ms).

¹⁸ Hernandez & Laskowski (2021) favor instead 'metaphysicalism' / 'anti-metaphysicalism', observing that the higher-order question has escaped attention.

According to 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,¹⁹ 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 or heteronomous, and don’t think noncompliance with it Matters or is Irrational, etc. By contrast, according to cognitivists the Normativity of facts and properties is primary, and thought or talk is relevantly “Normative” only in a derivative sense of being *about* something that is ostensibly Normative in the primary sense. Noncompliance with this Normativity is considered to Matter (be Wrong or Irrational) essentially.

A second dispute further divides cognitivism into two camps. This concerns whether the Normativity of the facts and properties that Normative thoughts or utterances are about is prior to/ independent of the psychology (particularly, motivations) of the agents for whom they are Normative. I’ll distinguish:

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

According to subjectivists, Normativity is essentially 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. 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 versions of subjectivism will observe an important distinction between *basic* (ultimate, intrinsic, input) motivation towards ends or principles, and *derivative* (proximate, extrinsic, output) motivation towards behavior. Basic motivation grounds Normativity, on this view, whereas derivative motivation responds 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

¹⁹ 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”.

²⁰ Subjectivism isn’t entailed by a thought’s being about motivation per se (e.g. *I Ought to be motivated to φ*); the issue is the Normativity. As subjectivism about *Normativity* rather than (e.g.) Reasons, this attributes psychological content to the cognition of Normativity, rather than to the (lower-order) content. Even if Normative thoughts—as about Normative things—aren’t strictly about Normativity itself, any plausible cognitivism about their Normativity must invoke the thinker’s *awareness* of the special feature as somehow transparent in the thought. This allows for (higher-order) *error theory* attributing Normative thoughts even in the (local or global) absence of any actual property of Normativity, and avoids classifying thoughts as “Normative” just because they are about something happening to have such a property unbeknownst to the thinker—just as we shouldn’t classify something as a “Reasons judgment” merely because it is about a fact that happens to be a Reason.

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. Objectivism seems to be endorsed or assumed by the majority of philosophers in metaethics, ethics, and other "normative" fields, as classification of facts and properties as "Normative" is normally treated as a nonrelative matter.²¹

For all their radical differences, these three camps share a pivotal 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/stance (according to noncognitivists). It is this one-dimensionalist assumption that ensures futility, in my view, because key to explaining the systematic ambiguity, intractability and indefinability plaguing metaethics is to recognize that the thoughts which are *paradigmatically and uncontroversially* Normative feature a two-dimensional character. They are both about certain kinds of descriptive content and also involve certain motivational stances—contents and stances that are relevantly special just because of their internal connection to each other. This may seem to point to a higher-order hybrid theory, defining Normativity simply as a combination of noncognitive stance and cognitive content.²² However, I'll argue it ultimately supports a view that is two-dimensionalist in a more profound and consequential way, which I'll call *perspectivism*,²³

The relevant motivation here is a basic/nonderivative orientation towards an end (outcome) or principle, constituting the psychologically prior perspective or stance from which the thoughts are entertained—rather than derivative motivation merely accompanying the thoughts. The descriptive contents of these thoughts are propositions about how things stand in relation to those ends or principles.²⁴ What these thoughts are about therefore varies depending on the motivated perspective from which they are made. For example, a deliberative judgment expressed as 'I Have to wear a mask' might be made from the perspective of an intention to minimize risk to others' health, and be more explicitly articulated as 'If I am going to minimize risk to others health then I necessarily wear a mask.' Or it might be made from the perspective of wanting to avoid a fine, explicable as 'If I am

²¹ Cf. the 2020 PhilPapers.org survey: "morality" is 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.

²² Broadly hybrid views are popular in metaethics today (see especially Copp (2001)), although are seldom addressed to the higher-order question of what Normativity is. Exceptions include Toppinen (2013), Schroeder (2013), Laskowski (2015), Hernandez & Laskowski (2021).

²³ The term has unfortunately many uses (e.g. for information-relativity); mine follows Nietzsche's original coinage.

²⁴ This invokes *end/rule-relational* semantics (Finlay (2014), Finlay & Plunkett (2018)). Perspectivists could also recognize as (more parochially) "Normative" any thoughts involving nonrelational ("thick") concepts, such as *brave*, *south-facing* etc., where similarly perspective-connected; e.g. Väyrynen (2013). What makes end/rule-relational terms ubiquitously "Normative" is that they connect with any motivated perspective whatsoever.

going to avoid a fine then I necessarily wear a mask.’ When trying to avoid inflicting harm or getting a fine, these are just the kinds of belief that function essentially to guide deliberation.

Significantly, if this is correct then we can expect the two dimensions sometimes to intersect in different ways, or come apart altogether. One can think or speak from a motivated perspective (a desire for some end, or a commitment to some principle) in ways other than making or expressing judgments about how things stand in relation 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.

According to perspectivism, our mundane, “merely formally normative” thoughts have exactly the same kinds of contents as special Normative thoughts. 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 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.²⁵ But there is nothing relevantly *special* about formal normativity, which is equally the content of uncontroversially mundane thoughts. Propositions about which actions promote particular ends or conform to particular rules are only significant from a perspective of concern for those ends or acceptance of those rules. What relevantly distinguishes (Normative) Moral judgments from (merely formally normative) mafia rules judgments is just that we are partisans of Morality but not of *la cosa nostra*.²⁶

This provides a principled explanation for the systematic and inescapable ambiguity observed above in normative terms: *any* term one might privilege as special will inevitably already have or soon acquire a mundane use. Any possible content of a paradigmatically special thought can also be the content of a formally normative thought, making transitions between special and mundane unpreventable. For every Normative thought concerning what is Valuable, Justified, a Reason, or Important, there is a corresponding disinterested, merely formally normative thought about what is valuable, justified, a reason, or important in an explicitly qualified or relativized way.

What pertinently distinguishes perspectivism from a merely hybrid view, however, are the implications it draws for how we classify thoughts as special or “Normative”. The one-dimensionalist assumption shared by noncognitivism, subjectivism, and objectivism posits the existence of a single special characteristic (whether of the contents or of the mental states themselves) sufficient to distinguish the special from the mundane, and account for its features. It is to this supposed distinguishing characteristic which ‘Normativity’ (or other favored term du jour) is then taken to refer, and metaethicists generally assume themselves to be speaking univocally and engaging in substantive disagreement about the nature of a common subject-matter. A hybrid theory simply identifies this supposed characteristic as rather a conjunction of a content and a motivated stance.

²⁵ On these grounds I’ve previously claimed to have *reductively analyzed* “normativity”, e.g. Finlay (2014).

²⁶ 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.

By contrast, perspectivism denies the existence of any such characteristic, finding rather that classification of a thought as special (“Normative”) is itself a matter of perspective. Once we distinguish motivated perspective and content as two separate dimensions there isn’t just one way of selecting a perspective to privilege when classifying thoughts as relevantly special, but as I’ll explain below, (at least) three different ways, which correspond to noncognitivism, subjectivism, and objectivism. This means there are no less than three different ways to pick out a supposed property of “Normativity”.²⁷ Perspectivism is therefore not a rival, hybrid theory of Normativity. Instead it fragments the metaethical landscape, problematizing any identification of “Normativity” and the claim to a univocal debate.

Perspectivism predicts and explains the futility of metaethical debate between noncognitivism, subjectivism, and objectivism as the inevitable consequence of the impossibility of capturing this two-dimensional character with the resources of a single dimension. As an analogy, consider the cartographical challenges of flattening the three-dimensional globe into two dimensions. There are different ways of going about this, yielding alternative flattenings or “projections”.²⁸ These may variously preserve—to some degree and within some range—particular geographical properties such as area, shape, distance, or direction. But no single projection can preserve all these properties, making distortion unavoidable. Flattening the metaethical domain has analogous consequences.

First, each camp ends up using the same term ‘Normativity’ (etc.) 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. There isn’t just one thing for “Normativity” to be, but three different things, depending on how you attempt to collapse the 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.

Second, each camp’s claims will be irremediably flawed—even given its own parochial concept of “Normativity”—due to the impossibility of capturing an n -dimensional phenomenon in an $n-1$ -dimensional model without distortion. These distortions prevent each camp from being able to develop a fully adequate theory, emboldening its rivals and leaving metaethics in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction.

²⁷ Parfit (2011) draws a similar four-way distinction. Finlay (2019) proposes 16+ alternative definitions for ‘normativity’.

²⁸ See e.g. <https://www.axismaps.com/guide/map-projections>

Figure 1 provides a first-pass depiction of this fragmentation. It represents the space (not to scale) of thoughts (utterances, etc.) potentially classifiable as “Normative”. The small circles represent the diverging amenity of these thoughts to being so-classified by noncognitivist, subjectivist, and objectivist theories (which of course disagree over their interpretation). For orientation, the uncontroversial deliberative paradigms of special Normative thoughts are in §1, while the uncontroversially mundane (“merely formal”) are in §9.²⁹

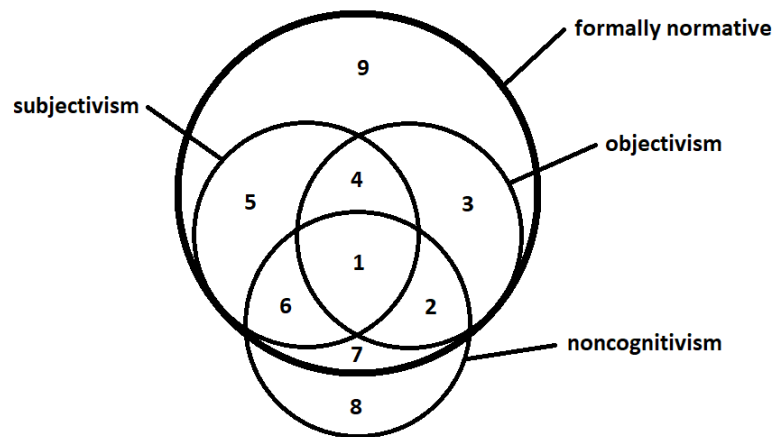


Fig. 1. Which thoughts etc. are “Normative”? - First Pass

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 *judge*, or thinker of the thought; (ii) the *subject*, or agent/person the thought is about (if any)³⁰; 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 noncognitivism, subjectivism, and objectivism.³¹

²⁹ Illustrations of other sectors: §2 Engaged “categorical” 2nd/3rd-person moral and legal judgments: “You Oughtn’t hurt others, whatever you desire”; §3 Amoralist/disengaged categorical moral judgments: “I don’t care if it’s Wrong”; §4 Perversely (i.e. theorist-alienating) hostile prudential judgments; e.g. (gleefully) “To escape me, you Had to choose the other option!”; §5 Disengaged perverse instrumental judgments: “Alas, he has no Reason now to spare the witnesses”; §6 Perverse instrumental exhortations: “Who cares if it’s immoral, you Should do whatever pleases you!” (“Evil, be thou my Good!”); §7 Engaged categorical applications of perverse rules: “Slaves Must obey our commands!” §8 Engaged thoughts/utterances without end/rule-relative content; e.g. imperatives, slurs, emotives, arbitrary policies, brute decisions; §9 Disengaged thoughts of merely formal legality (law, games, etiquette).

³⁰ This option disfavors classifying the “merely evaluative” as “Normative”.

³¹ 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).

This fragmentation is concealed from our view by a narrow focus on the paradigmatic and uncontroversial cases of Normative thought (§1) such as deliberative judgments (*I Ought to φ*). In these cases the different concepts of “Normativity” converge extensionally, due to the coincidence of the motivated perspectives of judge and subject (being the same person at the same time) and theorist (due to our sympathetically adopting the judge/subject’s perspective). When we expand our view, to include for example second- and third-person judgments (*You/She Ought to φ*) and diachronic judgments (*I Ought at that time to have φ -ed*), we encounter cases where the perspectives of judge, subject, and theorist diverge. Here attributions of “Normativity” become controversial, as in Figure 1 and now in higher resolution:

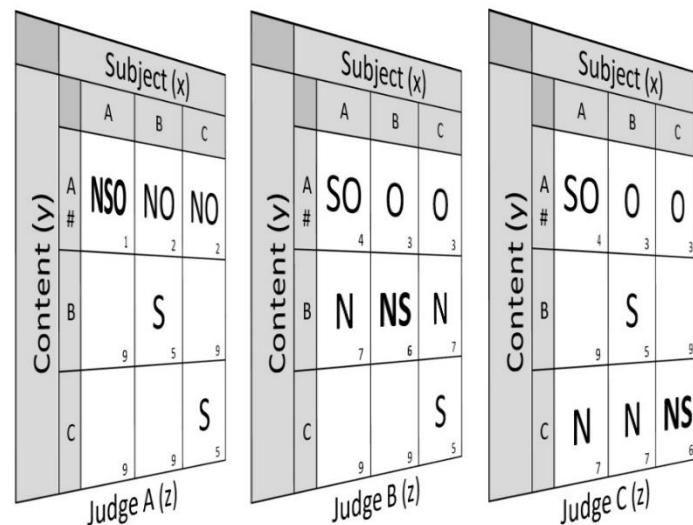


Fig. 2. Which thoughts etc. are “Normative”? - Second Pass

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’).³² ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’ label different ends or rules. 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 end A*, for example, or *what conforms with rule A*. 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 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 here stipulated to share the motivated perspective of Judge A but not of Judges B or C (marked “#” on the y-axis).

This diagram helps to 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

³² i.e. corresponding to Figure 1’s three small circles excluding §8. Sector numbering corresponds to Figure 1.

profile (N-Normativity) due to being made from an engaged, motivated perspective. Noncognitivist 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” (Figure 2’s bolded 3D diagonal/ §1 in Figure 1)³³, as we move away from these paradigms they will be under pressure to classify cases divergently.

Noncognitivists will struggle to accommodate—or will 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. 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, §8), involving a motivated perspective without end/rule-relative content—potentially including imperatives (*Stay off the grass!*), emotive language, pejoratives and expletives (‘bastard’, ‘Fuck!’), arbitrary policies (*Always call heads*) and resolutions (*I shall φ*).

N-Normativity is undoubtedly a genuine (kind of) of psychological property 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.³⁴ 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’ concepts of “Normativity”. Opponents thus complain that “there is something *better* for Normativity to be.”³⁵

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, and aim 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).

³³ See note 41 on ‘O’'s divergence from ‘NS’ on this diagonal.

³⁴ Due perhaps to the implausibility of any kind of fact having a sufficiently universal tie to motivation (Gibbard (1990: 32), Blackburn (1998: 70)).

³⁵ Parfit (2011). See Finlay (2014: ch.5) for discussion; ‘guidance’ is itself multiply ambiguous.

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/agent's motivations (desires or will). When you settle your deliberation over what to do by judging that you Ought now to ϕ , 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 broadly instrumental 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".³⁶

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). Particularly salient here is categorical moral condemnation; e.g. a judgment that *Hitler ought to have refrained from genocide, regardless of his own ends*.³⁷

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.³⁸

S-Normativity is also a (kind of) of real relation, 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 judges' and 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 the formal and

³⁶ E.g. Schroeder's (2007: 1) reasoning from the contrast between Ronnie (who likes dancing) and Bradley (who doesn't) to subjectivism.

³⁷ Some subjectivists bite this bullet, denying this is a Normative 'ought' (e.g. Harman (1975), Williams (1979)) while others try to evade it (e.g. Schroeder (2007: 103f)). Prudential analogs involve a subject changing perspectives over time, e.g. Parfit's "future Tuesday indifference".

³⁸ E.g. Parfit (2011), Thomson (2008: ch. 9).

nonpsychological matter of 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.³⁹ For anyone but the most narcissistic, their deliberative judgment will be (e.g.) “In order to *save my child* I Must run into the burning building”, and not “In order to *satisfy my desire (to save my child)* I Must...”, or “In order to *act on a principle I am able to accept as law*, I Must...” 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.⁴⁰ A further consequence of this “psychologistic” error is that because characteristically 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’s “Normative” judgments regardless of their perspective (i.e. “open question” intuitions) tends to push objectivists—even if they resist—towards embrace of the “nonnaturalist” view that Normativity is a *sui generis*, unanalyzable part of reality detected by direct intuition.

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* (themselves), while being insensitive to the motivated perspective of either subject or judge. Whatever conforms to their (unalienated or nonconflicted) desires or will they’ll classify as “objectively Good”, and whatever conflicts with it 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.⁴¹

³⁹ Pettit & Smith (1990).

⁴⁰ E.g. Parfit (2011), Hieronymi (2021). For subjectivist defenses, see Smith (1994: 153-4), Schroeder (2007: ch.2).

⁴¹ 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 (e.g. Parfit (2011)), *or* (ii) as mistaken Normative thoughts (e.g. Enoch (2011)). In Figure 2 ‘O’ only tracks choice (i); choice (ii) coincides rather with ‘N’—making the bolded diagonal relatively uncontroversial. Correlatively, a morally-concerned objectivist may classify amoralists’ disengaged “moral judgments” as Normative but alienated (following ‘O’), or as non-Normative (following ‘N’).

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.⁴² 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 radical 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? Rather than providing a competing theory of Normativity, it finds 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) is merely the intersection of three different ways of classifying thoughts and utterances as interestingly special. There is no objectively Wrong or Right choice whether to privilege 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 Should we do? One may challenge whether a perspectivist can even ask such a question coherently. While perspectivists cannot consistently opine or wonder about what the *objectively* Best thing to do is, we can certainly raise practical questions and make recommendations from particular standpoints we occupy. This article assumes the intellectual or philosophical end of collective understanding 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 in a Nietzschean spirit "will the eternal recurrence" in metaethical debate.

Given this essay's 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

⁴² Don't objectivists' judgments involve objectivist concepts (Dowell (2020))? I consider objectivism rather a mistaken *theory about* a shared kind of thoughts (Finlay (2020)).

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 treatment 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. More carefully, while all camps 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 can be fully accommodated with the perspectivist’s resources, I contend,⁴³ so that objectivism may often stem from an innocent failure of imagination. But objectivism is often 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 an ubiquitous kind of illusion: the familiar charge of antirealists in every era that we “project” into the external world something internal or subjective. Mackie writes in 1977 of our tendency “to objectify concerns and purposes...giving them a fictitious external authority”, George Santayana in 1911 of “human ideals that have been projected into the empyrean”. In the previous century, Nietzsche wrote, “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...!”⁴⁴ Another century prior, Hume wrote about our tastes “gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment,”⁴⁵ and of the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects”⁴⁶.

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.⁴⁷ Consider visual afterimages following a laser hitting the retina; a naïve 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

⁴³ E.g. Finlay (2008), (2014). The hardest challenge (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.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche (1882).

⁴⁵ Hume (1751).

⁴⁶ Hume (1739).

⁴⁷ For rival, evolutionary explanations see Joyce (2006), Street (2016).

schema of such posits 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 experientially variable is more salient (as foreground) than the comparatively constant (as background/ acclimatization).

This schema 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 verbally or mentally 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*.⁴⁸ No such feature exists, 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.⁴⁹ This conception provides only a higher-order description of a property, one which fails to denote anything. So 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.⁵⁰

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 the illusion of things seeming a certain way is importantly distinct from the *delusion* of believing they are so.⁵¹ 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. Applying the same standards supports the same rejection of objectivist intuitions, whose supposed property finds no independent support outside these seemings.

⁴⁸ 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).

⁴⁹ Cf. Hume on “calm passions” mistaken for “reason”.

⁵⁰ This stymies any argument from conceivability to metaphysical possibility to epistemically possible actuality, which falls at the first hurdle: there is nothing conceivable here.

⁵¹ This echoes error theorists (e.g. Joyce (2009: 58-9), Olson (2014: 7)), but without attributing any delusion to ordinary, first-order normative thought, following rather Nietzsche’s attribution to “we contemplative ones” (1882, §301).

Perspectivism satisfactorily explains everything about our “Normative” thoughts,⁵² while the posit of O-Normativity fails to explain anything, including the objectivist’s intuitions themselves.

How then can we explain the objectivist delusion’s hold over so many philosophers? Objectivists often assign these independently unverified intuitions a strikingly robust authority—sometimes even insisting they are unchallengeable and necessarily have the “last word”.⁵³ 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 delusion’s grip 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 strongly attached to objectivism, wishing for their own Normative beliefs and claims to be cognitions and assertions of facts that Matter perspective-independently. (Acknowledging 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.⁵⁴) As is well-known, motivated reasoning shifts our thresholds for proof so that *any* favorable pseudo-evidence becomes regarded as sufficient for accepting a hypothesis, while the burden for unfavorable evidence is set unattainably high. The projective illusion provides this motivational bias all the ostensible justification it demands, and their combination poses a formidable obstacle to progress.

Here one may protest that a philosopher’s motives are nobody else’s business, and anyhow impossible to discriminate confidently. But objectivists have not uncommonly declared such motives in the apparent hope of thereby rallying others to their cause, making those motives fair game. The many possible grounds of “fear of relativism”⁵⁵ include: thinking that without objectivity we can’t take morality seriously and are forced to tolerate the Intolerable,⁵⁶ wanting a guaranteed rational path to moral persuasion of aggressors,⁵⁷ 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. It has been argued we even have a moral or prudential *obligation* to be objectivist

⁵² Opponents may challenge perspectivism’s ability to accommodate phenomena such as disagreement, uncertainty, akrasia, and more. These are important disputes.

⁵³ E.g. Nagel (1997), Huemer (2005).

⁵⁴ 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 (1927: 238)). Parfit (2011) argues extensively against noncognitivism and subjectivism but never considers perspectivism.

⁵⁵ Cf. Scanlon (1995).

⁵⁶ E.g. Joyce (2011), Enoch (2011).

⁵⁷ Cf. Williams (1985).

realists (to be “warm in the cause of Virtue”),⁵⁸ so some may publicly espouse objectivist realism without privately believing it. 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 values...would tend to render people more truly social than would a belief that things have intrinsic and unchangeable values.”⁵⁹

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? Again, my perspective here aims at the intellectual ends of shared understanding, as a philosophically kosher, nonideological kind of motivated reasoning, and I endorse Santayana’s sentiment that “there is no room in philosophy for the shouting Moralists”—while conceding that some things Matter more than philosophy.⁶⁰ We all have “non-intellectual” motives, of course, such as ego, career, and attachment to a favorite theory. But these don’t have to dictate our philosophical views, and we expect good-faith philosophical inquiry to leave them at the door.

Acknowledging it an empirical question (and that I might be self-oblivious), my impression is that ideologically-motivated reasoning is disproportionately found among objectivists. Generally it is 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 doctrine against refutation. Objectivism, particularly in nonnaturalistic realist forms, is thus noted to have close affinities with religious faith.⁶¹ 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 mysteriously supposed beyond challenge?

Philosophers in other camps do not seem similarly driven by “non-intellectual” motives, so far as I can discern. Contra the suggestion (for example) that rejection of O-Normativity may be motivated by a wish to escape moral obligations, contemporary noncognitivists and subjectivists seem more concerned to insist their theories don’t diminish morality’s scope or Importance, 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, or fit into a more general understanding of the world, than by worry of the practical consequences of rejecting subjectivism or noncognitivism.

⁵⁸ E.g. Kramer (2009), Isserow & Elliott (2021).

⁵⁹ Santayana (1911: 430); see also Foot (1972).

⁶⁰ Like Santayana, I pursue enlightenment partly from optimism it better promotes harmony and respect.

⁶¹ E.g. Santayana (1911), Street (2016), Killoren (2016). Plato’s treatment of the Form of the Good is archetypical.

C. Charity

One might complain that 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 (and philosophy generally seems in need of more, not less), I reluctantly have to call out charity itself of various forms—as a tendency to assume the best of others—as here a third obstacle to enlightenment. While we've so far 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. Perhaps straining my allegory, it is charity towards the deluded that keeps the more enlightened in Samsara.

One form of charity concerns *reference*: the naïve assumption that when others use words (nouns, adjectives) they succeed in talking about something. This leads us to interpret others as thinking and talking about whatever seems by our lights the most suitable referents for their terms, even when we have grounds to suspect error, incoherence, or reference-failure.⁶² 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.⁶³

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 on 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 fortifying and spreading their faith than in attaining metaethical truth and understanding—entangling us in unwinnable battles rather than simply taking our ball and going home.

A third form of charity concerns *truth*: our tendency to trust others' reliability and to interpret them however we think best secures their statements' accuracy. These three forms of charity combine for unfortunate epistemological effects. As expert opinion and peer disagreement commonly provide evidence of what is true, the prevalence of objectivism among ethicists and metaethicists is liable to lend it authority, and lower our confidence in contrary insights and understanding—especially since those holding metaethical views on faith will tend to project the highest levels of confidence.⁶⁴ 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

⁶² Cf. Harman (1996). This impulse is plausibly to blame for the idea of reference-magnetism, which invites ignoring differences in speakers' intentions and trusting the world will sort out our mess for us.

⁶³ Cf. Bedke's (2019) case for subjectivism about "oomph".

⁶⁴ 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%.

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.⁶⁵

If metaethics is to overcome the obstacles to enlightenment we may need to become a bit less indiscriminate with our charity: less ready to assume others are using their terms coherently, successfully, and with the same meanings we do, less trusting that their positions are motivated intellectually 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 of his past lives. Awareness of the lack of genuine metaethical progress and our repetition of past moves is similarly hampered by the unfortunately short memory of academic philosophy.⁶⁶

For various reasons—including professional pressures and, ironically, belief that philosophy is progressing like science—most writers today rarely bother to read much philosophy written more than a decade or two ago, leaving us ill-equipped to recognize how the contemporary debate replicates the past. Indeed key points of this essay itself aren't particularly original and have been made to some approximation many times before. (Hopefully I 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,⁶⁷ Santayana in the 1910s, and especially Nietzsche in the 1880s—to whose slogan "Beyond Good and Evil" this essay's 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.⁶⁸ 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 a hard-won appreciation of its ambiguities, limitations and perils, and becoming accustomed to challenging careless uses with a demand for disambiguation: "Do you mean that formally, noncognitively, subjectively, objectively, or ...?"

⁶⁵ Metaethicists' largest divergence from philosophers generally on the 2020 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.

⁶⁶ "When we occasionally catch [metaethical knowledge]...we always forget it again immediately": Nietzsche (1882, §301).

⁶⁷ Anscombe (1958: 3-9).

⁶⁸ E.g. Hieronymi (2021), Dannenberg (2023).

To attempt a nuanced appraisal in conclusion: 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 crosscutting 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 suggest we retain it, as a useful even if dangerously polysemous term of philosophical art. Love the one you’re with!⁶⁹

⁶⁹ I owe thanks to many, including OUP referees, Simon Kirchin, Hille Paakkunainen, Robert Audi, Sam Baron, David Clark, Jorah Dannenberg, David Enoch, Nick Laskowski, Matt Lutz, Laura and François Schroeter, Ellis Wong, participants in a Spring 2021 USC graduate seminar, and audiences at department and conference talks at Seoul National U., Lingnan/HKU/NUS, ANU, Dianioia/ACU, Syracuse U., Frankfurt School, U. Notre Dame, U. Tampere, and the 2023 AAP Conference. Sincere apologies to all whose generous advice I haven’t heeded, or whose relevant work I haven’t engaged or acknowledged.

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