Beyond Normativity: Can Metaethics Escape Samsara's Wheel?

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What is the future of normativity? What should the future of normativity be? My answers depend on whether these questions are read narrowly or broadly. The narrow reading concerns inquiry under the rubric 'normativity', a busy but recent industry. Call this *meta-'normative' theory*: my tentative prediction is that it is a passing fad due to fade away, and my prescription will be (with a caveat) that it should. Inquiry into normativity read broadly is however a central thread in human philosophical thought, pursued under many rubrics such as 'the good', 'value', 'obligation', 'ought', 'justification', 'reasons', 'rationality', 'Wert', 'Dao'. I'll call this *metaethics*.[1] Metaethics mightn't be disappearing anytime soon, but I think it is stuck in a rut, making no genuine progress. It purports to be a search for truth akin to a science with similarly legitimate methods, but this claim has no credibility if decade after decade—or century—it keeps cycling through the same debates, resolving nothing. This essay sketches two possible futures: a Bad Future where the same disputes and moves are recycled in new clothing, and a Good Future where we finally put these particular disputes behind us—whether this means metaethics moving on, or us moving past metaethics.

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

A full explanation of this analogy needs two things. First, a cause for "Death": why does each epicycle degrade and expire? My answer here will be *systematic ambiguity*, due to the under appreciated two-dimensional character of the uncontroversial paradigms of normative thought. Second, a cause for "Rebirth": why does a new epicycle emerge from the ashes? My answer here will appeal to a combination of four factors: illusion, attachment, charity, and forgetfulness.

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[1] An older use not limited to study of morality proper; an alternative label is *metanormative theory*.

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

To illuminate the cycle of futility I'll begin by examining the progression of its current epicycle. The adjective 'normative' and its nominalization 'normativity' came into metaethical vogue around the 1980s and 1990s, largely displacing discussion earlier conducted under rubrics such as 'value,' 'justification,' 'ought', 'obligation', 'rationality', and 'reasons'. This was partly in response, I believe, to a growing dissatisfaction with the older terminology as harboring an ambiguity that prevented clear discrimination of the intended subject-matter.[3]

This dissatisfaction is salient in some classic papers of the 1970s. For example, Philippa Foot (1972) observed that deontic terms like 'ought' and 'must' fail to isolate the special feature of interest to moral philosophers—evocatively labeled the *fugitive thought*—since there are also "mundane" or "trivial" oughts of etiquette and club rules, etc. which lack it. J. L. Mackie (1977) observed that while there is a mundane use of many terms like 'valuable' and 'good' signifying "answering to interests" or meeting some arbitrary or institutional standards, this isn't the (inchoate and "queer") use of interest to moral philosophers. And whereas Foot seemed comfortable differentiating the special use of 'ought' as *reason-giving*—still a popular choice—Bernard Williams (1979) distinguished between two different (normative) uses of 'reason': an "internal" use he accepted as ordinary and legitimate, and an "external" use he attributed to moral philosophers and found to be either "bluff" or "not clearly expressed".[4]

Notwithstanding differences, each writer addresses some term(s) commonly taken to express a special feature of interest to philosophers and observes an ordinary use lacking that feature, challenging the term's ability to isolate it (and also whether a coherent conception is even possible.)[5] As Christine Korsgaard later puts it (1996: 44), different writers make "different assumptions about which is the normatively loaded word"—showing that for her, the loaded word has become 'normative' itself.

This terminological slipperiness has played a major role in metaethicists' adoption of 'normative' as a term distinguishing the special oughts, value, reasons, etc. from the mundane ones. But ironically, 'normative' itself is now widely recognized to harbor this same ambiguity,[7] as succinctly expressed by John Broome:

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

Although writers often suggest just two relevant kinds of use—distinguished in various ways, like "robust", "genuine", "authoritative" on one hand, versus "formal", "pseudo", "institutional", "trivial"

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[3] I mean only that *sentences* with these words have different signification on different occasions of use (different *uses*). This doesn't entail semantic ambiguity of the words themselves (different *senses*), given contextualist treatments of lexical meaning and pragmatic enrichment. While I've elsewhere (e.g. 2014) defended unifying semantics for ordinary words like 'good', 'ought', and 'reason', I think unifying the term of art 'normativity' is impossible (2019).

[4] Also Mackie 1977: 78f and Foot 1972: 309n ("to say that moral considerations are *called* reasons is blatantly to ignore the problem"). Williams' primary target is apparently Nagel 1970, which itself drew a distinction in "reasons for action"—the cause of much confusion in the 1960s—between *justifying* and *explanatory* reasons.

[5] Roughly parallel stories can be told for other terms like 'rational' and 'authority'.

on the other—I'll distinguish four major kinds, using "mundane" as a catch-all contrasting with "special".[8]

This pesky ambiguity is what I anticipate killing off meta-'normative' theory, as increasingly more writers abandon the term 'normative' and elevate a new favored term or terms in its place. The power-struggle over the next regime is underway, and it is diverting but probably fruitless to speculate about which pretender will emerge victorious—or if we're entering a "warring states" period with no hegemonic rubric. Each of the "X-first" camps provides a candidate, for example. Reasons-firsters often suggest that the relevant use of 'normative' can be isolated in terms of *reasons*—nevermind the role ambiguity in 'reasons' played ushering in the "normativity" epicycle— while some new kids on the block, fittingness-firsters, have recently made competing claims for the notion of *fit*. Favor has also been shown towards *mattering*, *importance*, *authority*, *rationality, correctness, guidance, choiceworthiness*… but the options are endless.[9]

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

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

> The first thing that strikes one about all these expressions is that each of them is actually used in two very different senses…the trivial or relative sense on the one hand and the ethical or absolute sense on the other…. Used in [the trivial] way these expressions don't present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how Ethics uses them.[11]

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

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

term could be the metaethical Holy Grail, referring unambiguously to whatever is special, enabling us finally to express the fugitive thought and clearly distinguish the special from the mundane.

This provokes a critical response (Stage Three), in which yet others (insurgents) observe that these terms also can be and are used in mundane ways. One might observe an instrumental use of 'fitting', where an attitude is deemed "fitting" towards an object in case it promotes the subject's goals, or a purely formal use where an attitude is judged to "fit" its object although there is no *reason* (insert loaded term) for having that attitude. Perhaps a joke is witty making amusement "fitting", while also offensive making amusement *wrong*. Anger or envy might be a "fitting" response in the sense that the object is outrageous or enviable, although being angry or envious is still *wrong* because *unvirtuous*.[12] One 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 the legal status of their actions—without *mattering*, since the end or rule itself doesn't *matter*.[13]

Fundamentalists will deny that these are legitimate uses of their favored term, but over time the counterexamples will become entrenched and familiar, and eventually (Stage Four) a critical mass of writers will get fed up with always having to qualify (what *really* matters, what is fitting in the *robust* sense, etc.), and of the intractable debates over the term. The next wave of pioneers will discover another term seemingly without the same baggage, and the fundamentalist crowd will jump on this new bandwagon, leaving behind only a few nostalgic diehards.

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. Different normative terms have different shades of meaning, and so there are genuine shifts in emphasis between a focus on *value*, or *obligation*, or *rationality*… In the case of *normativity*, conceived as a shared *property of* oughts, value, obligations, reasons, etc., there is more explicit emphasis on the higher order.[14] But this change is less significant than it may seem. Earlier epicycles were similarly interested in what was special about thoughts about oughts, obligations, reasons, etc., fixing on particular terms as representative of the class. The same fundamental issues arise at both levels, as we'll see. I also believe metaethical writing on "normativity" frequently conflates the supposed higher-order property of normativity (being normative) with the lower-order or substantive properties, relations, etc. that are normative ("the normative"), and in practice the latter receives almost all the attention as in previous epicycles.[15] Finally, efforts to define the special sense of 'normative' frequently reach back down for lower order terms like 'ought' and 'reason', revealing the ultimate futility of the appeal to the higher order.

What can be done? Some dismiss the significance of natural language, denying philosophy need be constrained by what words normally mean. One gambit is to stipulate one's intended use of an ordinary term.[16] But clear stipulation is itself difficult if not impossible without *any* language that already isolates the intended meaning—consider Broome's reliance on his readers' "knowing it when they meet it"—which does nothing to address skepticism, like that expressed by Foot, Mackie

and "the good") in the text said to have launched contemporary metaethics. See Finlay 2019: 200f. [16] E.g. Moore 1903, Parfit 2011.

and Williams, about whether there even is a coherent thought here. Additionally, writers and readers alike seem to struggle to detach familiar words from their ordinary meanings and uses despite stipulative declarations, and these associations may provide an illicit, unearned feeling of familiarity and understanding.

Another gambit is to introduce a new technical term (e.g. 'oomph')[17] stipulated to have exclusively the special use, in the hope of avoiding altogether the baggage of ordinary meanings. But this doesn't escape the challenge of making clear stipulations in the absence of an existing vocabulary; those adopting this path have often been skeptics about whether the special use is coherent or refers to anything—perhaps because without the reassuring familiarity of an ordinary word it's too hard to sustain the illusion that we understand what we're talking about.

Instead of trying to get around the terminological obstacles and dismissing the mundane uses as irrelevant, I recommend rather stepping back to consider *why* normative vocabulary might be so systematically ambiguous. The existence of some underlying connection between the different uses is beyond reasonable doubt: my diagnosis will identify the mundane uses as basic and the special uses as derivative.[18]

2. Of the Origin of Futility: a perspectivist diagnosis

The origin of the confounding ambiguities threatening metaethical debates with futility, I'll now suggest, is a largely unrecognized complexity in their subject-matter. This diagnosis is opinionated and controversial. I've argued for its truth elsewhere,[19] and will here focus instead on tracing its implications for progress in metaethics.

It's fairly uncontroversial that metaethicists of all stripes are united by interest in a special kind of thought. The central paradigms include present-tense, first-personal, *deliberative judgments* such as *I ought to φ*, which settle a process of practical deliberation and yield an intention or action. But everyone also agrees that these deliberative judgments don't exhaust the class of similarly special thoughts, which may include thoughts about past and future actions, the conduct of other agents, aesthetic and doxastic matters, object or character evaluations, and more. The same kind of specialness may also extend from thoughts to their parts (e.g. concepts), and to speech and language as their expressive vehicles.[20] I'll adopt a convention of capitalizing special uses of terms—and my mentions of these uses—to distinguish from mundane uses, denoting this special class as *Normative* thoughts (Ought/Reasons/Value thoughts, etc.) I'll soon reject the assumption that all parties are concerned with the *same* class of "Normative" thoughts, and are drawing the same line between special and mundane—as emerges once we broaden our view beyond the uncontroversial paradigms—but it will briefly serve as a convenient fiction.

This shared assumption is where the agreement ends, however. Philosophers offer sharply different views of what it is to be a Normative thought (utterance, etc.), divisible for our purposes into three major camps. (Note: I take these to be theorists' competing *interpretations* of a universal and metaethically-innocent ordinary practice, not different concepts underlying a fragmented ordinary

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[17] Joyce 2006.

[18] Rival diagnoses include (1) that mundane normativity is "fool's gold", easily mistaken for the real thing, and (2) that mundane uses signify *purported* special normativity (Raz 1979, Wodak 2019). [19] Especially Finlay 2014.

[20] My earlier work focuses on language; here I follow Laskowski 2017 in prioritizing thought—although I'm disinclined to attribute "Normativity" at the (component/lexical) level of *concepts*.

practice.) A fundamental dispute is whether these are distinguished as a kind by their *content*, or the nature of what they are about—special Normative stuff (such as Value properties, Ought facts, relations of Rationality, entities like Reasons) sharing a special property of Normativity—or whether they are rather distinguished by their *functional psychological role*—typically, a motivational role connected to practical attitudes like desires, intentions, and emotions. I'll distinguish:

> *Cognitivism*: For a thought (etc.) to be Normative is for it to be about a certain special Normative subject-matter—facts, properties, etc. cognized as possessing a property of Normativity.

> *Noncognitivism*: For a thought (etc.) to be Normative is for it to have a certain special motivational role or profile in the thinker's[21] psychology.

For noncognitivists, Normativity is primarily a feature of thought and talk, and only derivatively if at all attributable to facts and properties. While a minority view within philosophy,[22] it seems almost universally assumed in talk about "normativity" by other humanists and scientists (e.g. in talk of "gender normativity")—who often see it as coercive ("heteronomous") and don't think noncompliance Matters/ is Irrational, etc. By contrast, for cognitivists the Normativity of facts and properties is primary, and thought or talk is relevantly "Normative" in a merely derivative sense of being about something Normative in the primary sense.[23]

This use of the labels 'cognitivism' and 'noncognitivism' requires a caveat. Here they mark a higher order distinction between views about *what makes a thought etc. Normative*, rather than the more familiar, lower-order distinction between views on *whether thoughts about Value, Reasons, Ought etc. have cognitive/descriptive content.* A theorist may give different answers to these questions. Today many "cognitivists" about the lower-order question, who ascribe descriptive contents to Normative thoughts, nonetheless endorse or simply assume noncognitivism about the higher-order question, classifying thoughts etc. as "Normative" purely on the basis of their noncognitive psychological profile ("Normative role").[24] This also applies to most so-called "hybrid" theorists, who combine cognitivist and noncognitivist elements at the lower order while being straight noncognitivists about their Normativity. Note that despite what the labels may suggest, noncognitivism isn't defined here as the negation of cognitivism but as a rival positive theory, allowing for a hybrid approach.

This terminological choice may therefore seem unwise,[26] but crucially avoids obscuring my point that the same issues arise at both levels, and that the "new" dispute under the "Normativity" rubric is fundamentally just the rebirth of the old issue in the current epicycle. To see this it's necessary to recognize that any plausible form of cognitivism about the Normativity of thought must invoke a thinker's *awareness* of the special feature, as somehow transparent in the thought. It is this intensional aspect that both allows a cognitivist to be a (higher-order) *error theorist* attributing Normative thoughts even in the (local or global) absence of any actual property of Normativity, and

[21] Noncognitivists focusing on talk rather than thought might instead invoke the motivational effect on an *audience*; e.g. Hare's prescriptivism (1952), Gibbard's "normative governance" (1990). For simplicity I'll treat this as a variant of a "thinker"/"judge".

[22] The 2020 PhilPapers.org survey (https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/5078) is vaguely suggestive, with only 15% of metaethicists (11% of all philosophers) favoring "expressivism" about "morality". [23] Thought/talk might also be "Normative" in the cognitivist's primary sense (e.g. debate over the "normativity of meaning"/ intentional states), but this is a separate issue.

[24] E.g. Eklund 2017, Schroeter & Schroeter ms.
[26] Laskowksi & Hernandez (2021) offer instead the labels 'metaphysicalism'/ 'anti-metaphysicalism', observing that the higher-order question has only recently drawn attention.

also saves us from implausibly classifying a thought as "Normative" merely because it is about something that *happens* to have such a property, unbeknownst to the subject—just as, at the lower level, it is implausible to classify something as a "Reason" judgment merely because it is about a fact that happens to be a Reason.

A second dispute further divides cognitivism into two camps. The basic question is whether the Normativity of the properties and facts that Normative thoughts or utterances are about is metaphysically prior to/ independent of the psychology (particularly, motivations) of the agents for whom they are Normative. I'll employ the following distinction:

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

> *Objectivism* (*Objectivist Cognitivism*): For a thought etc. to be Normative (either *per se* or for a subject/agent S) is for it to be about a special Normative subject-matter that isn't even in part the psychology/ motivations of *S*.[28]

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

Objectivists by contrast view relevant motivation as merely a (derivative, proximate) *consequence* of being sensitive to mind-independent Normativity. Although in principle a big tent, we'll see that objectivists face pressure towards a package of views on Normativity that includes *primitivism* (or nonnaturalism, quietism) about its metaphysics, *intuitionism* about its epistemology, and *motivational externalism* about its extension. In other words, Normativity is sui generis, cognizable apriori, and not contingent on agents' concerns. These pressures prompt some objectivists (error theorists) to deny Normativity exists. My impression is that objectivism is endorsed or assumed by the majority of philosophers working in metaethics, ethics, and other "normative" fields—who treat classification of facts and properties as "Normative" as a nonrelative matter.[29]

Even if not an exhaustive taxonomy, I think practically every theorist who commits, explicitly or implicitly, to a view about what it is to be "Normative" is either a noncognitivist, subjectivist, or objectivist.

These three camps share a crucial assumption. For all their differences, they all offer accounts of what it is to be Normative that are *one-dimensional*. A thought is Normative in case it is about

[28] The thought *I ought to be motivated to φ* doesn't entail subjectivist treatment in virtue of being about motivation; the issue is the *oughtness*.

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something with a particular property or relation (according to objectivists and subjectivists), or in case the thought itself involves having a particular kind of motivation (according to noncognitivists). It is this assumption that ensures futility, I'll suggest, because the key to explaining the systematic ambiguities plaguing metaethics is to recognize that what distinguishes the *paradigmatically and uncontroversially* Normative thoughts is a two-dimensional or hybrid matter of *both* being about a kind of descriptive content *and* also involving a motivated stance—a content and a motivation made special by their intrinsic connection to each other.

The two-dimensionalist view I favor is what I'll call *perspectivism*.[30] This construes the motivation as the *perspective* or standpoint from which these thoughts are made, and analyzes their descriptive contents as propositions intrinsically connected to that same motivated perspective—involving a relation between the object of evaluation, such as an action, person, state of affairs, etc., and the object of the motivation, such as a desired or intended end or outcome, or an accepted rule or principle. What thoughts of this special kind are about therefore varies according to the perspective from which they made—suggesting a contextualist semantics for the corresponding language. A deliberative judgment expressed as "I have to wear a mask" might for example be made from the motivated perspective of intending to minimize risk to others' health, and be more explicitly articulated as *If I am going to minimize risk to others' health then necessarily I wear a mask*. Or it could be made from the perspective of avoiding a fine, and then expressible as *If I am going to avoid a fine then necessarily I wear a mask*. A judgment expressed as "it would be best/I ought to wear a mask" may have variously the contents, *Wearing a mask maximizes the probability that I don't harm others' health/ that I don't incur a fine*.[31]

Equipped with this perspectivist understanding of paradigmatic and uncontroversial Normative thoughts we can begin to explain the ambiguity and futility of metaethical discourse as the inevitable consequence of failing to appreciate their two-dimensional character—assuming instead the existence of a single special characteristic, whether of the contents or of the mental states themselves, sufficient to distinguish them and account for their features. It is this supposed single characteristic to which 'Normativity' (or other term *du jour*) will be taken to refer. But if perspectivism is correct, then we may expect the two dimensions to sometimes fail to intersect in the relevant way—as we can indeed see they do once we look beyond the paradigmatic to the disputed cases. One can think or speak from a motivated perspective, such as a desire for some end or commitment to some principle, in ways other than making or expressing judgments about how things relate to those ends or principles—as when we merely emote, prescribe, or decide. And one can think or talk about how things relate to certain ends or principles in the absence of any motivation towards those ends or principles—as when we make disinterested "amoralist", instrumental or legal judgments.

30 This term has unfortunately many uses (e.g. for information-relativity, which I also accept), but mine is faithful to Nietzsche's original coinage. Two-dimensionalist views of thought's Normativity are also advanced by (e.g.) Toppinen 2013, Schroeder 2013, Laskowski 2015, Laskowski & Hernandez 2021. 31 This invokes the *end-relational* (and *rule-relational*; see Finlay & Plunkett 2019) semantics for thin normative terms advanced in Finlay 2014 as the compositional values suggested by the usage evidence across the broadest range of contexts, and also explaining their practical roles. If trying to avoid inflicting harm/ a fine, these are the right

kinds of beliefs to guide deliberation. Perspectivists could also liberally recognize as Normative any thoughts involving non-relational ("thick") concepts, such as *cruel*, *brave*, *South-facing* etc., where similarly perspective-connected (e.g. Väyrynen 2013). Whereas these could only be parochially Normative, the flexibility of end/rule-relational terms like *ought* and *good* suits them for special use from any perspective, providing a stronger (but still overreaching) claim to essential Normativity.

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Figure 1 below provides a first-pass depiction of this fragmentation. It represents the space of thoughts (concepts, utterances, etc.) that are potentially classified as "Normative"—along with the mundanely normative—and their diverging amenability to being so-classified for noncognitivist, subjectivist, and objectivist theories (the three intersecting circles)—which of course will differ in how they interpret these thoughts. For initial orientation, the uncontroversial (deliberative) paradigms of Normative thought lie in §1, while the uncontroversially mundane lie in §8.[32]
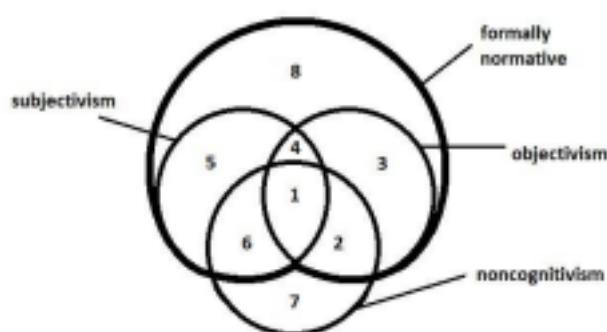

Fig. 1. Which thoughts (utterances, etc.) are "Normative"? (First Pass)

If we make the cognitivist's one-dimensionalist assumption and treat 'Normativity' (etc.) as referring to the common character of what all paradigmatically and uncontroversially Normative thoughts (§1) are about, then perspectivism finds nothing there except *formal* normativity—a relation to some standard—since these thoughts all have a formally normative (end/rule-relative) subject-matter. But there is nothing relevantly *special* about formal normativity, which is of course equally the subject matter of uncontroversially mundane thoughts (§8).[33] Propositions about which actions promote particular ends, or conform to particular rules (all except §7), are only significant from the point of view of concern for those ends or acceptance of those rules. What relevantly distinguishes my (Normative) Moral judgments from my (merely formally normative) mafia rules judgments is just that I am a partisan of Morality but not of *la cosa nostra*.[34]

It follows that *any* term a cognitivist might privilege as special inevitably either already has or soon acquires a mundane (formal) use. Any possible content of a paradigmatically special thought can also be the content of a mundanely normative thought, making conversion from special to mundane use or vice versa too natural to be preventable. For every Normative thought concerning what is Valuable, Justified, Ought to be done, a Reason, or Important, there is a corresponding non

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[32] Illustrations of other sectors: §2 Engaged "categorical" 2nd/3rd-person moral, prudential, legal judgments: "You oughtn't hurt others, whatever your desires"; §3 Disengaged categorical thoughts, like wondering what final ends one Ought to have [NB: perspectivism may struggle to identify *well-formed/coherent* thoughts in this space]; §4 Perverse, hostile prudential judgments; e.g. gleefully: "To evade my trap, you needed to choose differently!"; §5 Disengaged perverse instrumental judgments; "Alas, murderers may have no reasons to confess even if it spares the innocent from punishment"; §6 Amoral instrumental exhortations; "Who cares if it's "Wrong", you Should do whatever gives you pleasure!", "Evil, be thou my Good!"; §7 Engaged judgments (utterances, etc.) without end/rule-relative content; e.g. imperatives, slurs, emotive expressions, arbitrary

policies, brute decisions; §8 Disengaged non-instrumental thoughts; e.g. of formal legality (law, games, etiquette), amoralist judgments.

[33] Some (like Dowell 2016) are therefore unimpressed with my previous claims (e.g. Finlay 2010, 2014) to have reduced "normativity".

[34] Foot 1972: 315, Finlay 2006: 17f, Baker 2018. This allows for hope (shared by Hume and Kant) that we'll all emerge partisans of morality after confusions are dispelled.

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Normative thought about what is in some relativized or qualified way valuable, obligatory, justified, ought to be done, a reason, or important.

This doesn't yet explain the intractability of metaethical debate, since all three camps agree at least that they aren't talking about (uncontroversially mundane) "formal" normativity (§8). The further problem is that the two-dimensional character of the paradigmatically special thoughts (§1) cannot be adequately captured with the resources of a single dimension. As a metaphor, consider the cartographical challenges of flattening the three- (or n-) dimensional globe into two (n-1) dimensions.[35] There are different flattenings or projections that variously preserve (to some degree and within some range) geographical features of area, shape, distance, or direction, but no possible projections can preserve all these features, making distortion unavoidable.

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

Metaethicists arguing about 'Normativity' usually assume themselves to be speaking univocally and engaging in substantive disagreement about the nature of a common subject-matter. Rejecting this assumption may seem intemperate, but (from the perspectivist's point of view) it is hard to resist. This is because on the assumption of a single dimension there isn't just one kind of thing for "Normativity" to be, but rather three different kinds of 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*. As we'll see, these three forms of specialness don't only answer to different definitions, but they also have diverging extensions. So there isn't a single class of Normative thoughts (concepts, utterances, expressions, etc.) after all, but three different ways of defining special classes with only partial overlap, as represented by Figure 1's circles.

The fundamental question separating the three camps is: *whose* motivated perspective do you track when you classify a thought as relevantly special (as "Normative")? There are three options: you can track the motivated perspective of (i) the *subject*, or agent/person whom the thought is about (if any); of (ii) the *judge*, or thinker of the thought; or of (iii) the *theorist*, i.e. yourself, as the person classifying. These options yield the three different meanings and extensions for 'Normativity' corresponding respectively to subjectivism, noncognitivism, and objectivism.[36]

This fragmentation is obscured so long as we focus only on the paradigmatic and uncontroversial cases of Normative thought (§1) such as first-person, present-tense deliberative judgments like *I Ought to φ*, because in these cases the different conceptions of "Normativity" converge due to the coincidence of the motivated perspectives of subject and judge (being the same person at the same time) and theorist (due to selection of cases inviting sympathetic identification with the

subject/judge). But when we expand our view beyond these paradigms, to include for example

[35] See e.g. the overview at https://www.axismaps.com/guide/map-projections
[36] A potential *fourth* camp (call it *metanoncognitivism*) interprets 'Normative' (etc.) as itself noncognitive: classifying something as "Normative" is expressing your motivated stance. The metanoncognitivist's classifications will largely track the objectivist's (Gibbard 2003), but with a very different self-understanding.

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second- and third-person judgments (*You/She Ought to φ*) and diachronic judgments (*I Ought then to have φ-ed*), we encounter cases where the perspectives of subject, judge, and theorist don't coincide. Here attributions of "Normativity" become controversial, as in Fig. 1, and now in higher resolution, Fig. 2 below:
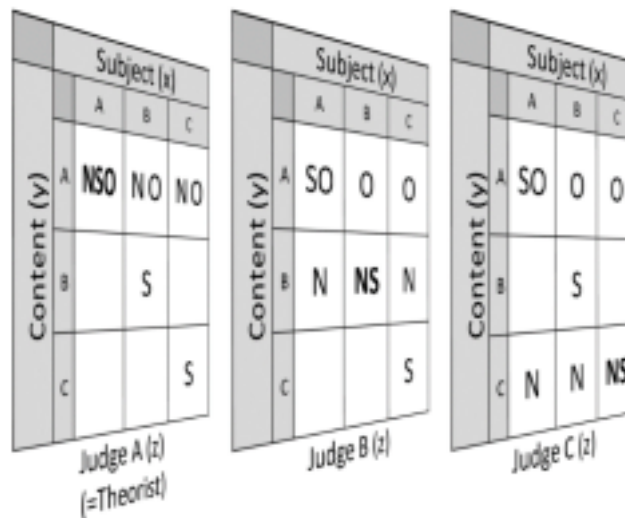

Fig. 2. Which thoughts (etc.) are "Normative"? (Second Pass)

This array represents the different attributions of "Normativity"/specialness to thoughts and utterances, etc., with (actually) formally normative content (i.e. excluding §7 from Fig. 1), from the points of view of noncognitivism ('N'), subjectivism ('S'), and objectivism ('O'), corresponding to the three circles in Fig. 1. 'A', 'B', and 'C' label different ends or rules. The Subject/*x*-axis tracks the motivated perspective of the subject/agent whose actions or choices (etc.) the thought is about. So "Subject A" is motivated towards/in accordance with end/rule A, but not end/rule B or C. The Content/*y*-axis tracks the end or rule that the thought is about. So "Content A" includes, for example, thoughts about what *ought to be done in order to achieve A*, or what is *consistent with A*. The Judge/*z*-axis tracks the motivated perspective of the judge (thinker, speaker), so "Judge A" is someone who is motivated towards/in accordance with 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"/"non-Normative" is stipulated to share the motivated perspective of Judge A, but not of Judge B or C.

This diagram helps us explain each camp's characteristic insights, oversights, and errors. *Noncognitivism's* basic insight is that paradigmatically "Normative" judgments differ from mundane descriptive, non-"Normative" judgments in having a special motivational profile (N-Normativity) due to being made from an engaged, motivated perspective. Noncognitivists' ascriptions of "Normativity" therefore follow the motivated perspective of the judge alone, insensitive to those of subject and theorist. While they will concur with their opponents in classifying deliberative judgments and their closest relatives as "Normative" (the bolded 3D diagonal[38] in Figure 2/ §1 in Figure 1), as we move away from these paradigms they will be under pressure to classify cases differently.

Noncognitivists will either struggle to accommodate or reject as not genuinely "Normative"—or possible—*non-judgmental* thoughts expressed with nonassertoric uses of "Normative" sentences: interrogative thoughts like *wondering* what Ought to be done, also *fearing*, *hoping*, *imagining* etc.

[38] Divergence of 'O' from 'NS' on this diagonal is a complication explained below in note 48.

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.[39] They'll deny there is a "Normative" subject-matter or that "Normativity" is a property of facts and properties (e.g. the contents of thoughts in Fig.1, §§3-5). Noncognitivists will also be under pressure—even if they resist—to ascribe "Normativity" in places others won't (Fig. 1, §7), featuring 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 decisions (*I shall φ*).

 N-Normativity is a genuine family of psychological properties of thoughts, utterances, etc. But in assimilating paradigmatically "Normative", deliberative judgments to the same general category as imperatives, pejoratives, and arbitrary decisions (Fig. 1, §7), noncognitivism overlooks that these judgments are interestingly special *in essential part* due to what they are about.[40] It therefore fails to accommodate one of the central desiderata for a satisfactory account of paradigmatically "Normative" thinking: that it seeks guidance of behavior by discovering truths of a special kind (that "tell us what to do"), rather than mere causation or influence ("making us do it")—a kind of guidance central to other theorists' conceptions of "Normativity".[41] Opponents thus complain that "there is something *better* for Normativity to be".[42]

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 paradigmatically "Normative" judgments have descriptive contents of a particular kind, aiming at an accurate grasp of facts that themselves serve to guide (derivative) motivation. Subjectivist ('S') and objectivist ('O') ascriptions of "Normativity" to thoughts are therefore insensitive to the motivated perspective of the judge/thinker (z-axis). However, they make the opposite error of overlooking the existence of a distinct perspective dimension as such, attempting to collapse the phenomenon of "Normative" thought into the content dimension alone. 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* (objectivist).

Subjectivism's distinctive insight is that an essential feature of the deliberative paradigms of Normative judgment is that they are about a content intrinsically connected to the subject's motivations (desires or will). When you judge that *you* Ought now to φ, thereby settling your
deliberation over what to do, the content of your judgment depends on your present motivated standpoint. The *truth-conditions* of these paradigmatic judgments can therefore be specified extensionally in terms of a relation between some choice or behavior (etc.) and the (basic) motivations of the subject, a kind of in-the-world relation (S-Normativity) that can also be found

[39] The fairness of this paragraph's objections for "hybrid" versions of noncognitivism is too complicated for a satisfactory treatment here. The closer to perspectivism, the less vulnerable a hybrid theory will be. [40] Possibly on the ground that there is no special kind of content with a sufficiently universal tie to motivation to be what all Normative judgments are about; e.g. Gibbard 1990: 32, Blackburn 1998: 70. [41] See e.g. Parfit 2011, Finlay 2014: ch.5 for discussion, and Finlay 2007 for a perspectivist analysis of guidance. Of course, 'guidance' itself is ambiguous between noncognitivist, objectivist, and subjectivist readings. [42] Parfit 2011.

between others' options and their motivations, a relation which the subjectivist therefore identifies as "Normativity".[43]

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 places subjectivists under pressure to diverge in idiosyncratic ways from other theorists in what they classify as "Normative". On one hand, subjectivists are committed— somewhat 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 perspective, if they don't similarly matter from the subject's perspective (Fig. 1, §§2, 3). Most prominent here is categorical moral condemnation; e.g a judgment that *Hitler ought to have refrained from genocide, regardless of his own ends*.[44] 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 (Fig. 1, §5); for example, a judgment that *Hitler had reasons to pursue genocide, given that it advanced his goals*—as utterly reprehensible as those goals may have been. As a result, both objectivists and noncognitivists sometimes deny that subjectivists could be talking about Normativity at all, since judging something to be S-Normative for some other subject S1 generally doesn't settle practical questions for the judge like whether to promote or pursue something or how to feel about it.[45]

S-Normativity is also a family of (in this case) real relations, in which subjects genuinely do stand to various behaviors, etc. But the subjectivist's 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 judgments. 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 are actually about. The extensional coincidence is due to the judge's motivated perspective selecting the end or rule that is the target of the subject's motivation in these paradigmatic cases. But what these judgments are about, perspectivism tells us, is how things stand in relation to those *ends* (outcomes) or *principles*, not the desiring or willing of them.

Deliberating agents think *from* their motivated perspectives, not *about* them. For anyone but the most narcissistic, their deliberative judgment will be (e.g.) *I Ought to run into the burning building in order to save my child*, rather than *I Ought to run into the building in order to satisfy my desire* (*to save my child*), or …*in order to act on a principle I can accept as law*. As subjectivism's opponents rightly complain, deliberative and other Normative thought isn't (usually) about the subject's motivations, or S-Normativity, even in part.[47] A further consequence of this "psychologistic" error is that because moral judgments evidently don't track S-Normativity, subjectivism either fails to

recognize, or else seriously distorts, the continuities between first-person, deliberative judgments and (e.g.) categorical moral judgments about others, or prudential judgments about one's past or

[43] For example Mark Schroeder's (2007: 1) reasoning from the contrast between Ronnie (who likes to dance) and Bradley (who doesn't) to a version of subjectivism.

[44] Some subjectivists bite this bullet, denying this is a Normative 'ought' (e.g. Harman 1975, Williams 1979) while others strive to dodge it (e.g. Schroeder 2007: 103f). Prudential analogs involve a subject changing perspective over time, e.g. Parfit's "Future Tuesday Indifference".

[45] E.g. Parfit 2011, Thomson 2008: ch. 9, [Gibbard 2003?].

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

future self—how they share the same kind of content and the same connection to the judge's perspective.

Objectivism's distinctive motivating insights are these points missed by noncognitivists and subjectivists: (i) that paradigmatically Normative thought aims at grasping the truth about a kind of subject-matter or fact with a guiding function of settling practical questions about what to do and think, etcetera—and (ii) that this thought isn't even partly about the subject's motivations or psychology. Recognition (with noncognitivists) of the implausibility of any ordinary, "natural" or empirical content sufficing to make a thought Normative, or being the common subject-matter of every person making Normative judgments regardless of their perspective (i.e. "open question" intuitions) tends to push objectivists towards embrace of the "nonnaturalist" view that Normativity is a sui generis, unanalyzable part of reality detected by direct intellectual 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 Normative content (sharing an objective property of O-Normativity), and mistaking their own motivations for a mere response to 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' in Fig. 2) will generally track the motivated perspective of the *theorist* (i.e. themselves), while being insensitive to the motivated perspective of either subject or judge.[48] That which conforms to their desires/will they'll classify as "objectively Good", and that which conflicts they'll classify as "objectively Bad", while others' diverging judgments will be interpreted as either factually mistaken attempts to grasp the same family of objective Normative truths, or as not Normative at all.[49]

Objectivism's way of flattening "Normative" thought necessitates many distortions, due to postulating as "Normativity"/the specialness of this thought a supposed property that doesn't even exist. In differentiating its content from that about "mere, formal" normativity it too errs about the subject-matter of that thought.[51] It also errs about 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 influence, and epistemology of "Normative" thought), objectivists are commonly left with a choice between embracing either brute mysteries and the impossibility of satisfactory explanations in metaethics, or extreme skepticism and error theory.

What are the upshots of this perspectivist diagnosis of the errors informing and following from the three one-dimensionalist metaethical camps? Taking perspectivism as a *rival theory of Normativity* entirely misses the point, which is rather that the noun 'normativity' and adjective 'normative'— along with any possible substitutes—are equivocal traps for superficial thinking, 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 (Fig 1, §1) here given a perspectivist analysis doesn't constitute a specially

[48] This oversimplifies. An objectivist classifying others' divergently engaged thoughts (e.g. Judge B's (mafioso's) thoughts about end/rule B (the mafia code)) can interpret these *either* (i) as non-Normative (even if deliberative) thoughts, *or* (ii) as mistaken Normative thoughts. In Fig. 2 'O' tracks choice (i); choice (ii) coincides rather with 'N'—making the bolded diagonal relatively uncontroversial territory. A morally-concerned objectivist may also classify an amoralist's disengaged "moral judgments" as Normative but alienated (following 'O'), or as non-Normative (following 'N').
[49] E.g. Parfit 2011.
[51] Don't objectivists' judgments involve *objectivist concepts* (Dowell 2020)? I consider objectivism rather a mistaken *theory about* a shared kind of thoughts (Finlay 2020).

significant division of nature at its joints, but merely the intersection of three different ways of dividing. There is no objectively Wrong or Right choice whether to focus on the perspective of subject, judge, or theorist/oneself: each is relevant for different purposes. If anything is specially significant about this intersection itself, it would be its role in fooling us into thinking there is a common subject-matter we all call 'Normativity'. So I will subsequently use the term mostly in scare quotes.

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

Getting practical, what do I recommend metaethics do? Or: what do I think we *Should* do? Some may challenge a perspectivist's ability even to ask this question coherently, but this is a question begging objection. A perspectivist cannot consistently wonder or opine about what the "*objectively* Right" response is, but can raise practical questions from particular perspectives. To be transparent, my question assumes the intellectual or philosophical ends of *shared metaethical knowledge and understanding* ("enlightenment"). Others might approach the issue with different priorities, and for them my recommendations may lack any (subjective and noncognitive) weight.[52]

Whereas full enlightenment would be a discourse-wide recognition of the two-dimensional, perspectival truth about "Normative" thought, for metaethics to escape the futile cycle and make genuine progress it may be enough for us to recognize how the two dimensions fragment the available interpretations of our favored terms like 'normativity' so that there is no unified subject matter. I'll end by discussing the path to this Good Future, and the obstacles metaethics has to overcome in order to reach this enlightenment rather than rebirth in the next epicycle.

For past and future failures to escape the cycle I blame a combination of four main factors: *illusion*, *attachment*, *charity*, and *forgetfulness*. My treatment of these will necessarily be programmatic, but also largely unoriginal, echoing particularly error theorists—except that my indictment isn't of ordinary (perspectival) "Normative" thought, but only of reflective/philosophical *interpretations or theories* of this thought. It will also be provocative, throwing bombs and ruffling feathers, because my narrative has a Villain. Stated baldly: *objectivists* are the obstinate majority in ethics and metaethics primarily responsible for the futile cycle with their proselytizing zeal for an inchoate idea and an imaginary property. More cautiously, while we all carry some responsibility, *some* among the ranks of *objectivist realists* are disproportionately responsible, although I will avoid naming names.

A. Illusion

The main and often only evidence objectivists offer that "Normative" thought concerns their alleged

property of (O-) Normativity is how things seem, or their "intuitions". If no such property exists, then where could the objectivist's intuitions and concept even come from?

Determinately objectivist intuitions are more difficult to isolate than generally supposed, since much of the alleged evidence from ordinary thought and practice can be fully accommodated with the perspectivist's resources.[53] (Objectivism may often stem innocently from a mere failure of imagination.) The most compelling cases may involve *wondering what final ends we Ought to have*,

[52] I like my philosophy moralism-free (cf. Santayana: "there is no room in philosophy for the shouting Moralist," 1911; cf. Hare 1952)—while agreeing that some things Matter more in life than philosophy. Alternate conceptions of philosophy itself are possible (e.g. Nietzsche's "philosophers as legislators"), and rather than bemoaning the futility of Samsara, one might prefer to "will the eternal recurrence" in metaethical debate. [53] Or so I've argued elsewhere, especially Finlay 2008, 2014.

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which can seem to demand a "Normative" content unrelated to any already-motivated perspective.[54] However, these intuitions can be explained as the outputs of a ubiquitous kind of illusion. This is the venerable idea, invoked by objectivism's skeptics in every era, that we "project" into the external world something internal and subjective.[55]

Sometimes complained to be merely a vague metaphor, I see this projection as an artifact of a general bias of our cognitive systems towards attributing external or mind-independent contents-as causes for our experiences.[56] Consider for example 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 appearing to buzz around you, and may fool less reflective creatures into trying to evade or catch it. Illusions of this kind are common and familiar: ringing in one's 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 ostensive scheme of such conceptions is, roughly: *that feature of the external world that is the content and explanation of this experience.* What makes it an illusion is its insensitivity to the subjective contribution to the experience. This insensitivity seems often to stem from a further bias by which the comparatively variable is more salient to us (as foreground) than the comparatively constant (as background/acclimatization).

This scheme applies directly to intuitions of objective Normativity, originating as misinterpretations of metaethically innocent thoughts and experiences. The experiential element may include the (derivative) motivations or feelings attending a "Normative" thought, or even the disposition to mentally or verbally token a sentence like 'I Ought to φ'. The resulting conception of O-Normativity will therefore be: *that external feature of what my thought is about, which is the content/ explanation of these motivations/ feelings/ thoughts/ dispositions.*[57][58] But there is no such feature, because the relevant characteristics of "Normative" thought aren't wholly determined by anything external, but essentially in part by something subjective, one's—typically stable—motivated perspective.[59] This conception provides only a *higher-order description* of a property, a description which fails to denote anything. So I maintain there isn't even an uninstantiated property of O Normativity, merely a confused idea, which is why the objectivist's concept remains stubbornly fugitive and attempts to capture it never escape metaphor.[60]

[54] Insofar as such wondering can't be accommodated perspectively I'd attribute it to the delusion described below.

[55] Mackie (1977) writes of our tendency "to objectify concerns and purposes…giving them a fictitious external authority," Santayana (1911) of "human ideals that have been projected into the empyrean," Nietzsche (1882) writes, "It is we…who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations… Whatever has *value*…has it not in itself…but has rather been given…value, and *we* were the givers…!" David Hume (1751) writes of our tastes "gilding and staining all natural objects with the colors borrowed from internal sentiment", and of the mind's "propensity to spread itself on external objects" (1739).

[56] Rival evolutionary explanations of objectivist intuitions are offered inter alia by Joyce 2006, Street 2016.

[57] This sits awkwardly with the "nonnaturalist" claim that Normativity is acausal—a claim I think allows no acceptable story about the connection between property and intuition.

[58] Rather than absurdly attributing our subjective states to the world, projection involves attributing an *inverse* quality, analogous to a photographic negative, as fit to produce the subjective experience. The "push" of our desires and aversions for particular ends is interpreted as a "pull" from the world towards particular actions. [59] Cf. Hume on "calm passions" being mistaken for "reason".

[60] This stymies any prospect for an argument from conceivability to metaphysical possibility to epistemically possible actuality. Such an argument falls at the first hurdle: there is nothing conceivable here.

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Such illusions could only be part of the story, however. If objectivist intuitions are akin to perceptual illusions then they could (theoretically) even be universal and impossible to escape, but there is a crucial difference between the illusion of things seeming to you a certain way, and the *delusion* of believing they are so.[61] 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 appear to be moving. "Normative" thoughts seeming to concern an objective quality similarly doesn't entail any belief or 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.

The issue is how much credence to give these intuitions. How things seem may be prima facie evidence for how they are, but we generally reject appearances when they don't stand up to 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 the appearance may have provided 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 objectivism, whose supposed property finds no independent support outside of these seemings. Perspectivism satisfactorily explains everything about our "Normative" thoughts, while the posit of objective Normativity fails to explain anything, including the objectivist's intuitions themselves.

How then are we to explain the grip of the objectivist delusion on even highly intelligent people? Objectivists tend to assign these particular unexplained, independently unverified intuitions a particularly robust authority—some even insisting that our intuitions in these matters are unchallengeable and necessarily have the "last word".[62] Plausibly all our other faculties are prone to illusion and error, so why would our philosophical intuitions be specially resistant? 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 accommodating moves! To fully understand the grip of the delusion we need to observe a second factor.

B. Attachment

A significant cause of "rebirth" and obstacle to enlightenment, as with Samsara, appears to be "attachment", in the form of motivated reasoning and credulity in the objectivist camp. Some people—including many working in "Normative ethics"—evidently have a strong psychological need

or wish for objectivism to be true; particularly, for their own perspectival "Normative" beliefs and claims to be cognitions and assertions of objective facts that Matter perspective-independently.[63]

[61] This echoes moral error theorists like Joyce (2009: 58-9) and Olson (2014: 7), although I don't attribute the delusion to ordinary, first-order moral/normative thought; cf. Nietzsche's attribution of the projective delusion to "we contemplative ones" (1882, §301).

[62] E.g. Nagel 1997, Huemer 2005.

[63] The many possible grounds of this "fear of relativism" (cf. Scanlon 1995) include: wanting a guaranteed rational path to moral persuasion (cf. Williams 1985), thinking that otherwise we can't take morality seriously and must tolerate the intolerable (e.g. Joyce 2011, Enoch 2011), wanting to dismiss conflicting values as factually ignorant, fearing a lack of divine retribution absent a divine Judgment, existentialist "angst" about the burden of being responsible for one's own values. While outside this essay's scope, a useful step to enlightenment may be demonstrating fears of perspectivism misplaced, as Santayana suggests: "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" (1911: 430).

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It's well-known that motivated reasoning shifts our thresholds for proof in such a way that *any* supporting pseudo-evidence may be regarded as sufficient for accepting a hypothesis, while the burden for opposing evidence may be set unattainably high. The projective illusion provides this motivational bias all the prima facie justification it seeks, forming a formidable obstacle to progress.[64]

Attacking other philosophers' motives is dangerous territory, and I emphasize that these claims may apply only to a zealous and vocal subset of objectivists. Many may lean towards objectivism rather on the basis of their impartial appraisal of the evidence—compelled perhaps by the deficiencies of noncognitivism and subjectivism while overlooking the perspectivist option or underestimating its resources.[65]

It may be complained that a philosopher's motives are nobody's business but her own, and anyhow impossible to discriminate confidently. I'd generally agree, but objectivists have sometimes voluntarily confessed such motives apparently in the hope of thereby winning hearts and minds, making those motives fair game for critical attention. Another complaint is that it is self-defeatingly hypocritical for a *perspectivist* to take issue with motivated reasoning, while holding that there are no questions of what Ought to be done except from a motivated standpoint. As above, I here explicitly embrace the perspective of the intellectual ends of knowledge and understanding, as a philosophically kosher kind of motivated reasoning. This in turn may elicit complaints about a lack of self-awareness—or an unfair double-standard—seeing as *every* philosopher is moved partly by "non intellectual" motives, such as ego, career, and attachment to a favorite theory. While denying the possibility that I am self-deceived here would indeed be hypocritical, having such motivations doesn't necessitate allowing them to influence your philosophical views, and we expect good-faith philosophizing to leave them "at the door".

Acknowledging it to be an empirical question, my impression is that ideologically-motivated reasoning in metaethics is disproportionately found among objectivists. Generally speaking, it is only objectivists who ever seem to accord inexplicably unchallengeable authority to intuitions, or to make issues out of their desire for their view to be correct or the practical consequences of its rejection. 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 to swallow for anyone whose primary goal is understanding, but may be welcomed as a satisfying result if your priority is rather (e.g.) to fortify your desired conclusion against refutation. Objectivism (particularly nonnaturalistic) has thus been

noted to have close affinities with religious faith.[66] What is the idea of objective Normativity ultimately if not a de-personalized version ("shadow") of God, peremptorily telling us what to do ("thou shalt!") in a way supposed mysteriously to be beyond challenge?

By contrast, I don't perceive philosophers in other, less populated camps to be similarly driven by "non-intellectual" motives. One suggestion, for example, is that rejection of O-Normativity may be motivated by desire to escape from one's moral obligations. But contemporary noncognitivists and subjectivists seem more concerned to insist that their theories *don't* diminish the Importance or scope of morality, and aren't notorious for their immorality. They seem more plausibly moved rather

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[64] A stronger accusation I won't make is that some are motivated to champion objectivism without believing it.
[65] E.g. Bertrand Russell: reluctantly persuaded of objectivism by G.E. Moore (writing "while my opinions as to ethics do not satisfy me, other people's satisfy me still less" (1944)) , he was ultimately persuaded out of it by Santayana (Russell 1929).
[66] E.g. Santayana 2011, Street 2016, Killoren 2016. Plato's treatment of the Form of the Good is archetypical.

by their inability to conceive how any objective subject-matter for "Normative" thought could explain its characteristic roles, e.g. in practical deliberation, than by fear of what follows if subjectivism or noncognitivism is false, and over time the views of prominent representatives of noncognitivism and subjectivism have shifted increasingly closer to each other, and thereby perspectivism—while objectivists haven't budged.[67]

It might still be complained that even if this is all correct, taking aim at opponents' motives is an egregious breach of the charitable norms of philosophical engagement. But while charity surely has a general instrumental value for intellectual ends there is danger in fetishizing it, and charity itself is the third factor in my narrative about the obstacles to enlightenment.

C. Charity

While my blame has so far been focused on objectivists, it takes two to Tango, and the motivated reasoning of *some* members of *one* camp cannot be solely responsible for the futility of an entire discourse. Here I regretfully see charity, of multiple forms—as a tendency to assume the best of others—as playing a significant role preventing progress.[68]

One such form of charity concerns *reference*: the naïve assumption that when others use words (nouns, adjectives) they are successfully thinking and talking about actual entities and properties. This form of charity leads us to interpret others as thinking and talking about whatever seems from our point of view the most suitable references for their terms, even when there are grounds to suspect error, incoherence, and reference-failure.[69] It perpetuates the futile cycle by leading metaethicists to mistakenly assume they are all engaged in dispute over the same property, and is a necessary condition for "rebirth", as objectivism's opponents follow them into new epicycles by assuming that with their newly selected special term for expressing their fugitive thought objectivists are talking something real.[70] [71]

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

A final form of charity concerns *truth*: our default tendency to trust others' reliability and to interpret them however we think most secures the truth of their utterances.[72] These three forms of

[67] See the evolution of the views of Simon Blackburn, Michael Ridge, and Mark Schroeder, for example. [68] Pushing my allegory perhaps too far, charity towards the deluded is what keeps the enlightened in Samsara. [69] Cf. Harman 1996. I blame this impulse for the idea of "reference-magnetism", which threatens enlightenment by inviting us to ignore differences in theorists' intentions and naïvely trust the world will magically sort out our mess for us. There are just too many feasible meanings for 'normativity'. [70] This omits the role of a simple assumption that everyone uses words with the same meanings, interpersonally and diachronically, which prompts us to miss the equivocacies in our metalanguage (e.g. in 'normativity'). This threat is exacerbated, not avoided, by the common supposition that metaethicists can set questions about language aside ("I'm not interested in what the word 'normativity'/ 'goodness' means, only in what normativity/ goodness is!") Philosophy as a shared practice cannot be so cavalier about language, as our medium of communication (and too often, proxy for thought).
[71] E.g. Matt Bedke's case for subjectivism about "oomph" (2019). Parfit (2011) is particularly insistent that his nonobjectivist opponents aren't talking about the same thing.
[72] Admittedly, charity between philosophers is sometimes in regrettably short supply.

charity here combine to have perverse epistemological effects. As the disagreement of peers and expert opinion generally provides reliable evidence of what is the case, the prevalence of objectivism among ethicists and metaethicists is liable to increase credence in it, and lower our confidence in contrary insights and understanding—especially since those who hold metaethical views as articles of faith can be expected to project the highest degree of confidence.[73] This influence will be even greater on non-experts and newcomers to metaethics, a constant thumb on the scale lending objectivism an initial credibility it doesn't deserve. While most would rightly be wary of an argument from authority for God's existence citing the prevalence of theists in the philosophy of religion, the parallel selection bias in metaethics isn't nearly as obvious, but may be no less real.[74]

If metaethics is to overcome all these obstacles and reach enlightenment then we may need to become a bit less charitable: less ready to assume that other theorists are using their terms coherently, successfully, and with the same meanings as us, less trusting that their positions are intellectually motivated by the weight of evidence, 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 George Santayana memorably said. An important step in the Buddha's path to enlightenment is therefore the recollection of his past lives. Awareness of the lack of genuine metaethical progress and our repetition of past moves is similarly hampered by the regrettably short memory of academic philosophy.[75] For various reasons—including professional pressures and, ironically, belief that philosophy is progressing like science—most writers today rarely bother to read any philosophy written more than a decade or two ago, and so we are ill-equipped to recognize how the contemporary debate duplicates the past.[76] Indeed the key points of this paper itself aren't particularly original and have been made, to some approximation, many times before. (I hope here to have at least framed them in a new and helpful way.) This includes Foot, Mackie, and Williams in the 1970s, Elizabeth Anscombe in the 1950s,[77] Santayana himself in the 1910s, and especially Nietzsche in the 1880s—to whose title "Beyond Good and Evil" my own pays deliberate homage. So we may well despair over the prospects of the current epicycle yielding to general enlightenment.

To conclude, what should metaethics do in order to reach and maintain enlightenment? If meta-'Normative' theory is riddled with ambiguity and equivocation, then it might seem advisable to abandon the rubric altogether, as some have begun to counsel.[78] However, while I endorse ending the current epicycle, understood as the battle over the nature of "Normativity", I don't think this

[73] This is supported by results from the PhilPapers.org survey "morality" question: of metaethicists favoring "nonnonaturalism" (36%), 60% selected "Accept" rather than "Lean Towards". Compare: "naturalistic realism" 41% (of 30%); "constructivism" [≈subjectivism?] 36% (of 17%); "expressivism" [≈noncognitivism?] 28% (of 15%); "error theory" 25% (of 7%). Objectivist realists—especially nonnaturalists—have the greatest tendency to express confidence.

[74] Statistically, metaethicists' most significant divergence from philosophers generally on the PhilPapers.org "morality" question is a higher adherence to nonnaturalistic realism (36% vs. 27%)—the strongest correlation of which is to theism in the philosophy of religion.

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

[76] I'm not claiming any moral high-ground!

[77] 1958: 3-9.

[78] E.g. Hieronymi 2021, Dannenberg ms.

must or should involve abandoning the term. After all, it has been my diagnosis that the confusions it embodies are only symptoms of a deeper problem that systematically attends *any possible* terminology used for the same purposes, so jettisoning the rubric may simply promote the Bad Future, 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 request for disambiguation: "Do you mean that formally, motivationally, instrumentally, objectively, or expressivistically?"[79]

To attempt a nuanced appraisal, whereas the 'normativity' rubric fails to satisfy ambitions either to elucidate the nature of the subject-matter(s), or to escape the special/mundane ambiguities, it *does* helpfully provide a general technical term enabling us to talk efficiently about the (multi-dimensional) commonalities cross-cutting a wide range of ordinary terms, thoughts, properties, etc.—the term we happen to have right now—and for this reason I haven't managed to eliminate it from my own vocabulary. So I propose we retain it as a useful although dangerously polysemous term of philosophical art.[80] Love the one you're with!

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