

# Can Reasons Fundamentalism Answer the Normative Question?

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## I. Why be a Noncognitivist?

Noncognitivism is a thesis in the philosophy of mind and language. It is about meaning and content. It was originally motivated by a set of worries in metaphysics, epistemology and moral psychology. Moved by the desire to accommodate obvious data and equipped with minimalism, expressivists have lost many of those motivations. So why continue to pursue this incredibly difficult expressivist program? You might be motivated:

1. To avoid a theory that relies on TRUTH and normative PROPERTIES, even if you are ok with normative truths and properties.
2. By a metaphilosophical commitment to the idea that one must earn the right to realist vocabulary.
3. By arguments internal to semantics.

So far as I can tell, Dreier would probably not be especially moved by any of that. Capitals don't make a difference and the semantics really might not work out. He might be open to (2)—especially if it gets cached out à la the explanation explanation. But here he explores a different argument.

Recall Schroeder's domain neutral vs domain specific reasons to be a noncognitivist. *The* domain specific reason was a puzzle recognized (at least since Hume) about motivation. (NB: From here on out, we are using 'judgment' as a neutral term. Moral judgments are the belief, desires, besires, desire-like beliefs, or whatever, that are expressed with assertions like 'Slavery is wrong.')

P1 Moral judgments motivate.

P2 Beliefs on their own do not motivate.

∴ C Moral judgments must have some noncognitive component.

Dreier's challenge can be seen a descendant of this line of argument. He lays down a challenge about the connection between normative judgments and motivation, although he takes the connection to be one of *rational necessity*.

## II. The Normative Question

In ethics, the [Normative Q]uestion can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is *hard*: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence and integrity don't inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question *why?* will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral? (Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 1)

As Korsgaard sees the question, there are a handful of conditions an answer must meet to be adequate. One is that the answer must be something that answers first-personally to the needs of a practically deliberating agent. When *I* wonder “Why be moral when morality demands I sacrifice so much?,” the answer must satisfy *me* (provided I am deliberating properly).

Korsgaard does not think that this question is taken seriously by cognitivists of a certain stripe. To get some purchase on this, consider the following (internal) dialogue in which I ask the normative question and try to use a simple, Moorean answer:

Me: My friend in California is in desperate need of help—help only I can give. It would be good for me to go help her.

Me: But dropping everything to go to California now will come at great cost to me! Why should I go help her?

Me: Because doing so is good!

Me: But why should I care about what’s good? Granting that doing so would be good, why should I go? Maybe I don’t want to be in the goodness-maximizing game anymore, especially when it comes at such a disadvantage to me!

Korsgaard worries that a simple, Moorean view cannot answer the normative question. When I ask “Why be moral?” and answer “Because it is good,” that leaves a kind of question open.

### III. From Mooreanism to Reasons Fundamentalism

One reason (among many) to shift to talk about *reasons* instead of talk about *goodness* is that it seems to close the question that simple Mooreanism left open. Here are two internal dialogues that illustrates the point:

#### *A Reason*

Me: The fact that my friend in California is in desperate need of help—help only I can give—is reason for me to go help her.

Me: But dropping everything to go to California would come at great cost to me!

Me: But why should I care about what I have reason to do? Granting that my friend’s need is a reason for me to go help her, why is that any reason to go?

#### *Most Reason*

Me: The fact that my friend in California is in desperate need of help—help only I can give—is a decisive reason for me to go help her.

Me: But dropping everything to go to California would come at great cost to me!

Me: But why should I care about what I have decisive reason to do? Granting that my friend’s need is a decisive reason for me to go help her, why should I go?

These dialogues seem more obviously confused. They either misunderstand the relationship between SHOULD and reasons or they are gobbledygook. Parfit and others think their move to reasons fundamentalism makes clear that the normative question does not need to be answered or at least does not apply to their views. They say that the fundamental moral truths

are of the form [ $p$  is a reason for me to  $\phi$ ]. It makes no sense to ask why by moral when all it is to be moral is to do what you have most reason to do!

Unsurprisingly, Korsgaard, Dreier and others think that this move to reasons does no real work. It does, however, put more pressure on those who would wield the normative question as an objection to explain what they mean and why the move to reasons fundamentalism doesn't help.

#### IV. Drier's Question

Korsgaard thinks the normative question gets purchase on Reasons Fundamentalist views for very hard-to-figure out reasons involving what it takes to deliberate practically. There is, as Dreier says, a worry about a kind of regress, and a claim about how it is that Reasons-y cognitivists like Parfit think we have to *apply* truths in our practical deliberation. Dreier is confused by all that and more or less ignores it. He thinks the question is (surprise surprise) one of explanation.

Since Korsgaard's 1986 Paper *Skepticism about Practical Reason* (SOOOO GOOD), people have changed the way they thought about the motivational datum we opened with. As Schroeder put it: "we typically expect people to feel at least some motivation to do what they think they ought to do" (p. 10). In the past, the thought was often put that you could not sincerely judge that  $\phi$ -ing was wrong and yet be totally unmotivated. Early non-cognitivists thought there was some truth in the vicinity of Necessarily, if I judge that I ought to  $\phi$ , then I'll intend to  $\phi$ .

$$\Box J(O(\phi)) \rightarrow I(\phi) \tag{1}$$

This is almost certainly too strong. If (1) were true, then a certain kind of irrationality would be *impossible*, and if impossible, it is not actually a normative principle that one must intend in accordance with normative judgment (Korsgaard 1986 and everywhere else). There also seem to be good counterexamples to (1).

Let us describe one of Sade's characters, Eugenie, who starts out life as innocent and morally up-standing, only to be utterly corrupted by a couple of typical Sadistic libertines. Eugenie is, before her downfall, competent with moral predicates—indeed, she has been well brought up, and has a particularly sensitive moral sense. After her conversion at the hands of the diabolical Mme. de Saint-Ange, Eugenie applies those predicates as before: she calls acts of charity "good," acts of licentiousness "wicked." But her motivation has shifted: what she calls "good" repels her and what she calls "wicked" attracts her. This much is uncontroversial.

Is it plausible that her putative moral judgments are somehow in quote marks—that is, is it plausible that she wants to do what others judge as wicked, perhaps in order to shock or titillate? Let us say "No," via stipulating certain counterfactuals to hold. Eugenie knows, let's imagine, that she was raised to be particularly morally sensitive, and knows herself to be a more reliable judge than those around her, so even if everybody else in the world were to judge that some act of hedonism is permissible, if Eugenie judges herself to know better, then she would still want to perform that act. Similarly, if the world were to judge some type of action to be dreadful, but Eugenie judges that really it's quite acceptable, then she would be motivated to refrain from performing it. (Of course, she might not want her refraining to be public knowledge, since to be seen to refrain from acts widely considered

to be wicked might itself be a good act, and Eugenie wants to avoid that. But this is an unnecessary complication: imagine the action in question to be hidden from all eyes...except those, perhaps, of her victim.) If the counterfactuals make sense, then the internalist's standard defense—that Eugenie is motivated to do what others regard as bad, and not what she sincerely believes to be bad—is thwarted. This internalist defense, furthermore, leaves an explanatory gap. Eugenie is interpreted as motivated to do what the local community, or Christians, or some group or other, regard as wrong, while she does not share their judgments. But why would she want to do that, as opposed to doing what the Buddhists or Muslims regard as wrong? One could no doubt invent a history that would answer this, but if we interpret her just as being motivated to do what she judges to be wrong, then the extra explanation isn't necessary: moral value is something which she believes in, and is deeply and personally interested in. We can see why her wicked projects are important to her, and we can understand perfectly why violating the norms peculiar to, say, Islam, does not interest her—it's not the moral system in which she believes. (Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, 2001)

They wanted to say there was some motivation to  $\phi$ , but this idealization will help us set things up cleanly. Since Korsgaard, there has been a tendency to instead formulate the issue as something like: Necessarily, if I judge that I ought to  $\phi$ , then I'll intend to  $\phi$  *insofar as I'm rational*. Why? Because totally irrational agents might well not intend (or be at all motivated) to do what they judge they ought to do. Put another way, early noncognitivists got the modality of the box wrong. It is not metaphysically or psychologically necessary, but rationally necessary. The box is normative. Writing rationally necessary as  $\Box_R$ , we have a new datum:

$$\Box_R J(O(\phi)) \rightarrow I(\phi) \quad (2)$$

Dreier's question: What explains (2)? In English: "Why is it irrational to fail to be motivated to do what one believes one ought to do?" (177). In general, you might think that necessary connections should get explained, even if the necessity is rational and not metaphysical. Reasons fundamentalism doesn't really matter at this point. Interpret the 'O' however you want—be it as OUGHT, SHOULD, HAVE A REASON, HAVE DECISIVE REASON, IS GOOD—the question is more or less the same.

## V. Prospects

One way to think of any question like this is to look at the notions that appear in the fact. Can any of them (or some combination) do the trick? Here is our menu:

- $R$  (Rationality)
- $J$  (Judgment)
- $O$  (Ought)
- $\phi$  ( $\phi$ -ing—or action more generally)
- $I$  (Intending)

What would answers appealing to this look like. Let's consider various proposals.

**KANTIANISM:** It's the  $J$ ! (Or maybe the  $J$ - $O$  complex.) As Dreier puts it: "A judgment of what I ought to do is a commitment of my will, perhaps (Korsgaard 1994) an instance of following a general rule I choose for myself. Knowingly failing to follow a rule I continue to endorse

is a paradigmatic case of incoherence. Being unmotivated, then, by my ought judgments is in the same family with contradicting myself, or having incoherent probability judgments.” (179)

NONCOGNITIVISM: It’s the  $J!$  (Or maybe the  $J-O$  complex.) The analysis of  $J(O(\phi))$  is in terms of motivational materials. To  $J(O(\phi))$  is (say) to plan to  $\phi$  or to disagree with not  $\phi$ -ing. It is irrational to plan to  $\phi$  and then not to  $\phi$ . It is obviously irrational to be in a state of planning to  $\phi$  without intending to  $\phi$  or to disagree with not  $\phi$ -ing while not  $\phi$ -ing.

MICHAEL SMITH: It’s the  $J!$  (Or maybe the  $J-O$  complex.) As Dreier puts it: “Smith (1994) says it is about what I would want my (actual) self to do were I fully rational. When I come to a conclusion about what I would want under conditions I myself think of as better than my actual ones, there is a straight-forward kind of incoherence in my thinking if I am unmoved.” (179-80)

All plausible answers, says, Dreier. Parfit’s answer, not so much:

PARFIT: It’s the content of the judgment, the  $O$ .  $O$  judgments are judgments about *what to do*—about action.

Why is this unsatisfying?

Ought judgments are simply beliefs about which things have a certain ineffable non-natural property. Suppose some other beings (not us) had a different disposition: they are disposed to be motivated by their judgments about which actions and states have some other non-natural property (the schmought property, perhaps). Their disposition would, on the present hypothesis, simply be a different disposition from the rationality-constituting disposition. There would be nothing to say about why beliefs about *this* ineffable non-natural property, and not *that* one, rationally require us to be motivated. But now the account does seem unacceptably mysterian. The idea that what we have had in mind all along when we talked about rationality was the disposition to be motivated by which actions we believe to have a certain ineffable property seems pretty strange. (180)

A further question from Jack: why don’t other attitudes to this special content motivate? If the content is what does the work, why wouldn’t supposing that you ought to  $\phi$  or hoping that or wondering whether or wishing that motivate you?

Questions:

1. Did Gibbardian Noncognitivism or Michael Smith’s view really do all that well? Why can’t we just ask the question: what is it about plans that makes it irrational to plan to  $\phi$  and not  $\phi$ ? Why is *that* irrational? Or why is it irrational not to do what you would do under better conditions? Yes, there is a kind of incoherence. But why is the incoherence rationally important?!
2. Is Parfit’s answer really so bad? What exactly is the problem with thinking that the certain special property of being what one ought to do (or likewise for being good) is special because of its connection to rationality!
3. Consider the following case: I believe Jack is in excruciating pain. I believe that I have the medication that will relieve his pain. I am wholly unmoved (I do not intend, whatever) to give him the medication. That’s weird. Something has gone wrong. Dreier (and many others, Parfit and Scanlon included) want to say that the weirdness in this case is of a very different kind than the weirdness in the case where (2) gets violated. Is that right? Why think that?

4. How do we explain other, related boxed facts? Like

$$\Box_R J(O(\phi)) \wedge B(\phi \leftrightarrow \psi) \rightarrow I(\psi) \quad (3)$$

$$\Box_R D(\phi) \wedge B(\phi \leftrightarrow \psi) \rightarrow I(\psi) \quad (4)$$

$$\Box_R B(p) \wedge B(q) \rightarrow \neg B(p \wedge q) \quad (5)$$

### BONUS SECTION: Was this Korsgaard's Question?

As a side note, this is almost certainly not what Korsgaard meant, even if it is partially right. Why? Because Dreier's question isn't obviously first-personal. It is a question about explanation that can be offered third-personally. All that stuff about regresses and applications of truths was central to how Korsgaard thought of the question. If this doesn't really make sense, don't worry. It doesn't matter for our purposes except to say that we should be careful to read Dreier as offering a full reading of Korsgaard. Let's treat Dreier's question as his own.

Here is a question that does matter: Setting aside Korsgaard exegesis, do *we* see some other question in the offing that would go unanswered even if the cognitivist could answer Dreier's question? Consider the kind of view defended by Ralph Wedgwood. Wedgwood has a Gibbardian semantics with one crucial addition: he thinks some plans have a very special property of being *choiceworthy*. He thinks that Gibbard + this very truth-y notion of choiceworthiness is the right semantics. I imagine one moved by the normative question to look at such a view and say "Choiceworthiness?... Why care about that?" Wedgwood has an answer to this, and we don't need to get into it. But this shows that a view that obviously solves Dreier's problem does not obviously solve Korsgaard's.