

## Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*

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In metaethics, an approach has emerged in recent years that can be called “robust realism”. “Robust” stands here for the central idea that there are irreducible and objective normative facts that can be known by us. But the proof of this elegant idea calls for a complicated theory that is far from robust. This is the quest undertaken by Ralph Wedgwood in his book *The Nature of Normativity*. Ralph Wedgwood is a CUF lecturer at Oxford and a tutor in Merton College. Although fairly active in the field of metaethics, *The Nature of Normativity* is his first book. Most of its content is based on various previously published articles.

Wedgwood expects his theory to answer questions such as how can we know these normative facts or truths and what is their nature. Answers to these questions convene around the claim that the intentional is normative. Wedgwood himself claims that the normativity of the intentional is “the key to metaethics”. He formulates one of the goals of his book as giving a metanormative account that would give a philosophical explanation to the problems that arise from the normativity of the subject matter. Such account would also give us a metaethical theory that can answer classical metaethical questions, but is not limited to the field of morality, because normative judgements cover a wider array of topics.

The book is divided into three distinct parts. The first part of the book deals with the semantics of normative thought and discourse, i.e. the meaning of statements about “what ought to be the case”. The second part is dedicated to metaphysics of normative judgements and gives an account of what makes something a right answer to a normative question about what people ought to think or do. In the third part, Wedgwood gives an epistemological account of how can we know normative facts or at least reach rational

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or justified beliefs about normative propositions. I'll proceed with giving a short outline of each part.

In the first part, the one that deals with semantic issues, Wedgwood proceeds from the idea that he calls "normative judgement internalism"—that normative judgements have an essential or internal connection to motivation and practical reasoning. This means that the motivation to act stems directly from normative reasoning and we don't need to look for additional reasons as to how a person moves from rational reasoning to action.

Wedgwood's approach to normative statements is closely related to recent developments of expressivism by Allan Gibbard and to Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism. Expressivists claim that normative judgements have no truth-values and they are mere expressions of psychological states. But common normative statements have been shown to behave very much as if they have a truth-value, and so expressivists have been busy extending their accounts accordingly. Wedgwood takes a deep look into Gibbard's account of "hyperplans", which is similar to the possible-worlds semantics, but covers both plans and beliefs and concludes that Gibbard has, in effect, come very close to realism. Wedgwood namely finds that Gibbard's notion of hypothetical hyperplans can be taken to mean that the most successful plan corresponds to independent moral facts. It seems to me that here Wedgwood makes an unjustified leap.

Gibbard's concept of a hyperplan is based on a much more subjective understanding of the reference of normative terms than Wedgwood seems to assume here. For example, Gibbard acknowledges that different people, for example in case of a person who values security and a person who values fame above all, might have different ideal plans in the exact same situation. Gibbard sees no possibility or a reason to look for a unified basis for values of different people but Wedgwood claims that values and attitudes are also based on the objective reality and thus can be seen as true or false.

It seems that a more thorough analysis might find that Wedgwood's attempt to attune Gibbard's theory with his own turns out to be circular. I have in mind a circularity of a sort that the "best plan" corresponds to the independent normative reality, if such an independent reality exists and, vice versa, to an expressivist account of normative judgements precisely when normative statements have no truth value. When there is no independent normative reality then Gibbard's expressivism remains undefeated. But rejecting expressivism is important to Wedgwood in order to develop his own account of plans that are now taken as truth-conditional.

The semantics of normative terms developed by Wedgwood is a version of conceptual role semantics. A conceptual role semantics says that a term's conceptual role determines its semantic role and thereby contributes to the

truth conditions of a sentence. The semantics of normative terms assigns truth conditions to normative propositions. Thus the previously mentioned semantic account also explains the connection between normative judgments and practical reasoning or motivation.

The second part of the book deals with the metaphysics of normative facts. It is the central and the most ambitious part of the book. Wedgwood actually hopes that his metaphysics can solve the metaphysical dispute between naturalists and non-naturalists, between realists and antirealists. According to his metaphysical account, normative facts, properties and relations are not reducible to natural facts, properties and relations; normative facts, properties and relations are causally efficacious and take part in the causal explanation of contingent facts about what is going on in the world. Causal efficacy of normative facts, properties and relations is connected to the normativity of the intentional. The claim that the intentional is normative means that it is essential to mental states that they are regulated by certain standards of rationality or justification, and thus we cannot fully explain mental states without referring to their normativity.

Wedgwood thinks that the causal efficacy of normative facts is consistent with a conception of causation according to which all normative causal relations are realized in causal relations between physical facts. But he also claims that mental and normative facts are not reducible. It is difficult to grasp how mental and normative facts could be irreducible when it is a general property of all contingent mental and normative facts that they are realized in physical facts.

The third part of the book deals with the epistemology of normative belief. Wedgwood points out that the central task of the epistemology of normative belief is to answer the question of how can we know about or possess justified beliefs about normative propositions (propositions about what people should believe or feel, do or choose). According to his account of normative semantics and metaphysics presented earlier, normative statements express person's beliefs and stem directly from his "cognitive states". If these statements are true, meaning that if the reasoning of the person presenting them has not been "derailed", then there is a normative fact that cannot be reduced to any terms that do not refer to normative properties or relations.

Wedgwood believes that his epistemological account is an example of the realist approach that offers a satisfactory explanation to the epistemology of normative belief. His epistemology of normative statements—an account about how we can know normative facts—says that we can know normative facts using our capability for theoretical reasoning, namely, that the theoretical truths have been built into our minds.

Wedgwood is aware of how widely views about normative truths can

diverge. This might be the weakest link in every realist metanormative theory. Situations in which we acquire firm normative knowledge could be extremely rare, much rarer than Wedgwood hopes in the third part of the book, whereas the first part of the book assumes that we generally operate with true normative facts and rationally. If rationality is intimately connected to the objective standards of normativity, then the question arises as to why do we possess these standards and how do we access them. And in contrast, if rationality is intimately connected to, for example, successful evolutionary survival and reproduction then we should ask whether and why should such standards of rationality correspond to some objective and moreover, eternal and invariable normative truths. These are tough questions that every realist needs to answer, but the chapter where Wedgwood offers a possible way to reach solid normative knowledge—via “pre-theoretical normative intuitions”—is curiously void of examples. Without them it is impossible to say whether these intuitions provide a sufficient explanation to how we could have a good chance of acquiring objective normative truths.

Of course, no metaethical or metanormative account can be expected to present a steadfast truth. As Wedgwood points out in the introduction, his enthusiasm and the style of writing may make some of his claims sound stronger and more confident than they really are. Despite of some gaps in his theory, it is a neat book which, arising from a simple thesis of normative realism, presents an elegant and coherent theory covering a wide range of philosophical sub disciplines.