An Expressivistic Theory of Normative Discourse*

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INTRODUCTION

For more than half a century after G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, much of “analytical” moral philosophy concerned the meanings of moral terms. Out of this discussion came analyses of a radically new kind: analyses of meaning that were noncognitivistic. Moral terms had resisted ordinary definition. Moore himself claimed they stood for “non-natural” properties, but to others that came to seem mysterious. Then in the 1930s, Barnes, Ayer, and Stevenson proposed a way out: that moral terms do not stand for properties at all, but have meaning of a different kind. Moral terms, they proposed, are not used to make assertions that can be true or false, but to do something else. According to Ayer, for example, what moral terms do is to express emotions, and that is what gives them their special meanings.

Here I too propose to explore and develop an analysis that is noncognitivistic. Mine, though, is not most directly an analysis of moral terms; I take up normative language of another kind. Philosophers sometimes ask what constitutes a “rational” course of action. Faced with a choice, we can ask what it is “rational” to do or, in terms less high-flown, what it “makes sense” to do. Now this language seems just as puzzling as moral language. Should we think that “being something it makes sense to do” is a property? If so, what is that property? Suppose two people disagree, say, on whether it makes sense to pursue honor for its own sake. What is at issue between them? Various kinds of answers might be

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given, and I shall not attempt here to refute the answers I reject. Rather
I want to presuppose, for the sake of discussion, that the various cognitivist
analyses that might be offered will turn out to be defective, in ways that
parallel the ways in which cognitivist analyses of moral terms have been
found defective. I then want to develop a noncognitivist alternative.

To a first approximation, my analysis is this: to say it makes sense for
someone to do something is to express one’s acceptance of a system of
norms that, as applied to the agent’s circumstances, permits the thing
in question. Suppose in a discussion of Aaron Burr, Abigail says, “It
made sense to challenge Hamilton.” She is, I propose, expressing her
acceptance of a system of norms that, as applied to Burr’s circumstances,
permits challenging Hamilton.

This analysis is noncognitivist in the narrow sense traditional in
metaethics: according to the analysis, “being something it makes sense
to do” is not a property which the speaker attributes to a course of action.
In saying “It made sense to challenge Hamilton” Abigail is not attributing
some special property to Burr’s challenging Hamilton; she is not asserting
a fact or a falsehood. Her words have meaning, but the meaning is to
be explained not by giving truth conditions for what she says but in
another way: by saying what state of mind her words express.

Such an analysis might be called “expressivistic.” According to the
analysis, claims about what it makes sense to do express a state of mind:
the speaker’s acceptance of a system of norms. To express a state of
mind is not to say that one is in it. The point is a familiar one for assertions
of fact: an assertion of fact expresses a belief the speaker has or purports
to have, but the speaker does not say he has that belief. The truth of
what he says depends, in most cases, on the world outside him, not on
his beliefs. Only his sincerity depends on his beliefs. Likewise, on the
expressivistic theory I am exploring, to say “It makes sense to do X” is
to express one’s acceptance of a system of norms; it is not to say something
true or false about the system of norms one accepts. In a strict sense,
what one says is neither true nor false—though anyone who shares the
state of mind expressed will consider it true and anyone in an opposing
state of mind will consider it false. A speaker is sincere if he really does
accept the system of norms he purports to accept, but we the audience
may grant his sincerity and still reject what he says: we reject what he
says if the system of norms we ourselves accept forbids, for the situation
in question, what the system of norms he purports to accept permits.

The phrases ‘it is rational to’ and ‘it makes sense to’ can no doubt
be used in a variety of ways. One possible use is simply to assess the

2. I speak to these issues in “A Non-Cognitivist Analysis of Rationality in Action,”

3. Simon Blackburn discusses “expressive analyses” in Spreading the Word (Oxford:
coherence of an agent’s thoughts and actions: we can ask how an act coheres with the norms the agent himself accepts. Thus when Abigail says “It made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton,” she might simply be claiming that challenging Hamilton was permitted by the norms Burr himself accepted. Whether it was is a question of fact, and no expressivistic analysis is needed to interpret the question. Here, though, I am after another sense of these phrases. Abigail could grant that the norms Burr himself accepted did require him to challenge Hamilton and still wonder whether it really made sense for a man in Burr’s circumstances to challenge Hamilton. She might, after all, regard the norms Burr himself accepted as crazy and so no indication at all of what it really makes sense to do. When Abigail wonders this, I am proposing, the answer she gives expresses a system of norms that she herself accepts.

Accepting a system of norms is a psychological state—or so I speculate.4 It is to be explained psychologically, as a syndrome that will figure in any adequate human psychology. I do not attempt necessary and sufficient conditions for a person’s accepting a given system of norms; I offer no operational test for the system of norms a person accepts. Rather I sketch a picture that includes a special kind of psychic state, “accepting a system of norms.” Even primitive human life demands an intricate coordination of actions, emotions, and expectations. A person whose actions, emotions, and expectations are well coordinated with those of his fellows can benefit from systems of cooperation and of mutual restraint. On such benefits of coordination depended, long ago, who survived and reproduced; Darwinian selection shaped psychic mechanisms that promoted coordination. A crucial such mechanism, I speculate, works through language and involves what I call “normative discussion” and “normative governance.” Language allowed evolving humans to share a representation of a situation not immediately present. In such discussion, reactions of various kinds could be expressed: emotional reactions, hypothetical decisions as to what to do in the situation being discussed, emotive labeling, and even explicit precepts. I call these expressions of reactions “normative avowal.” Such discussion could coordinate if two things held. (i) Normative discussion tended toward consensus. It might do so if, first, normative avowal influenced other parties to the discussion to share the reaction expressed, and second, normative avowal opened one to demands for consistency. (ii) What one avowed or was prepared to avow in normative discussion had some influence on what one did, felt, and expected when one actually found oneself in circumstances of the kind discussed. I call this influence on action, emotions, and expectations “normative governance.” I call the putative syndrome that involves both normative governance and tendencies toward normative avowal “acceptance of norms.”

All this is highly speculative, although elsewhere I do try to give some plausibility to the speculations. I do claim that we cannot get far in understanding normative language without a normative psychology, and the tests of a normative psychology must, in the end, be empirical. On an expressivistic analysis, normative language is to be explained by elucidating the kinds of states of mind it expresses. What states of mind human beings have and might express is a psychological question; hence no such analysis will be on firm ground without an adequate, firmly grounded human psychology. Lacking that, we can only show what a good analysis would be like if the psychological facts were a certain way. Beings of some kinds would lack normative language, and I have tried to sketch a plausible human psychology that is rich enough to allow for normative opinion and normative language. If my speculative psychology were on the right track, I am saying, then here is what we could say about the meaning of normative terms.

The project as I have sketched it has many gaps. In this paper I treat only what could broadly be called the “logic” of normative language. As I have given it, the analysis is crude and inadequate; it will be coherent only when it is greatly refined and modified. I start out in the next section by displaying the kind of structure I take a “system of norms” to have. In the third section I cope with limited knowledge, both on the part of the agent whose actions are being assessed and on the part of the observer who does the assessing. To handle these problems we must refine the analysis, but only in limited ways. The fourth section raises a set of more serious and far-reaching problems; I call them the problem of embedding, the problem of communication, and the problem of normative naiveté. Coping with these problems requires a thorough revision of the analysis, and in the last two sections I offer one. By the time I am through, I shall no longer speak of expressing “one’s acceptance of a system of norms,” but speak of asserting a “normative content”—where a normative content is in some ways like a proposition. The analysis remains noncognitivist in the narrow sense that according to the analysis there are no normative facts that normative opinions represent. The analysis attributes to normative thought, though, significant features in common with thought that is plainly descriptive.

SYSTEMS OF NORMS

The analysis speaks of a “system of norms” and not simply of norms. A person’s normative judgments will often depend on his acceptance of more than one norm, and the norms he accepts may weigh in opposing directions. Abigail may accept both norms of prudence and norms of honor, and those norms may weigh in opposite directions for a situation like Burr’s. To come to a judgment all told on what it made sense for

5. Ibid.
Burr to do, she must weigh honor against prudence. Her normative judgments, then, depend not on a single norm, but on a plurality of norms that she accepts as having some force, and on the ways she takes some of these norms to outweigh or to override others.

The system of norms she accepts is a matter both of the norms she accepts as having some force and of the ways she copes with normative conflicts. How can all this be represented? What is it for one norm to "override" another, or for one set of norms to "outweigh" another in a given circumstance? We might respond by trying to develop careful definitions of such terms as 'norm,' 'weight,' 'priority,' and the like, or by developing a system of axioms that defines these terms implicitly. My purposes, though, will be served by a simpler course: describe the end result of all these weights and priorities of individual norms, and so consider a system of norms as a system of permissions and requirements, applicable to a wide range of actual and hypothetical circumstances.

What matters about a system of norms is what it requires and what it permits in various conceivable circumstances. We can characterize any system $N$ of norms by a family of basic descriptive predicates 'N-forbidden,' 'N-optional,' and 'N-required.' Here 'N-forbidden' simply means "forbidden by system of norms $N$," and likewise for its siblings. Other descriptive predicates can be constructed from these basic ones; in particular 'N-permitted' will mean "either N-optional or N-required." Now when a system $N$ of norms applies in a definite way to an act, that results in the act's having exactly one of the three basic properties being $N$-forbidden, $N$-optional, or $N$-required. We can call a system $N$ of norms complete if these descriptive predicates trichotomize the possibilities: if on every conceivable occasion for action, every act open to a subject is either $N$-forbidden, $N$-optional, or $N$-required. (So long as $N$ is consistent, nothing will be more than one of these things.)

Ordinarily, a person will accept only a system of norms that is incomplete. He may be undecided whether to accept or reject certain norms, or he may be unsettled as to the relative weights of the various norms he accepts, so that when those norms conflict, he is unsettled as to which one prevails. These kinds of normative uncertainty are different from factual uncertainty: even an observer who knew all the facts of a case might still be ambivalent in his normative judgments. Ordinarily, to be sure, normative uncertainty is combined with some degree of factual uncertainty, but factual certainty, even if achieved, might not resolve all normative uncertainty.

A person who accepts only an incomplete system of norms is, in effect, undecided among complete systems of norms that are compatible with it. He is undecided on how to extend or sharpen his incomplete system of norms to make it complete. We might, then, represent an incomplete system of norms by the ways it can be sharpened without change of mind. Speak, then, of the various possible completions of the incomplete system of norms an observer accepts. A completion of an
incomplete system $N^*$ of norms will be a complete system of norms that preserves everything which $N^*$ definitely settles. With this terminology, where $N^*$ is an incomplete system of norms and $X$ is an act or attitude, we can now say things like this: $X$ is $N^*$-permitted if and only if, for every completion $N$ of $N^*$, $X$ is $N$- permitted. A like relation will hold for any other term in this family: for 'N*-forbidden,' 'N*-required,' and the like.

A system of norms for action will apply to a wide variety of circumstances, actual and hypothetical. In each fully specific set of circumstances, there will be a set of alternatives open to the subject. In each specific circumstance, I have been saying, a complete system of norms trichotomizes the alternatives: each is forbidden, optional, or required. An incomplete system of norms is characterized by the set of its completions—the set of complete systems of norms governing its subject matter with which it is compatible. Much more might be said about the structure of systems of norms, but this will be enough for my purposes.

IGNORANCE

No one is omniscient; we act, believe, feel, and judge without all relevant information—at least some of the time and, perhaps, always. Consider an observer who judges what it makes sense for a subject to do; observer and subject may be the same person or different people. Both the observer's and the subject's information may be limited. A satisfactory analysis must handle both kinds of limitations.

Take first the subject whose actions are being judged. His information may be limited, and rationality will involve coping well with this limited information. We need to distinguish what it makes sense objectively to do and what it makes sense subjectively to do—what it makes sense to do in light of all the facts, and what it makes sense to do in light of information available at the time to the agent. The rational course of action is what it makes sense to do subjectively, in light of one's limited information. What it makes sense to do objectively, in light of all the facts, we might call "advisable." Because subjects may lack information we must distinguish rationality from advisability.

Our analysis copes with this distinction straightforwardly. To think it made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton, I have said, is to accept a system of norms that permits challenging Hamilton in Burr's exact circumstances. Now we can distinguish Burr's objective circumstances from his subjective circumstances. His objective circumstances consist of all the facts that bear on what he does, whether or not he has any way of knowing those facts. His subjective circumstances consist of what he knows, what he has reason to believe, and the degrees of plausibility he should ascribe to various eventualities given his information. Now a system of norms might apply either to a person's objective circumstances or to his subjective circumstances—or as I shall say, "objectively" or "subjectively." To think an act rational is to accept a system of subjectively applicable norms that permit the act in question when applied to the
subject's exact subjective circumstances. The term 'rational' is permissive rather than obliging, and the corresponding permissive predicate in the 'advisable' family is 'not inadvisable.' Accordingly, to think an act "not inadvisable" is to accept a system of objectively applicable norms that permit the act when applied to the subject's exact objective circumstances. To think an act "advisable" is also to accept a system of objectively applicable norms, but in this case a system that, as applied to the subject's exact objective circumstances, required the act. The significant difference here is between "rational" and "not inadvisable": the difference between applying norms in a way that is not at all limited by the information available to the subject, and applying those norms in the only way the subject himself could: in light of the information available to him.

Suppose N is a set of norms that, as applied to driving, puts some slight weight on speed and puts great weight on avoiding an accident. The set will have objective and subjective variants. Consider a driver approaching a blind intersection, and suppose that unbeknown to him, no cross traffic is in fact coming. Then driving through without slowing down to check for cross traffic is N-required objectively but N-forbidden subjectively. For in fact, speeding on through would save time without causing an accident, and so that is what is objectively N-required. In light of what the subject knows, on the other hand, speeding on through without stopping to look runs a substantial risk of an accident for small savings in time, and so it is subjectively N-forbidden. Hence a knowledgeable observer who accepts both variants of N will consider driving through without looking advisable but irrational. As an advisor with a clear view of the crossroad, he would motion the driver on through. With no well-placed advisor in the offing, though, our observer would reject driving on through as a way of coping with the driver's limited information.

So much for limited subject and omniscient observer. Turn now to the harder problem: limitations on the observer's information. An observer will often not think he knows all the facts that bear on whether a given act is rational or advisable. To make judgments of advisability the observer needs to know about the subject's objective circumstances and to make judgments about rationality he needs to know about the subjective circumstances — what the subject has reason to think he knows and the probabilities the subject has reason to ascribe to various eventualities on which he is not certain. Even if an observer accepted a complete system of general norms, he might still have no idea how they applied to a particular case, because he knew he lacked some of the facts.

As a second approximation to an analysis, we might treat limitations on observers' knowledge as follows: an observer, we assume, accepts at least an incomplete system of general norms; call it that system N*. He thinks an act rational, we can say, if and only if he thinks it N'-permitted — that is to say, rational according to N*. For any particular system N of norms, recall, whether an act is N-permitted is a matter of fact, and so a belief that the act is N-permitted is a factual belief. Thinking X rational,
then, is a combination of a normative state and a state of factual belief. It is accepting a system $N$ of norms such that one believes the subject to be in circumstances for which $N$ permits $X$.

Suppose, for example, the system of norms Dolly accepts consists solely of one norm, "Maximize your expected length of life." James, let us suppose, is approaching a blind intersection in a carriage. Dolly, then, thinks driving through without looking to be irrational just in case she thinks that doing so, given what James knows, fails to maximize his expected length of life.

The normative belief is only partly factual. To think that driving through without looking fails to maximize length of life is not in itself to think that driving through without looking is irrational. We can see this by considering another observer Sam who accepts an alternative sparse system of norms. Let system $N'$ consist of the single norm "Always maximize immediate excitement," and let a Sam accept system $N'$. Then Sam, if he knows the facts, will accept the descriptive statement "Given what James knows, driving through without looking fails to maximize expected length of life." He will reject, however, the claim that driving through without looking is irrational. For given the general norms he accepts, he would accept this normative conclusion only if he thought that driving on through without looking failed to maximize immediate excitement—which would be a strange thing to think.

An observer, of course, will often fail to have an opinion on a given normative question. He may fail to have an opinion even when he himself is the subject. The observer may be agnostic for either of two reasons or for a combination of them. First, he may think himself ignorant of relevant facts. Second, he may accept only an incomplete system of norms and so be undecided about aspects of his normative system that bear on the situation he is considering.

That completes my second approximation of what it is for a person to think an act rational or irrational, advisable or inadvisable. The observer thinks an act rational if he accepts some system of norms, complete or incomplete, and thinks the subject to be in circumstances for which that system permits that act.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SECOND APPROXIMATION

The second approximation is still an approximation; it fails with at least three kinds of problems. One is the problem of embedding: the analysis applies to simple contexts, in which it is simply asserted or denied that such and such an act is rational. It says nothing about more complex normative assertions. A second problem concerns communication: the analysis leaves it mysterious how a normative opinion can be communicated from speaker to hearer. The third concerns normative naiveté. The analysis requires that all one's normative opinions be coherently grounded on general normative principles that one accepts. What are we to say of
the naif who accepts normative conclusions without accepting a full set of grounds for them?

Handling these problems will require a substantial transformation of the analysis, but a single transformation solves them all. In this section I lay out the problems, beginning with embedding.

Suppose we have an adequate account of the state of mind expressed by such simple statements as “It made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton.” What are we to say of more complex contexts, like “Whenever Burr does anything it doesn’t make sense to do, he clings to his purpose stubbornly.” Sentences of indefinite complexity can be built recursively from simpler elements, and these get their meanings from the meanings of their elements, in systematic ways. For sentences that express truths or falsehoods, we have a rich legacy of accounts that tell us how this happens: Tarski and his successors tell us how the truth conditions of a sentence depend on the truth conditions of its components. Can we do anything of the sort with an expressivistic theory? A normative sentence, the expressivist says, expresses a state of mind; its meaning is explained not by giving its truth conditions but by telling what state of mind it expresses. When a normative terms appears in a complex context, can we still say what state of mind is being expressed? Can we give a systematic account of how the state of mind a complex normative sentence expresses depends on the states of mind that would be expressed by its components alone?6

Take next the problem of communication. When a person calls an act rational, as the proposal now stands, he expresses his acceptance of a system of norms, possibly incomplete, that he thinks permits the act in question. The speaker, though, need not evince which specific system of norms he accepts. When Abigail says “It made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton,” we the audience do not know whether she puts prudence first and thinks the challenge prudent or thinks the challenge imprudent but puts honor first—or what. She herself accepts a specific system of norms, however incomplete, and draws normative conclusions jointly from the system and her factual beliefs. What she expresses, though, is a property of the combination. She expresses her acceptance of a system $N$ of norms and a set $B$ of factual beliefs with this joint property: that $B$ includes the belief that $N$, as applied to Burr’s circumstances, permits challenging Hamilton. If she is sincere, the analysis says, she has some specific combination of factual beliefs and normative commitments that has this property. We listeners, though, learn much less; we learn only the joint property. What, then, do we understand from Abigail’s normative assertion? What she expresses should be available to

the listener; the listener who understands should know what she has expressed. We, though, may understand perfectly well what Abigail is saying and yet have no idea what general system of norms she invokes in her judgment.

The problem of communication leads to a further problem, which I call the problem of normative naivété. Suppose the audience accepts what the speaker says, and does so on the speaker's authority. What state of mind constitutes this acceptance? Even if the listener is fully prepared to believe what the speaker says—to accept it, once he has said it—he cannot then come to share the specific state of mind the speaker is in. No matter how willing to believe the listener may be, no matter how willing to share the speaker's state of mind whatever that may be, he cannot do so; he lacks the necessary information. What could it be, then, to accept a normative conclusion—to accept something which corresponds to a property of a specific combination of normative system with beliefs—and yet to fail to be in any specific normative-credal state that has that property? People do sometimes seem to be in such a state; the analysis should explain its nature. Let me call this the problem of normative naivété.

The problem can extend to the speaker as well: Abigail might have little idea what system of norms properly applies to Burr's situation; she might, say, simply follow John's lead in her political opinions even when he does not explain his grounds to her. She might, then, be quite convinced that it made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton and assert that it did, even though she was unsure what general normative principles applied. In that case, there is no general system of norms that she accepts. She expresses a normative opinion without expressing her acceptance of any particular system of norms. How can an expressivistic analysis allow for this?

Indeed for most speakers the state the analysis depicts seems too complex. Normative beliefs appear to be plain enough, and the people who have them may be incapable of dealing with the logical constructions I have been presenting—or at least of dealing with them at a speed that would sustain conversation. What, then, can we say is going on?

NORMATIVE CONTENT: THE FINAL ANALYSIS

In its second approximation, the analysis failed with at least three problems: the problem of embedding, the problem of communication, and the problem of normative naivété. To rescue the analysis will require a transformation, and I proceed with it in two steps: in this section I develop a formal account of the "normative content" expressed by normative statements. Then in the next section I suggest what such a formal representation might have to do with the meanings of normative statements.

Normative statements are of many kinds. In the first place there are the general normative principles that combine to form systems of norms—such principles as "When humiliated, issue a challenge* or "Never challenge
anyone." In the second place, there are normative conclusions for particular situations. These will follow from premises of two kinds: the system of generic norms a person accepts and the person's factual beliefs about the particular situation in question. Finally, there are the various complex constructions that include normative terms. How can we give a uniform representation to normative statements of all these different kinds?

Begin with complete systems of norms. A system of norms, recall, is the end result of the ways the various general normative principles a person accepts combine, weigh against each other, and override one another. If it is complete, then for every conceivable fully described occasion for action, the system classifies each alternative open on that occasion as required, optional, or forbidden.

The next notion we shall need is that of a completely opinionated credal-normative state. Imagine a goddess Hera who is entirely coherent and completely opinionated both normatively and factually. She suffers no factual uncertainty; there is a completely determinate way \( W^* \) she thinks the world to be. She likewise lacks all normative uncertainty; there is a complete system \( N^* \) of general norms that she accepts. She is consistent in her factual and normative beliefs and accepts everything factual and normative that follows from the things she accepts. Together, \( W^* \) and \( N^* \) constitute a completely opinionated credal-normative state, a factual-normative world \( (W^*, N^*) \), as I shall say.

Together, \( W^* \) and \( N^* \) entail a normative judgment for every occasion for action. They entail, for instance, whether or not it was rational for Burr to challenge Hamilton. Hera is not at all uncertain what Burr's subjective circumstances were, and she is not at all undecided what norms to apply or how to weigh them against each other. She applies the norms she accepts to Burr's subjective circumstances as she thinks them to be and comes to one of three definite conclusions: that for Burr, challenging Hamilton was rationally required, that it was rational but not rationally required, or that it was irrational. Any particular normative judgment holds or not, as a matter of logic, in the factual-normative world \( <W^*, N^*> \).

Now return to Abigail who is no goddess. She is uncertain both factually and normatively: she thinks that challenging Hamilton was rational, but she is uncertain of her grounds. She accepts, we might say, the "normative content" that it was rational for Burr to challenge Hamilton, but she accepts no single version of what Burr's subjective circumstances were, nor any one system of general norms from which the normative content she accepts follows. How can we treat what she accepts?

The normative conclusion she accepts is in effect a disjunction of all the complete factual-plus-normative opinions that might have yielded it. Formally, we might speak in terms of sets: the normative content she accepts—that it was rational for Burr to challenge Hamilton—could be represented by the set of maximally opinionated ways in which she might have accepted it. It can be represented, that is to say, by the set of all
factual-normative worlds \(<W,N>\) for which it holds. This, recall, is the
set of all pairs \(<W,N>\), where \(W\) is a possible world and \(N\) is a complete
system of norms, such that system \(N\) as applied to Burr's subjective
circumstances in world \(W\) permits challenging Hamilton.

We now have a formal representation of the normative content
Abigail accepts. We have not said how this formal representation explains
the meaning of what she says, but let me postpone that and consider
embedding again. Our new representation solves not only the problem
of communication but the problem of embedding as well. No matter
how complex a normative statement is, we can still represent its content
as the set of all factual-normative worlds for which it holds.

To do this, we have to say when, in general, a normative statement
holds for a given factual-normative world. Let \(S\) be a statement with
normative terms in it, and let \(<W,N>\) be a normative-factual world. What is it for \(S\) to hold in \(<W,N>\)?

Earlier I spoke of the descriptive predicate that \(N\)-corresponds to a
normative predicate: to 'rational' \(N\)-corresponds the descriptive predicate
'optimal-according-to-\(N\),' or '\(N\)-permitted.' To settle whether normative
statement \(S\) holds in factual-normative world \(<W,N>\), we do the following.
Replace each normative predicate in \(S\) with its \(N\)-corresponding descriptive
predicate, yielding a purely descriptive statement \(S'\). Then normative
statement \(S\) holds in \(<W,N>\) if and only if \(S'\) holds in \(W\).

Take, for example, Abigail's claim,

Whenever Burr does anything irrational, he sticks to his purpose
stubbornly.

It holds in a factual-normative world \(<W,N>\) just in case

Whenever Burr does anything forbidden by \(N\), he clings to his
purposes stubbornly

holds in \(W\).

This new representation of normative content yields answers to all
three problems that beset the second approximation. Embedded contexts
now pose no special problem: so long as we have an account of what it
is for a descriptive statement to hold in a possible world \(W\)—for a maximally
specific way the world might be—we can now say that it is for any
normative statement to hold for a factual-normative world \(<W,N>\).
Having said that, we need only add the dictum, the content of a normative
statement is the set of factual-normative worlds for which the statement
holds. This representation lets us say what is communicated by a normative
statement—even when the speaker expresses acceptance of no one general
system of norms. What is communicated is the normative content of the
statement he makes. The representation also lets us say what the naive
accepts—the naive who accepts a normative statement but cannot derive
it from any facts and general normative principles that he accepts. He
accepts the normative content of the statement. The analysis has been
sharply transformed, but we now have a unified formal solution to the problem of embedding, the problem of communication, and the problem of normative naïveté.

MEANING AND THE FORMAL REPRESENTATION

What does our formal representation have to do with meaning? It tells us nothing direct; psychologically, I think, normative beliefs are much like any other beliefs. The fact-norm distinction is not between two quite disparate kinds of psychological states but between the kinds of content that can reasonably be ascribed to them. As we experience them, beliefs simply are what they are; they have a gestalt-like quality about which we can say very little. When we give a logical-philosophical account of the structure of beliefs, we do not, if I am right, display their intrinsic psychological nature. Rather, we see how they fit into a system.

To display the objects of belief as a system, we need to show two main things: the inferential relations among them and their connection to the world. In the case of straightforward factual propositions, the connection to the world is through sense experience. What I am trying to do now is to give a like account of normative content. What, I am asking, constitute the inferential relations among normative contents? How, through these inferential relations, do normative contents gain their connection to the world?

The connection of normative contents to the world is not entirely through sense experience; they connect as well by a special kind of normative motivation. That, at least, is the theory I am proposing. Normative motivation is the special kind of motivation that stems from accepting a normative content that applies to oneself right now. Abigail may have thought it made sense for Burr to challenge Hamilton, but that opinion could govern no action of hers. If Burr, though, thought it made sense to challenge Hamilton at that very moment, his opinion could very well govern his actions. Whereas purely descriptive propositions are tied to the world through sense experience alone, normative contents are tied to the world not only through sense experience but through normative governance of actions.7

Just as few descriptive propositions describe present sense experience, so few normative contents directly govern present action. Propositions and normative contents are tied to the world through a web of inference. It is here that the formal representation I have given plays its part. Given the representation, we can treat entailment in the usual way: content \( P \)

7. Normative opinions may govern action indirectly too, by governing planning. If Burr thinks that later it will make sense to challenge Hamilton, or that it will later make sense to do so if certain eventualities arise, he will tend to plan accordingly. That makes for an additional tie of normative language to the world. The independent motivational role of planning is explored by Michael Bratman in a number of articles; see his “Taking Plans Seriously,” Social Theory and Practice 9 (1983): 271–88, and “Two Faces of Intention,” Philosophical Review 83 (1984): 375–406.
entails content $Q$ if and only if $Q$ holds in all the factual-normative worlds in which $P$ holds. When we apply our formalism to interpret a person’s normative thoughts, the psychic facts our formalism must match are the inferences the person takes as immediate and unproblematical. These inferences must be interpretable as recognitions of entailment: Where the person confidently infers statement $Q$ from statement $P$, we must represent $Q$ as being entailed by $P$ and the other contents we interpret him as accepting. That is a prime constraint on our attribution of content.  

Our problem is thus one of radical interpretation of a person’s thoughts. We match normative contents to his thoughts under at least two constraints. First, the inferences he makes with confidence are to be explained by relations of entailment among the normative contents we attribute to him. Second, his propensities toward normative governance of his actions are to match the normative contents we attribute to him. When the normative contents we interpret a person as having at a time apply to that person himself at that very time, he must be normatively motivated. Conversely, when he is normatively motivated, we must attribute to him a normative content that applies to himself at that time. It is these constraints on interpretation that turn the formal representation I have given into an account of the meaning of normative language.

These constraints do not do all the work by themselves; other strong desiderata guide interpretation. The normative beliefs one attributes should be intelligible: They should be generated from considerations familiar in our own lore, combined in ways that have familiar parallels. To accommodate this desideratum, the translator will have to move back to a richer conception of normative systems, a conception that makes it explicit what the considerations are that enter into normative judgment and how they weigh against each other or override one another. The more bizarre normative thought comes out on an interpretation, the more our appraisal of the interpretative scheme must suffer. Some bizarre-ness, though, must surely be allowed; the normative thought of headhunters must not be made out to match the thought of Quakers. Desiderata of intelligibility work within the rough constraints I have been depicting: that inferences seen as obvious really do follow from things accepted, and normative motivation stems from normative beliefs. The job of our formal representation of normative content is to allow us to formulate these constraints.


9. The need for this line of thought or something like it was pressed on me by Richard Burian.