



Book Review

The Nature of Normativity, by Ralph Wedgwood

María José Alcaraz León
Universidad de Murcia

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The Nature of Normativity, by Ralph Wedgwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 296 pp.

Ralph Wedgwood's *The Nature of Normativity* is a comprehensive book that aims simultaneously at providing a meta-ethical account of normative properties and statements and a discussion of the relevance of such a theory to issues pertaining to epistemology, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and theory of rationality. His project is clearly stated from the beginning of the book. The view offered can be regarded as a variety of meta-ethical realism, which he claims to be compatible with a non-reductive understanding of normative properties and able to explain Normative Judgement Internalism (NJI) — the claim that there is an essential internal connection between normative judgement and practical reasoning or motivation. To do so he tries to offer a semantic account of normative concepts based upon conceptual role semantics — which he opposes both to causal accounts and to conceptual analysis accounts — and the underlying idea that the intentional is normative.

Before defending his own view, Wedgwood sets up a clear map of the views in dispute paying special attention to those aspects of his own project that cannot be successfully explained within those rival accounts. Hence the discussion he establishes with rival views always have a foot on the points he takes as most significant for his own project. Thus, for example, Wedgwood assumes NJI is true and focuses upon the impossibility of explaining this claim within Expressivism, Causal Theories and Conceptual Analysis accounts. For him, the essential connection between normative judgments and practical deliberation can be better explained if we take the former as expressing cognitive states — i.e. beliefs. He needs to argue, against those who defend a Humean account of motivation, that mere beliefs are sufficient to make NJI true. To do so, Wedgwood introduces what might be taken as the core of his proposal: an analysis of the concept 'ought' in terms of conceptual role analysis.

According to this approach, the nature of a concept is the essential conceptual role it plays in reasoning. For example the conceptual role played by the logical operator 'or' is given by the basic rules of rationality that governs its use, i.e., that make 'if p , then p or q ' valid. Thus, someone is said to possess a concept if she manifests a disposition to follow the basic rules of rationality for using it. Specifying

those basic rules will give us an explanation of what it is to possess a particular concept and the semantic value of that concept.

In the case of normative concepts, such as 'ought,' that role consists, according to Wedgwood, in a certain regulative role the concept plays in *practical* reasoning. So, it is part of the basic rational rules of the use of the concept that there is a relationship between using the concept and some facts about motivation.

To establish this, Wedgwood cannot simply take for granted that the concept 'ought' plays this essential conceptual role in practical reasoning, for it can be disputed whether a concept might have this sort of role at all. Wedgwood needs then to articulate that particular conceptual role in such a way that it follows from the basic rules that govern its rational use that it possesses this connection to motivation or practical reasoning. As he explicitly puts it, 'Acceptance of the first-person proposition 'O <me, t > (p)' — where ' t ' refers to some time in the present or near future — commits one to making p part of one's ideal plan about what to do at t ' (p. 97). According to this characterization, the rational use of the concept 'ought' is based upon my disposition to follow the following rule: my recognition that I ought to ϕ commits me to adopt as part of my ideal plan any p that is implied by ϕ . Not following this rule will amount to not using the concept 'ought' in a rational way. One can ask at this point in virtue of what can Wedgwood establish that this is the rule that governs the rational use of the concept. Why will I be irrational if I use the concept 'ought' in a way that does not fit with this rule? To some extent the simplest answer is that there is nothing more basic one can appeal to in order to justify the rule. According to Wedgwood, this rule is basic and users do not acquire it in any sort of inferential or justificatory way. Put crudely, rationally using the concept amounts to having the disposition to use it according to this rule.

At some point, Wedgwood notices that accomplishing these rules is not simply a matter of conforming our practice to them. Thus, following his analogy with belief states, there is a point in conforming to the standards of justification and rationality of beliefs. Hence, the point of achieving correct and rational beliefs is that we 'get things right' regarding facts about the world. Similarly, Wedgwood holds, there is a point in adopting correct and rational plans: to get things right in one's plans and intentions and hence 'have a set of intentions that one will actually execute in such a way that as a result one will act in a manner that is genuinely choiceworthy.' (p. 101) Although Wedgwood's

analogy between the correctness of a plan and a belief might seem persuasive, there is a certain ambiguity in the way he characterizes the conditions under which a plan is correct. On the one hand, he seems to claim that the correctness of an ideal plan depends upon external facts about the agent (Wedgwood's, pp. 101–102) but, on the other, it seems that a plan is correct if one would act in a genuine choiceworthy way, which, in turn, implies that one will perform *p*. It is in virtue of this second characterization that Wedgwood can dispel a possible objection to his characterization of the essential internal connection between ought and practical rationality. According to this objection, it is possible to find a case where one ought to plan on an action but one does not have to take that course of action. The example is of an eccentric millionaire who is willing to give you £1 million if you plan to drink a toxin but who is quite indifferent to the fact that you actually drink it. Wedgwood dispels the objection by claiming this is not a case where the agent forms a *correct* plan in the relevant sense, because 'for a plan to be correct, it would have to be true that if you act in a genuinely choiceworthy way at *t*, then you will drink the toxin at *t*.' (Wedgwood, p. 104) I think one can be quite unconvinced by this answer. Why is the agent's decision to plan on drinking the toxin, but not actually carrying on the plan, not a choiceworthy action? His answer seems to simply restate the conditions that the example challenges, but this does not seem to be a good answer. It seems that it would be correct to plan on doing *p* if *p* is part of a correct plan, but then a correct plan cannot be simply characterized in terms of that plan that will commit me to perform *p*.

The notion of a correct plan is taken under more consideration in Part II of the book, devoted to the metaphysics of normative facts. In chapter 7, Wedgwood tries to clarify what it is for a plan to be correct. To do so, he will appeal to the general idea underlying his project that the intentional is normative. Thus, normative judgments possess propositional content and they are winning judgements iff the proposition embedded is true. Mental states have, therefore, both standards of justification and rationality; besides there is a purpose or goal in conforming to these standards. Wedgwood keeps using his analogy between belief and planning. To that extent, he draws a similar story for what counts for a belief to be correct and rational and what counts for a plan to be correct and rational. Since the final purpose of belief is to get things right about the world, a belief would be correct if it is true and rational if, 'in relation to a given body of

information I, that body of information I makes it *highly likely* that my belief in question is correct' (p. 156). Similarly, since the final goal or purpose of a plan is to make correct choices, a plan will be correct if 'one will realize those choices and act in a way that is genuinely choice worthy' and it is rational 'just in case given I, that choice maximizes one's rational expectation of coming as close as possible to choosing correctly.' (p. 162). Here, as well, the notion of a plan's being correct seems to be defined in terms that leave some room for ambiguity about what counts as a correct plan. Acting in a way that is genuinely choice worthy does not seem to be a property of the content of my plan but of the action that would allegedly follow if I adopt *p* as my plan. It might be true that the final goal or purpose of practical deliberation is to get things right about our plans or choices, but it seems we still need some more clarification of what counts as a correct plan if Wedgwood's thesis is to have the convincing character of the corresponding thesis for the case of belief.

In the rest chapters of part II, Wedgwood discusses some of the implications of the claim that the intentional is normative for some metaphysical debates. In particular, he tries to show how this claim implies that normative properties cannot be reduced to non-normative ones, although he thinks this is still compatible with a form of naturalism.

In part III of the book, Wedgwood addresses some epistemological aspects of his view. Since he has committed himself with metaphysical realism about normative properties, he will endorse a form of cognitivism. Once more, he introduces an analogy with the acquisition of perceptual beliefs in order to delineate his own epistemology of normative beliefs. He claims our knowledge of cognitive statements requires us to acknowledge that there are 'primitively rational ways of forming beliefs' (p. 230) which we take as basic sources to acquire those beliefs and that cannot be justified in any further way. Allegedly, this notion is to play some role in our acquisition of normative beliefs as well. However, there seems to be a problem with the way in which Wedgwood establishes this notion. The problem can be easily shown in the case of belief, but I take it can also be of relevance in the case of normative beliefs. For example, in the case of perceptual beliefs, Wedgwood claims one can rely on perceptual experience as one of the basic ways of forming beliefs because 'There is an essential connection between our sensory experiences and the truth' (p. 232). However, this can only be stated in the absence of the hypothesis of

the evil demon. In that case, there would not be an essential connection between our sensory experiences and the truth. Therefore, if anything like a 'primitively rational way of forming beliefs' is at stake in acquiring normative beliefs, a similar worry might arise regarding whatever that way is thought to be. In particular, since Wedgwood claims that way is a form of normative intuition, exercised and manifested in our dispositions to respond to normative facts in the corresponding ways, we may have worries about the essential connection between our intuitions and truth.

Finally, Wedgwood tries to defend the claim that normative knowledge is *a priori* and he further discusses how his account is able to accommodate genuine normative disputes.

Certainly, any reader interested in meta-ethics will find in this book a very rich and comprehensive attempt to delineate the nature of normative statements. Although there Wedgwood offers very appealing claims, there seem to be a few explanatory gaps within some of the points discussed that may leave the reader uncertain regarding crucial aspects of his view.

María José Alcaraz León

Dept. de Filosofía, Facultad de Filosofía, Universidad de Murcia
Edificio Luis Vives. Campus de Espinardo, 30100 Murcia, Spain
mariajo@um.es

When Truth Gives Out, by Mark Richard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 184 pp.

Richard's *When Truth Gives Out*, written in an engaging and accessible style, develops around the idea that the notion of truth, contrary to a lot of received wisdom from philosophy of language and logic, is not — or at least, not always — the right concept to employ in analyzing belief, assertion, or their evaluation. The book is organized in five chapters and two appendices, all of which could work equally well as independent essays. In particular, Chapter IV, *What's the Matter with Relativism?*, largely overlaps with his well-known paper 'Contextualism and Relativism,' *Philosophical Studies* 119, 2004, 215–42. The choice of compiling those pieces into a monograph, rather than a mere collection of essays, is motivated by the fact that each chapter addresses, sometimes in different ways and from different angles, the